

IS THE PRESS CORRUPT?

BY GEORGE SELDES

To commemorate the 25th anniversary of the born again North Coast Times Eagle, we offer a critique of the American press by George Seldes, who died in 1995 at the age of 103. He was one of the premier journalists of the 20th century, reporting on World War 1, the Russian Revolution, the Spanish Civil War, and the rise of fascism and Nazism. His honesty and independence got him into trouble but also led him to publish from 1940 to 1950 the first American magazine of media criticism IN FACT, which inspired the famous and trenchantly independent I. F. Stone's Weekly. The following is an excerpt from Seldes' self-published book, "The Facts Are..." (published during World War 2) which appeared in a collection of his writings just before his death.

What is the most powerful force in America today?
Answer: Public opinion.

What makes public opinion?

Answer: The main force is the press.

Can you trust the press?

Answer: The baseball scores are always correct (except for a typographical error now and then). The stock market tables are correct (within the same limitation). But when it comes to news which will affect you, your daily life, your job, your relation to other people, your thinking on economic and social problems, and, more important today, your going to war and risking your life for a great ideal, then you cannot trust about 98% (or perhaps 99½%) of the big newspaper and big magazine press of America.

But why can't you trust the press?

Answer: Because it has become big business. The big city press and the big magazines have become commercialized, or big business organizations, run with no other motive than profit for owner or stockholder (although hypocritically still maintaining the old American tradition of guiding and enlightening the people). The big press cannot exist a day without advertising. Advertising means money from big business.

I have written several books on the press and I am publishing a weekly newsletter devoted largely to criticizing the big city newspapers (the public opinion-making newspapers) and exposing their corruption, because I still believe that the press is the greatest force in the world and can be used for good or evil. And I believe that the American press by its control of public opinion can either fool all the people into restoring a world in which one-third of the nation will again live in economic slavery without sufficient food, clothing and shelter, or it can, if it wants to, bring out of this united effort against native as well as foreign fascism a world approaching the Jeffersonian ideal.

In 1787, Jefferson declared that "the basis of our government is the opinion of the people." Given the choice of "a government without newspapers, or newspapers without government," he would prefer the latter. Think of it! Jefferson was willing to let the press itself rule the country instead of merely creating the public opinion that rules.



GERALD MOSS

But Jefferson did not foresee that the American press which creates opinion and which rules indirectly would become almost exclusively a millionaire's press, or a corporation influenced press, or the medium of big business via its advertising, and therefore the corrupt press which serves private interests rather than the public interest. If America is to be bossed by the public opinion created by its press, if it is to fight and win this war, if it is to make a great peace, then it should know the power of the most powerful force which is abroad in the land.

The press which attacked George Washington, which denounced him as everything from a traitor to a drunkard, was not a corrupt press. It was in fact a free press. But the press which from 1922 (or thereabouts) to the present day attacks New Deal Franklin D. Roosevelt, the same press which tried to suppress the old Teapot Dome scandal and the doings of Harding's Ohio gang, while sniping at every governmental action for the general welfare of the American people, is a corrupt press.

Why has the press become corrupt?

So long as it was possible for an itinerant printer or any tiny minority possessing a few hundred dollars to set up shop and issue a newspaper, there was no monopoly of public opinion. And there was no corrupt press. In Boston, in New York, in colonial days, and later in Washington, and in every city and town in the wake of the pioneers marching westward, wandering printers kept alive the free press and produced the most picturesque era in the nation's journalism. It was still possible toward the end of the 19th century to get out a newspaper without being a millionaire, or a company with a soul mortgaged to the banker in a small town.

But as William Allen White — the man always chosen to prove the publishers' claim that the press still has integrity — now confesses, it takes a comparatively large bankroll to start a paper anywhere — his own *Emporia Gazette* is worth \$70,000, and if a man with another viewpoint wanted to start an opposition sheet in Emporia it would involve a much greater sum. In Chicago or New York it would mean the risk of a million dollars a year for many years.

Mr. White does not disagree with Frank Munsey, the great newspaper wrecker whom he saved from oblivion with the famous phrase: He turned a great profession into an 8% investment. The fact is now accepted that the newspaper is big business. Whether it is therefore ipso facto corrupt because big business is corrupt is still being debated.

There is only one viewpoint which the entire press of the nation expresses, respects, represents and works for: the viewpoint of business, money, wealth and power represented by what is generally known as the God of Things As They Are, or the Status Quo. The press has been united almost to a paper in defending existing conditions and opposing not only some radical plan for change but even all those mild reforms which friends of big money and the status quo, the latest of whom is Franklin Delano Roosevelt, have initiated for the double purpose of helping the Have-Not and saving the and preserving the system of the Haves.

The change that has come over America is this: that beneath the uproar the press made in our early history, the motivation was not money, it was not commercial. Today the press is motivated almost entirely by the motive of profit for itself and its backers. This profit motive not only affects the handling of all the news about labor, "defense" strikes, wage increases, the whole problem of taxation, a large part of the legislation of state and nation, but it also affects the news of world events.

It is my claim that the press, which could be the most powerful force in making this country over into an industrial democracy in which poverty would be unknown, wealth equitably distributed, every person certain of the minimum requirements of decent living (as well as the four freedoms), has, on the contrary, become the most powerful force against the general welfare of the majority of the people.

AMERICA'S BEST JOURNALIST

BY TRISTRAM COFFIN

At his death in 1989, I. F. Stone (born in 1907) was the elder statesman of American journalism and the inspirational model for much of its alternative press. He played a pivotal role in developing modern investigative journalism. Without the example of his iconoclastic newsletter, *I. F. Stone's Weekly*, the alternative press of the 1960s, '70s and '80s might never have been relevant. He is probably the best journalist the United States has produced. The late Tristram Coffin (1912-1997), founding editor of *The Washington Spectator*, was one of Stone's many apprentices.

He was the best reporter I have known, a short, wiry, black-haired man with piercing eyes behind thick glasses. Izzie Stone (his friends always called him "Izzie") had an absolute faith in truth, and he pursued it with an almost religious fervor. If anything could save humanity from its follies, it was truth.

He was restless, innately curious, and had a splendid scorn of those in power. He did not rely on press releases, public relations hokum, or structured press conferences for news. Instead, he dug and dug until he discovered the facts cunningly hidden away. His sources were the government reports that most media people in Washington take one look at, note the number of pages, and put down.

For too many reporters, Washington is a country club life, picking up news like flowers at a florist's, already prepared and fussed up, going to official gatherings and being hailed by the first name, playing cards in the pressroom, swapping yarns at the National Press Club, and accepting government favors such as trips on Navy vessels in the balmy Mediterranean. But not Izzie.

He did not trust the accuracy or slant of government hokum. He knew the well-paid press agents tried to put the best face on any situation. So he went behind the scenes. Nothing mysterious about it. He dug into official but little-read accounts of congressional investigations or of the General Accounting Office. And he always kept a file of the best foreign newspapers. Izzie found out, for example, that *Le Monde* of Paris had far more accurate accounts of the fighting in Vietnam than most of the American media, because the French had been there for years before we entered the fray.

When other reporters flocked around Joe McCarthy, begging for a tidbit that would make a front page byline, Izzie

was checking the record. He knew that McCarthy's stories were mostly sham made up from the senator's alcoholic imagination.

One tactic of the Washington politician is to make friends of reporters by giving them leaks, and sharing whiskey or sherry with them. Not Izzie.

Yet he was not an austere or remote individual. Izzie gained an immense enjoyment from his work, and he was always ready to help a young reporter on his way. Between the intense bouts of reporting and writing, he took his wife dancing and on cruises.

Izzie became a folk hero during the Vietnam War, for he told the naked, bare truth of that terrible adventure. He did not buy the optimistic chants of the administration. He knew this was a war we could not fight without awesome losses.

Izzie was essentially a scholar, one who went to the roots for the real facts. When he retired from the newsletter, leaving a vacuum (for none could match his spirit), he resolved to find the roots of democracy and liberty. He believed he would find it in the golden age of Greece, so he went back to school, taught himself to read ancient Greek, and translated official reports of the time. The result in 1987 was a book, *The Trial of Socrates*, which to the surprise of the publishers became a best seller. This was because thousands had faith in Izzie Stone. They knew he would find the truth.

(I. F. Stone wrote: "I tried to bring the instincts of a scholar to the service of journalism; to take nothing for granted; to turn journalism into literature; to provide radical analysis with a conscientious concern for accuracy; and in studying the current scene to do my very best to preserve human values and free institutions.")

(I. F. Stone also wrote, "All idols must be overthrown; all sacred dogmas exposed to criticism; the windows thrown open; the cobwebs swept away! Every government is run by liars and nothing they say should be believed.")

(And I. F. Stone wrote: "To be a pariah is to be left alone to see things your own way, as truthfully as you can. Not because you're brighter than anyone else — or your own truth so valuable. But because, like a painter or a writer or an artist, all you have to contribute is the purification of your own vision, and add that to the sum total of other visions. To be regarded as nonrespectable, to be a pariah, to be an outsider, this is really the way to do it. To sit in your tub and not want anything. As soon as you want something, they've got you.")

—THE NATION (1989)

RIVERSEA
GALLERY
CONTEMPORARY WORKS OF ART

RIVERSEA GROUP EXHIBIT

JENEEN DOUMITT JACQUILINE HURLBERT

MARION OMAN RANEY

JULY 17 - AUGUST 18

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THE
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