

FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

and the phenomenon called Agnewism

By WILLIAM B. ARTHUR
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The truth is that today there is no way to avoid the name and shadow of Spiro Agnew if the subject at hand is the freedom of the press.

Such is my subject.

I do not intend, however, merely to castigate the Vice President, no matter how worthy an exercise that might be.

I merely intend to share some thoughts that have come to me on the subject of our freedom, as journalists, and our freedom as it relates to the broader freedom of the people of this nation. Some of my thoughts relate to the phenomenon we sometimes call Agnewism.

All of us, of course, have thought and talked a great deal about the Vice President, as well as about the President whose voice he is. Yet, I am not sure that we have thought enough about the deeper causes of their behavior.

I do not suggest here any ignorance of the facts.

Heaven knows, the main facts are plain enough.

They pop up before us all the time as front page news.

And the main facts, I'm sure we all agree, add up to an indisputable conclusion.

We can conclude only that American journalism is the target of a uniquely broad and unrelenting attack.

Some among us regard it as the bitterest attack in history.

Julian Goodman, the president of NBC, puts it like this:

"Not since 1798—when newsmen were sentenced to prison under the Sedition Act for statements displeasing to the government—has American journalism been under greater attack. It began with television news. It has moved to newspapers, news magazines and other periodicals. It extends to events the newsman covers, to people he talks to, to confidences he needs, to words he writes, and to scenes he photographs."

The Freedom of Information Committee of the American Society of Newspaper Editors concluded just recently that:

"Never has the subpoena been used as viciously, as irresponsibly and as often against freedom of the press as it has this (past) year."

So the attack upon us is being waged with a diversity of weapons — oratorical, philosophical, political, even legal.

Where we do not face attacks, we face efforts to divide us. Because of the way it sluffed off the networks and lauded local broadcasting stations, President Nixon's message to the recent Chicago convention of the National Association of Broadcasters was widely construed as an effort to weaken the broadcasting news media by inciting hostility among its various components.

Everybody thus can perceive that we face a multi-media attack, so to speak, even though the brunt of the battle is currently falling upon the TV networks.

In this very season every one of the three networks has

been targeted for either overt frontal assaults or dangerous political pressuring backstage.

Their cases are familiar.

As an acrimonious aftermath of its special report on "The Selling of the Pentagon," the Columbia Broadcasting System is being subjected to a massive and unprecedented attack by the entire Administration, and by some members of the Congress as well.

When we pause to reflect that, for all the acclaim it received, the CBS program was simply an elaborate statement of the obvious — the obvious being that the Pentagon functions as a vast and costly propaganda machine — then we can only regard the nasty controversy over that program as remarkable.

For broadcasting nothing more astonishing than its coverage of the war in Indochina, however, NBC has been absorbing harassment and fire from a group — albeit, a small group — of United States senators who seem to assert the right to second-guess the editorial judgments made by the network.

Just recently, too, ABC's judgment was overwhelmingly mauled by direct pressure from the Administration. When Congress was set to vote on the SST, as you recall, ABC had scheduled an SST critic to appear on its evening talk show. White House minions, however, browbeat the network in an effort to replace the critic with a spokesman of their own choosing and persuasion. Sad to say, the scheduled critic was displaced.

We are under attack, and we are losing some of the battles.

CBS and NBC, I'm happy to note, are fighting back with some vigor.

Led by its president, Dr. Frank Stanton, CBS is going to court in legal defiance of a House Committee's effort to subpoena all of the films and records that were assembled during the production of "The Selling of the Pentagon."

Dr. Stanton has even declared that, if need be, he is willing to go to jail to defend the freedom of his news organization. When he spoke of the possibility of a jail term, he added, in fact, that he could "use the rest." I don't know how optimistic Dr. Stanton is, but in this instance I like his style.

At NBC, President Goodman responded with some firm-

This speech was delivered by the editor of LOOK at the Region 1 conference of SDX in Hartford, Conn.

ness to the senators who, after reviewing video tapes of the network's war coverage, charged NBC with biased reporting.

Julian Goodman wrote to every congressman and every senator about the situation and said among other things:

"The charges of bias are not only unsupported, but dangerous, because they seek to interfere with the free flow of information essential to the public.

"The standard for news coverage is accuracy and fairness, not whether the news presentation serves the purposes of those who would like to see it reported in a way that would support their own views.

"This latest incident (and Mr. Goodman is still talking about the formal charge of bias voiced by the Senators)—This latest incident, taken with other equally groundless attacks on television journalism, for partisan purposes, appears to be part of a continuing effort to discredit and intimidate network news organizations so that they will not be effective or independent in presenting the facts the public must have to examine the course and soundness of government policy.

"I ask you to consider the very fundamental point of principle involved here—the need of a free people to have the facts and developments on issues realistically reported even though the facts are unpleasant."

I can cheerfully endorse those words, uttered by a man for whom I have the greatest respect.

But I would like to add something about these fights in which NBC and CBS are currently engaged, as well as about the other well-known open battles with which all of us are familiar.

I would like to add that, even though these attacks are unjustified and dangerous, I do not believe that it is this kind of assault that represents the greatest hazard to the freedom of the press.

Where the attack is open and unmistakable, its very visibility allows for a swift and full definition of the crucial issues involved, of the historic stakes that swing in the balance. In the open arena, after all, we can fight back with the whole weight of the U.S. Constitution on our side.

With the First Amendment as our main weapon, and with even modestly reasonable courts to hear us, I frankly do not see how we can fail to win where the attack against us is frontal, where the political invasion of the sanctity of a news operation is brash and brazen.

Conceivably, I am over-confident about this.

Yet, as grave as these overt attacks may be, I am frankly more concerned about the total political and social atmosphere of which such open attacks are actually symptomatic.

I speak of the atmosphere that has developed in this country in the last few years. As I see it and hear it and smell it, it is an atmosphere of bald-faced repression, the repression of unpleasant realities and of the individuals and groups that insist upon telling of them and that often protest them.

We live in an atmosphere, after all, in which our President finds the dissenting collegiate young so distasteful he calls them "bums," and his Vice President finds protesting

youths to be "rotten apples" to be ruthlessly plucked from the barrel.

The insidious assaults on the freedom of the press are but one symptom of this atmosphere. The widespread political trials of this epoch are symptomatic, and so were the Kent State murders. Symptomatic, too, are the development of dossiers on dissenters and critics of government, and the military surveillance of civilians. In all of these acts we show ourselves to be afraid of many things, and often what we seem to fear most is simply someone's truth.

Such is the atmosphere of our times. It is a malignant atmosphere. And I believe that the present Administration nurtures and inflames it.

Still, I do not suggest that it is the creation of this Administration.

To speak of the current scene, as we often do, as the Age of Agnew may indeed do the Vice President a well-deserved disservice, but do not feel that this best serves our own understanding of what is happening.

It is not easy to plumb all of the causes of the malignant atmosphere of our times.

Yet, I think it is possible, with the facts at hand, to grasp something of what is at work in us as a nation, of what is at work in that vast and mysterious cosmos of feeling and emotion and thought that we must, for want of a better term, call the national psyche.

I do think it is possible to glimpse the character of the seemingly malevolent political winds that keep whipping us about.

What I sense, in very broad terms, is that we as a nation are experiencing and have been experiencing the shock of fresh self-discovery.

And let us remember that self-discovery, whether in the psyche of an individual or a group, is invariably a shocking process.

Newly-perceived reality collides brutally with deeply embedded old illusion.

And this collision sets off the most unnerving and often shattering internal combat. It does this whether it occurs in an individual or a group.

Old illusion and new reality lock themselves promptly in battle to assert supremacy.

Poets and psychiatrists alike have noted the extreme difficulty of seeing ourselves truly — of seeing ourselves as others see us.

And so what have we as a nation been compelled to discover about ourselves?

What has wrenched the national psyche so dramatically?

What new realities have baldly thrust themselves into our consciousness, there to go to war with comfortable old illusions?

In truth, so much has exploded upon us in a very short space of time, mostly in the last 20 years, that it is scarcely possible to enumerate it all.

Most of us, however, are intimately familiar with the things that historic and vagrant events have smashed into our knowing minds.

I submit that in this short piece of time we as a nation have been discovering bit by bit that we have grown to be something radically different from what we have always

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thought — or liked to think — ourselves to be.

Let's ponder merely the main elements of this epoch of self-discovery.

We have thought ourselves to be a charitable people; yet we have discovered that even amidst fantastic plenty we allow millions to go hungry.

We have thought ourselves a generous people, yet we have discovered that amidst unheard-of affluence we allow millions to live in poverty.

We have thought ourselves a people dedicated to equality, yet we have been obliged as never previously to confront the raw truth that we have suppressed and brutalized black Americans as well as other minorities.

Realities that we could repress in simpler times have been smashed home again and again in this era of television's intimacy, this epoch of a general information explosion.

Almost every American has heard the sound of the whack of the club on the heads at Selma.

We have thought ourselves as a people enamored of justice, and yet we have discovered our eagerness to put down protests not by remedying the injustices that spawned them but with brute force — brute force brutishly applied in the name of law and order, of shotguns in Orangeburg, of rifles at Jackson State, of police clubs in Chicago, of infantry weapons at Kent State.

I certainly tell you nothing new in saying that we have thought of ourselves as a nation constructed upon the premise that the individual is supreme.

But what we are finding out about the place of the individual in the society that we have actually fashioned?

We find the individual submerged and often stifled within the vast and dehumanized organizations of ever-expanding technological apparatus.

As a people we are gradually perceiving our willingness to apply all manner of legal coercions upon the individual who threatens to cause a public inconvenience (for example, we can now jail someone preventively in Washington) — while we are unwilling to apply even modest legal coercions to those vast technological organizations when they inconvenience the public, in the interest of their own efficiency, by regularly spitting millions of individuals into the desolation of unemployment.

We are being forced to discover, in short, that as a people we have neatly reversed the premise of the supremacy of the individual.

And have not we as a people been confident that we loved the good green earth?

Examine our national hymns. Read our anthems. Read our literature.

We have always conceived of ourselves as a people who loved the land, who were part of the land, who were indeed possessed by the land.

Now we look about us and discover, with jarring suddenness, that we have in truth been ravagers of the land, that we have been engaged systematically, even compulsively, in the sorry process of converting our rivers into sewers and our air into loathesome gunk.

And what of our cherished belief that we were the world's great stewards of peace. What a battle this self-concept has had to fight as for a period of years, few in number but seemingly measureless in duration, we have been obliged to watch ourselves, in our own living rooms, perpetuate a war so wasteful, so brutal, so far away, so pointless and so bloody and tragic as to defy comprehension.

Well. That is one hell of a lot of fresh reality to accommodate to.

Yet, there is something else, something crucially important.

I refer to a notion that is just now bludgeoning its way into our reluctant consciousness, an idea that challenges the concept that we have always held of ourselves as an invariably victorious people.

Have we not always thought of ourselves, nationally, as an invariably righteous and infinitely powerful people and thus destined to prevail in any test on the battlefield?

I do not profess the credentials of a military expert. But I do suspect, as I look upon the sorrowful events of Vietnam, that we as a nation are virgins no more.

Inexorably, even though our Vice President says that to say such a thing is masochism, the unaccustomed and unpalatable taste of defeat is rising in our reluctant throats.

But how furiously we resist this notion, how adamantly, how stubbornly.

The very suggestion, the very possibility that defeat may be a reality collides with an epic and painful crash against our cherished concept of ourselves.

We are the unvanquished.

We are the unbeatable.

My point, of course, is to underscore our capacity for resisting the unsettling reality, for rejecting it. This capacity is a most remarkable thing.

No sooner have you and I read of front-line witnesses telling of the flight of our disarrayed forces before the counterattacking enemy in Laos than we look to the tube and hear our leaders assure us of the announced success of the mission.

I have no doubt that some huge number of our countrymen prefer, at least momentarily, to accept the insistent reassurances of the leadership.

For such Americans, the unbearable alternative is to accept an unsavory truth that challenges a deeply held concept of what the American people are.

Self-discovery often comes hard indeed.

Such is my simple point.

In a nation, as in an individual, some irrepressible part of the psyche stands ready to wage battle against the acceptance of any fresh reality that threatens to demolish — or even to seriously disturb — that accumulation of notions and ideals and illusions and verities that form the fabric of self-identity.

Just as we resist the idea that we can have been defeated, we resist the reality that we condone hunger (no matter how voluminous the evidence), that racism is structured into our very institutions (though we read of the fruits of it week by dreary week), that we perpetuate poverty (though we see it ourselves).

Rather than regard ourselves as unjust, we redefine justice. Thus millions of Americans, by their own testimony, regard as just the use of lethally violent brute force against protesting children.

Our national tendency, in short, is a human one. Our national psyche tends to reject reality when it conflicts with the self-conception that provides us with our sense of self-worth.

And quite clearly, part of this tendency is the further tendency to reject or resent even the knowledge of these offensive and shattering realities.

Here, obviously, I come back to us.

I come back to journalists.

I come back to us purveyors of knowledge.

And I come back, too, to the political and governmental atmosphere that has been flowering in such an ugly way.

This atmosphere, I believe, is a manifestation of what is happening in the national psyche.

We are a nation at war with fresh and disturbing truths about ourselves.

It is a commonplace to speak of us as a divided people today.

In the conventional analysis the division is supposed to be ideological.

Our minds tend to see the configurations of the division in terms of trends to the right or trends to the left, of conservative tides or liberal ones.

I have come to believe, however, that our most agonizing division springs from our capacity to perceive reality, from distortions of perception that are caused by the conflict of mind that I have described.

To me, we seem to be divided between those of us who are willing, in the face of shattering new realities, to see, and accept, and those who cannot bear to see and accept.

What the actual fractions of our division might be I do not know.

Still, I suspect that the number of those who resist reality is large.

By simply looking and hearing we can witness today that a great many Americans resist certain truths.

The reason is simply that such truths cause in us a sense of humiliation.

They cause us to feel defeat.

We tend to resent a press that reiterates these truths again and again.

We tend to regard such a reiteration as persecution, and such a press as our persecutor.

A remark that the late Thurman Arnold made comes to my mind when I survey the current political scene. Arnold was a lawyer and a writer and a very sagacious political observer. And he said this:

“Whoever obtains power in times of national humiliation and defeat is apt to express and intensify the persecution manias which that atmosphere develops in any people.”

I believe that this is so. And I believe that the present Administration is expressing and intensifying the natural resistance of the American people to acknowledging and accepting certain distasteful truths about ourselves.

I do not believe that this Administration is merely at war with the press.

I believe that this Administration, whether by design or unconsciously, is at war with the truth. Don't they read the Bible? Do they not know that it says, clearly and crisply, in John 8:32: “And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”

We know that the Administration is busily and relentlessly engaged in propagandizing us, intruding, through its agencies, even into the contents of popular songs and the stuff of entertainment programs.

And we know, or should know, that it is developing as its primary constituency that portion of the American people who find it exceedingly difficult to accept certain harsh realities.

The Administration's attitude is, of course, epitomized by that of the Vice President.

In the Administration's war on truth Spiro Agnew is simply the chosen front man. His voice is the chosen voice.

I suspect that you and I have too often regarded him merely as a gadfly to the press, the hatchet-man assigned merely to needle critical commentators and give pause to all who would either report news or make comments at variance with the Administration's version of the truth.

Now, however, I think it behooves us to ponder the words of Spiro Agnew on a context broader than that of conventional politics.

James Reston was pointing out the other day that in contrast with what our forefathers said about the press Agnew's criticisms seem almost genial.

But I think Reston's remark, though superficially accurate,

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tends to mislead us. Though he may indeed sound more genial than press critics of an earlier day, Spiro Agnew's attacks on the press must be gauged on the basis of all that is at work in the American nation today.

I think his rhetoric needs to be seen as something more than a recurrence of those traditional potshots at the press, those nettlesome attacks that we have experienced so often and weathered so successfully.

I no longer believe that Agnew and this Administration aim merely at needling and intimidating reporters and commentators and broadcasters and publications.

Agnewism panders directly to the national tendency I have described, our tendency to resist unpalatable reality.

Agnew is doing far more than causing the press some discomfort. He is willfully encouraging the American people in a tendency that could eventually save them not only from reality but from any meaningful concept of what freedom of the press — or freedom itself — actually is.

Let's briefly consider the Vice President's attack on the media in April.

Public reporting on America's flaws became, in his words, "the movement to plead America guilty."

The public reporting of our extremely dubious adventure in Laos became, in his word, "masochism."

Well, this language is not addressed to the media at all.

This language is from the textbooks of psychiatric pathology, and it is addressed to the American people.

Spiro Agnew is telling Americans that we who put unpleasant truths before them are sick.

We are persecutors trying to inflict the American people with a sense of guilt.

In this particular speech, our Vice President even took exception to a New York *Times* headline over a story about a Gallup Poll.

Gallup, it turns out, found that 12 per cent of Americans would like to move out of their country.

The percentage of Americans so displeased by conditions here has doubled in the last 12 years.

Now, Agnew did not actually question the existence or accuracy of this reality.

What he complained about was that the headline failed to emphasize that 88 per cent of us Americans are still willing to live here.

Well, I don't think that here Spiro Agnew is merely second-guessing an obviously good news judgment. Because once again he goes on to suggest to the people that there is something sick and wrong about a press that thrusts distasteful realities into the national consciousness.

What could be the Vice President's motives?

I have no access to the inner reaches of Spiro Agnew's mind.

In a way, I realize, it may be more charitable to accuse the Vice President of dubious motives than to charge that he really believes the things he says.

We can only speculate about his real intentions.

And I notice that just the other day the former president

of CBS News, Fred Friendly, said that there was apparently "malice aforethought" in the Administration's efforts to — and I'm quoting — "sow seeds of serious doubt about the news media."

And just recently, too, Nicholas Johnson, the most outspoken of our Federal Communications Commissioners, leveled quite a blunt charge against President Nixon and his right-hand man.

"What Nixon-Agnew are up to," Commissioner Johnson asserted, "is to try to convince the American people they cannot believe their media."

If that is so — and I tend to agree that it is so — then we know where our real battlefield is, we know where the real danger to us lies.

We do not need to know this Administration's motives, finally, to see the effect of what they are doing.

They are inflaming and exploiting the popular atmosphere, and the popular atmosphere is emboldening our governmental servants at all levels to launch overt attacks upon the press.

But suggest again that we can answer overtly these overt attacks and ultimately win.

The battle that we ultimately could lose lies out there in the fermenting mind of the nation. Our greatest danger will rise directly with the diminishing of our national capacity to see and admit and confront certain simple and ugly truths that are available to all of us, journalists or not. I personally have no doubt that the Administration is diminishing that capacity.

One example of how this is happening came across that barricade that I call my desk the other day. It was a letter, a letter about an article that *LOOK* recently printed. The article told of the ravaging of the countryside in Vietnam. The article was about ecocide, really.

We printed not merely a word description of some hideous things that American power has wrought there but some color photographs. One color picture revealed an area thoroughly stripped of foliage. It was barren, desolate, heart-breaking.

Well, the letter about it came from a man in Maryland. His letter began: "I find myself somewhat concerned about your honesty . . ." It went on to express his total doubt of the authenticity of our photograph. The writer said that as a matter of fact he believed we published a picture of some mudflats that he had seen somewhere.

We answered, of course. We sent him the precise latitude and longitude of the location we depicted. We sent him other references that could help him document our report, if he chose to.

It was not, however, this man's chilly resistance to the truth that finally blew my mind. It was the fact that at the bottom of the letter he indicated that he was sending a copy to Vice President Spiro Agnew.

So I tell you with some certainty that here was one American whom the Vice President has turned off from reality but good. We can only imagine how many others there are. I personally fear there must be many.

It is in them that we eventually will meet our greatest hazard. For if their number grows large, they will prevail even when the Nixons and the Agnews have passed from the scene.

Our danger, clearly, is not merely to our freedom, not merely to the freedom of the press. The danger is to the freedom of the people, the freedom of this society. Ultimately the freedom of the press is not severable from the freedom of the people. And ultimately the freedom of a people cannot survive when their capacity to receive new truths is impaired.

I think we should ask whether we are tending today to become a society in which truth is the enemy.

What kind of society does the present Administration really desire us to be?

Perhaps we can deduce this from their words.

We know they cherish a constituency that they call the Great Silent Majority.

Well, although it may not yet be a majority, I feel now that what the Administration really cherishes about it is the notion of silence.

My personal suspicion is, and this is drawn from their attitude toward unpleasant truths and uncomfortable realities, that they would cherish a Great Silent Society.

In this society, of course, there would be no discomfort from unpleasant truths. There would be no guilt-engendering discussion of social flaws.

No doubt problems of the Great Silent Society would be cured just the way that old-timey families used to cure the lethal drinking problem of the black-sheep uncle — by never mentioning it, even at his funeral.

Existence would seem quite placid in the Great Silent Society. Perhaps some successor to Agnew would pop up on the tube to cheer everybody up from time to time. He could remind us, for instance, that fully 78 per cent of us had managed to survive our own pollution for another week. Certainly he would not be masochistic enough to tell us that 22 per cent had just perished in the weekend smog. Joy to the world.

Somewhere there must be a flaw in the Great Silent Society concept. Perhaps it is that existence therein would not be human life.

I hope that from the character and duration of my remarks you do not conclude that I am against silence.

I would like to remind you — and myself — of some of our colleagues who now are silent, and most honorably so.

I would like to remind us all that more than 30 of us journalists have

died in an effort to bring home to the American people some of the truths and realities of the war in Indochina.

One of those journalists was a man I hired, a man named Sam Castan. He worked for *LOOK*.

And at the time of his death in Vietnam, one of his colleagues cabled me from Saigon:

"Sam was . . . an inspiration for those of us searching for some truth in this Babel of conflicting reports."

Well, sadly, Sam is searching no longer. But his silence speaks to me tonight, his silence and the silence of others.

Let's remind ourselves again and again of what Elmer Davis once reminded us so well.

"The first and great commandment," said that salty Hoosier, "is, don't let them scare you."

Let's take it to heart. Be unafraid. Fight them on all fronts. Fight them and make sure they know that the only silence they will obtain will be over our dead bodies.

And when we answer our enemies let's don't always be so polite.

Let's remind them from time to time that if they don't like a free press in a free country, then they can find what they do like in a place such as the U.S.S.R. Or perhaps a Nazi Germany would suit them better. Or, maybe a place called hell. ■

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