

# The Washington Post

## Obituary: Samuel F. Yette, influential newsman, first black Washington correspondent for Newsweek

By T. Rees Shapiro  
Washington Post Staff Writer  
Monday, January 24, 2011; 11:17 PM



**Samuel F. Yette**  
(1929-2011)

Samuel F. Yette, 81, a journalist, author and educator who became an influential and sometimes incendiary voice on civil rights, died Jan. 21 at the Morningside House assisted-living facility in Laurel. He had Alzheimer's disease.

In a career spanning six decades, Mr. Yette (pronounced "Yet") worked for many news organizations and government agencies and held positions in academia, including as a journalism professor at Howard University.

As a young reporter, he covered the civil rights movement for black publications including the Afro-American newspaper and Ebony magazine. In the mid-1960s, he served as executive secretary of the Peace Corps and special assistant for civil rights to the director of the U.S. Office of Economic Opportunity, which administered anti-poverty programs.

In 1968, Mr. Yette became the first black Washington correspondent for Newsweek. He said his three years at the magazine were rocky and blamed his firing in 1971 on the publication of his book "The Choice: The Issue of Black Survival in America."

The book asserted that the federal government showed a pattern of repression against African Americans that, left unaddressed, could lead to genocide.

"Blacks are given a choice in this country," Mr. Yette wrote. "To accept their miserable lot or die."

He cited his experiences with the Johnson administration and the Office of Economic Opportunity and claimed that even government programs aimed at helping the most vulnerable citizens were vehicles to repress them further.

"The raised hand of Uncle Sam," Mr. Yette wrote in his book, was "swatting poor Negroes while rewarding rich whites with the spoils of black misery. As this truth became known, hope turned to hatred, dedication became disgust, hands raised for help became clenched fists, and eyes searching for acceptance turned inward."

In the book, Mr. Yette used contemporary accounts from newspapers and government documents to back up his statements. He referred to a study that indicated an overwhelming majority of white Americans would do

nothing if the government instituted the mass imprisonment of blacks.

Mr. Yette told the Tennessee Tribune in 1996 that "there were those well-placed in our government who were determined to have a final solution for the race issue in this country - not unlike Hitler's 'final solution' for Jews 50 years earlier in Germany."

A few months after his book was published, Mr. Yette was dismissed from Newsweek. He sued his former employer and claimed that he was fired because of "incipient racism" among leaders at Newsweek, which then was owned by The Washington Post.

Mr. Yette won an initial court ruling, but the decision was reversed years later in a federal appeals court. The Supreme Court declined to hear the case.

Mr. Yette turned the rest of his career to education as a professor at Howard. Mr. Yette was a charismatic classroom presence who required his students to read the Constitution and Bill of Rights.

"I could barely read or spell when I entered Mr. Yette's class," Richard McGhee, a Howard athlete, told Post columnist Dorothy Gilliam in 1986. He noted that the dedicated professor would "painstakingly go over my work with me, made sure that I understood everything and let me know that . . . I could see him anytime."

Lawrence Kaggwa, a professor and former chairman of Howard's journalism department, called Yette "a mind builder [who] wanted his students to be able to talk intelligently about any issue."

Kaggwa said students were attracted to Mr. Yette's controversial opinions, and noted that his writing and reporting classes filled quickly every semester. In order to teach the rookie journalists how to meet deadlines, Mr. Yette started each of his lectures at the minute they were scheduled and locked the classroom doors, Kaggwa said.

Samuel Frederick Yette, born July 2, 1929 in Harriman, Tenn., was the grandson of a slave.

Mr. Yette was a 1951 English graduate of Tennessee State University and received a master's degree in journalism from Indiana University in 1959. His career in journalism took off in the mid-1950s after he accompanied Life magazine photographer Gordon Parks on a tour of the South.

Parks was assigned to document segregation; Mr. Yette told the Tennessee Tribune in 1996 that he served "as a reporter, researcher, pack-horse, camera-loader . . . front-man and chauffeur" for the established photographer.

In 1956, he became a reporter for the Afro-American newspaper. He covered several major civil rights events, including the 1957 march on Washington and numerous events organized by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

In the mid-1980s, Mr. Yette started his own publishing firm, Cottage Books, and reprinted his book in 1982. He released a book in 1984 titled "Washington and Two Marches, 1963 & 1983: The Third American Revolution," a photographic journey of the civil rights movement written and photographed in collaboration with his son, Frederick.

Mr. Yette's wife, the former Sadie Walton, died in 1983. Besides Frederick Yette of Washington, survivors include another son, Michael Yette of Forrestville, Md.; five sisters; a brother; and two granddaughters.

During his career at Howard, Mr. Yette passed on his belief in the power of education to generations of students.

As Mr. Yette once said: "I remember my mother telling me, 'Keep stretching your arms for learning. Someday, somebody will ask you to show how long they are and they won't ask their color.'"

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