

# The Function Of A Free Press

By Warren Phillips

(Editor's Note: This article is reprinted from the September, 1985, issue of the ADL Bulletin, national publication of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith. Mr. Phillips is publisher of the Wall Street Journal, which was the recipient during the National Commission meeting of ADL's Hubert H. Humphrey First Amendment Freedoms Prize. This article is excerpted from his acceptance address.)

There is much criticism and debate in our country today over the performance and the sense of responsibility of the press. I don't believe the issue of individual performance, or even the issue of individual responsibility, is as important as a better understanding of the function of a free press in a democracy.

When the Founding Fathers provided for a free press, when Jefferson and, before him, John Milton, and later, John Stuart Mill argued for press freedom, they certainly never assumed the press would always perform well and act responsibly, would always know the truth and tell the truth. In light of the low-quality sheets of their day, they assumed we would have to suffer a goodly share of fools and rogues in the press.

But they believed that through diversity, out of the vast welter of conflicting ideas that would be put before the public, the truth would emerge. And that it would emerge more effectively than through any efforts to impose standards of truth from the outside or through any other means yet devised. The evidence over 200 years -- at the local courthouse level as well as at the more cosmic levels of Vietnam and Watergate -- is that truth does indeed emerge in this fashion.

Our professional *raison d'être* is the pursuit of truth that is successful through the diversity of

its pursuit, if not through the perfection or responsibility of each and every individual pursuer.

The Founding Fathers certainly did not expect individual perfection and we certainly have not delivered perfection. Careless errors in the press are cited by numerous critics and also can be found listed daily in the corrections and Letters-To-The-Editors columns. Charges of base motives are made frequently, as are allegations of bias. This charge of bias, of slanting and distorting the news, is not a new criticism either.

Franklin Roosevelt and Adlai Stevenson, the former in the 1930's and the latter in the 1950's, both denounced what they labeled "The One-Party Press," meaning, of course, the Republican Party press. Their comments reflected the traditional criticism that newspapers are guilty of an establishment bias, set by owners and advertisers -- a right-wing bias. Yet, in contrast, the most frequently heard complaints in recent years allege bias from the left.

Or do they?

Just before Watergate, Newsweek polled the public and found that 45 percent believed the reporting on the Nixon administration out of Washington was "slanted." But that group divided almost equally into those who thought the media was prejudiced against the administration (23 percent) and those who believed the media was prejudiced in its favor (22 percent). In other words, nearly half of America thought the press slanted the news but they were split down the middle on which way we were slanting it.

Could it be that bias sometimes is in the eye of the beholder? Do we sometimes have slanted readers?

People are so committed, so involved, so agitated in this age of change and controversy

and instant communications that many of them look for newspaper accounts of events -- from Nicaragua to South Africa -- to reinforce and agree with their own views, even their prejudices. If they don't get that, they often feel the press is not credible.

In 1959, Walter Lippman told the National Press Club that the inescapable job of the Washington correspondent was to make a meaningful picture out of the jumbled jigsaw puzzle pieces that were the bits of daily raw news. But he hastened to add that the analogy was imperfect. "Our job," he said, "is harder than it implies. In real life, there is not, as there is in every jigsaw picture, one picture and one picture only into which all the pieces will eventually fit."

Collectively, U.S. newspapers have vastly improved the extent and quality of their coverage over the past quarter century and also the conscientiousness with which they approach their responsibility to be both accurate and fair. They have improved the educational level and professionalism of their staffs. They have stressed care and balance as never before. They have gone on an orgy of self-examination and self-criticism that exceeds anything they've done in the past.

We must do even more. We must do more to prevent our failing in the future, as we often have in the past, to anticipate, to foreshadow for our readers some of the major trends in society.

It is distressing to look at our coverage in the 1960's of Northern racial tensions and later of campus unrest. We overlooked the smoldering fuses and moved in on those stories only when the explosions came.

Many papers -- not all -- failed in the 1970's to alert their readers to the energy shortage that was in the making even before the oil boycott. Most failed equally in the 1980's to alert readers to the switch in an oil glut.

Even those of us close to the scene failed to prepare our readers for the financial crisis that

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