

The Press and the United Nations

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From forty years' experience of the wretched guess-work of
the newspapers of what is not done in open daylight, and of their
falsehood, even as to that, I rarely think them worthreading, and
almost never worth notice. (1)

It is a melancholy truth, that a suppression of the press
could not more completely deprive the nation of its benefits, than is
done by its abandoned prostitution to falsehood. Nothing can now be
believed which is seen in a newspaper. The real extent of this state
of misinformation is known only to those who are in situations to
confront facts within their knowledge with the lies of the day. I
really look with commiseration over the great body of my fellow
citizens, who, reading newspapers, live and die in the belief that
they have known something of what has been passing in the world of
their time. (2)

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I have chosen, for several reasons, to begin my remarks
today with these two paragraphs from Thomas Jefferson, the first
from a letter to James Monroe and the second from his celebrated
letter to John Norvell.

The first reason is that these somewhat critical remarks,
in Jefferson's closing years, show that occasional impatience with
the press must be expected even from friends like Jefferson, who,

in the words of Frank Mott, "stands out as the foremost exponent in history of the necessity of a free press in any system of popular or democratic government".
(3)

The second reason is that these quotations show that criticism does not imply a permanent hostility to the press. Even in Jefferson's case, after the bitter Monroe and Norvell letters, he wrote just before his death: "...the press...is also the best instrument for enlightening the mind of man, and improving him as a rational, moral, and social being".
(4)

The third reason is that after only four months in public office, I think I understand the tone of Thomas Jefferson's critical letters better than I ever did before; and, at the same time, retain the confidence he had in the press as a part of our democratic system.

To a certain extent, public officials and public journals are involved in an inevitable competition and conflict that is healthy in our society. I tried to define the difference between the role of a diplomat and the role of a newspaperman, last October, when I had fresh occasion to think on the matter. The diplomat, I decided, has a duty to further the interests of his country, whether it makes news or not; and the newspaperman has a duty to get the news whether it furthers the interests of his country or not. Now I am not wholly satisfied with this definition, but I think it will do as a means of emphasizing an essential difference in approach. I must say, on my own part, I never became enough of a diplomat to be indifferent to what made news and, as a newspaperman, I never was so completely preoccupied with getting news as to be indifferent to the interests of the country, and I suspect that few other newspapermen ever are

wholly indifferent on this point.

But there is at least a difference of emphasis on what is of the first priority. And this philosophical difference between journalists and public men is heightened by a difference in focus. Public men, except those at the very top, have their interest riveted on a particular scene or a specific issue; but the editors of newspapers are compelled by the nature of their craft and the obligations of their trade to be generalists. What a generalist thinks needs emphasizing in the news is not likely ever to much suit a particularist.

The recognition of these circumstances prepared me for differing views with my former colleagues. There is another point of difference between officials and journalists upon which I must touch. I cannot honestly say that the careful scrutiny of the press coverage of the United Nations last winter has disclosed to me a single instance in which I thought a newspaper had exaggerated the importance of any international event with which I was connected, or over-emphasized my contribution to that event. I regard this as a great tribute to the restraint of colleagues who frequently must have wished to give me greater attention than I deserved. Some mornings, as I opened The Washington Post and the New York Times, I could hardly suppress the wish that my former colleagues had not triumphed more frequently over their strict journalistic inhibitions in this respect. I am sure that most public men share this point of view. The vertical pronoun is such a small character that it is amazing how difficult it is to get it into print.

A few months experience at the United Nations, during which I was busily engaged in trying to learn a new trade, has not equipped

me to make a final pronouncement on the success with which the correspondents there plied my old trade. But it has given me some impressions, and I am going to share them with you.

I left with the sensation that able reporters were finding it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to get at the story of the United Nations, that they were not able to get hold of the story in a way that gave them professional satisfaction and that they did not get, on the whole, an exhibition of lively interest and concern from the editors who made their assignments and handled their copy.

The period under my study, I must concede, was one of more than ordinary difficulty for the U.N. correspondents. They were laboring under the competition of a national election campaign. They were dealing with words about a world situation in which acts of international character were commanding news attention from Vietnam to the Middle East and to Africa. But even these intrusions, I think, did not make the situation wholly abnormal.

I put the difficulties of the correspondents down to three major factors. First, to the structure and nature of the United Nations itself. Second, to the prevailing view of the United Nations in the United States. Third, to the disenchantment of news editors with the United Nations dateline.

Every editor in the United States is aware that the United Nations is not a national legislative body, I am sure, but I am afraid that when editors sit down to make assignments for covering it and when they are confronted with news decisions about it, experience with legislative bodies influences news judgments. They know that in Congress and State Legislatures, the focus of news is on actual passage of bills

and debate is habitually dealt with in a very summary way, except when the greatest issues are at stake. Words do not command great attention in our legislatures and sessions of Congress unless they are associated with imminent legislative action. It is the possibility of passage or defeat of bills that gives legislative sessions newsworthiness.

The 23rd session of the United Nations General Assembly, on the other hand, commenced with 23 days of general debate, (111 speeches) devoid of any central focus, lacking any coherent direction, mostly unlivened by immediate relevance and seldom endowed with the genius of eloquence. One understands why this is so. The Assembly is not there just to legislate, it is a convocation of sovereign powers for whom the floor of the assembly is a forum of the world at which they can get an audience for national views. It probably is necessary to have such a forum, and occasionally, the cumulative effect of the general debate is not without news value. In the 23rd General Assembly, it was a matter of some moment that 77 representatives denounced the occupation of Czechoslovakia. There have been other Assembly sessions given historic importance by a single theme. But the endless Niagara of words, largely devoted to parochial concerns, has a deadening effect on every session of the Assembly. It is not possible to sustain interest in such a general flow of words. The sheer volume of utterance dulls the interest, not only in the General Debate itself, but in utterance more relevant to action which takes place later in the session. The prevailing reaction of the press is inattention induced by sheer boredom. This annual ordeal, I am afraid, poisons the U.N. dateline for weeks to come.

The multilateral diplomacy practiced at the United Nations

is a phenomena of world politics that is not novel enough any longer to elicit attention for that reason alone, but it is novel enough so that few reporters who have been accustomed to covering other diplomatic events and few who have gained their experience covering domestic political events are quite prepared for its eccentricities. Some of them, I suspect, never will get prepared for them, or reconciled to the curious difference between the behavior of diplomats in their own countries and in New York.

The fact that the United Nations General Assembly is a congress of states and not a legislative or parliamentary body imposes another news-destroying characteristic upon its proceedings. The President of the Assembly and the chairmen of the committees find it quite difficult, if not impossible, to impose upon these bodies the rules of relevance and order that exist in parliamentary bodies. The permanent representatives at the United Nations address themselves to whatever issues they please and at such length as suits their wishes, with very little interposition or interruption by the chair. This adds to the U.N.'s reputation for verbosity.

The U.N., from a news point of view, has a further structural awkwardness in the multiplicity of its organs and committees. The individual correspondent would find it impossible to cover them adequately if all of them were always equally newsworthy. The lone reporter is condemned to a considerable amount of hearsay reporting since he cannot be omnipresent.

Editors and reporters probably cannot avoid reflecting in their news gathering and news selecting a certain American disillusionment with the United Nations. No doubt we expected too much

of the United Nations at the beginning and when it failed to fulfill our own euphoric hopes we were quick to condemn it or discount it for not having capabilities equal to our exaggerated expectations. The inability of the United Nations to deal with the war in Vietnam, the Middle East, the invasion of Czechoslovakia and the war in Nigeria have contributed to a national feeling of its impotence. (It does not matter that Americans would be quite unwilling to give the United Nations powers that would end that impotence). We are nonetheless disappointed in it as an instant world policeman.

The attitude of news editors is a subject on which I have made no surveys. But unless most of the reporters with whom I have talked are mistaken about it, news desks are not fascinated with the United Nations dateline. This impression among reporters has a very demoralizing effect on their own endeavors. Many of them feel that it is a waste of time to explore to the end the news leads they get. They feel that in-depth reporting on the day to day events at the United Nations is unwelcome and unwanted. And their own experience with stories trying to explain spot news events lends some credence to their judgment.

There are some other problems of news coverage at the U.N. that are common to the whole news scene but only painfully evident in New York. I have been impressed for ^Iyears with the difficulty that the press of the United States has in covering utterance. It is infinitely more competent at covering action. I know of no wholly satisfactory formula for covering speeches and statements. The only completely satisfactory method is that involving the publication of a full text -- hardly a possibility for all utterance that is reported.

But my own experience at the U.N. tends to fortify a long-held view that the English method of abstracting speeches (reduced to whatever length available) is better than the American method of seizing upon a single sentence or phrase. The news-lead method is particularly disconcerting if a public man is trying to make a balanced, pro and con statement. He is likely to find that the press has picked on one or the other alternative, to the exclusion of other. Let me see if I can make this a little clearer by illustration. At the close of the 23rd General Assembly, I tried to summarize my own parting estimate of the United Nations by saying that I thought it less successful in dealing with great power rivalries in the Security Council than its founders had hoped, because of the veto and other circumstances; but that I thought the United Nations, having failed to deal successfully with all the wars of this century, was probably doing more to forestall the wars of the next century than anyone had anticipated. I thought its greatest achievements were in preventing wars of the future ^{rather} than in handling the consequences of the wars of the past. Most of the news play of that summary focused on the failure to deal with current crisis to the total exclusion of any mention of the more hopeful estimate of its future efficacy. Now there is some justification for this -- in that the estimate of the present is an opinion of something already happened while the forecast is a guess at something that will happen. Nevertheless, it seemed to me then, as it does now, that my total view was represented as being far more gloomy than I had intended and far more discouraged than the full text of my remarks. But I do not cite this in particular complaint or irritation -- but only as the kind of hazard involved in the conventional and almost habitual American newspaper treatment of

utterance. As an editor I made a feeble effort or two to use the British method but I found an almost insurmountable objection to the change by both editors and reporters.

Coverage of the United Nations also suffers, in my opinion, from a general preoccupation of the press with the immediate and controversial. These matters get attention. The relatively non-controversial and long-range questions have to struggle for attention. Yet, in my view, the great work of the United Nations is being done in connection with long-range problems. The United Nations Development Program, under Paul Hoffman, is one of many economic and social activities of the U.N. which is continuously at work on situations that would, if neglected, produce some problems in the next century. It does get some attention, but not enough to make the country and the Congress very conscious of its endeavors. It is the kind of program about which editors and politicians have been talking for years -- a program in which the United States puts up only part of the money with other nations furnishing the rest; a program in which grant money is only seed money and not a vast expenditure to literally subsidize growth. But notwithstanding these credentials, Congress was able to cut the appropriations so that the United States was the only great power to cut its 1968 contributions to UNDP. The figure is going back up this year, but it ought to go up faster and farther and I think it would if UNDP got as much attention as more controversial programs.

And so it is with the Economic and Social Council, the Seabeds Committee, the Committee on Outer Space, the Food and Agricultural Organization, the World Health Organization, the United Nations Childrens Fund, the Expanded Program of Technical Assistance

and other agencies going forward quietly with their humanitarian work around the world.

In my own view, history will ultimately disclose that the most important act of the United Nations 23rd General Assembly, was the authorization of an international conference on the human environment in 1972. So I recently checked over the coverage of that proposal in many American newspapers. I think it got more attention in the Los Angeles Times than in any other American newspaper -- a circumstance that must be attributed to the admirable competence of Earl Foell of the Los Angeles Times, to the receptivity of the Los Angeles Times news editors to news about the U.N. generally, and to the advantage that arises from the West Coast time lag by which the Times profits. The New York Times gave the matter some attention news-wise and more attention editorially. The Minneapolis Tribune had one story running about a column. The Christian Science Monitor printed two columns about it. The wire services gave it some attention, with William Oatis describing it in his wrap up story as "the greatest innovation" of the session of the Assembly. But there were some curious lapses -- The Washington Post gave the adoption of the resolution two small paragraphs of 75 words on an inside page. And its treatment was not exceeded by some others. It came to me later that the resolution was under the almost fatal handicap of unanimous adoption. The sponsors would have got a lot more attention for it if they had staged a stiff fight in the Assembly -- preferably with the U.S. arrayed against the Soviet Union, or at least with the developed against the underdeveloped nations. As a sort of standard of news judgment on this particular story, I am relying, I must confess,

on the detached opinion which led to the publication of the full text of the speech by the United States Representative in the Ellsworth American of Ellsworth, Maine.

But even controversy did not always get attention for U.N. proceedings. The debate on the proposal to put South Africa out of the United Nations Committee on Trade and Development was a very lively controversy, filled with the most serious implications for the future of the United Nations, but coverage was not as extensive as I expected.

A curious lapse in U.N. reporting, it seems to me, is the lack of much analysis of U.N. Assembly votes. Some very curious alignments appear on very strategic roll calls, but there is no analysis of the kind that greets major votes in Congress or State Legislatures and little comment on some revealing changes and shifts in alignment that occur from time to time. I have inquired into this and have been told by U.N. correspondents that their papers are not interested.

It seems to me that the press as a whole does not exploit fully the opportunity presented it by the presence at the General Assembly of the foremost diplomats of the world. Many an editor who would be glad to print an interview of a column or two with a foreign minister, if it involved dispatching his own correspondent half way round the world, seems curiously uninterested in what the man has to say when he comes to New York for a General Assembly session. I think there is a cost syndrome at work in the whole press -- in addition to the usual standards of news judgment there is the added factor of the cost and inconvenience of getting the news. Foreign ministers are just too cheaply and conveniently available in New York. But I think this

judgment ought to be revised, partly because of the newsworthiness of the international figures themselves, and partly because their conversations with each other constitute an important contribution to world diplomacy. What they say to each other in New York is a matter that ought to be our great concern.

I wish I could say that I helped the press improve its coverage of the U.N. but I cannot say that. I am afraid I was no help at all. This was mainly because I decided the instant I got there that I would see the press in only one posture -- on the record. During my brief tenure, I told no one anything off the record or for background. I made myself available to any reporter who asked to see me but I distributed no inside information or background dope. While most editors say this is the way they wish to have it, I now frankly don't believe it. I believe I am coming to agree with the press advisers at the U.N. and with the reporters themselves who all recommend background briefings for the American press. One would like to think that this is not necessary, but a brief experience has convinced me it is necessary if one wishes to have the purposes and policies of the government understood. The mission which does none of this is at a disadvantage in an international community where others do it regularly. I believe there were misinterpretations and misunderstandings of American policy that might have been prevented by careful and thoughtful background briefings.

In closing, I would like to urge American newspapers to give a more extensive and intensive coverage of the United Nations. To say that it should be better covered is not to speak in praise or derogation of it. If it is failing in its broad purposes and programs, your readers

ought to know it; just as they ought to know it if it is succeeding. Great issues depend upon its success or failure. It cannot be a matter of indifference to anyone concerned about the future of our own country or the future of the world. If it is not adequate to the exigencies of the current world conflicts we should be looking to its improvement. If it needs more help in dealing with the crises of the next century that help should be provided.

I know that every editor here would give a front page play to a story that the United Nations building at New York was on fire. Let me tell you gentlemen, off the record, and for background, there is a bigger fire than that to be observed at the United Nations. It is not the building that is burning. It is our world that is on fire -- on fire from the unextinguished blazes of the last war, threatened by a population explosion with which we have only begun to cope, imperiled by destruction of the human environment that grows year by year more menacing to human survival, harassed by the ideological rivalries that are growing rather than diminishing and driven by the gathering division between the have and the have-not nations.

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FOOTNOTES

- (1) The Writings of Thomas Jefferson, Lipscomb and Bergh, Vol. XIV p. 430, Letter to James Monroe, February 4, 1816.
- (2) Ibid. Vol. XI, p. 123, Letter to John Norvell, June 11, 1807.
- (3) Jefferson and the Press, Frank L. Mott, Louisiana State University, 1943, p. 65.
- (4) Ibid: p. 65.