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PUBLIC OPINION AND PRESS OPINION

11 June 1948

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PUBLIC OPINION AND PRESS OPINION

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COLONEL BABCOCK: Captain Worthington, distinguished guests, and gentlemen of the class: Throughout the public-opinion course during this college year we have heard a great deal about the press, we have heard about the effect of press opinion on public opinion, and we have heard about the great advertising campaigns carried on through the press; and many other aspects of the press have been discussed. Our speaker this morning has a rich background of press experience, having filled almost all of the positions that can be filled on a newspaper, and finally rising to the top as editor of The Evening Star.

When I first heard Mr. McKelway, at the Navy seminars on public relations, I was impressed by his profound knowledge of the public relations activities of the Armed Forces. I thought at the time that if public-relations officers understood the background of public relations as well as he did, we would do a very much better job.

We have asked Mr. Benjamin McKelway to come to the College this morning to discuss "Press Opinion and Public Opinion." The effects of each on the other. I take great pleasure in welcoming to the Industrial College of the Armed Forces, Mr. Benjamin McKelway. /Applause/

MR. McKELWAY: Gentlemen: I am honored by your invitation to appear here today before this group of officers selected for training and study in the Industrial College of the Armed Forces. Your presence here confers distinction on you. You have been chosen because of your service, your records and your demonstrated aptitudes for specialization in one of the intricate problems of our times--the total mobilization of a nation for war.

The complexity of our society and the character of modern warfare have made such specialization necessary. You are planning for a dreadful contingency. But our survival, in the face of that contingency, will depend largely upon the skill with which we are able to apply the organized knowledge gained by such courses of study as those offered in this College.

The subject assigned to me by your Commandant, General Vanaman, is an involved one. It is "Public Opinion and Press Opinion," discussion of the relationship between press opinion and public opinion, with special emphasis on the influence of each upon the other. I am not going to attempt to cover it adequately in this discourse, for that would be a futile undertaking.

One of the pioneers in organized study of public opinion and the hazardous prediction of its future manifestation was the old Literary Digest. We all remember, I am sure, how the Literary Digest fell flat on its face in predicting an election and thereafter ceased to exist. The causes of its failure as a prophet are probably complicated, but one simple failure is now recognized. It attempted to judge public opinion by the replies to specific questions sent out on self-addressed, return postal cards. But the questions were addressed only to that segment of public opinion which is represented in the telephone directories.

The public opinion of telephone subscribers, we know now, is not necessarily the public opinion of the nontelephone subscribers. The public opinion expressed by people at a $10,000 income level is not necessarily the public opinion expressed by people at a $2,000 income level. The men of a community do not express public opinion, for public opinion is incomplete without the opinion of the women. The man on the street does not express public opinion. For public opinion is also made up of the man, or the woman, who does not happen to be on the street.

Numbers of people polled in a quest for public opinion seem to make little difference. The careful selection of the types of people who are polled seems to make all the difference. We do not yet know how accurate is the gauge of public opinion furnished by the art of polling. Practitioners of the art are the authorities on that question and I do not happen to be one of them. It seems to be established, however, that if the samples of public opinion are carefully chosen, inferences drawn from the mathematical results of such sampling may be correct within fractions of a decimal point.

Some of the results of polling are surprising. If these results are correct, newspapers have every reason to re-examine the claim that they are molders of public opinion. And all of us have reason to be concerned about whether public opinion is qualified to be the ruler of this or any other country.

Dr. Gallup took a poll not long ago to test public familiarity with President Truman's civil rights program. That subject has been on the Nation's first page, and has been thoroughly gone over on the editorial page, for many months. But in the South, where it has been represented as something of a burning issue, 32 percent of those polled never heard or read of the civil rights program. Outside the South, 45 percent were equally ignorant.

You might have thought that everybody in the country, with the ability to read or listen to a radio, would know something about the Taft-Hartley labor law. Yet Dr. Gallup tells us that 39 percent of the people questioned about the Taft-Hartley law said they never read or heard of it.

Yet 59 percent of the people polled on the question did not know what candidate the Cleveland Plain Dealer was supporting. As a foot note it might be remarked that Erie County did give Wilkie a slight majority in 1940, although Ohio went the other way. That sort of information about public opinion is rather disillusioning to newspaper people.

I do not mean here to disparage the influence of the press on public opinion. That influence is a very powerful one. There are numerous examples of news papers which have courageously started out to champion an unpopular cause; have bravely gone forth in the face of what seemed to be overwhelming public opinion, to suffer public ridicule and then to see this ridicule change to applause and support. We know of the evil influence on public opinion of an irresponsible or venal press; of how the press can inflame public opinion by half-truths or sensation-mongering and of how such flames can be extinguished by calm, considered, presentation of the truth in other newspapers. The good influence of the press increases as the press itself becomes more conscious of its importance in a free democracy. Abuses of the freedom of the press are on the decline with acceptance by the press of the truth that responsibility is a necessary obligation which accompanies freedom.

What I am talking about is that we are just beginning to submit some accepted generalizations of the past to careful examination. We are finding out how to take this thing called public opinion apart and see what makes it tick. And we are learning how to measure the effect of newspaper opinion on public opinion and sometimes we find results that are surprising. We do not know whether it is a fact that the newspapers' influence on public opinion is on the decline. It may be that it has not declined at all. For perhaps the press never exerted the influence on public opinion that has been claimed for it. We probably are only scratching the surface of knowledge concerning public opinion. More is there and digging will uncover it.

We know that public opinion is fluid, subject to constant change. That has always been a characteristic of American public opinion. It is evidenced in many ways. If the polls of public opinion are correct, the position of the candidates changes almost every week--with one candidate shooting ahead, to remain in the lead only until overtaken by another candidate. I think there is a dangerous change of public opinion in process now regarding the United Nations. Here is an undertaking in world government that will be highly successful if, within the next century, it begins to make itself felt as an important influence in the community of nations.

But sometimes it seems as if the American people expected the United Nations to end all wars by next Thursday. Failing that, they are willing

What will be the result if polls by a government agency reveal a tremendous public opinion in favor of a course of action that the duly elected legislators and men experienced in public affairs oppose? If we are going to experiment with government by public opinion polls, we should be very certain that polls are accurate reflections of public opinion in the first place and that public opinion, as revealed by polls, is competent to govern. Newspapers are utilizing polls of public opinion not merely to inform their readers of the findings but to inform themselves of the effectiveness of their own publications.

Some of the polls reaffirm the knowledge, already gained from experience, as to the most effective methods of displaying news. They also suggest new approaches. We find for example that newspaper writing, which should be for the mass of the people, falls far short of reaching too many of them. It is too full of long sentences, multisyllable words and gobbledegook phrases, understandable only to the reporter in Washington who writes about them and the bureaucrats whose doings are described.

This discovery has led to organized attempts for greater clarity by more simple writing. But the rush and the tension of newspaper writing make progress in improvement disappointingly slow. We hear much, and I have alluded to it before, of the declining influence of the newspaper press. Some of the evidence of this decline, however, should be more carefully weighed before it is accepted. One frequently cited piece of evidence as to the decline of the newspapers' influence is the well-known fact that although the late President Roosevelt lacked the support of a majority of the newspapers, he was elected then re-elected three times.

The theory that this is proof of the decline of newspaper influence is not strengthened by history. It has been estimated (by Mr. A. L. Mott), for example, that in the eight Presidential campaigns between 1796 and 1824, only three of the successful candidates had the support of a majority of the press. In the twenty-six campaigns in the next century, before Mr. Roosevelt's first campaign, only 15 of the successful candidates were supported editorially by the majority of the newspapers which took a political stand on the issues.

Beginning with the 1920 Republican landslide and the election of President Harding there were two subsequent Republican victories which kept that party in power for twelve years. These victories were explained, by some hostile critics of the press, probably Democrats, as the fruit of Republican progaganda by the controlled press. Beginning with Mr. Roosevelt's first victory in 1932, he enjoyed three subsequent triumphs at the polls. Some of the Republicans blamed his first election on the "smear tactics" of the Democratic National Committee's publicity director against President Hoover, aided and abetted by the newspapers; whereas others referred scornfully to the declining influence of these newspapers.

But as newspaper editors, some of them followed practices which are no longer in good standing in the newspaper business. They deliberately suppressed news. They deliberately colored news to suit the paper's own opinions. They deliberately refused to print the other side of the argument. Some of these editors were not conducting the sort of newspapers we know today. They were conducting party organs, which lived and died with the causes they espoused. Their cardinal mission was not the printing of news, as it is today. Their mission was to support some cause, to hammer away on public opinion in an attempt to fashion it to their own ends.

The more modern conception of the role of the press today is that of an informer, rather than a molder, of public opinion. And that is a more lofty conception, and a more desirable one so far as the public interest is concerned. There are numerous examples of successful politicians who get where they do in spite of the opposition of the press. The explanation is as in the case of Mr. Roosevelt, that they are permitted to express their own views in the news paper's news columns, and those views appeal more to public opinion than do the editorial views of the newspaper.

Let us examine, for a moment, one of the curious manifestations of public opinion in politics. The distinguished Governor of a great southern state has become notorious over the Nation by reason of his going around kissing babies. Now kissing babies is an old trick of the politicians. But in the case of this Governor there is a great difference. The important difference is in the age of the babies selected for kissing. The Governor definitely prefers those who have reached what we might call the age of indiscretion. They are no longer in their mothers' arms. According to the photographs they are in the Governor's arms, whenever the opportunity presents itself.

Now I do not know whether this particular form of baby kissing has been condemned, praised or ignored by the papers which operate in the Governor's bailiwick. The point is that public opinion seems to be so favorably impressed by the Governor's osculatory prowess that the editorial position of the newspapers on the subject is of no consequence whatever.

The proof of the favorable public opinion lies in the fact that the Governor gained additional prestige and added glamour when a paternity suit emerged from the background of his public baby kissing. To sum up some of these rambling observations, we are just beginning to know something about what public opinion really is. This new knowledge should make us careful in generalizing about it.

As for the influence of newspapers on public opinion, it is possible that it is as strong today as it ever was, but perhaps not nearly so strong as we previously supposed it to be. This influence of the newspapers

making available to them the necessary factual information. Its aim should be to make public opinion of the Armed Services an informed and therefore intelligent public opinion. It should never be to mislead, to propagandize, to misinform, to sell a bill of goods.

I would like to tell you of an incident that occurred during the war. It involved the tragic death of that great soldier for whom this post is named--General Lesley McNair. He was killed, as you remember, when bombs from our own aircraft fell short of the target. Other soldiers fell with him, at the same time and from the same cause.

In the stress of the moment, perhaps in the confused thinking which followed the shock of his death, high echelons at the Pentagon took under serious consideration the preparation of an announcement that General McNair's death resulted from enemy gunfire. That announcement was to have been followed by appropriate steps which would attempt to censor, at the source, any information to the contrary.

The reason for this proposed misinformation to the public was fear that if the truth of the cause of General McNair's death became known, ill feeling between the Ground Forces and the Air Forces would be increased.

Fortunately for the Army, this proposed deception of the American people was abandoned and the truth was told. The result could have been anticipated by anyone familiar with normal reactions of public opinion. The people of the country were saddened and shocked over the loss of a fine soldier, but they accepted it as one of the inevitable misfortunes of war and blamed no one. Had they been deceived, the truth eventually would have come out anyway. You know how news travels in an army. And public opinion would have been bitter and unforgiving. Nothing so affronts public opinion as an effort to mislead it officially by an untruth.

I sometimes think--perhaps unfairly--that the military mind, trained as it is and disciplined in the need for strategic planning, is too much preoccupied with thoughts of how it would prefer to have public opinion react in certain circumstances, and to that end engages in some scheming to bring about the desired effect. That approach can be dangerous. It should not be the business of the Government--or its agencies, the Military--to attempt manipulations of public opinion. Its guide, in dealing with the public, should be the truth, the whole truth (less, perhaps, the information which reveals actual military secrets), and nothing but the truth. When we leave that theory, when we embark on government propaganda within our own country with the idea of making popular or unpopular one set of ideas, we tamper with an instrument that can become dangerous.

I suppose the free and uncontrolled press of the United States undoubtedly prints many things that military men think should not be printed and some of these things that are published foster a public opinion which to

Is this wise, or is it unwise? Whether it is wise, or whether it is unwise, it was the idea of the men who founded this country, and it was shaped in their minds by bitter experience under other systems. It was their belief, as Judge Learned Hand has expressed it, "That right conclusions are more likely to be gathered out of a multitude of tongues than through any kind of authoritative selection. To many this is, and always will be, folly; but we have staked upon it our all."

Thank you, gentlemen.

COLONEL BABCOCK: Mr. McKelway, you have shown your usual fine grasp of this broad subject and have opened the field for many questions on almost any aspect of it.

Who would like to lead off?

QUESTION: You alluded briefly to the irresponsibility of the press. Could you say a word on the responsibility for their publications particularly in respect to columnists, who, at times, make near treasonous statements based on information from the Government which should not have been put out?

MR. McKELWAY: I agree as to that indictment of some columnists. I do not know what the answer for it might be. It cannot be dealt with effectively by legislation. If legislation is resorted to in one case, it can be done in another. I believe, in the end, that public opinion, as slow and confused as it may be at times, usually succeeds in reaching a right verdict as to irresponsible publications and, in the end, serves to discredit them. Many of them are annoying temporarily, but they are one of the things that have to be put up with as part of a free press.

QUESTION: I would like to ask a rather specific question about the cartoonist, Bill Mauldin. As you recall, he published cartoons in "Stars and Stripes" all through the war. After the war was over, he was syndicated and published cartoons rather widely throughout the country. I understand that now he has pretty much lost his position with his syndicate, that his syndicate has dropped off to almost nothing. I am inclined to believe it is due to what have been considered to be his rather radical ideas. Would you mind discussing that particular problem? I think it refers to the problem of the columnists dealt with in the question just asked. Is it a question of going against the editorial policies of the papers that were represented by this syndicate?

MR. McKELWAY: I don't think so. I happen to know the syndicate. There was such a variety of opinion represented in the newspapers which subscribed to that syndicate that I do not think any political slant to the cartoons would make much difference, so long as they were interesting and were followed by the public. But people didn't think they were funny.

That is the guiding policy, I would say, of the best papers of the country. It explains something that still is an astonishing fact to a good many people. A newspaper will give a full account of something that somebody has said or advocated which is very unpopular not only with the newspaper but with the people who read it. The people who read it want to know why the newspaper prints it. It is the only way to attempt to reach this ideal goal of complete objectivity in telling people what happened.

A great deal of the shading in news stories is unconsciously done. The reporter's own feelings, his own philosophy, his own beliefs may shade what he writes. But his story goes through many hands, and the people on the newspaper staff who edit it try to take out all of that shading or coloring.

Now, I am speaking of the ideal; I am not speaking of all newspapers in the United States. One exception I can mention here is the Chicago Tribune, which is one of the largest and most successful newspapers in the country. There they make very little attempt to tell an objective story of what happened. They play the news and they write their news according to that newspaper's policy. They do not attempt to conceal that. That is their policy rather than the policy of attempting to put the straight facts before the people and letting them make up their own minds about what to think of them.

COLONEL BABCOCK: Are there any questions from the visitors?

(No response) Are there any questions from the faculty? (No response)

Mr. McKelway you seem to have covered the ground so well that they cannot think of any other questions.

On behalf of the Commandant and the College, we wish to thank you for giving of your valuable time in order to present this interesting dissertation.

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