

Tom Braden

McGovern at Oxford: Round 3

TOKYO — How marvelously life-giving that far removed from one's country, one cares deeply about what is said in one's country. Example: To go to Vietnam is to hope — no matter what one has thought about the meaninglessness of the war — that the United States of America will come out, if not with honor, at least with **heads up and hearts brave**, ready to confront, if it must, a real foe and a real challenge.

To the temporary expatriate, fascination with the rectitude of the country works in smaller ways as well. Example: the treatment of Sen. George McGovern's London speech by the Eastern Establishment press. In Tokyo, George McGovern is not of the slightest importance; I suspect he is of only marginally greater import in Washington, and in the United States. If ever there were a clear bet, it is that George McGovern will not run for the presidency again.

Yet, I picked up the old newspapers here in Tokyo and the first thing that caught my eye were the remarks of my columnist colleague, Joseph Kraft, about George McGovern's speech at Oxford University. Kraft's remarks maddened me as injustice maddens. To madden further, there was an editorial in *The Washington Post* suggesting how proscient Kraft had been.

To begin with, who is Joseph Kraft to say that one of the great weaknesses of the McGovern campaign was

the number of journalists who dominated it? I don't know what number of journalists Joseph Kraft can count in the McGovern campaign but I do know this: Joseph Kraft is a journalist who considered himself at one time to be the principal braintruster of Sen. Edmund Muskie and when Edmund Muskie began to fall behind, Joseph Kraft was reduced to tearful prose. I will tell you further that Joseph Kraft is a journalist who never took the trouble to cover the McGovern campaign. Maybe that's why he doesn't know how few former journalists were running it.

And who is *The Washington Post* to imply that it is sinful to speak criticism of your country from abroad. Surely we have passed the stage where a speech at a great institution of learning is to be judged on the basis of whether that great institution is "abroad."

Did *The Washington Post* criticize Adlai Stevenson when, after his defeat in 1952, he spoke criticism of this country from abroad? Is every defeated presidential candidate to behave like Barry Goldwater? One would think that a man who has the unique experience of running a national campaign for the presidency, might contribute more to national decision-making than to put in a sleepy word once in a while in favor of continuity for Arizona defense bases.

To be fair to Kraft, and to *The Washington Post* editorial writer, it seems to me doubtful that either had read the McGovern text. The wire stories from London featured McGovern's criticism of the man who beat him and of the press which "never laid a glove" on the man who beat him.

I think McGovern was wrong to criticize the man who beat him so soon after being beaten. But if McGovern sounded like a crybaby about the press, did he not—after experiencing a presidential press conference in which not one member of the press dared to ask the President-candidate about the Watergate affair—did he not have at least as much reason to be a crybaby about the press as the last candidate you can think of who was a crybaby about the press?

But all this was aside. If critics had taken the trouble to read McGovern's speech, they might have mentioned its point. It was that presidential power was outrunning constitutional restrictions. McGovern suggested ways in which Congress could—and in his opinion should—attempt to adjust the balance.

Would anybody argue with this thesis? If Barry Goldwater had made a similar plea, the Establishment would have applauded. But Goldwater doesn't say anything. McGovern does.

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(See editorial, F.Y.I., on opposite page.)

F.Y.I. Post 2/27/73

From time to time in this space we take issue with something that one or another of our syndicated columnists has written on the page opposite. And from time to time, one or another of the columnists takes issue with us. Today, we have both situations going at once and—in addition—a sideways skirmish in which the columnist in question, Tom Braden, takes a poke at his fellow columnist, Joseph Kraft. Now, all of this may be too much for you, and we promise to be very understanding about it if you should decide to move right on to Ann Landers, where family disputes are dealt with on a regular and perhaps more rewarding basis. But on the chance that some of you may stay behind, we thought we would take this opportunity, For Your Information, to answer a couple of questions that keep coming up concerning the relationship of this newspaper to the columns that we print on these two pages and, not incidentally, to straighten out the record that Mr. Braden has skewed.

First things first—and there is no need to get too ponderous about it. The question most people ask is: If you (meaning The Post) do not agree with or approve of what a syndicated columnist writes, why do you print it? The answer is that people who write nationally-syndicated columns of opinion for this page and the page opposite enjoy a certain autonomy and independence in that they are understood to be speaking for themselves and—especially in the aggregate—offer the reader a wide variety of viewpoints. It should go without saying that we also think the columns are individually and collectively worth reading—which is why we print them.

In taking responsibility for that judgment—the judgment to print them—we nonetheless do reserve one or two prerogatives to ourselves. Such as, for example, editing out material or possibly declining to run a particular column at all when we think that the material is grossly misleading or grossly (and gratuitously) offensive. By and large, however, we prefer to give the columnists their head, to respect their independence and to keep our hands off their prose. But when a column seems to us to be interesting enough to print and yet pretty far off the mark (or interesting precisely because it is so far off the mark) we may repair to a little criticism in these columns.

Which brings us to Mr. Braden, by his own definition “maddened” by an “injustice” that has belatedly come to his attention. The injustice is the fact that both Mr. Kraft and an editorial in this space appearing on Jan. 23

were sharply critical of a speech Sen. McGovern had delivered in Oxford, England. Writing from Japan about what was said in Washington about what Sen. McGovern said in England a month ago, Mr. Braden, among other things, accuses Mr. Kraft of some serious professional lapses and goes on to announce, generously, that “to be fair” about it, he is prepared to concede that probably neither we nor Mr. Kraft had read the full text of the McGovern speech.

Mr. Kraft’s professionalism needs no defense from us, but we would observe in passing that if Mr. Kraft considered himself—as Mr. Braden asserts—“the principal braintruster of Sen. Edmund Muskie,” that news will be as much of a surprise to him as it will to Sen. Muskie’s braintrust. And nothing in our file of Mr. Kraft’s columns during the weeks preceding the election suggests to us that he “never took the trouble to cover the McGovern campaign.” On the contrary, he was often on the road. We might add that nothing in the column Mr. Kraft wrote on the McGovern speech suggests to us either that he had not read the full text of the speech—as we also had before we rendered our offending editorial. It was, in fact, the text of that address which persuaded us that it was even worse than preliminary news accounts had suggested.

“And who is The Washington Post,” Mr. Braden demands to know, “to imply that it is sinful to speak criticism of your country from abroad? Surely we have passed the stage where a speech at a great institution of learning is to be judged on the basis of whether that great institution is ‘abroad.’” We couldn’t agree more fully. In fact, we said as much, and explicitly, in the editorial in question which, to be fair about it, we suspect Mr. Braden may not have read:

“For our part [the editorial said], we have no objections to an American politician letting his countrymen have it in a speech overseas. After all—why not? Our objection is to the petulant, self-pitying tone and the inaccurate and misleading conclusions that flowed from it.”

Mr. Braden is free to feel that our view of the Oxford speech does Sen. McGovern an “injustice”; that’s what columns of opinion are all about. But we would argue that opinions are interesting and of value to readers precisely to the extent that they rest on an accurate rendering of the facts.