

A VIEW OF THE WORLD

Abraham Martin Murray

OUTRAGED INNOCENCE. A few months ago public television carried a discussion among newspaper editors about which is "the most powerful" paper in the country. The *New Yorker's* "Talk of the Town" editorialist was indignant: "In our opinion, power is the last thing that a newspaper should aim for." The ideal cited by the *New Yorker* is the work of Woodward and Bernstein in bringing about Richard Nixon's fall from office. The two reporters and their employer, the *Washington Post*, were, we are assured, untainted by the slightest hint of political motive. They might have had their private preferences, "but they could not let those preferences influence their findings without jeopardizing the value of the findings." "Rather, they had to pursue the trail of evidence single-mindedly, wherever it might lead...In a free country, facts are powerful, but it is not reporters who wield that power." Even editorialists, we are told, have only the illusion of power, "for ultimately it is up to the reader whether or not he will lend his sympathy to the argument."

Perish the thought that any part of the media—especially editors or publishers—should be exercising power in the selection, slant, and selling of "the news." The *New Yorker's* version of the shining knights' impartial search for truth outdoes the advertising we saw for *All the President's Men*. Watching the movie, we were strangely unmoved by the high-sounding preachments of *Washington Post* editor Benjamin Bradlee about the sacred freedom of the press. No doubt our skepticism had something to do with Bradlee's early admissions in a published memoir that, when he was with *Newsweek* in Washington, he used to clear stories in advance with his good friend President John F. Kennedy. Presumably that too had no connection with power or with Bradlee's relationship to power. One may speculate whether the kind of naiveté reflected in "Talk of the Town" is feigned or real. Or it may just be the inadvertence induced by a two-martini luncheon at the Century Club, when one goes back to face a deadline in those stuffy little cubicles where *New Yorker* people write their stuff.

The excuse or occasion for mentioning all this (the clippings have been lying around for some time) is the outrage being expressed at a revelation about the congressional subcommittee on assassinations. It seems that when the committee was trying desperately to get itself re-funded, somebody leaked a document that showed that the committee members discussed how they might get the media to view their work in a more favorable light. There followed a host

of editorials claiming to be scandalized by the thought that politicians should worry about their "image."

We draw several conclusions. First, the media managers can't have it both ways. They can't boast about ending the war in Vietnam, toppling a president, and keeping the world humane and honest (none of which the press really did or does to the extent they—we—sometimes think) and then turn around and claim to be innocent of considerations of power. Second, journalism, whether written or visual, is powerful and there is no shame in admitting it. This need not pose a threat either to democracy or to journalistic "integrity" so long as biases are acknowledged and enough differing centers of power are kept in play.

Third, politicians, on congressional committees or elsewhere, who are indifferent to the power of the press, are to be deemed stupid rather than pure. Editorialists should not profess shock at the results of their own handiwork that establishes them, for better and for worse, as forces to be reckoned with. Finally, anyone looking for the untainted pursuit of the absolute truth should not look to politicians or the press. These two parties are precisely that, parties engaged in a power-impassioned struggle for favor and influence, sometimes tempered by consideration for differing versions of the commonweal. Out of that struggle, if it is reasonably free, comes, as often as not, and always by the grace of God, something that approximates truth for the time being. The process is called democracy, and it has little patience with the pretensions of media managers who claim to wield no power.

BIASES UNDISGUISED. The above notwithstanding, we confess to bemusement at the state of editorial posture in a new journal called *First World: An International Journal of Black Thought*. The journal boasts the sponsorship of some very prominent black Americans. The premier issue is just out, in which one of the organizers gives the reasoning behind the name. "'First world' is recognition of the historical perspective of Africa as well as its present role," he said. "Africa gave the world civilization: architecture, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, religion. Today, it is unsurpassed in its gifts. The dependency of the rest of the world on Africa's raw materials and other resources is growing. 'First World' is a statement against this 'Third World' nonsense." Isn't the title somewhat chauvinistic? "It is conceptual, it is chauvinistic, it is

propaganda, and it is directional for Black people. No pretensions to objectivity there.

ON BEHALF OF THE INNOCENTS. It took some courage for leading Irish-Americans to issue the appeal they did last St. Patrick's Day. Those who appealed were Edward Kennedy, Thomas P. O'Neill, Daniel P. Moynihan, and Hugh L. Carey. The appeal was that 1977 might be "the year in which peace should come at last to Northern Ireland." "It is evident to us," the four said, "that continued violence cannot assist the achievement of such a settlement, but can only exacerbate the wounds that divide the people of Northern Ireland." Without mentioning the Provisional IRA by name they called on "all organizations engaged in violence to renounce their campaigns of death and destruction." Most important in the view of the Republic's Government in Dublin, the four appealed "to our fellow Americans to embrace this goal of peace, and to renounce any action that promotes the current violence or provides support or encouragement for organizations engaged in violence."

For the last couple of years Irish leaders have been coming to these shores in an attempt to persuade Irish-Americans and others to deromanticize the lethal activities of the IRA. The evidence suggests that without support from America the monies for arms and murder would soon dry up. Some Americans, including, unfortunately, New York City Council President Paul O'Dwyer, continue to wave the bloody shirts of 1916. They insist all the troubles will be over as soon as they "get the Brits out of Ireland." More sober minds closer to the action realize such an approach is a formula for open-ended slaughter, a slaughter that, if not contained, could provoke a civil war embroiling the whole of the Republic.

There is little to suggest that the St. Patrick's Day appeal has made much difference so far. Indeed, the Dungannon priest, Father Denis Faul, reports a new and more virulent strain of killers. "Sad and puzzling is the language that goes with it—'Capitalist' and 'Bourgeois Imperialist'—the language of class warfare is new in Ireland and does not fit the Irish tradition." Faul notes: "It is fortunate that this new grisly campaign of selected murder attempts is not associated with the language of traditional Republicanism—to further distort that fraternal and noble instinct to work with all the people of Ireland to better themselves in freedom."

That "fraternal and noble instinct" took a different form in New York City last Easter Sunday. At a Roman Catholic church there four hundred veterans of the IRA, their families, and friends celebrated the sixty-first anniversary of the Easter Rising. A priest of quite different stripe from Father Faul assured the crowd that Jesus was a revolutionary not unlike the brave men of the IRA. The wailing of widows and orphans is not audible from 28th Street and First Avenue. Later, over breakfast at the Statler Hilton, the president of the veterans group noted with

satisfaction that there were at least twenty veterans of the 1916 rising in the parade to the hotel. "Each year it's a little more difficult to get a crowd," he sighed. "At our age they're dying off." God give them peaceful rest, and may the new generation of Irish-Americans welcome the future promised in the words of Carey, Kennedy, Moynihan, and O'Neill.

A NOMINATION. Senator William Proxmire regularly nominates for a "general nonsense reward" government research projects that expend a lot of money to no discernible public purpose. If there are not similar rewards in academia, there certainly should be. For instance, there is this recent *New York Times* lead on a study issuing from Temple University's Institute for Survey Research: "Survey Finds That Most Children Are Happy at Home but Fear World." What were described as "troubling" findings discovered precisely what the headline suggests; children feel safer and happier at home than in the big, bad world. "The most disturbing element disclosed," the director said, "is that children's fears did not simply grow out of their imaginations but that the survey suggests the children have reason to be fearful." Such research projects are apparently very useful in educating some academics to the elementary facts of life. Unsubstantiated rumor has it that Temple University will soon release a study purporting to show that most people feel more secure with friends than with strangers, and another offering scientific evidence that one's chances of dying increase with age.

COMPOUNDING THE CONFUSION. One would think the definitions of "liberal" and "conservative" could hardly get more confused than they already are. But people who cannot think without labels keep trying. In particular Evans and Novak, Joseph Kraft, and James Reston have been doing funny things with "liberal" and "conservative" in their analyses of Jimmy Carter's moves. A recent Reston column demonstrates the point: "By his defense of human rights, Mr. Carter reassured his liberal supporters, and by his open proposal of a freeze on new weapons and a major cutback in old weapons, he reassured his conservative critics." While human rights in general has a strong base in liberalism, the human rights question in Russia and Eastern Europe, the areas about which Mr. Carter has been most publicly articulate, has not struck us as being a liberal cause over the last thirty years or so. Nor, to our notice, have conservatives been conspicuous in their clamoring for arms cutbacks. We are not unappreciative of Mr. Carter's legerdemain with traditional alliances, but we suspect there are still some abiding continuities in the differences between, for example, Senators John Tower and George McGovern.

Abraham Martin Murray is the collective name of those who contribute to "A View of the World." The opinions expressed sometimes coincide with those of the editors.