

THE PRESS AND THE PRESIDENCY

STEPHEN J. WHITFIELD

Brandeis University

(Resumen)

Este artículo discute el destino interrelacionado de dos instituciones estadounidenses que se originaron en la época revolucionaria y que son extensiones de la idea de la soberanía del pueblo. Una es la presidencia, algo que no tiene equivalente fuera de los Estados Unidos, y la otra es la prensa independiente, cosa que ha sido muy escasa fuera del mundo occidental. La libertad de la prensa está garantizada en la Constitución de los Estados Unidos y, como resultado, muchos periodistas han aprovechado del derecho para criticar duramente a la política, y en particular al presidente. Este artículo recorre la evolución de la relación entre estas dos instituciones, utilizando distintos ejemplos de conflicto y malentendidos, desde la época de Benjamin Franklin hasta los presidentes más destacados del siglo XX. Aunque la controversia de los últimos años entre la prensa estadounidense y los presidentes ha provocado mayor auto-conciencia e introspección entre los periodistas, desafortunadamente estos problemas no están más cerca a una resolución que cuando sugieron por primera vez hace varias décadas.

.....

Once upon a time the notion of "sovereignty of the people" was an audacious and original way of making a new government distinctive and legitimate. For what was startling and special about the American political experiment, beginning a little over two centuries ago, was the extent to which government was to be dependent upon popular will, upon public opinion. The leaders of "the first new nation" claimed that their power, which was limited and temporary, was to be based upon the franchise, which could be effectuated only if the citizenry were informed and wise. The birth certificate of an independent nation therefore asserts not only that life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are inalienable, but also that rebellion must be justified out of "a decent respect to the opinions of mankind." And one illustration of the importance of the consent of the governed is the intertwined fate of two institutions that also originated in the Revolutionary period and that are extensions of the idea of the sovereignty of the people. One is the Presidency, which then had no exact equivalent outside the United States; the other is the independent press, which has been rare enough outside the Western world.

To recount American political experience, without also indicating how public opinion has been molded and registered, is to skip an essential dimension of that history. Such an account would have to begin with Benjamin Franklin, who, for all his versatility and virtuosity, identified himself in his will merely as a printer. His was also the first truly American book, the *Autobiography*, whose central distinction between appearance and reality (in one of the most interesting passages in the book) is perhaps

"the" philosophical problem of the journalistic enterprise. The Revolution itself might have been different without such pyrogenic propagandists as Samuel Adams and Thomas Paine. The Alien and Sedition Acts, an early attempt to gag the press, so discredited the administration of John Adams that a peaceful transfer of power was accomplished in 1800 to the party of Jefferson, who called that election itself a revolution. Visiting Jacksonian America, Alexis de Tocqueville made the force of public opinion (and the rambunctious energy of the press) the centerpiece of his critique of egalitarian democracy. Enough Northerners valued freedom of expression to make martyrs out of Abolitionists like Elijah Lovejoy, whose life was taken and whose printing press was destroyed by an Illinois mob in 1837. The eloquence of William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass, who were not only orators but also editors, helped convince many in the North that the price of slavery was too high for the land of the free to pay. When President Lincoln demurred, however, and announced that the salvation of the Union and not the emancipation of the slaves was the paramount issue in the war, his most-quoted articulation of Northern war aims was not addressed to the Congress but to an editor, the cantankerous Horace Greeley of the *New York Tribune*.

Fewer Americans followed Greeley's advice, which was to move from east to west, than followed his example, which was to move from country to city (Potter 94), where by the final decade of the nineteenth century they were reading "yellow journalism." The story of American expansion overseas, beginning with the Spanish-American War, cannot ignore the sensationalist circulation wars between Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* and William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal*. Not too much credence, however, should be placed on the telegram that Hearst sent to an illustrator in Cuba who found only placid scenes and no likelihood of American intervention: "You furnish the pictures and I'll furnish the war." It is of course one of the great lines in the saga of American individualism, too sharp a line not to be recycled into the most widely admired American films of the sound era, *Citizen Kane* (1941), the biography of a newspaper publisher. The original script had a simple—and significant—working title: *American* (Swanberg¹²⁷; Carringer 18).

Nor could the nation's literary history be told without including former newspapermen like Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser, Ernest Hemingway and John Dos Passos. Perhaps such a journalistic apprenticeship, according to one scholar, "exposed each writer to a vast range of experience that would ultimately form the core of his greatest imaginative works. It forced him to become a precise observer" and perhaps "taught him to be suspicious of secondhand accounts and to insist on seeing with his own eyes." Sinclair Lewis's most political novel, *It Can't Happen Here* (1935), pits an old-fashioned country editor (straight out of Norman Rockwell) against a fascist politician (straight out of George Lincoln Rockwell). It may not be accidental that the chosen persona for the comic strip hero Superman was Clark Kent, who worked, if memory serves, as a reporter for the *Daily Planet*. Norman Mailer, who has wanted to be known as a novelist, was nevertheless the founder and

part-owner of a newspaper, the *Village Voice*. Even Henry Ford, the greatest folk hero of rural Americans in the first half of the twentieth century, felt obliged to own a newspaper, the *Dearborn Independent*. Except for writers of fiction, no one exerted greater influence upon the attitudes of 1920s youth than Henry L. Mencken, a regular contributor to the *Baltimore Sun*. Perhaps the over-thirty citizen whom radical youth in the 1960s most admired was I. F. Stone, whose resemblance to Thomas Paine had not gone unnoticed. A couple of scholars have advanced the interesting argument that the work of the most influential and important American political philosopher of the twentieth century could not be found in the learned journals but instead on the editorial page of the *New York World* and in the syndicated columns of the *New York Herald-Tribune*, Walter Lippmann (Fishkin 4; Rossiter and Lee xi-xx).

Perhaps in no other country has journalism been so prestigious for long than in the United States, though the disparaging remarks of, say, Søren Kierkegaard are far too extreme to constitute a fair comparison with European attitudes. "The lowest depth to which people can sink before God is defined by the word 'journalist,'" the theologian once wrote. "If I were a father and had a daughter who was seduced, I should not despair over her; I would hope for her salvation. But if I had a son who became a journalist and continued to be one for five years, I would give him up" (Kierkegaard 431).

In recent years the press, especially in its treatment of Presidents, has become increasingly the subject of controversy, its means and ends increasingly the subject of political debate itself. New, if unintentional, pertinence can be detected in Julius Caesar's lines (in Act I, Scene ii of Shakespeare's play): "Who is it in the press who calls on me? I hear a tongue shriller than all the music." Journalism is controversial because it is so influential: the three television evening news shows of CBS, NBC and ABC have regularly drawn about fifty million viewers, and one newspaper in particular was responsible for helping to discredit nearly all the President's men and to trigger the unprecedented resignation of the Commander in Chief. One measure of the enhanced prestige of journalism is the vocational interest among American undergraduates; many students would have liked to have been Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein—although only Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman were allowed to *play* Woodward and Bernstein in the 1976 film. Given the ongoing fascination with the relationship between the press and the Presidency, there is exigency in an historical inquiry, however brief, into the implications for a powerful executive branch of the First Amendment's prohibition upon any Congressional "law abridging freedom . . . of the press."

For purposes of clarification, a dichotomy of extreme Presidential responses to press criticism can be proposed. At one pole is Thomas Jefferson, the President most associated with a high-minded and ringing defense of

freedom of the press, subject only to liability for personal injuries. This formidable censor of the public functionaries, by arraigning them at the tribunal of public opinion, produces reform peaceably, which must otherwise

be done by revolution. It is also the best instrument for enlightening the mind of man, and improving him as a rational, moral and social being (Levy, *Freedom* 333).

Jefferson went even further while the Constitution was being devised. Writing from Paris on "the basis of our governments being the opinion of the people" (Levy, *Freedom* 373), he formulated an unnecessarily stark hypothesis: "Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate for a moment to prefer the latter" (Levy, *Freedom* 373). And yet the almost touching absolutism of Jefferson's faith could not be sustained. Five years after he left the White House to return to Monticello, he privately attacked

the putrid state into which our newspapers have passed, and the malignity, the vulgarity, and mendacious spirit of those who write for them. . . . As vehicles of information, and a curb on our functionaries, they have rendered themselves useless, by forfeiting all title to belief (Levy, *Freedom* 376).

Thus the familiar charge that journalists lie has a perhaps surprising ancestry. In his final years the Founding Father who first achieved prominence because of the facility of his pen read only one newspaper, the *Richmond Enquirer*, and "that chiefly [for] the advertisements, for they contain the only truths to be relied on in a newspaper" (Levy, *Jefferson* 68). Jefferson may well have exaggerated the abuses of the early republican press which, however partisan and acerbic, was not consistently unfair; but he continued to enunciate the ideal of liberty of expression.

That the ideal differed from the real can be suggested by an incident over a century later, when the American Civil Liberties Union lodged a protest with James Michael Curley, the legendary Irish-American mayor who had banned a Ku Klux Klan rally in Boston. The ACLU representative wrote Curley eloquently about the First Amendment rights that all citizens of the nation were guaranteed and quoted frequently from Jefferson's inspired writings on human liberty. But Curley remained unmoved, and his reply was brief: "My dear sir, I know perfectly well what these great statesmen said, but I also know what they did" (Murphy 58-59).

In this instance, the mayor's historical sense was accurate. Jefferson, for example, sought to muffle the Federalist opposition press of his day by taking advantage of a loophole in the First Amendment which prohibited only the Congress from abridging freedom of the press: state prosecutions might therefore be undertaken in cases of seditious libel. He thus found it a little too easy to identify attacks upon the policies and personnel of his Democratic-Republican administration with threats to the civil order itself, and his reaction was as sly as it was thin-skinned. Here, for example, is an excerpt from a confidential letter that the President wrote in 1803—it

is not being leaked for the first time—to his ally, Governor Thomas McKean of Pennsylvania:

The press ought to be restored to its credibility if possible. The restraints provided by the laws of the states are sufficient for this if applied. And I have therefore long thought that a few prosecutions of the most prominent offenders would have a wholesome effect in restoring the integrity of the presses. Not a general prosecution, for that would look like persecution; but a selected one (Levy, *Jefferson* 58-59).

With that letter Jefferson enclosed a newspaper that he himself considered a promising target for selected prosecution. It is intriguing that, in refusing to release the White House tapes under the doctrine of executive privilege in 1974, Richard Nixon had draped himself in the toga of the sage of Monticello, whose establishment of precedent when subpoenaed was in fact ambiguous. But it is not widely known how much of a Jeffersonian, in the sense of hostility to the press, President Nixon actually was.

The threat of prosecutions to the independence of the press should be seen as only one kind of Presidential policy, however. Its polar opposite is perhaps best represented, among early executives, by Andrew Jackson. It is true that one can cite from Jackson's letters all sorts of nasty remarks about the contemporary press. A successful duelist, he had a tendency to become "Action" Jackson, to take personal offense in an age when editing was a high-risk occupation, especially in the South, where packing a pistol was more useful for journalists than owning a thesaurus. But the characteristic Jacksonian response was not vilification and persecution but a more oblique danger to an autonomous press: what during John F. Kennedy's administration was labelled "managed news." The press, which was supposed to be independent if the public was to be fairly and fully informed, was partly incorporated into the administration as a mouthpiece of its policies. Three of the five advisors in Jackson's "kitchen cabinet" were veteran journalists, of whom the most important were Amos Kendall and Francis P. Blair. Newspapers like the *United States Telegraph* and the *Washington Globe*, which Blair edited, were essentially conduits of the President's views. The *Globe* got government advertising as well as the printing responsibilities for government departments, and Federal office-holders whose salaries were more than \$1000 per year were expected to subscribe to it. No wonder the semi-weekly in 1830 burgeoned quickly into a daily. The *Globe's* definition of objectivity was predictably fuzzy: the speeches of the Whig opposition leaders were generally unexcerpted and unreported in its news columns, while the editorials of rather obscure country newspapers were copiously quoted "as an indication of public opinion." In fact those editorials were written by Kendall and Blair within the executive branch and then planted in the provincial press for the purpose of getting reprinted in the *Washington Globe* to suggest grass-roots opinion (Schlesinger Jr., *Age* 67-73; Pollard 153-71;

Weisberger 78-82).¹ Like Jacob and Esau before the patriarch Isaac, the hand was the hand of some rustic printe; but the voice was the voice of Old Hickory himself. For some the distinction between journalism and what became known in the twentieth century as public relations was thus blurred.

Within this necessarily schematic framework of repression at one extreme and co-option on the other, the tension between modern Presidents and the press might be seen in sharper outline. Most of the important twentieth century chief executives have veered closer to the Jacksonian than to the Jeffersonian model: reporters have more often been used than abused, outmaneuvered than opposed actively. Close to a happy medium, to a healthy distance from the press, was the first modern President. Theodore Roosevelt established the first anteroom for White House correspondents, and from time to time he allowed himself, while shaving, to be interrogated by the first celebrated investigative journalist, Lincoln Steffens. There may have been a hint of intimidation in Roosevelt's denunciation of "muckrakers," the term he coined in an attempt to impugn or at least limit the journalistic ventilation of smoke-filled rooms and the exposure of corporate corruption. But Roosevelt also adhered to what Alexander Hamilton had deemed essential to government: "energy in the executive" (*The Federalist* no. 70). By being so newsworthy, by making "good copy," he attracted favorable notices and inaugurated the centralization of power in the executive branch that is the primary fact of modern American politics. Like the wonderful actor Barry Fitzgerald, "he could steal a scene from a dog." Theodore Roosevelt knew that the blare of headlines dwarfed the impact of editorials, and grasped the rhythm of the news cycle so that his political activities and personal vitality would dominate the front page rather than get buried next to the shipping news. The President leaked, bluffed, blustered, and was so inventive and shrewd that he succeeded in "making. . . modern journalism work for him" (Juergens 5-12, 14-40, 72-79, 267, 268; Boorstin *America* 102; Cornwell, Jr. 7).

But perhaps the most adroit of Presidents in dealing with the press was Roosevelt's distant cousin, who had taken undergraduate pride in editing the Harvard *Crimson* and became a master not only of the art of being "good copy" but of the new medium of radio. One measure of the astonishing directness with which Franklin Roosevelt used the radio is how readily his "fireside chats" could be conjured up by those with memories (or those too young to remember) and yet those chats were delivered only about twice a year. Intimacy and personal warmth were so distinctively his political signature that Roosevelt could say "my old friend" in eleven languages. But his use of the radio was more than temperamentally suitable, it was also a partisan necessity: by 1935, 60% of the nation's press was editorially against the New Deal. In the campaign the following year, among the 150 leading newspapers, those supporting Alfred M. Landon enjoyed a circulation of fourteen million, those favoring

1. This technique was later imitated, with politically harmless implications, by the *Reader's Digest* (Boorstin, Daniel. *The Image*. New York: Atheneum, 1962, 135-136).

Roosevelt had a circulation of under seven million. Among the large dailies, three-fourths were for the Republican challenger and only about a fifth were for the incumbent. One of the biggest dailies, the *Chicago Tribune*, once headlined in 1936 that a "Roosevelt Area in Wisconsin is a Hotbed of Vice" and began a news account of the Republican campaign as follows: "Governor Alf M. Landon brought his great crusade for the preservation of the American foundation of government into Los Angeles" (Boorstin, *America* 107-12; Pollard 773-840; Leuchtenburg 330-31; Schlesinger Jr., *Politics* 7). Such bias could of course cut both ways, however. During the 1940 campaign, for example, an announcer on a Yiddish radio program in Detroit was heard to deliver a fervent message on behalf of Wendell Willkie, to conclude that "this has been a paid political announcement" and then to add his own obiter dictum: "As for me, I'm voting for Roosevelt."²

Against such pervasive opposition to the New Deal among American publishers, Roosevelt had little choice but to outflank what he called "the Tory press." He injected new life into the regular press conference that Woodrow Wilson had originated, but abandoned when it worked to his disadvantage (Juergens 149-51), a forum that has been followed by most subsequent Presidents. (Exceptions have included Herbert Hoover, Lyndon Johnson, and Richard Nixon.) In the press conference Franklin D. Roosevelt could display his own domination of the mechanics of government, could present and elaborate upon his budgets and other policies, could plant rumors and float trial balloons that his cousin Teddy had invented, and—perhaps most importantly—get a feel for citizens' concerns by the kinds of questions that reporters asked him. In this indirect but invaluable fashion, he faced the nation 337 times in his first term, 374 in his second. During his twelve years and one month in office, Roosevelt held an average of nearly two press conferences a week—Nixon by contrast would average seven a year. Corners were cut, however. Access to Roosevelt also exacted a price upon photographers, who played by the implicit rule never to show the President as an invalid who was incapable of walking (Schlesinger Jr., *Imperial* 224; White, *Making* 265; Grossman and Kumar 27-28). As a result few citizens seemed to realize that the President was paralyzed from the hips down. He was privately vituperative against some reporters, some columnists, and some publishers—like Moses Annenberg, the anti-New Deal owner of the *Inquirer* and the *Racing Form*. After Roosevelt growled to his Secretary of the Treasury, "I want Moe Annenberg for dinner," the obedient cabinet officer offered a reassuring reply: "You're going to have him for breakfast—fried," which is pretty much what happened. Convicted of income tax evasion, the publisher was jailed from 1940 until 1942, when he died of a heart attack (Morgan 555-56; Cooney 20, 125-28).

Yet Roosevelt's public reaction to press criticism was characteristically stylish rather than surly or self-pitying. At a Gridiron Club banquet late in 1934, he quoted

2. Author's conversation with Lawrence H. Fuchs, Westton, Massachusetts, 1974.

at length from the vehemently anti-New Deal H. L. Mencken's brilliant and dyspeptic dissection of his profession: "Journalism in America," which a decade earlier had blamed "most of the evils that continue to beset American journalism today" not upon "the rascality of the owners" or the narrowness of business managers, but upon "the stupidity, cowardice and Philistinism of working newspaper men." In attendance, Mencken lost his sense of humor when Roosevelt quoted him, and vowed to "get the son of a bitch"—but never in fact managed to lay a glove on him (Bode 308-11; Schlesinger Jr., *Coming* 565). Until the Second World War changed the circumstances, the threat to use the prosecutory powers of the Federal government, or indirectly through the states, generally lay fallow. And whatever the air of deviousness that still hangs over the reputation of Franklin D. Roosevelt, he did not suffer from what was later politely called a credibility gap; his accessibility helped him to earn the respect of most news reporters who covered him, even as their editors upheld the adversary ideal. Thus the extremes of persecution and of news management were avoided, and columnist Heywood Broun was right to praise him as "the best newspaperman who has ever been President of the United States" (Boorstin, *Image* 20).

Kennedy was much in this mold, though less successfully. What Roosevelt was to radio, Kennedy was to television, from the 1960 debates that helped him edge past Nixon that November to the press conferences that undoubtedly enhanced his popularity beyond his narrow mandate. While already in prep school, Kennedy was unusual in cherishing a subscription to the *New York Times*, whose editorial endorsement in 1960 led him to quip, in the light of the then-ubiquitous subway advertisements for that newspaper, that he got his job through the *New York Times*. Had he lived long enough to retire from the Presidency, Kennedy had thought of becoming a newspaper publisher, and shared Roosevelt's genuine liking for reporters, devouring their stories along with his breakfast (White, *President 1960* 337; Schlesinger Jr., *Thousand* 716-19, 1017; Bradlee 18-19, 74-75, 149-52; Burner 16). Indeed Kennedy was so accessible to some reporters and editors that the independence of the press was somewhat compromised; the adversary ideal was so perforated that Kennedy and the journalists who covered him seemed almost to operate on the buddy system.

That, it may be conceded, was the press's problem, not the President's; but it was also a national problem, a vulnerability to myth at the expense of realistic judgment. During Kennedy's administration, in 1962, John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* had portrayed a newspaper editor, Dutton Peabody (Edmond O'Brien), whose motto became lapidary: "When the legend becomes fact, print the legend." With Kennedy's assassination the age of Camelot, an era that can only be termed innocent, came to a close, even though, in the United States, reports of the death of innocence are always exaggerated. Two examples may suffice. The first is actually from the spring of 1960, when Eisenhower's second term was almost over and when the Central Intelligence Agency's U-2 spy plane was shot down over Soviet territory. At first the administration lied, claiming that Moscow had knocked down a weather plane engaged in a routine mission. Two years earlier the military correspondent of the *New York Times* had penetrated the secret of the top-secret plane, as had two of its other

reporters, but for security reasons the story had not been printed. The May 6, 1960 edition of the aforementioned newspaper did not report that the United States government asserted it was a weather plane. The *Times* simply stated that it *was* a weather plane, and seemed to accept the claim of the federal government rather than trying to learn whether the Soviet charges were true, as in this instance they were (Moynihan 42; Beschloss 234-35, 250, 251, 258).

Less than a year later, with President Kennedy green-lighting Eisenhower's CIA invasion of the Bay of Pigs, the *Times* had managed to piece together a story on the forthcoming assault on Cuba and had planned to give the story the attention it deserved. Reporter Tad Szulc had even learned of the government's order for radio silence on April 18, 1961, an order that made invasion "imminent." The *Times* ran the story on page 1 on April 7: "Anti-Castro Units Trained to Fight at Florida Bases," but toned down Szulc's original account, because Washington bureau chief James (Scotty) Reston and publisher Orville Dryfoos put national security concerns and the Presidential gamble ahead of the "scoop." In effect the newspaper elevated a definition of the national interest—the potential defeat of Fidel Castro—ahead of its own Constitutional and professional interest in disclosing facts bearing on public issues. The *Times* did not explicitly mention the complicity of the CIA. The exposed invasion plans did not therefore generate the sort of opposition that might have flared had the *Times* conspicuously reported what it knew, and the invasion itself was of course a fiasco—not by later standards, but still a fiasco. Kennedy later told managing editor Turner Catledge: "If you had printed more about the operation, you would have saved us from a colossal mistake" (Catledge 259-65; Schlesinger Jr., *A Thousand* 260-61; Slisbury 148-63; Talese 4-5).

The *Times* was not designed to be an auxiliary of the executive branch, and the President became a wiser man, though still not sufficiently respectful of the autonomy of the press. In the fall of 1963, he hinted to the publisher of the *Times* that its Saigon correspondent was "too close to the story" there and should be transferred—David Halberstam's dispatches bore almost no resemblance to the official optimism from Vietnam. But he was not removed from his post, and went on not only to earn a Pulitzer Prize for his reporting but also to be vindicated, broadly speaking, when the political and military failures of American policy in Indochina could no longer be camouflaged, especially during the terms of Johnson and Nixon. Referring to the 1964-68 phase of the conflict, Halberstam recalled:

The White House constantly, constantly lied about what its intentions were. . . . Scotty Reston's phrase "escalating by stealth" is exactly right. . . . They were lying to their own Bureau of the Budget Director, they were lying to the Council of Economic Advisers, they were lying to everybody. . . . That is why they have no credibility (33-34; Grossman and Kumar 10).

The patent attempts by such administrations to hide the failures of foreign and domestic policy have put innocence very much on the defensive. The distance widened from "managed news" to "credibility gap" to coverups that quickly became "inoperative." The Jeffersonian description of journalists "forfeiting all title to belief" would now be more commonly ascribed to the officials that journalists cover. Mendacity was so prevalent by the early 1970s that it inspired the quip that in two centuries the Americans had gone from George Washington, a President who could not tell a lie to Richard Nixon, a President who could not tell the truth. Later, satirist Mort Sahl added that President Reagan could not tell the difference. One of the most misleading assertions that Nixon was fond of making was how grossly unfair and hostile to him the press and especially the electronic media were. Theodore H. White did concede, in his narrative of the 1972 campaign, that the President's animus to the *Washington Post*, for example, was repaid in kind. Nevertheless, as novelist Philip Roth noted, that Nixon "should find this utterly conformist medium, these mammoth corporations like NBC and CBS, to be heretical and treasonous is a perfect measure of his powers of social observation" (White, *Making* 256; Roth 56). In each of Nixon's three Presidential campaigns, he was supported by about 80% of the American press; in 1973, among newspapers which endorsed a Presidential candidate, 93% supported Nixon. The pro-Nixon newspapers enjoyed a circulation of over 30 million, while those backing George McGovern had a tenth of that figure (Schlesinger Jr., *Imperial* 230; White, *Making* 253-54).

Before memories fade and the flags at half-mast are saluted too sentimentally, it is useful to recall how much of a Jeffersonian Nixon was, how far the independence of the press was breached. Kennedy had tried to get a messenger transferred when bad news was delivered and had also angrily cancelled the White House subscription to the *New York Herald-Tribune*—though other factors eventually caused that newspaper to collapse. But newspapermen under Nixon had their telephones tapped and their notes and tapes almost subpoenaed by the Department of Justice. One CBS commentator, Daniel Schorr, was subjected to an FBI investigation; another, Marvin Kalb, to a disinformation campaign, accused of operating a—of all things—a Romanian agent. Nixon's appointees to the Supreme Court made possible the 5-4 decision in *Branzburg v. Hayes* (1972) that confirmed the practice of jailing reporters who decline to reveal their confidential sources to grand juries. As dissenting Justice Potter Stewart (an Eisenhower appointee) phrased it, journalists were to be attached to the "investigative arm of government" (Schlesinger Jr., *Imperial* 230-32; Kutler 175-83; Kalb 205-9).

The danger posed by Vice President Spiro Agnew, when he denounced bias and monopoly in the mass media, was surely exaggerated. He had been very selective in his targets, which were picked for partisan rather than analytical reasons. But the First Amendment is supposed to protect Vice Presidents as well as "nattering nabobs of negativism," and it is hard to suppress the suspicion that any television station or commentator whom Spiro Agnew could intimidate was unlikely to hold ideas worth

considering anyway. What is indefensible, though perfectly legal, was the move to silence the *Washington Post* when Nixon associates challenged the renewal of its licenses for two Florida television stations, an economic threat that caused the *Post*'s stock to drop 28% in two weeks (Schlesinger Jr., *Imperial* 231). What is indefensible, and most notorious of all in the relationship of President Nixon to the press, was the first attempt in American history to impose prior restraint upon newspapers, the very sort of governmental action which the First Amendment was intended to prevent. The *Times* decided to publish the Pentagon Papers in 1971 partly because it had been burned before the Bay of Pigs invasion, and partly because in the intervening decade Reston in particular had learned not to accept automatically an administration's definition of what is news or what is in the national interest (Ungar 99-100, 244, 246). The very excesses of the Nixon administration, in revealing the shallowness and sometimes the shoddiness of what was meant by national security and national interest—i. e., some representatives of the people might be embarrassed—had the effect of creating a wider and healthier distance between the press and the Presidency. The national interest is indeed best served by a skeptical and autonomous press, by access to bad news as well as the gospel. As the Founders recognized in devising obstacles to tyranny, citizens need to sift through the official lies, the misleading announcements, the half-truths.

Nothing in these observations is intended to imply that the press itself has been a reliable protector of republican liberties, or that in any dispute government officials have inevitably been in the wrong. Few Americans who have enjoyed first-hand knowledge of an event, and who have compared their own observations with coverage in the press, are astonished any more at the extent to which everyone from reporters to editors to printers manage to get things bungled. Nineteenth century Presidents hired private secretaries, twentieth century Presidents have press secretaries, while newspeople have often been reluctant to go beyond the official handout and the press release, and have been dependent on the cultivation of official sources. Too often watchdogs are petted so gently that they become lapdogs. For example, an ex-chief of the White House Correspondents Association, "Jack" Horner of the *Washington Star*, earned such notoriety among his colleagues for a willingness to pose queries that Presidential aides had planted that, when Eisenhower began one reply as follows, "Mr. Horner, I'm glad you asked that question," the room burst into laughter (Grossman and Kumar 67).

It is also risky and lamentable that newspaper competition is insufficient or even absent in many towns and cities and even one state. Many citizens of New Hampshire must have found tiresome the *Manchester Union Leader* and the late publisher William Loeb's flair for coining phrases in his newspaper like "Kissinger the Kike?" and "Moscow Muskie" (Cash xviii). They nevertheless have had no other major daily in their state—which hosts the first of the Presidential primaries—to read. Given the prestige which investigative journalists have sometimes enjoyed, draped in the mantle of uncovering coverups from My Lai to Watergate and beyond, a wet blanket

should also be thrown in: reporters have been fallible, and many of them have tended to sensationalize, to degrade, to trivialize. (Once the U. S. Post Office found itself with an envelope on which "The S. O. B." was written, without a street address or even a town. The mail was delivered to the Washington home of Drew Pearson, and had indeed been intended for the dyspeptic columnist [Pilat 44].) Reporters whose beat is the executive branch generally depend upon leaks from officials who are playing their own game within the bureaucracy, to sandbag superiors or to short-circuit policies that they find repugnant. Yet since neither the motives nor the identities of such bureaucrats are commonly indicated, readers and perhaps even journalists themselves may not know how they are being used (Moynihan 45). Despite the saturation of stories associated with the Watergate scandal, for example, the identity of "Deep Throat"—he or she or they or possibly no one at all—is yet to be publicly disclosed. Nor is the motive of Woodward's source in confirming the unravelling of the coverup known, perhaps not even to Woodward (Epstein 6-13, 16-17, 18, 30-31; "Woodward" 17; Rosenbaum 20-22).

The power of the press over politicians may be just as unexamined and insidious. It is not the voting machines or the computers that sometimes determine victory in Presidential primaries. For example, Lyndon Johnson in 1968 and Edmund Muskie in 1972 received the most votes in the Democratic primary in New Hampshire, yet because of other pols bearing polls, especially Eugene McCarthy and George McGovern, the press was more impressed by how well these challengers had performed against the front-runners and wrote its stories accordingly. The journalistic interpretation of the New Hampshire results helped make McCarthy and McGovern look like the winners they weren't. In 1988 the candidacy of Gary Hart was discredited by the single question of a reporter, on the topic of adultery. That journalist, Paul Taylor of the *Washington Post*, later explained why Hart and Senator Joseph Biden had been excised from the Democratic primaries: "Somebody had to prune the field. It simply wasn't practical for voters to make choices among a dozen or more contenders. . . . The assignment fell to the press—there was no one else." Monitors had elevated themselves, rather arrogantly, into the king-making roles that backroom bosses once played (Taylor 9, 10-11, 15-16).

Moreover there are serious problems of rebuttal for almost everyone besides a President of the United States. Ordinary citizens cannot talk back to their TV sets nor count on winning costly libel suits; the power of the press to misjudge and to attack is virtually unchecked by the law of libel, although the threat of such a suit can be devastating to weak or unpopular newspapers. The press is intended, in Jefferson's phrase, to be "a curb on our functionaries," and the press conference emerged in the twentieth century to constitute a kind of curb. "Nobody elected us to do this," veteran Washington correspondent Peter Lisagor once explained, "but since we don't have a parliamentary system in which the President can be questioned on the floor of Congress, the press acquired that role by custom and tradition. We can't make a

strong case for it though.¹³ Yet no check exists upon the press itself except the refusal to buy newspapers and magazines or to buy time on radio and television. In other words the press is granted the privilege of regulating itself—except when the law is violated—the kind of privilege that the framers of the Constitution shrewdly avoided bestowing on the new government itself—and hence the intricate system of balance of powers, checks and balances, and ultimately of course the consent of the governed.

Though journalists are expected, rather heroically, to regulate themselves, they are not required to flash professional credentials. Without internal checks or contrapuntal pressure, newspeople have often been vicious, incompetent, wrong and unfair to Presidents and other people. They have also been too kind, too indulgent. Here is *Newsweek's* Morton Kondracke, often branded a "liberal," writing in 1985, after Ronald Reagan's cancer operation:

The President has cast a kind of golden glow over the past 4 1/2 years, his programs representing a return to bedrock American values and his optimism shielding the country from bitter realities such as burdensome debt, social inequity and international challenge. Reagan is a kind of magic totem against the cold future (Fallows 45; Griffith 80; Weisman 34; Hertzgaard 253, 346).

Interestingly enough, Reagan's reputation as the Great Communicator did not depend on mastery of press conferences, of which he held fewer than any of his predecessors in the previous half century. And although heightened controversy in recent years has undoubtedly provoked greater self-awareness and introspection among journalists, these problems and others are no closer to solution than when Lippmann, Mencken and A. J. Liebling scrutinized their colleagues so mordantly in earlier decades.

It is certainly possible, though few Americans may admit it, that there are questions without answers, problems without solutions. Here one of Lyndon Johnson's favorite stories is pertinent. During an oral examination, a candidate for the position of railroad engineer in Texas was asked what he would do if two trains were approaching one another on the same track at speeds of one hundred miles an hour and they were only fifty yards apart. The engineering candidate deliberated his answer and then replied that in those circumstances he would go fetch his brother. Why?, the candidate was asked. He replied: "He's never seen a train wreck before."

The relationship between the press and the Presidency, while rarely definable as a collision course, has nevertheless been a most imperfect, a bad system. But it could be worse, as can be gleaned from, say, the history of the former Soviet Union. Here is a statement from the Central Committee of the Communist Party on the

3. Interview with Peter Lisagor, February 11, 1976, qtd. in Grossman and Kumar 5; Kutler 170-74.

sixtieth anniversary of *Pravda*, a newspaper whose then editor had earlier served as ambassador to Prague and to Hanoi:

The major tasks of the press are to popularize. . . advanced methods of labor, management and administration; to work persistently for their introduction everywhere, and to educate tirelessly in all Soviet people a conscientious, creative attitude toward work, a feeling of being master of the country and a high sense of responsibility to society. . . . (Kaiser 215)

Compared to that historic articulation of the responsibility of the press, the often nasty record in the United States of its relations with Presidents, a legacy of mistrust and misunderstanding, seems less somber and dispiriting. Instead, there is something rather touching about a remark that Harry Truman uttered five years after leaving the White House. His reminiscence partly validates the Founders' vision of popular sovereignty—though two centuries later—citizens can vigorously transmit their views with FAX, overnight polls, 800 numbers, FedEx, air shuttles, talk radio programs and on-line bulletin boards. The White House e-mail address on America Online is "clinton pz." Truman's recollection bears meditation as a clue to the partial success of the national experiment in self-government: "When I was President, I felt that I always learned more about what was on the minds of the people from the reporters' questions than they could possibly learn from me" (Blumenthal 44; Truman 25-31; Schlesinger Jr., *Imperial* 225).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Beschloss, Michael R. *Mayday: Eisenhower, Khrushchev and the U-S Affair*. New York: Harper & Row, 1986.
- Blumenthal, Sidney. "Letter from Washington: The Syndicated Presidency." *New Yorker* 5 Apr. 1993: 42-47.
- Bode, Carl. *Mencken*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969.
- Boorstin, Daniel J. *America and the Image of Europe: Reflections on Modern Thought*. Cleveland: Meridian, 1960.
- . *The Image*. New York: Atheneum, 1962.
- Bradlee, Benjamin C. *Conversations with Kennedy*. New York: Pocket Books, 1976.
- Burner, David. *John F. Kennedy and a New Generation*. Glenview, Ill.: Scott Foresman, 1988.
- Carringer, Robert L. *The Making of Citizen Kane*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.
- Cash, Kevin. *Who the hell is William Loeb?* Manchester, N. H.: Amoskeag Press, 1975.
- Catledge, Turner. *My Life and The Times*. New York: Harper & Row, 1971.
- Cooney, John. *The Annenbergs*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982.

- Cornwell, Elmer E., Jr. *The Presidency and the Press*. Morristown, N. J.: General Learning Corporation, 1974.
- Epstein, Edward Jay. *Between Fact to Fiction: The Problem of Journalism*. New York: Vintage, 1975.
- Fallows, James. "The New Celebrities of Washington." *New York Review of Books* XXXIII.10 (12 Jun. 1986): 41-49.
- Fishkin, Shelley Fisher. *From Fact to Fiction: Journalism and Imaginative Writing in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- Griffith, Thomas. "Mr. Optimism Meets the Skeptical Fouth Estate." *Time* 23 Nov. 1981.
- Grossman, Michael Baruch and Martha Joynt Kumar. *Portraying the President: The White House and the News Media*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981
- Halberstam, David. "Getting the Story in Vietnam." *Commentary* 39.1 (Jan. 1965): 30-34.
- Hertsgaard, Mark. *On Bendend Knee: The Press and the Reagan Presidency*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988.
- Juergens, George. *News from the White House: The Presidential-Press Relationship in the Progressive Era*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981.
- Kaiser, Robert G. *Russia: The People and the Power*. New York: Atheneum, 1976.
- Kalb, Marvin. *The Nixon Memo*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Kierkegaard, Søren. "The Journals (1850-1854)." *A Kierkegaard Anthology*. Ed. Robert Bretall. New York: Modern Library, 1946.
- Kutler, Stanley I. *The Wars of Watergate: The Last Crisis of Richard Nixon*. New York: Knopf, 1990.
- Leuchtenburg, William E. *Franklin d. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-40*. New York: Harper & Row, 1963.
- Levy, Leonard W., ed. *Freedom of the Press from Zenger to Jefferson: Early American Libertarian Theories*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966.
- . *Jefferson and Civil Liberties: The Darker Side*. New York: Quadrangle, 1973.
- Morgan, Ted, ed. *FDR: A Biography*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985.
- Moynihan, Daniel Patrick. "The Presidency and the Press." *Commentary* 51 (Mar. 1971).
- Murphy, Paul L. *The Meaning of Freedom of Speech: First Amendment Freedoms from Wilson to FDR*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1972.
- Pilat, Oliver. *Drew Pearson: An Unauthorized Biography*. New York: Pocket Books, 1973.
- Pollard, James E. *The Presidents and the Press*. New York: MacMillen, 1947.
- Potter, David. *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American character*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954.
- Rossiter, Clinton and Jame Lare, eds. Introduction. *The Essential Lippmann: A Political Philosophy for Liberal Democracy*. New York: Vintage Books, 1965.

- Roth, Philip. "On Our Gang." *Reading Myself and Others*. Ed. Philip Roth. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1975.
- Rosenbaum, Ron. "Ah, Watergate!" *New Republic* 186 (23 Jun. 1982): 15-16.
- Salisbury, Harrison E. *Without Fear or Favor: The New York Times and its Times*. New York: Times Books, 1980.
- Schlesinger, Arthur M., Jr. *The Age of Jackson*. Boston: Little, 1945.
- . *The coming of the New Deal*. Vol. 2 of *The Age of Roosevelt*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959.
- . *The Imperial Presidency*. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1973.
- . *The Politics of Upheaval*. Vol. 3 of *The Age of Roosevelt*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960.
- . *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965.
- Swanberg, W. A. *Citizen Hearst*. New York: Bantam, 1967.
- Talese, Gay. *The Kingdom and the Power*. New York: World, 1969.
- Taylor, Paul. *See How They Run: Electing the President in an Age of Mediaocracy*. New York: Knopf, 1990.
- Truman, Harry S. "My View of the Presidency." *Look* 22 (11 Nov. 1958): 25-31.
- Ungar, Sanford J. *The Papers and the Papers*. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1972.
- Weisberger, Bernard A. *The American Newspaperman*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961.
- Weisman, Steven R. "The President and the Press: The Art of Controlled Access." *New York Times Magazine* 14 Oct. 1984: 34-37.
- White, Theodore H. *The Making of the President 1960*. New York: Atheneum, 1961.
- . *The Making of the President 1972*. New York: Atheneum, 1973.
- "Woodward on the Record—Sort of." *Time* 3 May 1976: 17.