

Reporter urged to seek counseling: Kelley fabricated stories

News in the [April 20, 2004](#) issue

Former *USA Today* reporter Jack Kelley, accused by that newspaper of fabricating many stories, has evangelical admirers in a spin because the journalist was celebrated for his Christian witness. Kelley's Christian friends are urging the discredited reporter to acknowledge his errors and seek counseling, according to Christianity- Today.com.

USA Today reported March 19 that its team of journalists "found strong evidence that Kelley fabricated substantial portions of at least eight major stories, lifted nearly two dozen quotes or other material from competing publications, lied in speeches he gave for the newspaper and conspired to mislead those investigating his work."

The national newspaper said that Kelley concocted a story in a session at an Evangelical Press Association convention about a photo he took of a woman in Cuba who he reported later drowned at sea while trying to escape that country. *USA Today*, however, found the woman alive and well in the U.S. Kelley denied that he made up the story.

"For years, leading evangelicals hailed Kelley as a role model to student journalists," wrote Tony Carnes, a senior newswriter for *Christianity Today*, on the magazine's Web site. The dilemma for Kelley's Christian colleagues, he said, "is how to support Kelley without losing their commitment to the truth."

In a 2001 interview with the *Christian Reader* (now named *Today's Christian*), a sister publication of *Christianity Today*, Kelley said he believed that "many times God has spared me" in dangerous foreign assignments as a journalist. "It isn't because of the glory, but because God has called me to proclaim the truth," he said, "and to worship and serve him through other people."

Don Lattin, a religion reporter for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, wrote in his Web log column for the Religion Newswriters Association that in that 2001 interview "the

swashbuckling Christian tells about a time he was being chased through the streets of Moscow by Russian mobsters.” Lattin quoted from the article: “I got this vision of an apartment building with the number 925 on it and an elderly man next to a door one flight up the stairs. Next thing I knew, I came upon building number 925. Walking in, I found an elderly man on the right who told me to come in until my pursuers passed.”

Added Lattin: “If you believe that story, I’ve got a couple of fine bridges to sell you here in San Francisco.”

Kelley, 43, resigned in January from the newspaper when he was confronted by editors with a person whom the reporter had asked to lie for him if approached by *USA Today* investigators. Christian colleagues initially hoped to believe Kelley’s denials of phony news stories. Syndicated columnist Cal Thomas walked into this year’s National Prayer Breakfast with Kelley only a few weeks after his resignation, said Carnes.

“But *USA Today*’s exposé of Kelley’s misconduct [means] that Kelley had misled Thomas and other Christian journalists, just as he had the Evangelical Press Association, student journalism classes and his own pastor,” Carnes wrote.