TWICE within our generation we have had pointed out to us that events in foreign countries thousands of miles away eventually reach out and take men out of their homes and jobs and put them behind a gun in some foreign country. If the American people are going to be smart enough to get along in this kind of a world they will have to take an active part in dealing with these affairs, which, although far away, bounce back into our faces.

That means a new task for the American press. It means that foreign affairs no longer remain in a separate compartment. They must be covered and discussed with the same firsthand knowledge and firsthand background that we have always applied to American politics, industrial news, and sports.

An editorial writer can sit in his office and read for a week about a new British budget. But he could go to England, talk to officials firsthand, really learn something about it, and be back in New York in no longer time. Furthermore, he would also have a store of material on which he would be able to draw for a long time afterward.

Full use of this new opportunity by the American press would not only be a most desirable enterprise but I think it is going to be imperative if we are fully to discharge our responsibility to the reading public.

After this war it will take a nation of fast and clear thinkers and extremely well-informed people to stay on top of the heap. We were poorly informed after the last war, and it has cost us dearly. We cannot afford another such disaster.

If we are going to exercise the leadership which I think we must exercise, it means that we shall have to revise some of our economic conceptions. Questions of international trade will assume complicated forms far more difficult to deal with than ever before. And American public sentiment which does not fully understand what must be done may, through its ignorance, bring pressure on Congress to frustrate our best interests as we did after the last war in pushing up our tariffs at the time when our own interests required that they should go down.

Flying reporters, flying editorial writers, flying columnists, the eyes and ears of the American people, have a job ahead of them which can be one of the great adventures of American journalism. Never in all time has any private institution had the opportunity to render a service compared with that which the American press can give by taking advantage of this new means of getting around.

We have put wings on the printed word by utilizing the telegraph and radio. I think the next move will be to put wings on our own feet so that when we reach the telegraph office we will have something more authoritative to say. I think it will be one of the greatest privileges that can come to any man to be a newspaper worker during the next decade when we shall have all of these mechanical facilities made to order for our particular work.

It is curious, when you think of it, that in our government which rests upon a foundation of public opinion, we never have developed any technique for measuring accurately what that opinion was except by the broad generalized verdicts at election time and such information as senators, representatives, and other public officials could gather haphazardly through correspondence and personal contacts.

The press is a public institution with a responsibility to the public. That responsibility, most newspapermen agree, is essentially to present a fair and accurate account of the news and, in addition to that, to throw such light upon the meaning of that news as it can through its editorial columns and its special commentators.

Discussion is the breath of a democracy’s life. The constant challenge of one opinion against another is essential. Without it democ-
racy becomes a fragile hothouse growth liable to snap under the first gust of opposition wind. The editorial page is—or should be—America's town hall.

The type of debate and the type of newspaper writing that must make a thing either black or white, that must distort it out of all proportion, that take a set of facts or circumstances and are impelled to throw in a dash of sensational overstatement, are an imposition on the public.

In recent years a new element has been introduced into the editorial picture. That is the syndicated comment column. One or more of these is found in most of the newspapers throughout the country.

As one of the lesser of these commentators, I venture to suggest that these comment columns are a mixed blessing to the editor.

They do provide him with national political comment written on the scene of action, where there is more complete access to the situation and a better opportunity to study it closely than is afforded to the editor sitting in his sanctum two or three thousand miles away. Usually these commentators are men of considerable experience in analyzing public affairs and can contribute something toward the clarification of them. In that respect they make a valuable contribution to the threshing-out process which is involved in the development of public opinion.

Yet there is some danger that these commentators will sap the strength of the editorial page. On a recent trip into the country, particularly in certain sections where Roosevelt is rated strong, I thought I detected a tendency in some newspapers to let the syndicated comment columns carry the hod, as if the editor felt that discretion was the better part of valor and, instead of lashing out against the New Deal, preferred to keep his editorials mild and tactful while allowing his real convictions to be presented by syndicated columnists.

I would not make this as a charge, for when the subject was touched on it was explained that editors desired to present both sides. Whether that was a bit of rationalization or not I, of course, do not know. In any case I believe it would be a serious loss if the newspaper editor should develop any tendency to leave discussion of national affairs entirely to his paid contributors in the East. Sound opinion is built up from the grass roots and not from the observations of writers in Washington. Washington, for the moment, is the newspaperman's paradise, with a page 1 story around every corner.

And paradoxically, though newspapermen never worked harder, they never had so much help and cooperation from the government. Not only is the Administration making big news every hour on the hour but it has recruited through the entire government an exceptionally able corps of press-relations men. These functionaries are of infinite help in reporting the day's news out of Washington. And I think it is infinitely better for each newspaper to hit out in its own way, with the indigenous flavor of its own community, than to lean upon the most erudite observations from Washington or New York. Let these outside writers be a stimulus to editorial thought, not a substitute for it.

12/39

A responsible newspaperman with questions of general importance has little difficulty in clearing with a Cabinet officer either directly or through an assistant. That is true too with senators and representatives, and with state and local politicians. They are never too busy to explain the background of a situation to a responsible newspaperman. They know through long experience that they can trust reporters and editors, and that it is better to give a full picture even though part of what they say is confidential, than to risk an editorial or a news story written through lack of information and understanding.

This working relationship between the politician and the press could well be emulated in many other fields of activity. Business would have been much better off long ago had it adopted a similar policy. Businesses alert enough to do so have found it greatly to their advantage. The medical profession has been negligent in this regard. Every working newspaper reporter has his own personal stories to tell about the difficulties of obtaining accurate information.
JOURNALISM

For the week, that adds up to 10 or 12 hours’ writing time. As for the rest, I can’t figure how much is work and how much is play. They are much the same in this business. We get some of our best material over highballs, and when I’m in the office, I’m practically loafing.

So, Mrs. Jeffries, if it’s all right with you, it’s all right with me just to put me down for 40 hours flat. We won’t count thinking time, so-called, and ideas that come out of the shower bath. And if one of Elmer’s investigators comes around to paste a $10,000 fine on you with 6 months in jail for the second offense, I’ll lie like hell to get you out of it. After all, much as I like the wage-and-hour law, I have a family to support and I can’t afford to give up newspaper work to become a timekeeper.

11/21/38

I have just come from the funeral of an old friend and colleague, Rodney Dutcher. We first worked together more than 15 years ago on the United Press. He richly deserved the tribute which President Roosevelt paid to him as a reporter who was “fearless and objective.”

That is as complete an epitaph as any working newspaperman wants when he goes to press for the last time.

To be fearless and objective. In our business those are the trademarks of quality. With them a newspaperman has everything. Without them, he can’t have much. Writing? That is only putting it down on paper.

To be fearless and objective is an achievement in our business. It is an achievement for a human being, beset as we all are with countless little half-hidden fears, to take the cold facts and lay them on the line. A thousand little inhibitions stare up at us from our typewriters. They say don’t use this and don’t use that. The facts are in hand but sometimes it takes a muster of cool determination to put them down in print.

To be objective also is an achievement. We are born with emotions and we easily acquire prejudices. It is natural to coddle, pamper, and nurse them until they turn on us and boss us, and

lash us into a daily shriek. To see the facts through this haze of emotion, to let them filter through, to keep still and let the facts do the talking—that, if you’ve never tried it, is an achievement.

Most newspapermen in America try to develop these qualities because they are, within the business, the marks of the good craftsman. And newspapermen, above everything else, want to be good craftsmen, and because they are thinking of that more intensely than about money, they have been taken advantage of and in many instances have been poorly paid for work which is of the highest importance in a democracy. We are, or should be, the eyes and ears of democracy and most newspapermen, as was Rodney Dutcher, are conscious of the obligation.

In only a few countries, besides our own, are newspapermen given this responsibility. Few countries now have any use for newspapermen who are fearless and objective. Those qualities are not wanted. Governments, politicians in power, tell newspapermen what to write in many countries. To be objective and fearless in Germany today is the quickest way to land in a concentration camp. An American kind of newspaperman would be, under some governments today, an ideal target for the firing squad.

In introducing President Roosevelt at the thirtieth anniversary dinner of the National Press Club here, Harold Brayman, correspondent of The Philadelphia Evening Public Ledger and president of the club, praised Roosevelt as a “newspaperman’s President.”

“The news sources here,” said Brayman, “have remained open, the most open of them all being the White House press conference, where questions are still welcome, whether pertinent, impertinent, or too pertinent, and where the free press reaches its highest degree of freedom.”

Some people think Roosevelt is too dictatorial. But Roosevelt and his most indefatigable critic, Mark Sullivan, still exchange pleasantries at press conferences. And at a press conference a few days after the recent election, Pete Brandt, of The St. Louis Post-Dispatch, asked Roosevelt if he wasn’t facing a conservative coalition in Congress that would cause him trouble. Roosevelt said he didn’t think so.
“I do,” Pete Brandt shot back. Nothing happened except that Roosevelt and everybody else laughed. Roosevelt can dish it out. He also can take it.

Because our public men are like that, because we have always protected the free press in America, it is possible for newspaper reporters to try, as Rodney Dutcher did, to be fearless and objective.

11/7/38

Somebody who wants to do his country a good turn should start a society to drive the ghost writer out of politics. Ghost writing has become such a commonplace in politics that it is taken for granted.

A politician is assumed not to have bothered to prepare his own written speeches. Ninety per cent of the political speeches which you have listened to in this campaign [November, 1938], were not written by the candidates who delivered them, but by some press agent, or some anonymous hired hand slaving secretly in the back room.

This practice has existed from the days of George Washington, whose Farewell Address was ghostwritten for him by Alexander Hamilton. When you hear a political speaker, you are almost safe in assuming that somebody else wrote his speech for him. This practice goes from Roosevelt down in both parties. It has turned political speaking into a synthetic, artificial, somewhat phony form of ballyhoo.

The public’s only means of sizing up a candidate is by what he says. Yet most candidates spend their time shaking hands and listening to delegations, and parading, and then just as they mount the speaking platform a secretary shoves up the text of that night’s speech which has been ground out by the ghost writer.

Postmaster General Farley, chairman of the Democratic National Committee, doesn’t write the speeches he delivers. They are written by Eddie Roddan, who is assistant to Charley Michelson at Democratic National Committee headquarters. Republican Chairman John Hamilton’s speeches are written by his publicity director, Franklyn Waltman. Both of these ghost writers are former Washington newspapermen. Each maintains a party headquarters speech factory, in which political speeches on any subject are ground out for any political candidate who wants literary help. Once I thought I detected a conflict of policy between two leading party figures, but I was promptly assured by the party ghost writer that I could not be correct because he had written both speeches and he knew there was no conflict between them. He had tried to say the same thing in different words, in the two speeches.

Harding and Coolidge had the same White House ghost writer for a time. He was Judson C. Welliver, once a Washington correspondent, and hired by Harding to write speeches. Welliver studied the florid Harding style and imitated it perfectly. When Harding died, he continued for Coolidge in the same capacity, imitating Coolidge’s more abrupt style. He took great delight in editorials which commented on the contrast in literary style between Harding’s speeches and those of Coolidge, he having written both.

In the current Ohio senatorial campaign, Robert Taft, the Republican candidate, is a changed man. Once he was an outspoken, hard-shell reactionary. Now he calls himself a liberal. Once he was a dull sour puss who couldn’t unbend. Now he is a lively, jolly handshaker, the soul of affability. They tell me in Ohio that the change was wrought by a squad of brain trusters, advisers, ghost writers, physical trainers, and what not, who took the crown prince of the Taft family in hand and streamlined him. The job was so well done that if he has good luck in the Tuesday election he is ready now to be placed in the show window as a 1940 model.

The backstage ghosters are powerful fellows. Smart writers can pull the mouthpiece candidates around by the nose. Soon after the 1936 election Republican Chairman Hamilton began saying in his speeches that the Republicans must begin to think about the people “across the railroad tracks.” It was a new line for John and inquiry developed that he had a new press agent. The chap was something of a liberal. But he didn’t hit it off at Republican headquarters here and eventually left. He is now with Tom Dewey in New York, and Chairman Hamilton’s speeches long ago resumed their tone of sturdy conservatism.

If a political candidate can’t get up and make a speech of his
Letters to My Children
Robert C. Maynard with Dori J. Maynard

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