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# Ignorance, Power, and Liberty

Tom Wicker: *On Press*; Viking Press; New York.

by Jeffrey St. John

"Most of the evils that continue to beset American journalism today, in truth, are not due to the rascality of owners, nor even to the Kiwanian bombast of business managers, but simply and solely to the stupidity, cowardice, and Philistinism of working newspapermen. The majority of them, in almost every American city, are still ignoramuses and proud of it."

—H. L. Mencken

*Journalism in America*, 1927

The passage of half a century might appear to make this jaundiced view of journalism outdated. Mencken was writing about a breed of newspapermen he thought a step up from streetwalkers and a notch below a precinct police captain. The majority of newspapermen in Mencken's day wrote for a largely immigrant audience and, as a consequence, a college education was not only unnecessary but regarded with contempt. Mencken himself, for example, never went beyond high school and acquired his extensive learning and scholarship from the Baltimore Pratt Library and a life-long love affair with the printed word. Mencken never wanted to do anything else with his life. "I find myself more and more convinced," he wrote a few years before his death, "that I had more fun doing news reporting than in any other enterprise. It is really the life of kings."

Mencken was perhaps one of the first to realize that the newspaper profession faced two fundamental perils: a militant prejudice toward liberty and learning by most journalists, and their seduction by politicians promoting the all-powerful state. "If experience teaches us anything at all," he wrote,

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"it teaches us this: that a good politician, under democracy, is quite as unthinkable as an honest burglar. His very existence, indeed, is a standing subversion of the public good in every rational sense. He is not one who serves the commonweal; he is simply one who preys upon the commonwealth. It is to the interest of all the rest of us to hold down his powers to an irreducible minimum, and to reduce his compensation to nothing. . . ."

The advent of the FDR New Deal in 1933 found Mencken upholding this view while much of the press in Washington was romanced, flattered and seduced by Roosevelt. "The New Deal," he wrote, "will be doomed the day the newspapers of the country cease to fill their columns with official propaganda in favor of it, and devote their space to the laborious amassing of truth about it."

Tom Wicker's work is largely an exercise in denying the sinful relationship the liberal national media has had with government power since the FDR New Deal. One has doubts, however, that Wicker is even aware that a relationship exists between the current growing hostility toward the national news me-

dia by the public and the simultaneous growing hostility toward politicians and bureaucratic big government. Instead, Wicker sets out to prove two things. First, that the hostility toward the press or national news media today is hopelessly wrong-headed by Americans who don't know any better. Second, that the press is really an adversary of government while maintaining no vested interest in political power and no influence in shaping the events of Tom Wicker's time. This book becomes, therefore, a massive exercise in evasion of evidence and experience.

The problems for the American news media, in Wicker's warped perception, began at the Republican National Convention at the Cow Palace in San Francisco in 1964 when former President Eisenhower electrified that audience with a denunciation of the pro-New Deal, anti-middle-class bias of the liberal national news media. The subsequent characterization of the GOP candidate, Barry M. Goldwater, in those news media as one who would repeal the gains of the New Deal manifested itself in the extraordinary spectacle of the media portraying the Ari-

"He is an old-fashioned Southern liberal. His heart bleeds and burns. His capacity for indignation is inexhaustible. He is the nag of conscience in a time of torpor and cynicism and greed and stupidity, a kind of ambulatory reproach. He seems determined in his column not to let us get away with it, whatever 'it' is."

— *New York Times*

"A searching assessment of the present state of journalism."

— *Newsweek*

"Thoughtful, highly readable . . . important for anyone concerned about the handling of news and its impact on American life."

— *Wall Street Journal*

"Charm and honesty . . ."

— *New York Times Book Review*

zona Republican as a Nuclear Napoleon abroad and a heartless character out of Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* at home. "For the first time in a fifteen-year career in journalism," Wicker observed of the angry fists of the 1964 GOP delegates directed toward the Cow Palace's press box, "I was forced to acknowledge to myself that my colleagues and I were hated and feared by millions of other Americans."

"The Goldwater nomination," Wicker adds with the first of numerous evasions, "was almost a model for change that lay ahead. Just as the Goldwaterites perceived the men and events of 1964 differently than those men and events seemed to be portrayed in the newspapers and on television, Americans generally began to find it more difficult in the 1960's and the 1970's to reconcile 'the news' they read or watched with their own perceptions, beliefs and attitudes."

Wicker does, however, acknowledge what cannot now be denied, but which the news media disbelieved when Goldwater said it during the 1964 campaign, namely that Lyndon Johnson was a bold-faced liar when claiming in 1964 to be a peace candidate; in fact, he was already conducting an undeclared war in Southeast Asia. And here is where Wicker becomes warped in his perception.

The wars of this century, in which America has been involved, have had the effect of corrupting the judgment and perception of intellectuals and journalists. Wicker perceives only that Vietnam was the product of the Cold War and the anticommunist mentality of his generation, and the free ride the press provided John F. Kennedy. To him, the CIA, the Johnson and Nixon administrations are the villains of the Vietnam nightmare, thus evading the two critical episodes in which the U.S. news media played a critical role in shaping events.

The first took place three weeks before President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas, November 22,

1963, when then pro-American President Diem of South Vietnam was overthrown by a group of Saigon generals with the active encouragement and active assistance of the U.S. CIA. The groundwork, for what many of us in the media at the time saw as either a prelude to deeper American involvement or the fall of Saigon to the communist Viet Cong, was prepared by three principal Saigon U.S. correspondents: David Halberstam of the *New York Times*, Malcolm Browne of the United Press International, and Neil Sheehan of the Associated Press. All three helped orchestrate a media campaign in which Diem was portrayed as a corrupt dictator oppressing a Buddhist minority who were incinerating

themselves in the streets of Saigon. The late newspaper correspondent for the now-defunct *Herald Tribune*, Marguerite Higgins, provides ample evidence in her 1965 book, *Our Vietnam Nightmare*, that the press reports of all three played a powerful part in influencing Washington policymakers and shakers to sanction Diem's overthrow. Higgins draws the conclusion that we would never have become mired in the Vietnam nightmare if we had stuck with Diem.

In a 1971 New York television show with Neil Sheehan, I apprised him of the perception, prevalent among journalists like myself, that toppling Diem meant something far worse than a deeper involvement for the U.S. to try

In the forthcoming issue of *Chronicles of Culture*:

## Accentuate the Negative . . .

"We have recently completed the first full year of the *Chronicles of Culture*'s existence, and it's time for a bit of summing up and soul-searching.

We are most often accused of two venial sins: liberal-baiting and negativism. Of course — both charges have the common rockbottom. We do concentrate on Liberal Culture because it is the reigning sociocultural sovereign whose wisdom and morality we question and challenge. Caring for values of intellect and literary excellence, we unfortunately have little to point out as satisfactory answers to the libcultural dominance. Whenever we run across them in fiction, arts or humanities, we praise them to the skies. However, as there is not enough of them of the quality we would wholeheartedly approve, we are often accused of sounding negative by our own brethren in *Weltanschauung*."

from the *Editor's Comment*

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Stage — Screen  
Liberal Culture — Journalism  
Polemics & Exchanges

to curb a political-military disaster largely of our own making. "Perhaps if many of us in Saigon," he replied, "had had that same vision of the future as you, things might have turned out a lot different than they did."

Wicker writes of Halberstam and Sheehan as colleagues with clean hearts, hands and consciences when it comes to a war which is the basis of his perception throughout his work. This is less reprehensible than his refusal to face the part that the U.S. media played in crippling the conduct of the war by giving full play to the U.S. procommunist circles which manipulated and orchestrated the escalating domestic antiwar movement after Lyndon Johnson became President in a landslide against Goldwater.

If one believes Wicker, the U.S. news media from 1965 on was embarked on a moral crusade to prevent their own government from pursuing the results of its folly in Vietnam. Evaded, of course, is the critical part the press played in providing a propaganda forum to the antiwar feelings and how it became an integral part of the Viet Cong, Chinese and Russian war strategies. This, of course, was not because the news media in America was committed to communist victory in Vietnam, rather it was committed to the political defeat of both Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon at home, at any cost. It never occurs to Wicker that whatever his good intentions, these two goals served the same end.

The most compelling evidence that Tom Wicker is proud of his contrived ignorance is his regurgitating the myth that the 1968 "Tet" offensive by the Viet Cong was the event that "shattered official pretensions to inevitable victory" and forced Lyndon Johnson in the Spring of 1968 not to seek reelection. The U.S. military had always maintained that the Viet Cong "Tet" offensive was a shattering defeat for Hanoi. The news media reported it as a defeat for the United States and it

was that perception that both prevailed and shaped events in this country and around the world. The *Washington Post* Saigon Bureau Chief at the time of the 1968 "Tet" offensive was Peter Braestrup, now editor in Washington of the *Wilson Quarterly*. Wicker knows him well, referring to him in his book as joining the Washington Bureau of the *New York Times* at the same time he did, in 1960. Ten years later, however, Braestrup shocked his Washington journalistic colleagues with a book that demonstrated with exhaustive documentation that, indeed, "Tet" was a crushing defeat for the Viet Cong and that the press played a major role in misleading Americans and world public opinion about the true nature of the offensive. The fact that the Viet Cong were able to conceal, with the help of the Tom Wickers of the world press, that it suffered a humiliating defeat proved enormously helpful in the all-important propaganda war that was part of the conflict in Southeast Asia. "The only way," observed Marguerite Higgins in 1965, "that the communists could make the United States welsch on its commitment to Vietnam is if American public opinion in the 1960's were to become as demoralized as French public opinion in the 1950's. This is something that communists are working very hard to accomplish, and there are a great many Americans unwittingly serving the Viet Cong objective of undermining the nation's will and stamina."

The full intellectual treason of the American news media in the Vietnam conflict remains to be written. Tom Wicker and the *New York Times* played an important role, posturing and pontificating to the public that what they did was an act of morality. Yet that same Wicker and that same newspaper find it hard to apply that same moralizing self-righteousness to the regimes in Southeast Asia that have now slaughtered hundreds of thousands in Cambodia and made concentration camp countries of Vietnam and Laos.

The *Times* demands full disclosure from the U.S. government, but denies that it should comply with the same standard when its reporters are summoned before criminal grand juries.

This hypocritical double standard is one of the numerous reasons why the American news media is regarded with such sullen hatred and resentment by millions of Americans whose basic sense of fairness is offended over and over again. Having promoted the idea that unions should be granted a virtual state monopoly, the *Times* and the *Washington Post* are horrified when union power is used against them. But when the private sector business community opposes union power and government power these papers adopt their double standard of supporting the unions and big government.

Wicker's work is fundamentally intended to justify to readers a defense of monopoly press political power and its alliance with the political leaders who benefit from its benediction. The columnist-critic Michael Novak calls Wicker a "representative of the lunatic left," and justly so. Asserting that the press "mirrors the character of the American community," Wicker is unable to explain how the nonstop campaign of savaging each and every American institution, custom and convention that offends the media's anti-middle-class consciousness, is expressing the soul of America.

The best chapters of this book, to accord Wicker the fairness that he refuses to give to others, is his running report on his own involvement in the coverage of the Kennedy assassination in Dallas and his jaundiced view of the White House and the Presidents who have sought to manipulate and use him. But he does not care to realize that he, himself, is the manipulator of values and viewpoints. One such value that Wicker clearly does not believe in is individual liberty, the only thing that Mencken ever thought he or any other newspaperman should believe in.

Wicker wants liberty for the press, but not for others. This is why he is guilty, along with most of the liberal news media, of moral and intellectual treason. Out of ignorance and an arrogance of power unchecked by any modesty of mind and heart, the Wickers of the world are the gravediggers of our free society, all the while believing in the balderdash that they are its guardians

and saviours.

"It is this vast and militant ignorance, this widespread and fathomless prejudice against intelligence," observed Mencken, "that makes American journalism so pathetically feeble and vulgar, and so generally disreputable. . . . The delicate thing called honor can never be a function of stupidity. . . ." □

## Exhorting Fiscal Sin and Sinners

William E. Simon: *A Time for Truth*; McGraw-Hill and Reader's Digest Press; New York.

by Clarence Carson

It is indeed a time for truth, and it is to his credit that former Secretary of the Treasury and Energy Czar, William E. Simon, sets forth some timely truths in this book. Two things are happily missing from his work. One is the argot of academicians, by which an appearance of learning obscures meaning. The other is the evasions by which politicians try to appear to be saying something but are concentrating on avoiding saying anything with which anyone can disagree, i.e., talk without saying anything. Mr. Simon is candid, forthright, and, we may hope, controversial.

Indeed, it can be argued that Simon has not yet learned to be a politician. If he is lucky perhaps he never will. That is not to say that he is unaware of the pressures and lures that turn a man into a politician. If he did not know of these already, several years in Washington under the Nixon and Ford Administrations should have provided him with some education on the subject. Even so, he did not occupy elective offices. He did not occupy a position of prominence as a result of repeatedly running for office. He did not live with the potentiality of defeat and humiliation

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which accompanies rejection which is the staple of political existence in America.

This may account for the fact that he provides little for us to go on as to how men are to be elected to office without developing those traits we abhor in many politicians. How can a man be elected—and, more important, re-elected—who does not become hypocritical, two-faced, and bow and scrape before the sacred cows born and bred of liberal ideology? The politician wants publicity, indeed, believes he must have it, but in order to get it, he

"The best that can be said for Mr. Simon's clichés, here repeated, is that Herbert Hoover's were even more unsuited to the times . . . Mr. Simon's wholly undocumented assertion that teaching in American colleges and universities is just ideological indoctrination is ignorant slander of teachers and students."

must face the glare of television cameras, the obtrusive questions of reporters, and the final judgment of a predominantly liberal press. The media men are all too eager to flay him for anything said in a moment of candor which departs from the liberal litany of values. I think Mr. Simon is aware of the problem, but he does not concentrate on it, possibly because there is no ready solution to it.

He does see the problem entailed in the dominance of the academe, the press, the pulpit, and so forth, of liberal intellectuals, and he does make some proposals for dealing with it. He

rightly discerns that thinkers, writers, and teachers who will speak for and defend liberty need to be nurtured and supported, and he offers some valuable suggestions on how this may be done.

The most striking portions of the book, however, deal with the fiscal irresponsibility of governments within the United States. It is appropriate that this should be so, for Mr. Simon knows whereof he speaks. He was in the Treasury Department during the time when New York City's fiscal crisis came to a head. His account of this crisis—how the city tried to subsist by borrowing against future income, the weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth of liberal politicians as their irresponsibility bore its inevitable fruit, the hypocrisy of leading bankers, and the attempts of sundry spokesmen to absolve themselves on the grounds that it was their compassionate efforts to help the poor that had done them in—is worth more than the price of the book. Mr. Simon is more than clever; he is brilliant in his analysis as he tears the compassionate claims to shreds.

What happened to New York City

—*New York Times Book Review*

portends for the United States government, and other governments of the Western world, Mr. Simon tells us, if they do not change their ways. Indeed, the United States has been hardly more fiscally responsible than New York City. The difference is that our general government can prolong its deficit spending almost indefinitely by monetizing the debt, as can governments of other sovereign nations. There are consequences of course. The more money that is issued the less its value. People recognize the declining value and have less and less confidence in the government. At the far end of this process lies