

Old Muckraker

Derek Shearer

er has he forgotten the obstacles repeatedly placed in his way. "Anyone who was taught from childhood to be a nonconformist, a libertarian, and a freethinker was sure to be in trouble most of his adult days," Seldes wrote in the introduction to *Tell the Truth and Run* (1953).

Early years.

Born in 1890, Seldes spent his early childhood in Alliance, N.J., a utopian colony his father had founded. The elder Seldes corresponded for several years with Peter Kropotkin and Leo Tolstoy about the problems and promise of mutual aid and communitarian socialism. He was also an admirer of Henry George, author of *Progress and Poverty*, and a leading proponent of the "single tax." "Father was a libertarian in the American tradition," Seldes later wrote. "I doubt if he had read Karl Marx, but I have no doubt he knew and read Thoreau and Emerson and Wendell Phillips."

In order to feed his family, Seldes' father left Alliance and took up work at a Philadelphia drugstore. There he also served as secretary of the Friends of Russian Freedom—a group which raised money to support the 1905 uprising against the Czar. A year after the revolt failed, the radical Russian writer Maxim Gorki and his common-law wife came to Philadelphia on a speaking tour.

The Russian embassy let it be known that the couple were not actually married, and the exclusive Bellevue-Stratford Hotel—where Gorki was staying—threw the couple into the street. Gorki thereupon marched to the drugstore where the elder Seldes worked and held an indignant press conference.

In 1909, at age 19, George Seldes went to work in the city room of the *Pittsburgh Leader* for \$3.50 a week. In 1912, he took a year off to attend Harvard, but a lack of funds and interest brought him back to the *Leader*. There Seldes gained experience as a reporter until 1916, when he left the paper for good, spent a few penniless months in Greenwich Village, then boarded a ship for London to cover the World War. He was to be a foreign correspondent and free-lance writer for the next quarter century.

For a short time Seldes rewrote United Press wire copy, then gained admission to the press section of the American Army and headed for France. He was the youngest of a group of reporters that included Heywood Brown, Floyd Gibbons, Will Irwin, Edwin L. James and Westbrook Pegler.

After the war, Seldes became a correspondent for the *Chicago Tribune*. He reported on the Russian Civil War from Moscow, meeting both Trotsky and Lenin. He remained from 1918 until 1923, when he was expelled for his dispatches on the Bolshevik purge of anarchists, social revolutionaries, and other political opponents. He moved to Rome, where he covered Mussolini and the rise of Italian fascism. Expelled from Italy in 1925, Seldes continued his work as a foreign correspondent in Central America, Europe and the Middle East.

In 1928, Seldes quit the *Tribune* and returned to the U.S. to become a free-lance writer. In the books that followed, and in articles for the *Saturday Evening Post*, *New Republic*, *Harper's* and *McCalls*, Seldes attempted to expose the suppression of news and corruption of the press by business interests.

Many publishers were less than enthusiastic about these exposes. Seldes recalls, "From the time I began criticizing the American press and publishing documentation that it could not refute or even answer, an attack began." His book *Lords of the Press*, which William L. White called the "most important book of the year," was boycotted by most reviewers.



From his rural Vermont home, Seldes today sees progress in newspaper reporting.

His old colleague Edwin James, who had become managing editor of the *New York Times*, sent down word that no book by Seldes could ever be reviewed in the *Times Book Review*. The management of the *Chicago Tribune* had Seldes' name removed from the bronze plaque commemorating the paper's foreign correspondents.

Nevertheless, Seldes' books were read and his magazine articles reached an appreciative audience. With the modest wife bought a farm in Vermont (Sinclair Lewis and Dorothy Thompson guaranteed the mortgage), where they planned to settle for good. But then the Spanish Civil War intervened.

"Here on our peaceful hills facing the Green Mountains through grey Chinese mists in serrated rows as far as we could see to the west, Helen and I read the news and talked and thought about it," Seldes wrote. "We felt now that this was more than a war; we felt that it was a conflict of ideas involving the world, and that we, too, like other people, were involved in it, although our country was neutral." The *New York Post* agreed to accredit Seldes as a correspondent, and they headed for Spain. There they stayed through the long agony of the civil war—returning to the U.S. in mid-1937 only long enough to sell their home and raise money for the Loyalist cause.

Founding *In Fact*.

Seldes returned to the U.S. convinced more than ever of the need to provide the American people with accurate information about public affairs. He had long toyed with the idea of starting a newsletter, in the muckraking tradition of his books and articles. But he lacked the funds to carry through such a project, and plans to contribute a regular column to existing publications repeatedly fell through.

Then, in early 1940, Bruce Minton—a neighbor of the Seldes' in Connecticut and a regular contributor to the *New Republic*—offered to put up a few thousand dollars to start a four-page weekly newspaper. The first issue of *In Fact* appeared on May 20, 1940, and was sent out to 6,000 subscribers—most of them AFL and CIO union locals.

What Seldes did not know at the time was that Minton was secretly a member of the American Communist Party. The Party, it seems, had decided to start a weekly paper which would reach out to a liberal and labor audience. It would follow the Party's line, but it would do so without resort to jargon—and all ties to the CP would be clandestine. A respect-

ed journalist—in this case Seldes—was to serve as a front for the operation. The plan was for Minton to write the newsletter from New York, while Seldes was expected to remain on his farm in Connecticut—contributing little more than his name.

As it turned out, the plan foundered on Seldes' enthusiasm and integrity. Instead of sitting on the sidelines, he turned out actual exposes and insisted they run as lead stories. Furthermore, Seldes complained from the beginning about Minton's rambling "think pieces" on world affairs. As Minton wrote years later, "to the horror and disappointment of the Party, Mr. Seldes proved to be beyond the usual methods of persuasion; his integrity, his personal honesty and forthrightness, his convictions were such that the Party was helpless."

In Fact's circulation skyrocketed—due entirely to Seldes' popularity—and the Party's position became untenable. It was clear that Seldes could not be pushed out without wrecking *In Fact*. The Party decided instead to write off the venture as a failure. By the fall of 1940 Minton's name had vanished from the masthead, and by early 1941 he had stopped contributing altogether.

In the prospectus for *In Fact*, Seldes wrote: "It will publish the real inside news, the kind newspapers frequently get but dare not print...." And indeed, over the next decade thousands of items were sent in by reporters whose papers wouldn't accept material that might antagonize or hurt business interests. Even Drew Pearson sent Seldes occasional items too hot for his syndicated column.

In Fact was one of the few publications to carry consumer news, including reports on research conducted by the Consumers' Union. Seldes also ran some of the earliest studies on the links between tobacco and cancer.

Seldes' experiences in Spain had left a deep impression, and he devoted himself and his newsletter to a crusade against American fascism. He attacked the National Association of Manufacturers as "the most powerful organized enemy of the American people." *In Fact* carried articles documenting how NAM and its leading corporate members—including General Electric, General Motors, and AT&T—opposed liberal legislation, spread anti-labor propaganda, and, in some instances, supported Nazi Germany and fascist Italy before America's entry into World War II.

In 1942, Seldes published the first expose of the *Readers' Digest*. He showed how it was not a simple digest of other

publications, but instead commissioned and planted articles that suited the conservative line of its owner, and then "selected" them for its own pages. Seldes also documented close parallels between the *Digest's* line and the fascist line.

From its inception, *In Fact* was subject to vitriolic attacks from right-wing newspapers, magazines and politicians. But this was the era of the united front against fascism, and Seldes' readership continued to grow—reaching a circulation peak of 176,000 by 1947.

In 1948, Seldes visited Yugoslavia and interviewed Marshall Tito, publishing a series of articles supporting Tito's independent socialism. Then, in 1950, he took a critical view of all parties to the Korean War, and members of the Communist Party reacted indignantly. "Immediately angry cancellations of subscriptions began pouring in," recalls Seldes. "They threw my newsletter out of the so-called Progressive Bookshops. American Communists began a boycott of *In Fact*, and eventually helped put it out of business, no doubt about that."

But the greatest blow to *In Fact's* survival came from the right, and the chilling effects of the McCarthyist repression. Labor unions and liberals cancelled their subscriptions in droves. By late 1950, *In Fact's* circulation had dropped below 50,000—less than a third of what it had been three years earlier. The newsletter was losing money and losing its influence. In October 1950 the Seldeses published their last issue, bought a small house in Vermont and retired from the press.

In July 1953, Seldes was subpoenaed before a closed session of Joe McCarthy's Senate subcommittee, where he openly answered questions about his career and beliefs. Roy Cohn, the subcommittee's chief counsel, probed Seldes about his "subversive books" and his "Communist cell" in Connecticut. Seldes answered directly: "I have a right to my views. I am a liberal, or a radical, not a Communist. I have a right to express myself that way." The subcommittee evidently thought it unwise to hear Seldes in open session. "Seldes is cleared," McCarthy told reporters. It was hardly a consolation. Seldes went back to compiling quotations in the Vermont countryside.

Still busy.

Few publications or people (outside of old friends) have shown much interest in Seldes since Joe McCarthy "cleared" him in 1953. But he is by no means out of touch. He keeps up-to-date by reading periodicals and newspapers in the Dartmouth library. His curiosity seems limitless.

Relaxing in their living room, Seldes reflected on improvements in press coverage over the years. "Progress has been made. Thanks to Nader, papers will now run consumer news, and papers like the *Washington Post* aren't afraid to expose the military-industrial complex—what we used to call the 'Merchants of Death.' And the *Los Angeles Times*, which used to be so anti-labor, runs Watergate exposes."

If the established media have indeed taken some steps toward responsible and honest journalism, a good part of the credit must go to George Seldes and the handful of other editors and reporters who have carried a long and lonely struggle against news management by publishers, censorship by advertisers, and fear of political repression. ■

Derek Shearer is a journalist in Los Angeles who writes frequently for *IN THESE TIMES*.

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