

Robert C. Reid

4/7/88
Enough

is enough



The question is about how far a journalist should ethically go in using his powers of public print, trust, and credibility to air his personal dirty linen and the personal outrages he or she feels have been inflicted by the established powers.

After all, we are getting paid good money to air our opinions as columnists, and, in effect, when we use our employer's money, newspaper, prestige and influence to line up in our cross-hairs an individual or organization against whom we have a personal vendetta that has nothing to do with the public at large, we are flirting with abuse of our right to the first amendment.

Granted, there is a razor-thin line here. If I bellyache about General Motors doing me wrong in a business deal with a new automobile, it could conceivably be looked upon as airing a personal distress. But, if in the course of the report, I use that annoyance to make a public statement, i.e., to point out that American free enterprise is losing out to foreign competition because of such analogous situations, then it is a case well-illustrated.

And if I write about anything else of my personal life in this space it should be amusing, entertaining or educational, or at least interesting.

I have gotten my share of parking tickets from over-zealous meter maids, but I don't go crying to the reading public about the injustice of parking meters by taking up valuable newspaper space. Nobody cares. Nine times out of 10 the ticket is deserved. I pay it and go on to other things.

But, if memory serves, I have read, in the past, several columns berating unjust parking tickets.

Last year, I received the first two speeding tickets in over 40 years of driving. I was not guilty, but the cops were wrong. I could have written an acerbic, damning column about the Maryland State Police. Instead, I did what every citizen can do when falsely accused. I went to court, and, in both cases, convinced the judge I was innocent, and the tickets were dismissed.

I have also run afoul of local covenants and zoning and building regulations, and never once, even in the days

when I was a newspaper publisher or editor, did I use the news or editorial columns to denounce the authorities for enforcing what they perceived to be the law. I just fought them on their turf, and won some and lost some. But I never fought them in my newspaper columns.

Fifteen years ago, I lost a zoning matter. I had won it before the county commissioners. Then I had to beat an appeal in circuit court. A handful of neighbors amazingly took it to the Special Court of Appeals and whipped me. That cost me my one shot in life at becoming a millionaire.

It was a bitter and unexpected pill to swallow. I had worked for years toward the objective that was so near. I had it in my clasp, only to see it slip away. A dream gone. Corinne and I both knew what that court had done. But she didn't cry or agonize over the loss of our constitutional rights. Someone else had exercised their constitutional rights and beaten us. I didn't take to the editorial page to rebuke, reprove or spew my distain.

It was a stinging disappointment. The *Washington Post* did call and did do a story. I had the chance to denounce the system, legally, as a journalist, in print. Instead, I made some trite, light comment like, "Win some, lose some."

You play to win, but you have to be ready to lose in this life.

If folks who read this space with any regularity don't know what I am talking about by now, then they're not paying attention.

Yup, the other columnist's picket fence. First, as I see it, it's a perfectly innocuous thing that shouldn't be any

bother, aesthetically or physically. It doesn't harm anyone, or anything, and to me is not offensive.

Just illegal.

It was erected illegally, in a historic area where such fencing is not allowed, and was rightfully ordered to be removed.

Perhaps — no, not perhaps — in all probability, this newspaper made too much of Roy's fence. Two front-page stories: once, when it came to light the fence was illegal; and, once, when it failed to receive a variance. A bit much. The articles would have better served the readership had they appeared less conspicuously inside the paper. Then there was an editorial. Maybe someone else's fence deserved an editorial if that someone was an ordinary citizen raising as much hell as Roy did over such a thing, but not in this case.

That's my unauthorized ombudsman's view. The paper just egged Roy on, encouraged him. My further gut feeling is that when that first fence crusade column came across the editor's desk, marked, "First in a series of three," the brakes should have been applied. From writing in this space for some eight years, I can say the editors go out of their way to allow the absolute freest of expression and opinion in these columns. I have only seen perhaps two columns rejected because of objectionable content in all the hundreds I have written. But in the case of the picket fence, it went too damn far, and enough is enough.

The way this subject was blown to gigantic proportion, made both the paper and the writer laughable.

The writing was one man's personal attack on what is darkly perceived to be a vindictive and sinister City Hall.

There are all kinds of veiled threats of bigger and more powerful media buddies about to enter the fray on the side of the picket fence. There are hints that the editors of all the major metropolitan newspapers are about to unleash their news hounds on the story. "60 Minutes" is mentioned. Will the CBS cameras soon be rolling in Frederick? Will a tenacious, insistent Mike Wallace be grilling a squirming and sweating Mayor Ron Young at his City Hall desk?

Will the masses, carrying lighted torches, descend on City Hall in support of this poor citizen wronged by a cruel and heartless government?

Oh come on, guys. Enough is enough!

Bob Reid is the Annapolis Bureau Chief of the Frederick News-Post.