

PUTTING THINGS IN PERSPECTIVE

Remarks of James Russell Wiggins, president of the American Antiquarian Society, former editor of The Washington Post, and former U. S. Ambassador to the United Nations, at the New England Sigma Delta Chi dinner, Worcester, Mass., June 23, 1975, following the ceremonies designating the American Antiquarian Society headquarters as an historic site in journalism.

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This is the second time I have participated in ceremonies dedicating sites of historic importance to journalism selected by Sigma Delta Chi.

The first occasion was in 1968 when the society selected *Gunston Hall*, the home of George Mason in Virginia. So, on this occasion, when the object of attention and dedication is the great library of the American Antiquarian Society called into being by Isaiah Thomas, I am struck by the varying roles of these two men.

Isaiah Thomas came from a home so poor that he was apprenticed to a printer at the age of six, by his widowed mother. He had almost no formal schooling. By the age of twelve he virtually took over the management of a printshop. He rose by his own drive and determination to become the editor and publisher of *THE MASSACHUSETTS SPY*, one of the 37 colonial weeklies, and one of the foremost in advocating the American Revolution. In 1775 he fled from British-occupied Boston to Worcester. Here, in 1812, he founded the American Antiquarian Society.

George Mason came from one of the first families of Virginia, inherited a great plantation, was privately tutored in his youth, and substituted for formal higher education tireless reading of his uncle's elegant library.

The Revolutionary role of Isaiah Thomas was that of the propagandist; the role of Mason was that of the scholar and philosopher and law-giver. Mason was a leader in formulating the policies, principles and philosophy that, after 1765, paved the way for Independence. Thomas was a leader in popularizing those principles.

Mason helped draft the non-importation Association which Virginia adopted at the time of the Townsend duties. He wrote the Fairfax Resolves of July 1774, which the Continental Congress accepted as a definition of the Colonial position. He influenced Washington, Jefferson, and Madison. He framed the Declaration of Rights in 1775 — on which Jefferson drew for the first part of the Declaration of Independence, and which later became the basis of the Bill of Rights.

Thomas took this intellectual material and helped make it into the raw material of popular opinion. It was a combination that produced the American Revolution, the partnership of great intellectual leaders and popular newspapers.

This partnership of intellectual genius and printing craft continued after the revolution. Papers like the SPY and thinkers like Mason combined first to produce a Revolution; and then to turn the destructive forces of Revolution into the constructive channels of nation-building. That they succeeded in making this transition is one of the remarkable aspects of the American Revolution, which unlike many revolutions, did not devour its children.

Yet, neither Thomas nor Mason, were blind and unvarying supporters of the new government. Mason opposed the Constitution (notwithstanding that he was one of the five foremost speakers in the convention), and his opposition showed his prescience for he resisted it for the lack of a bill of rights and for its failure to abolish slavery. Thomas, when the time came, was capable of sectional bias against the War of 1812, along with most of New England.

Neither of them, however, could be accused of a

“habit of dissent” amounting to an unremitting opposition. They were not 18th Century Maoists seeking a permanent revolution. The Revolution in which one took a leading part as a philosopher and the other as a propagandist ended at Yorktown. They might dissent from the policies of the new government; but they did not wish to destroy it, as they had helped to destroy British government in North America.

Americans of their generations, by and large, successfully reconciled themselves to the end of the Revolution. They knew when to stop being revolutionaries. It sometimes is a hard thing to know when the time has arrived to stop being a revolutionary. It sometimes is difficult to decide when the overthrow of a government is too important to allow honest man to treat of its errors generously; and when the preservation of a government is so important as to impel honest men to treat its shortcomings indulgently.

By 1775, Isaiah Thomas, and his colleagues were not worrying about dealing generously with the British government imposed on the colonies and occupying the port of Boston; after Yorktown, they would have to decide that some generosity might be necessary to maintain the country they called into being.

Washington and Adams thought the Anti-Federalist press lacked the toleration essential to maintain domestic tranquility. Later, Jefferson thought the “artillery of the press” oftentimes destructive. It is a hard balance to maintain.

Sometimes, one worries a little about that balance today.

We have also come through a revolution of sorts; and sometimes there is reason to fear that some of the revolutionaries have forgotten that their war has been won. The habit of revolution persists into the peace. Having become accustomed to defaming a hated government, patriots sometimes turn the same weapons on their own government with which they have replaced it.

We have been through a new American Revolution — in a manner of speaking. We have emerged from it with a purged domestic government with higher moral and political standards and a foreign policy of lower posture. But some of the “revolutionaries” who brought the change about, unlike the revolutionary leaders of 200 years ago, seem not to have heard of their “Cornwallis” and “Yorktown”.

The first American Revolution and the more recent one both demonstrated abundantly the power of the press to destroy confidence in existing institutions and to arouse a desire for an alternative. This negative role is one most congenial to the press. The news, by its nature, is largely negative. Its negative aspects derive from human nature and not from the nature of the press. It is our natural instinct and impulse to dwell on what is wrong more than on what is right. This is often a good thing, and not unhealthy or damaging most of the time, but there are some circumstances in which it may be misleading. Some of those circumstances may now exist.

The press of the past few years (like the colonial press from 1765 to 1776) emphasized the defects of governments in the United States.

The defects needed emphasis.

As we emerge into a new era, it seems to me, we need to examine the intensity of the scrutiny which we focus upon our institutions. A press more skillful in inquiry and in the presentation of news than ever in the past has the power to place government conduct and all aspects of American life under more intense examination than any press that ever has existed anywhere in the world. Its very skill and capacity, along with the good it accomplishes, may distort perspective, warp judgment, and inspire mistaken estimates of the relative worth of our institutions.

This is more likely to be true, in my opinion, because of the uneven scrutiny that the press exercises. The intensity of the light it turns on contemporary society in the

United States is much greater than that it directed to the past and far brighter than that it turns upon events and governments abroad and immeasurably more penetrating than the light it can turn on the possible evils of any alternative system of the future.

The very brilliance of the contemporary press as a critic today sometimes leaves the impression that there have been few deviations from rectitude in American governments of the past, few military reverses, few economic mistakes. The abuses of power, the departures from the letter of the law, the disregard of the constitution that occurred long ago are obscured both by the weaknesses of the national memory and by the less efficient press examination of governmental conduct in earlier decades.

Our short memories, our superficial press attention to history, our romantic notions of the past, our journalistic infatuation with the "unprecedented", create an illusion of relative political purity and social serenity in the past that makes contemporary derelictions more odious. Those who criticize government today, like those who criticized 200 years ago, have, as a part of their armament, the popular illusion of a golden past from which there was a fall and a departure.

There is an even more emphatic disparity between the ability of the press to scrutinize our own country and its governments, and its ability to scrutinize other countries and their governments. While in the United States, the right to know has steadily expanded, over much of the earth's surface it has steadily diminished. Only now and then in our media do we get a glimpse of what is going on in the Soviet Union. At intervals we get books like Solzhenitsyn's *THE FIRST CIRCLE*, and the *GULAG ARCHIPELAGO*, like Constant's *THE GREAT TERROR*, or documents like Khrushchev's report to the Twentieth Party Congress, and for an instant, the ghastly terror of life behind the Iron Curtain is illumined as though by a flash of lightning on a dark and stormy night.

If the proverbial man from Mars descended into our

midst, and informed himself solely by the contents of the American media, he would be likely to conclude that in the United States, crime is rampant, traffic accidents are commonplace, highway deaths a daily phenomena, crimes of violence a part of our life style, political corruption endemic, air accidents an almost daily occurrence, general social malaise the prevailing climate, while at the same time, he would be impressed by the fact that there is little or no crime in the Soviet Union, no traffic accidents, no highway deaths, no political corruption, no airplane accidents, and a general social climate marked by the eager cooperation of everyone from the Young Pioneers to the aged to hasten a Communist millenium.

Fortunately, Americans are not so naive as to arrive at this conclusion, but the daily drip of disclosure that parades a succession of weaknesses and errors about the American system is not matched by the same perpetual train of revelation of wrong-doing, error and disaster in the Soviet Union.

Nor is there column after column of news about what goes wrong in the Peoples Republic of China.

The great information network that, but lately, brought into American living rooms the war in South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia has been severed. It is not conceivable that millions of people could have been summarily exiled from Phnom Phenh without dreadful cruelty, terrible hardship, incredible deprivation, but the march into the countryside has gone relatively unreported. There has been nothing to match the TV screen image of the nude child fleeing napalm bombs. There has been no photograph to parallel the pistol execution wrought by Saigon's chief of security. A vast curtain of silence has descended upon a stricken Indo China. The vanquished peoples of three countries have had the good grace to sink silently into the grave, mercifully sparing American sensibilities the sight of their anguish on TV screens and in newspapers.

It may be unavoidable. But there is a distortion in the perspective of popular judgment on the relative hard-

ships of a war to resist conquest and a peace achieved by submission to conquest. We watched the anguish of defense on our TV screens every night. We are not burdened by the cries of the sick, wounded and dying who have fallen to Communist tyranny. The camera does not lie about what it sees; but until it is omnipresent, it tells a constructive lie about the relative horrors or the terrors it can see and those it cannot observe.

Let us say that over many decades, our Television brings into the parlor almost daily, in living color and with stereoptican sound, the sights and noise of battle fields where small nations struggle to preserve themselves from the aggression of their larger neighbors, exhibiting before our eyes the terror, anguish, violence and brutality of war.

And let us say, over the same decades, we are unable to present to the same audience, the shame, terror, suppression and assassination wrought by tyrants who succeed in overcoming their neighbors, who choose not to fight. Will a people who have had such a presentation over many years be able to arrive at an informed and intelligent judgment, if and when they may be confronted with the hard choice between resistance to conquest and submission tyranny?

The news presents an inadequate picture of the shortcomings of the past and of the follies in foreign lands and to that extent exaggerates the virtues of past or present alternatives to American institutions, establishments and officials. The press is similiary handicapped in any effort to disclose the injustices of that other foreign country — the future. There are no reporters in the land of Tomorrow. So the very evidently defective Today must suffer by comparison with an ideal Tomorrow that exists only in the imagination of naive people who are deluded by the notion that man is perfectible, not just improveable.

This kind of partiality in the disclosures of the news ultimately may present any existing system at such a disadvantage that it seems relatively less acceptable to society than a poorly remembered past, an only partially reported present, or a fanciful future. And if it does, we

may live to see a time when public confidence is so shaken in the government about which we knew a great many bad things that an outraged citizenry turns to alternative systems recommended only by public ignorance of their defects and injustices.

Without abandoning the alert detection and energetic exploitation of news about the defects in the government of our own country, how can we give the news that perspective which it would have if we could report with equal facility the news about the defects of governments in other countries? Without concealing the undeniable cruelties and violence of war in defense of our interests or our own freedoms, how can we keep them in perspective when we are unable to report the violence and cruelty of those who wage war against us or against our friends?

These are troublesome questions for me. I can look back on a half-century of American newspapering in which, so far as I know, I have not hesitated to uncover and report wrong-doing, wherever, and whenever I have found it. Surely this is a function of the press. It is a function with which we cannot dispense without imperiling our system. But how do we restore the impartiality that would exist if we were as free to uncover and report the wrong-doing of every other system of government? How do we escape the role of agents provocateur, arousing the citizens of this country against their own institutions?

How do we give perspective to disclosures about the shortcomings of our own government? How do we fill the void in our reporting caused by our inability to turn upon others the same bright light of inquiry that we so sharply focus on our own country? How do we keep a balance between our negative reporting and our constructive reporting? How to give readers a healthy, balanced view of contemporary revelations of wrong doing — a view that will not let them either relax over iniquity or inspire them to turn to an alternative about the shortcomings of which we have not adequately informed them?

To conceal or suppress accounts of our own failures

certainly would be misguided policy, divesting Americans of the very information the democratic system requires. To conceal or suppress (however unwillingly) the accounts of the failures of other nations, at the same time, distorts perspective, misleads judgment, and warps opinion on the relative merits of rival regimes.

The "artillery of the press", from 1765 to 1775, shattered public confidence in the British government of North America so completely that the actual resort to arms was merely the physical climax of total alienation. If this drumfire of criticism and disclosure, maintained by 37 small and scattered weekly newspapers, was able to destroy the public confidence in British institutions, can we assume that the immensely more effective "artillery" of our modern system of communications will not impair public faith and confidence in the government of the United States?

Recently we have been much excited about the transgressions of the Central Intelligence Agency, as we should be if we value the preservation of our civil rights and constitutional safeguards. But how do we put even this in perspective. It would be too transparent if we were to insert an italic paragraph in every CIA story saying: "Of course, these offenses aren't a patch on what is being done by every other secret police in the world". We may believe that. A note of explanation of this kind would sound defensive and apologetic, and it wouldn't be convincing.

We are left with the uncomfortable sensation that sometimes we are unfair to our own country and its government.

This sensation first disturbed me in a major way in 1951. A committee of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, paid a visit on President Harry Truman, at the White House. We went there to urge the President to amend Executive Order 10-290 which set up the categories of classified documents and distributed the authority for putting on public papers the stamps of RESTRICTED, CONFIDENTIAL, SECRET, and TOP SECRET. We wished to limit the number of categories; to restrict the

total number of documents subject to classification, and to greatly curtail authority to use the designations.

When we had completed our presentation, President Truman turned upon me. His face was flushed. His dander was up. His patriotism was aroused. He was no longer just the President of the United States. He was very much Captain Harry S. Truman, the commander of Battery D. And he was very much the Missouri boy who read everything he could find about the history of his United States of America. "Damn it", he said warmly. "It's your country, too, you know".

And so, I commit to a rising generation of newspapermen the task of finding a solution to the problem of giving perspective to a news report that is curiously variable in the fierce light it focuses upon the weaknesses of our time and country, and the light that it turns upon the flaws of other times and countries. I hope to spur them on to the task with Harry Truman's brisk reminder: "It's your country, too, you know".