

Old News

The news racket is dead, mummified, and ready for a mausoleum. The joy has gone. Reporters were once a misbegotten tribe of ashen-souled cynics, honest

drunks chain-smoking their way to the grave, foul-mouthed, profane, boisterously male, believing in nothing but the certainty of corruption and the squalor that is human nature. In short, they were philosophers and splendid company. You couldn't chew the fat with a better crowd. They knew the world as no one else did. I mean the real world—big-city bus stations at 3 a.m. where things crawled forth that would unnerve the underside of a rotting log. They knew Linda's Surprise Bar in Saigon and Lucy's Tiger Den in Bangkok. Many had been in the military and survived the ritualized absurdity of GI life. Delicates and milque-toasts they weren't.

They were the world's true aristocrats. All the Heidelberg philosophers rolled into one and exponentiated knew less of life than a cub on his second year on the police desk. Less that was worth knowing, anyway.

Maybe the news trade didn't build character, but it built characters. Marquis, Mauldin, Royko, Charley Reese, Smith Hempstone, Paul Vogel—names ancient and less so, mostly unknown in the wider world, guys who told wild stories in the press bars of Taipei and Joburg, stories both impossible and sometimes true.

There was Six-Pack Muldoon, a chopper pilot working in Southeast Asia. Always flew with an open six-pack in the cockpit. Asked why, he said, "In 30 years of flying, I've only crashed twice. Both times I was sober. I'm not going to risk it again."

That world is gone. The news biz has been sanitized, made polite and tedious, like a family pool hall with orange felt and no betting. The morgue has become "the library." Newsrooms are "non-smoking environments." As women came in, the boisterousness and dirty stories went out. The gals could do the job perfectly well, but the atmosphere changed. A true news weasel no long felt at home. You could no longer say, "So there we were on Bugis Street, and Murphy picks up this hooker with three thumbs, yeah, really."

And then ... give me strength. The Ivy League took over. The ashtrays went and very nice young people from Princeton showed up. They were smart, sometimes rocket smart, knew about things the old hands had never heard of, learned fast, but they were so ... nice. They ate salads. Until then no reporter had ever eaten a salad, only marbled steak and Jim Beam and other things bad for you. The old-timers watched the new arrivals with horror. It was like being invaded by Moonies.

The D.C. Bob began. Newspapers fell into the gummy clutches of the school-marmish censorship that we call political correctness. Reporters talking in restaurants began the furtive reconnaissance—the duck of the head and the shifty glance about—to make sure that no one was within earshot who might be offended. Practically everyone could be offended, indeed seemed to be looking for the chance: blacks, Asians, Hispanics, women, homosexuals, Jews, what have you.

The National Press Club got overrun by lobbyists and flacks. It too fell into the tarpits of the Higher Priss. The big portrait of a bosomy young lady that had once graced the walls had to go. The place began to feel like a hotel lobby. Heartwarming events began, like tree fungus on a log not quite dead. Old-timers hated anything heartwarming. You could shoot at them and they didn't care, station them in Bangladesh and they would hold up. Heartwarming events were too much.

I quit the Press Club over Costa Rica Night, I think it was. Or maybe Mexico. I was at the bar talking to Mike Causey, stand-up guy, a classic newsman, then with the *Washington Post*. A very nice young lady came over tried to sell me tickets to Costa Rica Night, if that is what it was. Oooh, she said, it was going to be fun. We would wear costumes and there would be piñatas and it would be a Latin American Experience, oooh.

I was courteous. In times of trial, I call on deep reserves of character. I didn't tell her I would prefer to spend the evening removing my lungs with a ball-point pen. Nor did I explain my idea of a Latin American Experience: standing at the Gavilan Bar in Guadalajara, hooking down José Cuervo and swapping war stories with my crazy friend Tom the Robot.

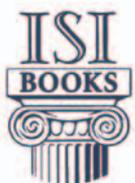
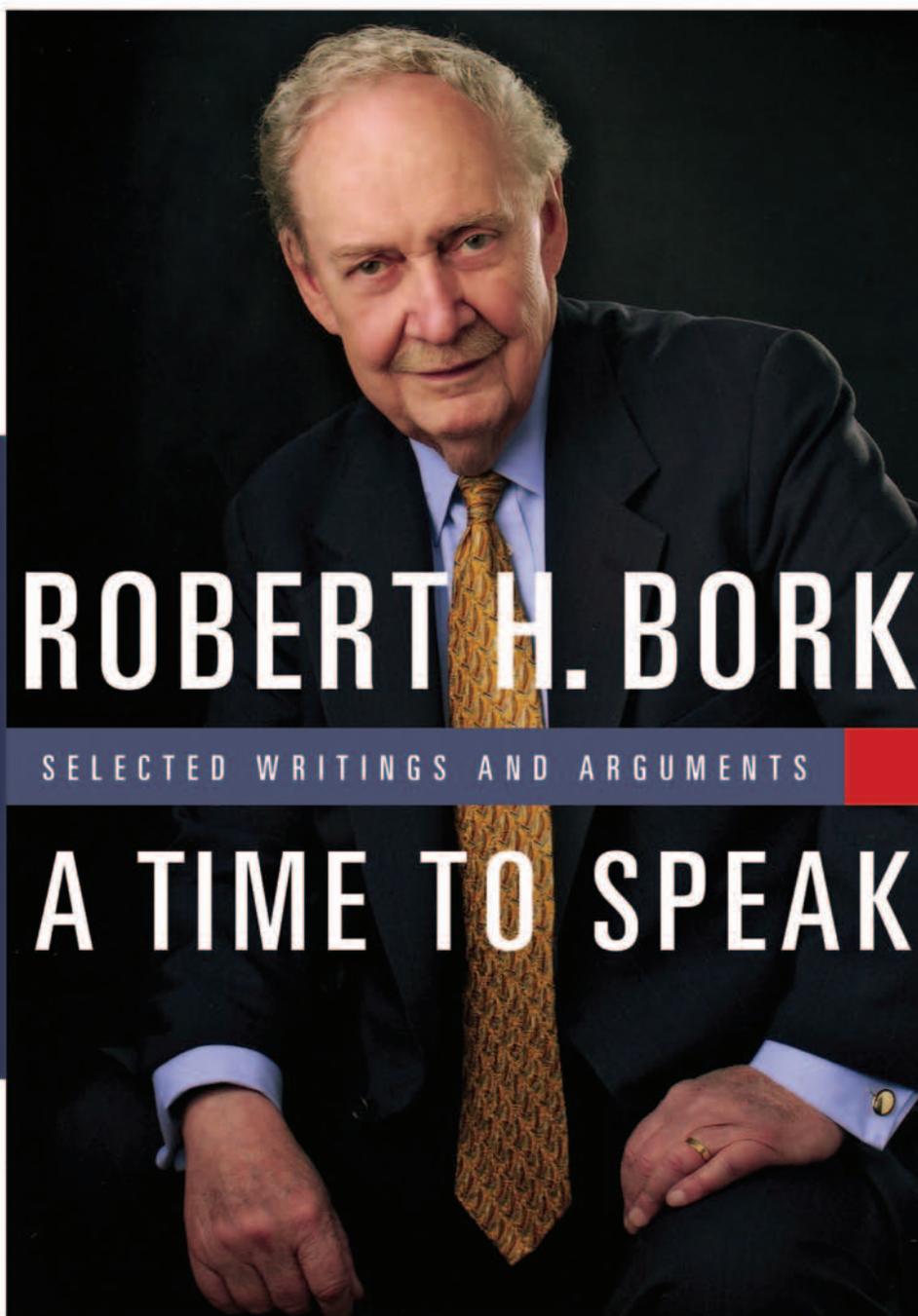
But I quit. Character only carries you so far.

And the corporations took over. Everything became tranquil, slant decided at corporate. Don't make waves. The fluorescents hummed narcotically, like paper shredders destroying evidence. Sterility flowered. Libel and character assassination fell into disfavor with publishers.

What a world. ■

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