

Route 12 - Old Receiver Road
Frederick, MD 21701

April 20, 1979

Mr. Jack Landau
Reporters' Committee for Freedom of the Press
1750 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20000

Dear Mr. Landau:

I'm sorry about the roosting of your chickens.

As a former chicken farmer who drew upon other experiences, I tried to get you personally and others on the Reporters' Committee for (some) Freedom of the Press (for some) to understand that this is the way of chickens: they do come home to roost.

The rich and fat never learn until too late that freedoms are like muscles: don't use them and you lose them.

Freedoms are indivisible. There is no freedom I lose that you also do not lose.

When you contribute to the loss of any of my freedoms, you endanger your own.

If in recent years the press in general and reporters in particular had done the kinds of stories that were once the glory of American journalism, we now would not have creeping authoritarianism taking this giant repressive step. Indeed, we would not have had the situations that made it even possible. Perhaps the Lieblings and the Seldeses have already told us why we lack Zengers:

Nixon's appointees had pasts not reported because the press failed to do its job. The packed court was at ease. Nobody ever called it packed. Something else was more important than that great American tradition.

Repressive efforts were made against not the wealthy and powerful, like CBS, but the poor, like me. No reporting.

Judes practiced similar abuses over the years, but against the poor like me, not the rich, like CBS. No reporting, not even when selfish interest coincided with boasted if unpracticed journalistic principle.

So there was no restraint on the practitioners of and believers in authoritarianism and gradually they established more authoritarianism and reached for more powerful and wealthier victims among their adversaries.

Now the powerful fear for themselves as they did not fear for their poorer brethren. As one of the poorer, I have no fears because I have lost no rights my richer brethren left to me.

The bell tolls for you (plural) and I sorrow for you, knowing from the living of it what this can mean to you.

This is not "I told you so." It is a reminder of Santayana's wisdom, learn from the past or ne doomed to relive it, perhaps more than you now anticipate.

Unfortunately, even the name of your committee is elitist. You have no interest in other writers or former reporters who are investigators and exposers.

You were cowards when FOIA was under attack and a bad precedent was being set. You were asked to file amicus briefs and, along with the Naders and ACLUs, refused. Despite this and selfish efforts at compromise, the Act was saved and strengthened. No thanks to any of you elitists, who have yet to report how or by whom so that others might be encouraged to use their muscles, to dare use their rights and insist upon them.

When as a poor man I sought to give meaning to a provision of the law, you (plural) were mean and vicious, grossly inaccurate and unfair. It was hurtful to me and my rights. When you were corrected, you were too elitost to admit error and perpetuated the harm you had done.

But the chickens heard your call.

Now the old cocks among them have dug their spurs into you and you scream.

Unless those spurs are clipped, they will gouge again.

The steel for the clipping is in the printed words that have not been printed. At least not by the rich of journalish. (I published enough about Berger in 1971, but I had no audience.)

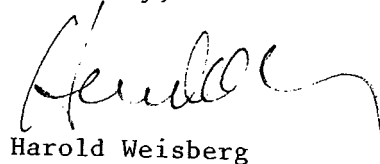
If you want chapter and verse for those specifics of what by tradition were stories and all of you eschewed, you need only ask.

It is a national tragedy that in recent years for the poor Zengers there was no established Hamilton. Your committee certainly wasn't.

It is another national tragedy that no matter how loudly you howl, you (plural) will do not more and are doomed to relive what has just happened to all.

So of course I sorrow for you and for the land.

Sincerely,



Harold Weisberg