

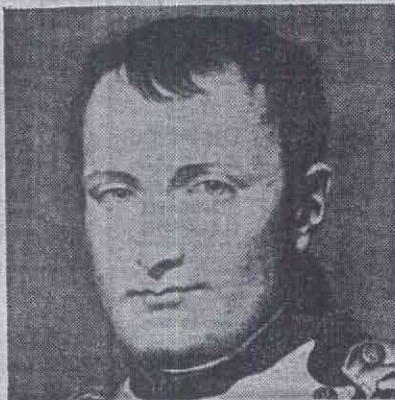
Power of the Press: Myth or Reality?

By Richard Harwood

WHEN the Lords of the Press are faced with demands that their communications empires be broken up, they often respond by saying that "the power of the press" is a greatly overrated commodity. When politicians run for office without newspaper support, they cry out loudly that "the power of the press" is a greatly underrated commodity. And both parties to these ancient arguments are very facile at changing sides. The successful politician says of his newspaper critics that they are empty voices howling at the moon. The editorial writers reply that they are the mighty agents of the masses.

The truth of the matter is that neither politicians nor media barons know very much about "the power of the press," although the weight of casual opinion usually comes down on the affirmative side.

Napoleon I is alleged to have said that "three hostile newspapers are more to be feared than a thousand bayonets. Lyndon Johnson raised the ante. He sent word over here three or four years ago that The Post's editorial support of his policies in Vietnam was "worth two divisions to me." Spiro Agnew, in his celebrated sermon on the media in 1969, endorsed the verdict of a bureaucrat that "the powers of the networks (are) equal to that (sic) of local, state and federal governments all combined." And there is Walter Lippmann's view: "The power to determine each day what shall seem important and what shall be neglected



Napoleon I: "Three hostile newspapers are more to be feared than a thousand bayonets."
Spiro Agnew: "The powers of the networks (are) equal to that (sic) of local, state and federal governments all combined."

is a power unlike any that has been exercised since the Pope lost his hold on the secular mind."

Our life styles tend to reinforce judgments of that kind. In the major cities — Washington and New York in particular — it is almost impossible for the journalist and the publisher *not* to believe that they are people of "power" and "influence." The great men of government and business answer our phone calls and invite us to dinner. They maintain armies of press agents and PR

men to serve our needs and theirs. Yuppies schedule their demonstrations to accommodate our deadlines. Foreign governments offer us free trips abroad; so does the Pentagon. The larger papers disdain that sort of largesse, as they disdain the turkeys and whiskies at Christmas time. But we have grown accustomed to the elegant facilities supplied at public expense by Congress and the White House and to a host of other privileges and prerogatives undreamed of by the ordinary man.

The leading men among us are much in demand as public speakers, university lecturers and television performers. Book and magazine publishers beg for their manuscripts. Presidential candidates and even Presidents, now and then, seek their advice and blessing. The prospects of fame and fortune are, in short, considerable and ever-present. "You fellows play ball with me," Lyndon Johnson told a group of reporters soon after becoming President, "and I'll make you big men."

THE INTENSITY with which the journalist is unloved serves, in a perverse way, to reinforce his self-image of "power" and "influence." When Agnew was running around the country making household words out of Tom Wicker and other big hitters of the Eastern Liberal Press, who could doubt that they were influential and powerful men? When John Kennedy attempted to have David Halberstam removed from his job for *The Times* in Saigon in 1963, who could doubt that Halberstam and *The Times* were movers and shakers in American foreign policy? (It is said that

when Henry Cabot Lodge arrived on Vietnamese soil as our new Ambassador that year, his first utterance was: "Where are the gentlemen of the press?") When Lyndon Johnson would stand in front of the White House news tickers muttering those awful words and shaking his fist, who could doubt the pervasive power of the press?

Still a couple of nagging questions remain. What is the nature of this "power" and who jumps through the hoop when it is exercised? Could it be—unspeakable thought—an illusion? If it isn't an illusion, why don't people and institutions do what we tell them to do every day?

One of the memorable demonstrations of the impotence of the American press occurred in 1936 when Franklin Roosevelt was re-elected over the almost unanimous opposition of the newspapers. After the votes were counted, a dissident on a Midwestern daily posted a notice on the office bulletin board:

The Country 523
The Country Club 8

Publishers, columnists and editorial writers suffer constant humiliations of that kind. This newspaper has been thundering at Congress for as long as the mind of man can remember to grant the District of Columbia home rule. It hasn't happened. Our friends at *The Washington Star* and *The Washington Daily News* decided re-

cently that Joseph Yeldell deserved the Democratic party's nomination for congressional delegate. The voters decided otherwise.

One of the unkindest cuts of all was delivered a couple of years ago by a lawyer in the White House. He called the editor of the editorial page to talk about a legislative proposal and to make a request: "Will you please not endorse the bill? It could cost us some votes."

It can be argued that politics is *sui generis* and that the "power of the press" over mass behavior and public attitudes is manifest in other ways. But there is little, if any, solid evidence to support even that proposition. The National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence sponsored extensive studies of the role of the media in these things and, in the course of those studies, reviewed all of the available sociological and psychological wisdom.

What the Commission's staff discovered from this great labor was that nobody knew very much about the subject. If there was any hard proof that people can be made to jump through hoops on command of the media, the Commission couldn't find it.

This suggests — as the election returns often suggest — that the audience out there is made up of individualists and, as Peter Drucker has written, "it resists vigorously any attempts to make it 'change its mind.'" If you try to propagandize that audience, he concluded, it may respond by believing nothing: "every communication becomes suspect." The popularity of "Lucy" and "Love Story" despite the contempt of the critics reinforces the point.

If these things are true, what are the Agnews and Lippmanns talking about when they complain or brag about "the power of the press"?

Douglass Cater, once a journalist and once one of Johnson's White House men, has a theory about that. The press, he suggests, is a kind of house organ for the government and other components of the ruling tribes. It is a *Tattler*, a *Spectator*, that tells them what their peers are up to and what is being said about them. "The image of gov-

ernment projected by the media," said Cater, "was being accepted (in the White House) as the reality, not only by the public but by those involved in government." A President might know that things written about him and his intentions were untrue. But he might still accept as fact and "reality" things written about Congress and its intentions and might modify his behavior accordingly. And so it went throughout the government. The press was a catalyst in those higher circles and that was its "power."

THE PRESS has another "power." It may be unable to move the country to its own views of what should be done. It may not even terrorize the Rules Committee of the House of Representatives. But it has the power to hurt or help individual men. The

New York Times a couple of years ago discovered and reported that a young man who had joined the American Nazi Party was a Jew. The young man thereupon killed himself. This kind of "power" is often demonstrated. People are sent to jail because of newspapers—Billy Sol Estes, for example. Reputations can be ruined by publicity, as Peter Yarrow, Lance Rentzel and Walter Jenkins have learned. The reverse is also true. The media have it in their power to convey instant celebrity on the Twiggles of the world, as well as heavier figures. But only rarely can they mobilize the masses for action.

The reasons for our impotence in the management of "public opinion" are yet to be discovered. One supposition is that the media speak with so many voices that a given message can't get through. "No previous society has enjoyed (or suffered) so large and varied an output of mass communications as the contemporary United States," according to Leo Bogart, an executive with the American Newspaper Publisher's Association. "In this country today there are 1,749 daily newspapers, 573 Sunday newspapers, 8,012 weekly newspapers, 652 magazines, 2,316 business and trade publications and innumerable school, labor union, and other special publications reflecting highly localized or transitory interests. There are 832 television stations including 167 educational stations, and 6,480 radio stations . . . So we are drowned in "messages".

A second supposition is that our "power" and "influence" is limited by the skepticism of the audience. Each time we or others interested in the media commission studies of public attitudes toward our performance, credibility problems emerge, especially among the most educated people in the samples. They are, quite simply, dubious of our performance as truth-tellers. As for the least educated, they have a different response: they tend to tune us out, to ignore the "hard news," the editorials and commentaries.

It would thus seem that the "power of the press" is as much myth as a reality and, in an important sense, that is a healthy thing. There is nothing in the Constitution or in our democratic traditions that suggests that the American Newspaper Publishers Association ought to run the country.

But there is something depressing, too, in the notion that the free American press is regarded to some extent in the country like the irresponsible child who too often cried, "Wolf!" A majority of our citizens, according to a CBS survey in April of last year, seems willing to curtail the First Amendment rights of the press to freely criticize the government. That is an ominous undercurrent. Either there is something wrong with the country or there is something wrong with us. The media, at this point, are not sure which it is but they are beginning, in haphazard ways, to try to find out.