

A POST-AGNEW VIEW OF MEDIA CREDIBILITY

by John Chamberlain

Mr. Chamberlain, author and nationally syndicated columnist, took part in The American Communications Media: A Study in Credibility, the second seminar of the Center for Constructive Alternatives during the present academic year. This paper was delivered before a group of Hillsdale College students and faculty.

Before the fall of Spiro Agnew it was fast becoming the new conventional wisdom to believe our communications media, or at least that part of it that was situated in the East, had become philosophically corrupt. The press and the electronics networks had themselves begun to react to the crescendo of criticism that echoed Agnew's speeches about "nattering nabobs of negativism" at the editors' desks. Speaking officially, the Columbia Broadcasting System reacted to Agnew by accusing the Nixon Administration of trying to establish censorship. At the same time, without making any fanfare about it, Columbia established its *Spectrum* format for radio commentary. Incredibly, the public began listening to two pillars of the libertarian Right, editor Stanton Evans and columnist Jeffrey St. John, who were there to balance Nick Von Hoffman of the *Washington Post* and Murray Kempton, formerly of the *New York Post*. Somewhere in the middle were Jack Jessup, once chief editorial writer at *Life*, and Stewart Alsop of *Newsweek*. This was the first really palpable application of the Fairness Doctrine to radio news commentary, and the gossip soon went around that Columbia's Dick Salant intended to do for its TV commentary what he had done for radio.

The *New York Times*, partly due to the prodding of Jeffrey St. John who had vainly sought a slot as an editorial page offset to such *Times* superliberals as Tom Wicker and Anthony Lewis, was busy with its own second thoughts about inflicting complete oneness in editorial expression upon those who had no means of escaping the fact that New York City's choice in newspapers is severely limited. The *Times'* concession to fairness was an Opposite-the-Editorial Page that gives some voice to independent thinkers in the Middle and on the Right. Eventually the *Times* was to hire Bill Safire, one of Nixon's first-term

speech writers, to be its House Conservative. Bill, of course, isn't that far to the Right, and his appearance as a regular is still over-balanced by the Wickers, Lewises, William Shannons and Scotty Restons who hog most of the op-ed space as *Times* Leftist institutions. But at least the *Times* high panjandrum had made a conciliatory gesture, and the paper has been sufficiently scrupulous about its commitment to accept some strong anti-*Times* doctrine from the likes of Senator Barry Goldwater and the White House's Pat Buchanan.

This was the way things were going when Agnew let all of his conservative followers down by pleading *nolo contendere* to a charge of willful failure to report kickback money on his Federal income tax forms when he was still in Maryland politics. Now, so one fears, the semi-repentant big Eastern media will resume their old arrogance. When the so-called New Journalists (subjective school) were holding their counter-convention in Washington, D.C., last spring, a lot of the Old Journalists (objective school) found themselves to be in unaccustomed favor with New Left radicals who would surely not have welcomed them a year before. The reason: two *Washington Post* reporters had cracked the Watergate case wide open, putting Nixon and his whole White House entourage on the spot. The accomplishments of the Washington press corps in uncovering leads to Watergate coverup skullduggery are not to be decried: reporters should follow up on clues wherever they may lead. But the atmosphere created by the *Washington Post* Watergate coups is becoming distinctly unhealthy. All too many newsmen and commentators in the national capital, and in its satellite city of New York, are now preening themselves on having been right all along. The danger is that it will be as if Agnew had never had his brief period of glory as a Tribune of the

People who was really on to the malfeasances and misfeasances of the big liberal press. As a people we are all too prone to identify a philosophy, a *Weltanschauung*, with a man, ignoring the fact that ideas stand wholly on their own. We reduce our knowledge to a symbolic shorthand in personality, and when the personal symbol, be it an Agnew or a Nixon, falls, the philosophy goes by the board along with the human being who has made himself its spokesman.



Actually, the case against the media was already well-established long before Spiro Agnew had deserted Rockefeller liberalism to become the chief conservative oracle of the Nixon regime. Howard K. Smith, the very sane TV commentator for ABC, had pegged it correctly long ago when he observed that most reporters were so caught up in the liberal ethos that they couldn't conceive of any alternative view of things. Bob Novak, of the columnistic team of Evans and Novak, agreed with Howard Smith, even though he is a liberal himself.

I'll leave the *Washington Post* out of my discussion, for I never worked for it, but I do know from personal experience that liberalism was busy calling the turn at such representative New York City-based publications as *Time* and the *New York Times* long before the campuses rose against Richard Nixon because he insisted on at least a semi-honorable exit from Vietnam. I worked at the *Times* when Edwin L. James was managing editor, and when Raymond McCaw and Neil MacNeil were pretty much in charge of the night side of what was then a neutral publication. McCaw and MacNeil were conservatives, but they believed in old-fashioned objective journalism. The *Times* went leftward by contagion during the period in which Turner Catledge was Managing Editor. Catledge was a Southerner, a Democrat by regional identification, and he never

really loved the ideology-smitten liberals from the Harvard and Yale Law Schools who flocked to Washington to work for FDR and the New Deal. In the Thirties, Catledge, as a *Times* Washington correspondent, relied on South Carolina's Jimmy Byrnes and Mississippi's Pat Harrison for his news. The Southerners under FDR went along with the politics of interventionism not because they wanted Big Government, or Left Government, but because the South had always been poor and felt it needed help as compensation for what the North had visited upon it in Reconstruction days. Catledge's first great patron was Arthur Krock, head of the *Times* Washington Bureau, and Krock was as conservative as they come.

The pressure of the *Zeitgeist* is undoubtedly what caused Catledge, as Managing Editor, to replace such aging conservatives as McCaw and MacNeil with liberals who had cut their eye teeth in the Rooseveltian Thirties and after. Catledge improved the paper in every possible technical way, improving both the writing and the news coverage, and instituting notable departmental changes. But he was always oblivious to the political shadings involved in his choices. The *Times* got big news beats, but somehow they all redounded to the greater glory of the liberal syndrome. Mrs. Ruby Hart Phillips, the veteran *Times* Havana correspondent, tried to warn her New York office about Castro, but the *Times* high command chose to believe Herbert Matthews on the subject. Matthews was a romantic who had admired Mussolini's derring-do in Ethiopia. Later he switched his commitments, doing in Spain for the Republican side what he had done in his Ethiopian war reporting for the cause of Fascist imperialism. I was myself no admirer of Franco, but it had become obvious in the last stages of the Spanish civil war that the Stalinists were in control behind a Republican facade, leaving Spain only the ugly choice between two brands of totalitarianism. John Dos Passos, coming home from Spain after a bitter disagreement with Ernest Hemingway, spread the word about the miscarriage of Spanish republicanism, but the news never reached Herbert Matthews. He carried over his blindness to Latin America when he became the *Times* "authority" on political movements south of the border. It would have been a permissible thing if the Matthews adulation of Castro had appeared on the editorial page or in a signed column. Instead it was blazoned forth in supposedly objective front-page stories.

Disturbed by the outcry against the *Times* when Fidel Castro correctly identified himself as a Marxist revolutionary, Turner Catledge went along with his publisher in a belated decision to limit Matthews to editorializing on the editorial page. But in his revealing autobiography, Catledge wondered out loud whether Matthews was "more sinned against than sinning." And Catledge was willing to print Tad Szulc's beat on the training of the Cubans for the Bay of Pigs invasion. The story was a breach of security comparable to the printings of the Pentagon Papers, but Szulc could get away with it because the U.S. was not officially at war at the time. The *Times* might have printed Szulc and still claimed

neutrality if it had only managed to come up with the story about Washington's responsibility for the Bay of Pigs fiasco that Charlie Murphy turned up for *Fortune Magazine*. But Catledge no longer had a balanced staff in those halcyon first days of Camelot. A beat exposing the White House sabotage of the free Cuban cause would have been quite inconceivable in the Matthews-Szulc-Catledge New York *Times*.

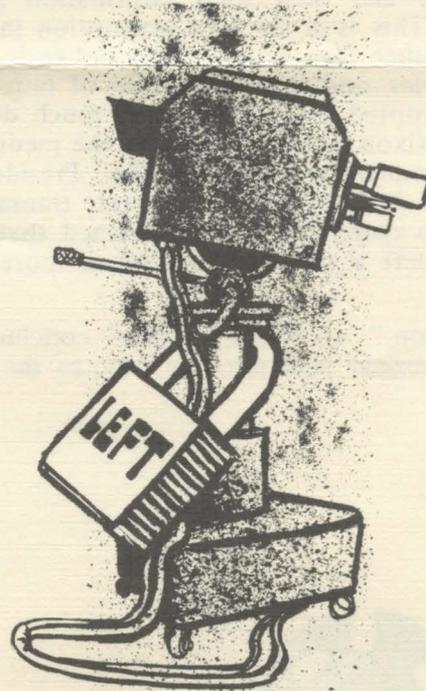
The Luce publications, to which I contributed as an employee and a free lance for fifteen years, were a Left-Right internal battleground for at least two decades. Harry Luce, a really great editor, though philosophically against Communism — "Communism is cancer," he used to say — never could quite make up his mind to take the Soviet military threat seriously. The Swanberg biography, which makes Luce out to be more of a Bircher than Robert Welch, is so far off base as to be laughable. Luce, as I have said elsewhere, was almost alone among American big-time publishers in his ability to read a map: he knew what a calamity it would be for the West if certain critical areas — Singapore, Panama, Suez, the North African littoral — were to fall into totalitarian hands. Nevertheless he tolerated editors and writers who disagreed with him fundamentally. For every Whit Chambers or Willi Schlamm on his staff, he had a John Hersey or a Teddy White. With the exception of Charlie Murphy and John Davenport, who hung on until after Luce's death, convinced conservatives and libertarians tended to drift away from the *Time* orbit. So did the Herseys, the Tom Matthews and the Charlie Wertenbakers at the other end of the ideological spectrum. In the end, people who would have done Luce's bidding when he was alive acquiesced in the movement to pull out of Vietnam before making sure the Communists would not take over. And Willy Brandt, West Germany's socialist premier, eventually made the cover as *Times*' Man of the Year for an *Ostpolitik* that has yet to demolish the obscene Berlin Wall.

The New York *Times* and Time, Incorporated, set the pace for Eastern big-time journalism as a whole. And electronic journalism, reading the news clips and the wire service dispatches, eagerly followed suit. Analyzing the tapes for the limited period of the Nixon-Humphrey race in the Autumn of 1968, which was in all significant senses "before Agnew," Edith Efron proved by a mathematical count that the broadcasters had indulged a flagrant pro-Humphrey bias. Agnew, in short, told us nothing that we did not know. He merely added image and verbal elegance to Edith Efron's rather stark and forbidding arithmetic.

Just what part of the eloquence of Agnew's speeches came from Agnew himself, and what part came from such accomplished wordsmiths as Pat Buchanan and Bill Safire in the White House, is an interesting subject for speculation and research. Since the liberals are now extremely busy degrading the substance of Agnew's thought along with his moral character, a John Coyne [also a participant in the CCA Seminar], for example, would do much to restore the prestige of conservative political and economic philosophy by exploring the true origins

of the Agnew attack on the liberal media. The point to be made here is that Agnew was a Thomas Henry Huxley to the numerous Charles Darwins and Alfred Russel Wallaces who had done the basic research that destroyed the legend of a credible liberal press.

In picking through some old files during the traumatic course of moving from one house to another, I came across some notes for a talk on journalistic responsibility that I made before the Connecticut Editorial Association in 1963. The burden of my song then was that the Kennedyites, entrenched in the White House, were "managing" the news. The only difference between 1963 and 1973 is that the Kennedyites, or their philosophical successors, now manage the news from outside the many sacred portals in Washington, Key Biscayne, Camp David, etc. In 1963 I jotted down a memorandum that reads as follows:



"Cuba, for instance. Dodd and Keating — Wedemeyer — plenty was known in September of 1963, if not before. Senator Capehart, The Administration, instead of trying to get at the truth about the Dodd-Keating claims, pooh-poohs them. One way of suppressing info is to deride it as non-info. But, in October, it turns out that the Dodd-Keating-Capehart trio is right. Too late to help Cuba, for the Administration then proceeds to steal the trio's thunder by ordering Khrushchev out of Cuba."

Well, what was that memorandum all about? It was about the casual press handling of the rather solid early indications that the Russians were busy moving atomic weaponry to an island ninety miles from the continental U.S.

Ten years later, according to the pertinacious Abe Kalish of Accuracy in Media, the press is still downgrading any information that might be interpreted to prove the Soviets are not truly in quest of a permanent detente. The New York *Times*, according to Accuracy in Media, failed utterly to report the

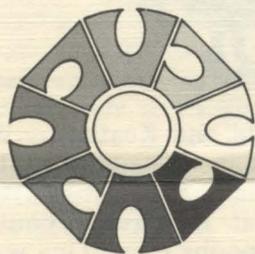
statistics in *Jane's Fighting Ships* that show the Soviet Navy is now well ahead of the U.S. Navy in fighting strength. When Hanson Baldwin was military editor of the *Times*, such a thing would hardly have happened. With the Russians now threatening to become the big beneficiaries of a reopened Suez Canal, what *Jane's Fighting Ships* has to say about the Soviet Navy is full of ominous portent for the peace and freedom of every nation with an Indian Ocean or Persian Gulf seacoast. The threat to the Indian Ocean can't quite be equated with atomic missiles pointed from Cuba at Florida and points north. But we do get much of our oil by a tanker supply line that runs through the soon-to-be-vulnerable Indian Ocean to Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Iran.

The media, both before and after Agnew, have been highly selective in the way they play both their suspicions and their solid information about corruption. This is a form of corruption in itself. To quote Father Dan Lyons, "the networks, the *New York Times*, and the mainstream of our press have been corrupted much longer and much deeper than has the Nixon team." Example: the media reported very prominently last year that President Nixon had made \$60,000 on a real estate transaction. Yet it had no comment when it learned that President Johnson left a personal fortune of more than \$25 million.

"Johnson," so Father Lyons concluded, "had always bragged how poor he was, so the press had

tried to say his wife inherited 'a fortune.' The actual amount was \$39,000. His leaving \$25 million is one of the greatest scandals of our time. But few, if any, columnists or commentators have said a word of criticism."

The *Washington Post* revived the old crusading spirit of Paul Anderson and other journalistic luminaries of the Nineteen Twenties in its pursuit of the Watergate culprits. The job was well done. But, really, was it any worse for Hunt and Liddy and the Cubans to try to steal Democratic secrets than it was for Daniel Ellsberg to filch the Pentagon documents and use the *New York Times* as a fence to get the stolen goods to the public? Ellsberg may have thought he was working from good motives (obeying the "higher law," and all that) when he passed some secrets along that he had been sworn to protect. But the Cubans who were recruited by Hunt to help bug Democratic National Committee boss Larry O'Brien thought they were on the trail of information that would link Fidel Castro, our mortal enemy, to the subversion of our political processes. Ellsberg and the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* have gone free, but Judge Sirica slapped the Watergate break-and-entry boys with sentences that can only be classified as cruel and unusual punishment, which is forbidden by the U.S. Constitution. The selective treatment of Ellsberg and the Cubans reeks with hypocrisy. This is the basic reason why our media lacks credibility; the liberal press has not played a morally straight game.



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