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# Freedom Sales Job

Back in Newark, N.J., a bastion of American freedom, a newspaper reporter has been put in jail by the politicians.

Peter Bridge had the bad taste to write about civic corruption. The pols were more than anxious to know what he knew that he did not write, and also where he got his information.

He refused to co-operate with a prosecutor and grand jury toward these inquisitorial ends. In the new, cold climate emanating from Washington and the Burger Supreme Court, it then became easily possible to throw Bridge in the slammer for as long as they want to keep him there.

**Talk or rot: those are Bridge's options. And so the eternal battle for the most fundamental of our freedoms, the right of a free press, flares on another front.**

Bridge is not the first reporter to go to jail for the principle, and I am regretfully certain he won't be the last. I wish I were more certain that the general public outside the ink trade understood the issue as something personal, affecting everybody in a manner scarcely possible to overstate.

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**WHEN LITTLE** tyrannies gain public assent they do so on the basis that it's somebody else who's to be tyrannized. This is how small tyrannies are sold, and how they become great tyrannies.

It is always the damned Jews (or the damned whoever) who are to be put away in those concentration camps, not the good Germans. Eventually, when the good German who assented feels the boot jarring his tailbone his reaction is one of astonishment: There must be some mistake!

Americans are no whit wiser than Germans, they are just luckier. The difference lies in a lucky inheritance of a work of genius and compassion, the Constitution of the United States, and more particularly those wildly radical afterthoughts known as The Bill of Rights.

What's disturbing when a matter like the Bridge Case is received indifferently by the public is that it emphasizes how thin is the thread upon which our liberties depend. How many "good Germans" are there among us, and how few keepers of the flame?

Every now and then political experimenters put this to the test by circulating petitions incorporating the Bill of Rights. Good citizens in preponderant numbers recoil. They think The Rights are something alien, red, subversive!

**This consistent result is a thing of profound personal shame to those of us who have been privileged to enjoy a lifetime of access to paper and ink. What have we been doing with our press freedom that it is so little understood and so lightly valued?**

Whatever else we've been doing, we haven't been doing much of a sales job on the benefits of the American Revolution.

Press freedom is under attack. It didn't take the Peter Bridge case to make that clear. It is under attack from the outside, as a rather calculated policy of politicians and officeholders. It is under attack from erosion within, as the news media grow less venturesome and less aggressive.

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**I RATHER LEAN** to the suspicion that our American newspapers began to decline in quality when editors became respectable, and began being admitted to decent clubs.

Reporters began to become less effective when they came under the influence of television's showbiz news programs, with their emphasis on the easily covered "press statement" and set-piece "news conference."

Economics has also operated toward the deterioration of a free press, particularly the economics of the ever-expanding public payroll. Politicians have found they can erect walls of public relations men around them, paying them generously out of the public purse. It is a woeful fact that some pretty bright minds that once might have been attracted to journalism have instead gone over to the enemy, for the simplest of reasons, money.

Those of us who are left of course abide by the same set of ethics that guides Peter Bridge, no matter what this Supreme Court or any other may say. For my own part I don't even disclose sources to my editors, much less to politicians, and my notes, my records, my files, and my thoughts are nobody's property but my own, except for those—like these—which you can buy for 15 cents at your newsstand.