

# The Waning Power of the Press

by OSWALD GARRISON VILLARD

IT is a curious anomaly that at the moment when more and more important issues and problems are challenging the world and demanding the serious attention of every editor who seeks to comment fairly on what is going on, the power of the editorial writer has waned to a remarkable degree. I remember well that when I joined the editorial staff of the New York *Evening Post* in 1897 under the leadership of Edwin L. Godkin, the second in command was always extremely worried as to how we should find enough subjects to write about during the summer months when our chief went to England. We were required to produce two long leaders six days in the week, and so little happened in the dull summer months that a substitute who could offer a wide range of topics was eagerly engaged.

To-day the reverse is the case. The editor, especially of a weekly, is so overwhelmed with topics that he hardly knows which to choose. There is expected of him an omnipotent knowledge of foreign affairs, finance, economics, and sociology, never demanded of Mr. Godkin and his great contemporaries. There were then only a few dailies on the Atlantic seaboard interested in foreign events. Our war with Spain began the change. If it is true that the farther west one goes now, the less space one finds given to foreign news and the less informed the editorial comment becomes, on the other hand there is far greater attention given to other countries by the American press than ever before. Indeed, we lay far more overseas news before our readers than do any other newspapers, with the exception of such dailies as the London *Times* and *Telegraph* and the Manchester *Guardian*. I mean telegraphic dispatches, and am not referring to semi-editorial foreign correspondence, which is chiefly sent by mail. Yet despite the increased news we are printing,

both foreign and domestic, despite much intelligent comment, the fact is that the power of the press in the United States and elsewhere to influence public opinion is declining.

For this there are a number of reasons. Primarily, as the tragic demise of the New York *World* and *Evening World* has reminded us, the daily tends to disappear. Within ten years fully three hundred American dailies have perished, and the new births hardly offset a tithe of the loss. There is now evidence that the trend among newspapers is as distinctly toward monopoly as elsewhere in industry. Chicago, for example, has practically only two morning dailies, Pittsburgh but one. New York has seen in recent years the disappearance of the *Herald*, *Sun*, and *World* from the morning field. There are only three serious English language ones left, and one of these is very weak. Again, we have the phenomenon of chain ownership by Mr. Hearst, Mr. Gannett, the Scripps-Howard syndicate, the Ridder Brothers, and various other groups. This control of many dailies brings with it their standardization, the simultaneous printing of the same editorial in perhaps twenty-six cities, the absence of any powerful local figure in the editorial rooms, and, finally, absentee ownership. Each one of the three daily newspapers of Pittsburgh, for example, is owned and managed from New York.

## NO MORE PERSONALITIES

MORE THAN that, we have the disappearance of the great editor, the vibrant personality often nationally known, like Henry Watterson, Horace Greeley, Godkin, Charles A. Dana, Samuel Bowles, and many others. In some cases, as in that of the *New York Times*, this is a deliberate policy. Mr. Ochs feels that the institution should be everything and should

transcend not only the owner, but any editorial personage. In other cases the great editor does not appear because the daily no longer offers him the editorial freedom it formerly did — Mr. Godkin was as unhampered by the ownership of the *Evening Post* as if he owned it himself, while Mr. Dana, Mr. Greeley, and Mr. Bowles owned their own papers.

Again, the newspaper profession having disappeared, and having been succeeded by the newspaper business, which differs not a whit from any other profit-making concern, the ownership is not in the least interested in hiring men of as vigorous personalities and independence as Mr. Bowles and Mr. Godkin. For these men had beliefs and fixed, unpurchasable principles which they often — yes, usually — upheld with strong and often bitter language, caring not in the least how many advertisers they alienated or how many subscribers they offended. Soon after I joined the *Evening Post*, for example, Mr. Godkin brought upon us a boycott by all save one of the New York department stores which lasted, more or less, a decade, cost us fully a half million dollars, and dealt the paper a blow from which it never fully recovered.

The modern newspaper owner is not in the least bit interested in having an editor of this kind, thank you. He is engaged in a life and death struggle against steadily rising costs and fierce competition in a business which requires ever greater capital investment. He wants to live at peace in the community — at peace with every group. He desires no crusading editor and no muckraker to attack capital or privilege, or vested interests, whether those be bootleggers or corrupt machine politicians or conscienceless magnates of public service corporations. Usually he is content to let his propagandizing be restricted to the creed of the Republican or Democratic Party. He prefers, if he thinks at all consciously of the matter, to do his influencing of the public mind by his headlines, by the emphasis he puts on the news he prints, and especially by the omissions of unpopular or unpleasant facts from his news columns. If it is necessary to berate somebody, why there are always the foreign-born criminals, the radical labor leaders, and, above all, the Bolsheviks — provided by a just Jehovah for that purpose. He can jump on them without touching either subscribers or advertisers.

## A WEAK PRESS

**Y**ES, THE NEWSPAPER manager of to-day must advance; year by year he must show increased circulation for its own sake and in order to get more advertising. To stand still — here again the New York *World* is our proof — is to die. As a result the editorial page, provided it is safe, sane, and harmless, interests the business manager far less than Calvin Coolidge's daily platitudes or the latest comic strips. Some of our richest and most successful dailies are practically without editorial pages; at least there are those like the Philadelphia *Bulletin* and the New York *Sun* that are without any forceful, or distinguished, or effective editorial writing.

What could be weaker than the editorials of the Washington *Star*? For years they have been written as if for kindergartens or for morons. In the capital of America the editors have been assuming that the intelligence of the great army of governmental clerks is about fourth grade. Elsewhere one finds daily after daily spending much money on improved news services and amusement features, yet altogether content with as ineffective and as prejudiced editorial pages as that of the New York *Herald Tribune*, or the timid, cautiously balanced opinions of the good-Lord-good-devil New York *Times*, with its evident desire to hurt nobody's feelings; or the bitter narrowness and ultra-conservatism of the Portland *Oregonian*, the Cincinnati *Times-Star*, the Chicago *Tribune*, and the Minneapolis *Journal*. With most of our newspapers editorial leadership is no desideratum whatever. Others may blaze the way; they may find even the Protestant churches forging ahead of them in such matters as old-age pensions, birth control, and other reforms. Plainly these editorial pages are deliberately emasculated, deliberately kept uninformed and superficial.

Yet the striking fact is that these same dailies usually recognize the great value of personality in other departments. If they do not employ an outstanding chief editorial writer and broad-gauge molder of public opinion, this does not keep them from hiring a sports writer at \$25,000 a year, or a columnist of the type of F. P. A. or Heywood Broun. They know that such men have a big personal following — Broun is surely worth at least 20,-

ooo readers to any daily, and his following grows steadily. As for the sports oracles, why, some are believed to command the devoted interest of an army of 50,000 or more "fans." They are paid accordingly.

The identification of book reviews, foreign dispatches, and special correspondence with the names of their authors is a comparatively recent development almost unknown when I entered journalism. The "by-line" is now awarded to reporters by newspapers which even three years ago were opposed to the practice of featuring the writer of an article. Formerly it was a great honor if a Washington correspondent was allowed to sign his initials. To-day if he is not given his full name at the head of his dispatch he is entitled to feel aggrieved. A David Lawrence may build up a new and large press service just on the strength of his personality and his ability, but four-fifths of the dailies that add his picture and his name to his dispatches insist that they have no need of an editor-in-chief with a personality and a name to attract interest and carry authority. How can one look at the columnists and the new stars like Walter Duranty in Moscow and Isaac Marcossion of the *Saturday Evening Post*, and assert with a straight face that the American public no longer is interested in journalistic personalities?

The truth is that the newspaper proprietor who is out for the dollars solely is afraid of a big personality in his editorial rooms lest such an editor rob him of some of his prestige and relegate him to the second-fiddle bench in his happy journalistic orchestra. Again, a vigorous editor might develop "isms," suddenly become "radical," and so become a disturber of the newspaper's traffic in its progress toward greater and greater prosperity. Also it must be admitted that besides the numerous enlightened proprietors, such as the Cowles brothers in Des Moines, the owners of the *Baltimore Sun*, the Newark, New Jersey, *News*, and numerous others, especially in the South, there are many too ignorant to know what it is really all about, and what is really going on in the world; yes, they are among the last to recognize some of the newer tendencies of the business to which they belong.

Perhaps the worst fault of the unenlightened and undernourished editorial pages is their entire loss of the critical faculty and their kotow-

ing to officialdom. The ability, or desire, to take a Presidential message, or utterance, and to analyze it or to compare it with previous outpourings of the same President, or previous ones, has passed away. Nowhere else in the world, I believe, does an official carry so much weight merely because of his title. One day someone is an agreeable business man in Chicago; on the next he is pitchforked into the Cabinet. On the third day his utterances on trade, the world crisis, unemployment, and the tariffs, are received as from an oracle. No one takes the trouble really to inquire into his qualifications or to check up on his statements as they appear; to point out, for example, that as late as June or July of 1930 he was asserting that there was really no serious crisis, only to declare in May, 1931, that it is the most serious in our history.

A Secretary Garrison is a little-known lawyer in New Jersey on March 3, 1912; he is quite unexpectedly appointed on March 4, just in time to be sworn in at the Wilson inauguration. On March 5 he is the greatest living authority on matters military, and the American people are expected to assent to everything that he says about preparedness, or America's military policy. One wonders just now whether the crisis in which we struggle and suffer to-day may not yet help to deflate some of the Cabinet prophets in the eyes of the press. If it does, it will be almost worth the price — for the press.

#### A WISE PUBLIC

ON THE OTHER side of the fence, the public is by no means ignorant of what has been going on. It reads editorials with its tongue in its cheek. It knows that the daily is primarily after the almighty dollar. It knows that only in increasingly rare instances does the editor have freedom of conscience, or the owner place public service above profits. It is quite aware that little or no news unfavorable to an advertiser appears in the columns of its favorite daily, and its cynical comment is: "Well, they've got to live, haven't they?" So the public frequently entirely disregards the advice of the newspapers, as is illustrated by the numerous elections in Chicago and New York in which the voters have gone directly contrary to an almost united press. The late Senator Medill McCormick once bitterly remarked to me after his defeat for reelection that he would



have been reëlected if only his brother's paper, the *Chicago Tribune*, had not supported him! The onus of that support had been too much for him to bear.

Once the public was influenced by what a Bowles, or Dana, or Greeley, or Raymond wrote. It knew the men and their points of view; the dailies were characterized by the editors' names, not by the owners'. They may have been restricted in range as they were often too solid to be entertaining. But, as has just been said of a corresponding period in the press of England, at least they "exercised a conscious social function in criticizing and directing the political and social life of the country," and most of them did it conscientiously and with responsibility even when their political philosophy got in the way of their social philosophy. They were not afraid to offer serious reasoning, elaborate argumentation. They refused to lay their course by solicitousness toward the advertiser on the one hand, or by fear of the readership on the other.

To-day the public takes the mass production of the newspapers much as it accepts the toothpaste or breakfast food modern advertising now forces upon it — and too often turns first to the sport pages. Others innumerable read the first page carefully, the headlines on the second and third, and then the stock tables. How can one be expected to read through forty-eight or fifty-eight pages in the subway, or en route to Hackensack — especially uninteresting editorials?

But I hear it said: "After all, the editor only gives the public what it wants." Bosh! That is the excuse with which the editor salves what little remains of his own conscience. There are editors galore who assure you that you cannot make a success of a daily without comic strips, "funny" Sunday supplements, sensational pictures all over the news pages, and headlines that render the make-up typographically crazy. How is it then that the *New York Times* has made such a tremendous success without comic strips, or Sunday comics, or headline atrocities, or endless vulgarities? How is it that the *Baltimore Sun* and the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* live well, if not rolling in luxury, by keeping to the best standards of the old journalism — dignity, taste, accuracy, newsmanship, and eschew the vulgar, the banal, and screaming sensationalism? The truth is that the

editor gives the reader not what the reader says he wants — the reader being practically entirely inarticulate — but what the editor thinks will lure the greatest number of people to buy his precious sheet; at bottom most of the fraternity uses exactly the selling technique of the barkers of the side shows of the village circuses.

I wish I knew the number of editors and owners who have defended to me their failure to print political speeches and public documents in full and also, from time to time, copious extracts from the debates in Congress. These men are usually great admirers of the success of Mr. Ochs of the *Times*; yet they fail to recognize that he has done just that sort of thing with such conspicuous success that the *Herald Tribune* has paid him the sincerest flattery of imitating him in these respects. No, they will go on telling you that "the public won't read any story over a column long"; that "nobody cares to read a speech except in a Presidential campaign"; and that "printing the exact text of the last naval treaty takes too much space and nobody reads it." The fact is that the average business man and salesman masquerading as editor is too often half-baked, under-educated, and half-trained. Moreover, those who run the gutter type of tabloid dailies would be perfectly ready to deliver obscene pictures daily "because that is what the reader wants," and to mask them as propaganda for "better bodies and better babies" — if only the police would let them.

The facts are, of course, that the journalist of conscience prefers to have his journal perish rather than to pander to the baseness which lies hidden in us all; that he would deem himself recreant to his public trust if he sought to shoulder off upon the public his own responsibility for his acts. He is perfectly aware that the loss of editorial prestige and power to control public opinion by the sound and honest opinions of the editors is due to the voluntary abdication of journalistic leadership by the hired journalists and the owners themselves. But they realize also, in all charity, that the press as a whole is in the grip of those mighty economic currents which are also making over the whole industrial, social, and political life of the world, and are sweeping us into revolution so vast that no man can now gauge its extent or predict the outcome.

## A WORLD-WIDE PHENOMENON

**T**HE INTERESTING thing is that the forces which are so tremendously making over the American press are at work in the press elsewhere quite as well. In England the Liberal press perishes in our sight — witness the combination of the *Daily News* and the *Chronicle*, or the merging of the noble London *Nation* of the late Henry W. Massingham with the excellent *New Statesman*. There the dominance of the press by the ennobled magnates has become so irresponsible, so dastardly, and so conscienceless as to methods, so arrogant in its assumption of greater power than the government, that even Mr. Stanley Baldwin, the Conservative leader, was compelled recently to go out of his way publicly to excoriate the Beaverbrooks and the Rothermeres in language most extraordinarily unrestrained for a British politician.

In Germany too, it appears, the press drifts more and more into the power of the great industrial magnates, while the remaining liberal organs find their very existence jeopardized by the growth of extreme radicalism on the right and on the left.

In numerous European countries such as Hungary, Poland, Italy, Russia, Spain (until the revolution), and others, the press has been emasculated, prostituted, or reduced to disgusting and disgraceful servitude to the particular dictator who happens to be in power. There, and in France, save for a few voices, its freedom and decency have gone. If it still makes public opinion, it does so only because the unfortunate populace has no other sources of information. Yes, but it has! Look at the Spanish revolution. The press was muzzled for years; the whole power of the government thrown against republican manifestations. Yet overnight, without the firing of a shot, the whole rotten edifice went down. There is hope in this for all of us. And a serious warning for those recreant Americans, notably officials, who seek to prohibit Communist meetings and are sending dozens if not hundreds to jail because of their opinions. Propaganda suppressed — it is the old story. The only safety lies in that complete freedom of speech and of opinion

which the Constitution of the United States guarantees.

But if our American press fails soundly to mold public opinion, fails to print the truth that makes men free to choose their own way of life and that of the government which is theirs? What then, beside the slow process of the spoken word? We cannot to-day say what the way out of this will be. I have heard competent journalists assert that in twenty years the *New York Times* will have shrunk to the size of a magazine — shrunk by the development of the radio; which raises at once the question as to who is to control the radio — the government, or the people, or private capitalists in search of profit? Perhaps we shall turn back to the era of pamphleteering, as in American Colonial days when the newspapers were few, feeble, and far between. That something will be found let no man doubt. Honest governments will not perish from this earth for lack of the means to disseminate unbiased information. Nor will it be possible in the long run to keep the masses content with the kind of pap, of lies, and half-truths with which, notably, the Bolsheviki are systematically stuffing their pitiful people.

Meanwhile Mr. C. P. Scott of the *Manchester Guardian*, dean and most admired of all British journalists, has just written in the *Political Quarterly*: "The newspaper is a vast machine. What matters is the spirit which lies behind it. The world is its province but that is an empty boast, unless it implies a real fellowship. . . . The world does move and every day it moves faster. The newspaper stands by to interpret, and, where it can, to help. What a spectacle! What an opportunity!" That the bulk of the American press, for the reasons already outlined above, beholds the spectacle, fails to interpret it, and utterly neglects its opportunity and shirks its responsibilities, is profoundly discouraging. To have destroyed by itself the influence of editorial utterance is a sin against the covenant, if only because ours is a two-party system dependent for its health and its progress upon an informed and enlightened electorate, constantly exposed to new and, if need be, unpopular ideas by a free, a fearless, and untrammelled press.

Next month — "What Is News?" by Stanley Walker,  
City Editor of the New York *Herald Tribune*

# The Seven Blunders of the World

by HENDRIK WILLEM VAN LOON

**I** TAKE the word "blunder" to mean: "A gross and avoidable mistake which brings irreparable disaster upon the perpetrator thereof."

Let me shed some further light upon this rather intricate definition by a concrete example. If I bump up against a stranger somewhere in the streets of New York and say, "Hey, you big bum! Look where you're going," (unconsciously borrowing the charming mode of expression of our handsome traffic officers), and that person, as I find out a few days later, happened to be Gene Tunney, then I have merely made a mistake. But if I go out of my way to pick a quarrel with a man whom I know to be Tunney and tell him that he is only a little bit of a sawed-off shrimp (which, speaking in the matter of tonnage he undoubtedly is when compared to the author of this eminently learned essay), then I commit a "blunder" and I soon realize it.

So I shall restrict myself in the enumeration of my pet blunders to such events as were avoidable, and I shall not take them at random but I shall devote one blunder apiece to every important social, spiritual, and economic organization which has played a rôle of importance during the last three thousand years. I shall not go too far back. The greatest blunder of all time probably occurred on the day when the first of our prehistoric ancestors discovered that by making certain grunts and wheezes he could impart his own ideas to some of the more intelligent among his neighbors and when (here comes the blun-

der) he did not keep that information to himself but set the whole world talking and caused all the misery that has followed in the wake of knowledge imparted to the unteachable. But that happened so long ago that we had better leave it out of consideration and for the present moment, at least, confine ourselves strictly to the last three thousand years.

**B** LUNDER NUMBER ONE. — *Allowing through sheer carelessness the murder of Abraham Lincoln at the moment when he could least be spared.* In the first place, then, I beg to offer you the worst blunder, the most ghastly blunder, the costliest blunder in the history of our own country since its beginning.

On the fourteenth of April of the year 1865,

Abraham Lincoln, having just returned from the city of Richmond, visited Ford's theater in Washington for an evening of relaxation after one of the most trying periods in his very trying life. The secret service people must have suspected that after such a tremendous upheaval as four years of civil warfare the woods would be full of fanatics who, no longer able to exhibit their glorious postur-

ings on the field of battle, would try to distinguish themselves in other and more terrible ways. But they took no precautions whatsoever for the safety of their President, and he was murdered as a result of their criminal negligence. His death retarded the normal development of the relations between the South and the North for at least an entire generation. His successor, poor, boozy

