Remarks Of
James Russell Wiggins, Editor and Publisher
of The Ellsworth American
on
PATRIOTS AND PRINTERS
prepared for delivery at the
Annual Convention Of The
Society of Professional Journalists
Sigma Delta Chi
Independence Mall
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
at 4 p. m., November 13, 1975

Two hundred years ago, in the Fall of 1775, the Second Continental Congress, which had convened here in May, wrestled with the anguishing issues involved in moving forward from resistance to rebellion, from the goal of reconciliation with Great Britain to that of Independence from Great Britain.

The delegates hesitated and vacillated, to the annoyance and alarm of radicals like Sam Adams and John Adams. They moved slowly, unwillingly, reluctantly and half-heartedly toward what to only a few of them was the inevitable step of separation from the mother country.

The utmost of their wishes they said “is that things may return to the old channel”.

On July 6, they had adopted a “Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Taking Up Arms,” in which they assured “fellow-subjects” in other parts of the British
Empire that “we mean not to dissolve that Union which has so long and so happily subsisted between us, and which we sincerely wish to see restored”. They solemnly stated: “We have not raised Armies with ambitious Designs of separating from Great Britain, and establishing Independent States”.

On July 8, in a petition to George III, they asserted their attachment to “your Majesty’s person”, and said they were “connected with Great Britain by the strongest ties that can unite societies”. Later on August 25, Thomas Jefferson wrote John Randolph that he would “rather be in dependence on Great Britain, properly limited, than on any nation”. As late as Oct. 7, John Adams wrote Abigail that “The thought that we might be driven to the sad necessity of breaking our Connection with Great Britain, exclusive of the Carnage and Destruction which it was easy to see must attend the separation, always gave me a great deal of Grief”.

It is only in retrospect, with a foreknowledge of the course of subsequent history, that Americans today, quite mistakenly, look back upon the eve of the Declaration of Independence as though the outcome were pre-ordained.

The delegates who met where now we meet were troubled and divided men, perplexed by the problems of resisting what they regarded as the tyranny of Great Britain, discouraged by the decline of liberal institutions in England, depressed by the state of human society.

For more than a decade New Englanders had lamented the plight of liberty throughout the world. Rulers of the East, they said, were “almost universally absolute tyrants . . . The states of Africa are scenes of tyranny, barbarity, confusion, and every form of violence.” Even in Europe, there were no well constituted governments or well governed people. Arbitrary authority governed France, Prussia had an absolute government. Sweden and Denmark had sold their liberty. Poland was “a ruin of licentiousness” and anarchy.
Eighteenth Century America’s views of the world were as discouraged as Ambassador Patrick Moynihan’s recent observation about the United Nations, in which he pointed out that out of 141 member states there are only about two dozen that could be called democracies. “Most of the new states, and many of the old ones,” he said, “have ended up enemies of freedom as we would know it, and we inherited it, and as we have tried to preserve it”.

The times were not unlike our own, in the discouragements they offered to men of liberal views and democratic principles. Yet, in the midst of doubts and discouragements, here in Philadelphia, just 200 years ago, a nation was struggling to be born. And when, on July 4, 1776, the Congress finally was brought to the Declaration of Independence, the confusion and discord of 1775 diminished, and a relatively united people went forward into the long and successful struggle toward nationhood.

That the people of thirteen prosperous colonies who, in 1764 before the Stamp Act and the Sugar Act, were devoted to the British government, loyal to the King, and devoid of any substantial dissent, could have come, in a little more than a decade, to a state of rebellion, is a kind of miracle. It was in part, a miracle of misguided governmental policy in England, in part a miracle of sudden maturity in a hitherto dependent people, and in part a miracle of the printed word.

Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., summed it up when he noted the circumstances that pushed the colonies on to independence, but concluded that the movement “could hardly have succeeded without an ever alert and dedicated press. At every crisis the patriot prints fearlessly and loudly championed the American cause, never yielding ground as did some of the politicians”.

John Holt of The New York Journal made no empty boast when he told Samuel Adams: “It was by means of Newspapers that we received and spread the Notice of the
tyrannical Designs formed against America, and kindled a spirit that has been sufficient to repel them”.

John Adams, in a letter to Thomas Jefferson in 1815, described the “Revolution” as something that took place in the minds of the people. He said it had happened before a drop of blood was shed at Lexington. And he spoke of the records of the legislatures, the pamphlets, and newspapers that caused public opinion to be enlightened and informed concerning the authority of Parliament over the colonies.

From the moment that news of the Stamp Act and the Sugar Act reached America in 1764, the patriot press kept up a drumfire of attack and accusation, playing upon all the fears and prejudices of the people, imputing satanic conspiratorial motives to British ministries. They challenged the power of Great Britain to levy taxes on the Colonies. They demonstrated the falsity of the contention that Americans had a “virtual” representation in Parliament. They first assailed the powers of Parliament, contending the King alone governed the Empire. And then, they turned their weapons on the King’s ministers who they said were deceiving him. Finally they turned on George III himself and lastly on the very institution of monarchy itself. Step by step, issue by issue, thrust by thrust, point by point, they brought a whole people to a pitch of resentment at which resistance became feasible. Then they fanned that resistance into rebellion. And the rebellion, here in Philadelphia, at long last, flowered into Independence.

The patriot printers of the American colonies did not act in any formal concert. They did not enter into any conspiracy or collusion to overthrow British power in North America. They started with a set of shared convictions about liberal institutions, imbibed from British liberal writers of the previous 100 years. When their agitation led to attacks on sumptuary acts of a benighted British government, they struck at each misguided policy
as it emerged. When the populace responded in riot and disorder, and the British ministry proceeded to repression and reprisal, the patriot printers attacked each trespass upon long-held colonial rights and roused the whole Atlantic seaboard to fury over the repressive acts such as the Boston Port Bill.

There were only 23 weekly newspapers in the colonies when the Sugar Act was passed in 1764. There were only 37 when the Continental Congress met here in 1775. Ten of these were in Philadelphia. By Twentieth Century standards, they were a puny lot. They had few subscribers. In 1765, the New York Journal had 1,500 circulation, the Boston Chronicle 1,500, the Pennsylvania Chronicle 2,500, the Massachusetts Spy 500, the Massachusetts Gazette 1,500. By 1775, the numbers had increased (but not spectacularly). On the eve of the Independence, the Spy had, 3,500, up 3,000 in 10 years, the Boston Gazette 2,000, up 500, but still few by today’s standards.

Even less impressive than the circulation of the colonial printers was their technology. The instrument with which they wrought a revolution was the Common Press, capable of printing some 200 sheets an hour on one side, with two operators, compared to 60,000 an hour printed by today’s presses. This puny hand press in the end, proved the most effective artillery in the Revolutionary arsenal. Henry Knox brought by sledge from Ticonderoga and Crown Point in December of 1776, eight brass motors, six iron mortars, thirty iron guns and 13 brass guns and a howitzer. One of them was a 24 pounder. These were the guns that when placed on Dorchester Heights drove the British out of Boston. But the Common Press was an even more formidable piece of artillery. It commenced its cannonade in 1764 and it never stopped until the British surrendered at Yorktown on October 19, 1781.

It was not the inanimate Common Press, of course, but the patriot printers who employed it, that furthered
the cause of the Revolution; but I hope that a sentimental apostrophe to that incredible progenitor of all our presses may not be amiss on this occasion.

From this ancestral frame has sprung
Each press that gives a paper tongue
To mortal cry.
Because of it, the printed word
Will make the voice of freedom heard
And never die.

The iron sons of wooden sire
Print millions where it printed quire;
But printing power
Does not derive from force and speed
But from response to human need
In every hour.

The Hoe and Scott and Goss and Wood,
In minutes, print more than it could
In day on day;
But thudding platen put to stone,
With spindle's clank and carriage groan,
Had things to say.

Let men who in these latter days
Lift up their voice in freedom's praise
Take pause to bless
This foe of tyrants, never budged,
This oaken fortress ink be-smudged —
The Common Press.

Benjamin Rush said, in 1787, "The American war is over; but this is far from being the case with the American Revolution. On the contrary, nothing but the first act of the great drama is closed". Nowhere is that ongoing revolution more evident than in the continued elaboration of the concept of freedom of the press, which was at once, a cause of the war and a consequence of it.

The patriot printers laid the groundwork on which subsequent generations have built the concept of a free
people’s right to know about the conduct of their own affairs. From their beginnings there has emerged an awareness that the citizens of a free society cannot be fully informed unless its press has (1) the right to get information, (2) the right to print without prior restraint, (3) the right of access to the means of publication, (4) the right to print without fear of reprisal by law or in spite of the law, and (5) the right to distribute.

After 200 years, these rights are sometimes still imperfectly enjoyed in our own country and they are not enjoyed at all in most countries of the world; but upon the solid foundations laid by the patriot printers the struggle toward a more perfect realization of these fundamental principles has proceeded.

The right to get information about their own governance was a continuing colonial effort, climax ed on June 3, 1776, by the successful motion of James Otis to open the proceedings of the Massachusetts General Court to the public so that citizens could hear the Stamp Act debates. On October 10, 1768, the Massachusetts Council, made public Governor Bernard’s plans for quartering British troops, notwithstanding Bernard’s protests. James Bowdoin, the Council Chairman, justified the betrayal of the Governor’s request on the ground that citizens in their “present temper” would not tolerate concealment. The Governor said “no civilized Government upon earth” could function when its intimate deliberations were “canvassed by Tavern politicians and censured by News Paper Libel- lers.” This indignation has been repeated many times. On April 3, 1769, Governor Bernard’s confidential letters to the British ministry on conditions in Massachusetts, were printed by the Boston Gazette and the Evening Post, and amidst the demands of the Council for his removal he sailed on August 1 for England, never to return. On June 2, 1773, Governor Thomas Hutchinson’s confidential letters to Thomas Whatley, former under secretary of treasury in Grenville’s government, were revealed to a closed session of the Massachusetts Assembly, and two weeks later they were printed in a pamphlet by Edes and
Gill. They were obtained from an unknown English source by Benjamin Franklin, by what means and under what restrictions has not yet been discovered. But they sealed the fate of Hutchinson, and once again successfully asserted the right of access to information about government. The printers who hammered at the doors of assemblies and opened the secret correspondence of their governors, paved the way for the opening of both houses of Congress in 1801. The struggle, of course, has not ended, but it proceeds on the solid precedents of the patriot printers to whose precepts recourse can always be had when government attempts to invoke secrecy.

The right to print without prior restraint had to be fought for by patriot printers who finally overcame licensing and other forms of prior restraint.

The right to print without fear of reprisal under the law made headway in America when Peter Zenger was acquitted of libelling Governor William Cosby after Andrew Hamilton's brilliant defense of truth as a defense and adroit demand that the jury pass on both the reality of libel in addition to the mere fact of publication. This patriot printer and his brilliant counsel established these principles in the colonies long before the Fox Libel Act achieved the same point in England in 1792. The years from 1764 to 1776 gave Americans instruction, obversely, in the realities of suppression of press freedom that springs from curtailment by those acting outside of the law or in spite of the law. Rioting mobs that drove Tory printers out of Boston and out of New York made clear to patriot printers (even when they were in sympathy with the mob) that there could be no real freedom of the press where lawless reprisal is possible. The mob that destroyed Elijah Lovejoy's press on November 7, 1837, reinforced the lesson. Unfortunately, there have been more recent examples of lawless destruction of newspaper presses. But, decade by decade, the press more firmly established the rights that patriot printers first asserted.

The right of access to the means of publication makes
its progress from the precedents of patriot printers more slowly. It is remarkable how many of them, in the turbulent years between the Stamp Act and the Intolerable Acts, asserted in principle the intent to open their columns to all opinions. As the struggle increased in intensity their adherence to the principle diminished. The principle, however, was acknowledged in one colonial newspaper after another. The media today still gropes toward a fuller realization of the principle the patriot printers asserted, and the principle that finds a modern formal expression even in the awkward devices of the fairness doctrine of the Federal Communications Commission.

The patriot printers struggled with the right to distribute — which must exist if all the rights that have gone before are to be given any practical meaning. It is an interesting coincidence that the climax of their struggle came exactly 200 years ago. Postal service in the colonies had reached a quite efficient level in 1764, with mail moving three times a week between Philadelphia and New York. Arthur Schlesinger has noted that with good luck a writer in Philadelphia wrote to New York and obtained an answer from his correspondent there the next day. It is a feat, Mr. Postmaster General, not always possible 200 years later. William Goddard, editor of the Maryland Journal and the Pennsylvania Chronicle, in February 1774, commenced the organization of a colonial postal system to replace the Royal Postoffice system. On July 26, 1775, the Continental Congress took over the system Goddard had set up and made Benjamin Franklin Postmaster General. The British postmasters at New York and Boston began firing postriders in the spring of 1775, because of Goddard competition. And on Christmas day, 1775, British postal headquarters in New York cancelled all deliveries through the continent, and left the field to the Colonial system.

The impulse behind this creation of the colonial postal system was long-standing suspicion of the British postal establishment, whose postmasters possessed authority to open letters and to hamper delivery of objection-
able matter. The Boston Gazette and the Massachusetts Spy had decried interference with distribution of the patriot press, and the postal service was accused of declining to distribute the New York Journal and Pennsylvania Journal. Editors in New York and Williamsburg made similar charges. So the tradition of unobstructed movement through the mails was born. It was rudely interrupted by Southern postmasters in the days before the Civil War when abolitionist journals were destroyed. It has been defied on some subsequent occasions. The mail, unhappily, has been tampered with in our own times. But the sanction of society for these abuses no longer exists — thanks to the precedents established by the patriot printers who called forth the postal service of this country.

We cannot honestly congratulate ourselves upon wholly achieving the full freedom for which the patriot printers contended. From time to time, as I have noted, the five freedoms essential to an effective freedom of the press have been denied Americans. Even today, when in my opinion, they are more secure than they have ever been in any country, any place in the world, at any time, there are imperfections to be noted. Some public men have the same surviving itch for secrecy that afflicted men like Governor Francis Bernard and Governor Thomas Hutchinson, and wherever there exists politicians who really distrust an informed people, full access to the business of government occasionally will be denied, for all such protections as the Freedom of Information Act, and other legal barriers to secrecy. Misguided legislators, from time to time, pass ridiculous statutes like the scourge of expungment laws enacted in Maine and elsewhere, demanding destruction of the criminal records of pardoned persons, and the police records of persons acquitted of crimes of which they have been accused. At the very time that access to judicial proceedings seemed to have become most assured, new issues have arisen over access to pre-trial proceedings. Contempt of Court powers are being used against printers more punitively than in the past. We have not finished the structure of freedom for
which patriot printers laid the foundation, but we have built well.

Much of what we are, we owe to the patriot press which roused the nation to revolution between 1764 and 1776. They were printers before they were patriots. The Stamp Act made them printers and patriots. And later on some occasions, they put their obligations as patriots before their responsibilities as printers. There was a notable example just 200 years ago, on the ninth of November, 1775, when the Second Continental Congress, meeting in this city, in these precincts, over the signature of every member, adopted a resolution imposing secrecy on their proceedings, resolving "That every member of this Congress considers himself under the ties of virtue, honour, and love of his country, not to divulge, directly or indirectly, any matter or thing agitated or debated in Congress . . .". Even Thomas Jefferson, who later reproached the Constitutional Convention, for tying up the tongues of its members, put his signature to this pledge of secrecy. So did Benjamin Franklin.

In November 1775, Congress appointed Benjamin Franklin, John Jay, and Thomas Jefferson, to meet with Achard de Bonvouloir, who had come from the King of France to offer unofficial support to the colonies. In these conversations on foreign aid of arms, ammunition, and money, Franklin launched the diplomatic career that would continue until he became the foremost American diplomat abroad. When he was asked by citizens of Providence if Congress was negotiating with a French commissioner, in 1775, he exclaimed: "How could such a Thing be before Independence was declared?" At that occasion, the foremost of all the printers clearly became first a patriot.

When such convinced liberals, such advocates of full information, such disciples of disclosure as Franklin and Jefferson find circumstances under which secrecy can properly be invoked by government, it must prompt us to pause and to examine carefully claims for confidentiality made in good faith and for proper purposes. The claimant may be a rascal — as many politicians who attempt con-
ceilment often are — but he also may be as devoted to liberty as Franklin and Jefferson were, and as convinced that there are rare circumstances in which even a good government must be permitted some secrecy.

It is a happy circumstance when it is possible to be both printer and patriot, without a vestige of conflicting purpose. And it is a rare circumstance in which the interests of the nation are not best served by policies that best serve the right of citizens to know about their government. There is a normal happy coincidence of selfish interests, and patriotic purpose.

Interest and duty went hand in hand for the patriot printers, from 1764 to 1776. Patriotism as well as self interest inspired the printers to insist upon disclosure of everything they could find out about British government in North America. A handful of weekly newspapers, with only a scattered circulation, in a single decade, brought British government in North America into such disrepute that Independence was inevitable. It was a demonstration of the terrible power of the printed word that must sober every man who shares in the exercise of such power. That it has the negative power to destroy organized government, the patriot printers conclusively demonstrated. That it has the constructive power to protect and defend the government, patriot printers, in subsequent generations have demonstrated as conclusively.

In the exercise of such awful power, to destroy and to defend, may the printers and patriots of this generation, in the decades following the 200th anniversary of the nation’s birth, bring to their solemn task, both the love of liberty that makes a free press the best critic and censor of government, and the love of country that makes their censures and criticisms consonant with the great necessity of defending free institutions that survive in the same degree, and in the same vitality, nowhere else in all the world. May Americans, 200 years from now, look back upon what we do and what we say, and find that we, like our predecessors in the Eighteenth Century, were both patriots and printers.