

The Press, the President and the

LIPPMANN, LIBERTY, AND THE PRESS

By John Luskin

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By PHILIP GEYELIN

WALTER LIPPMANN, who still continues to write in retirement from Maine in the summer and New York City in the winter, had by his eightieth year spread upon the record 21 books and numberless signed articles, editorials, and learned essays—in *The New Republic* in its early days, in *The New York World* as director of its editorial page, and in the newspaper column "Today and Tomorrow," which he wrote three times a week for several decades.

That is a lot of thinking, elegantly and forcefully set down, and it is unlikely that anybody is going to be moved to search out and plow through even a significant portion of this life's work. But John Luskin has given us an immensely enticing appetizer for the feast that Walter Lippmann has laid before us over nearly 70 years.

It is in no sense a biography, or even an attempt at a comprehensive analysis of Lippmann's public philosophy and of the way it evolved and changed over the years, but more in the nature of a long review of Lippmann's writings. And if it does not leave you with a clear idea of the core of Lippmannism, whatever that may be, this may be due in part to the fact that Lippmann is not to be celebrated as much for any enduring dogma as for bringing an extraordinary erudition and flexibility of mind to what, in his salad days, was daily journalism—getting to the heart, as well as one could, of daily events, fast moving and only dimly perceivable.

What is most fascinating about this book, then, is what it says along the way about the continuing problems inherent in the relationship between the news business and the government—about what is old and what is new in this delicate relationship.

Lippmann was dealing 50 years ago with a news business undominated by television networks and wire services, and he thus was not encountering some

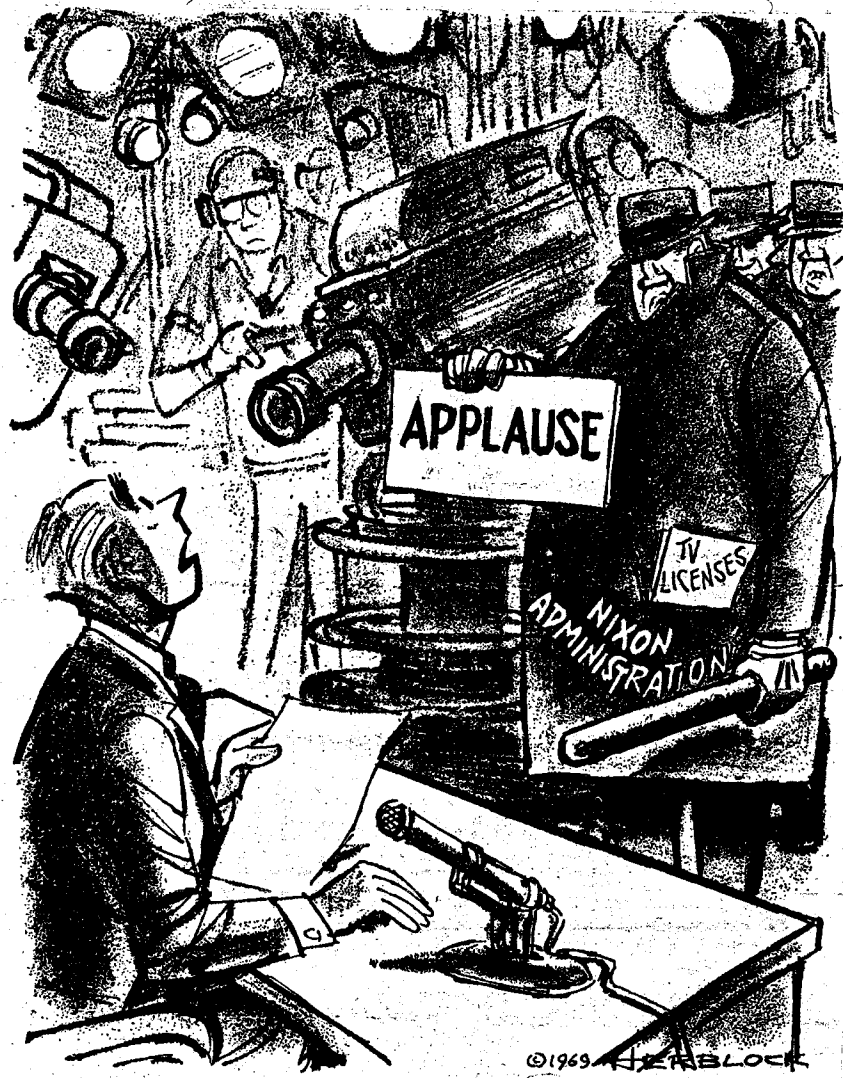
Right to Know

of the particular questions posed today by the administration in power. He did not, for example, confront the kind of challenge to the First Amendment involving a free-functioning press that has been raised by the Nixon administration's attempt to set itself up as the arbiter of truth in television newscasting. He was spared the recent compulsion on the part of judges and prosecutors to drag newspapermen into the law enforcement process and to challenge the right of reporters to maintain confidential relationships with news sources.

But he foresaw some of this in a chapter on censorship in a book called *Men of Destiny* (1927) in which he developed the theory that suppression of free speech varies according to the size of the audience; that the more massive the medium, the more it courts censorship: "In the jargon of a learned treatise a man may if he likes, discuss with equan-

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imity the advantages and disadvantages of . . . assassination as a method of social reform," Lippmann wrote.

One of the major issues of his time was the problem of balancing the people's right to know with the people's capacity to participate intelligently in government policy-making and with the government's right to conduct some of its business in secrecy. As Luskin takes us from one brief excerpt to another, it appears that Lippmann wrestled with the problem without ever precisely pinning it down, perhaps, because of the nature of his restless and inquiring mind. He began as a Socialist and wound up more of a conservative—as he believed almost every reasonable person is inclined to do. He changed his mind and made many a false prophecy, which he also believed was in the nature of his business. And so he was always open to critics of lesser intellectual power and curiosity and narrower convictions. But if Luskin's sampling is a fair one, Lippmann was never dull and rarely unrewarding, and there do run through his writings some simple home truths about the role of the press that are well worth fastening onto today.

As Luskin paraphrases him, Lippmann held that the best way to "explain the role of the press in the formation of public opinion . . . is to recognize that news and truth are not the same, and that while the press can report the news well or badly it can report the truth scarcely at all." The function of news,

Lippmann once wrote, "is to signalize an event; the function of truth is to bring to light the hidden facts, to set them into relation with each other, and to make a picture of reality on which men can act."

Lippmann maintained that truth, using the word broadly, could best be arrived

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at by institutions or by commissions composed of able and learned men and that policy-making was best done, not by public participation, but by such organizations. "The press is no substitute for institutions," he wrote. "It is like the beam of a searchlight that moves restlessly about, bringing one episode and then another out of the darkness into vision. Men cannot do the work of the world by this light alone."

Proceeding from this modest view of the role of journalism in bringing pub-



lic opinion to bear on public policy, Lippmann went on to argue over the years for restraint on the part of the press; for the acceptance of limitations, self-imposed, upon its use of its power, for some self-policing. While he was uncomfortable about the idea of the press writing about itself, he was, if you will, an early-day advocate of ombudsmanship for the news business—however he might reject the word itself.

At one point, he urged the creation of a "competing, non-commercial international news agency to be financed by benevolent foundations, militant liberals, and organized labor"—as Luskin describes it—which would serve as a sort of antidote to the free-wheeling commercial news business. As far back as 1920 he suggested, among other reforms, the publishing of the names of all staff members of all newspapers, careful documentation of every article, prominent retractions of errors, and the establishment of "courts of honor" in which publishers would be required to appear. He made the case in rather prescient terms:

"The regulation of the publishing business is a subtle and elusive matter," he wrote in *Liberty and the News*, adding: "if publishers and authors themselves do not face the facts and attempt to deal with them, some day Congress, in a fit of temper, egged on by an outraged public will operate on the press with an axe."

At the same time he fiercely insisted on the freedom of the press to function independently and without government control, to tell bad news as well as good news, to swing its "searchlight" full circle. He expressed in his writings extreme contempt for government officials who could not bear the heat of press criticism. President Coolidge was one; what Cool-

idge wanted, said Lippmann, was "a reptile press (which) prints what those in power wish to have printed . . . takes what is handed to it and does what it is told to do." Commenting on a speech by Coolidge, Lippmann said witheringly that it had disclosed in a most interesting fashion how the president's mind worked. Coolidge, Lippmann said, had

declared for peace, goodwill, understanding, moderation; disapproved of conquest, aggression, exploitation; pleaded for a patriotic press, for a free press; denounced a narrow and bigoted nationalism, and announced that he stood for law, order, protection of life, property, respect for sovereignty and principle of international law. Mr. Coolidge's catalog of the virtues was complete except for one virtue . . .

That is the humble realization that God has not endowed Calvin Coolidge with an infallible power to determine in each concrete case exactly what is right, what is just, what is patriotic . . . Did he recognize this possibility, he would not continue to lecture the press in such a way to make it appear that when newspapers oppose him they are unpatriotic, and that when they support him they do so not because they think his case is good but because they blindly support him. Mr. Coolidge's notion . . . would if it were accepted by the American press reduce it to utter triviality.

It would be hard to find in contemporary writings a more apt or relevant description of the present state of relations between the government—or more precisely the presidency—and the press.