

JOHN TEBBEL
SARAH MILES WATTS

THE PRESS

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PRESIDENCY

FROM GEORGE WASHINGTON TO RONALD REAGAN



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THE PRESS and THE PRESIDENCY

*(From George Washington to
Ronald Reagan)*

John Tebbel

Sarah Miles Watts

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Preface

One of the paradoxes of these paradoxical times is the fact that while “the media” and “the press” are perennial subjects of controversy and daily comment by the population at large, there is little written about them for the general reader. With a handful of exceptions, the literature consists of the highly partisan views of columnists and politicians and the scholarly work of political scientists, sociologists, and others engaged in media studies.

What is lacking in most of what has been written is the historical viewpoint. Until this volume, for instance, there has been only one full-length study of the presidents and the press, beginning with George Washington. That was James Pollard’s *The Presidents and the Press*, first issued in 1947, which carried the story through Franklin Roosevelt (a paperback supplement ended with Truman). Everyone who works in this field must be grateful to Pollard for his pioneering study, and we acknowledge our debt to him.

In this volume, however, we have intended to go considerably beyond what Pollard did and write a history that would explore in depth the shifting relationship between press and government from the beginning to the present. While Pollard’s work was divided into discrete chapters, this book is written as narrative history, a form long unfashionable but now reviving somewhat as a legitimate approach.

While the book is intended for a general audience, we have appended a list of sources for those requiring it. We have not neglected the immense body of scholarly work that has been done on the presidents, including the most recent studies. But in addition we have explored contemporary letters and diaries and the non-scholarly books about events written by reporters and editors who were on the scene. The latter have been used with due regard for possible bias and faulty recollection.

If we define historical writing as “critical thinking about the past,” as some have done, interpretation and a point of view become inevitable. Thus, in this volume, we have treated the history of president-press relationships as a continu-

ing narrative, in which both institutions have changed considerably, yet in many respects have remained the same. We have attempted to show the vital importance of the First Amendment foundation upon which the whole structure rests and how it has fared from Washington's day to our own. The book is consequently both a study of the presidency itself, including the personalities of the presidents, and a study of the changing character of the press.

The viewpoint of the book, reduced to its simplest terms, is that the presidency has evolved into an imperialistic institution which is now capable of manipulating and controlling the media, and through them the public, in ways beyond the vision of the Founding Fathers. Government is now, consequently, in a position to exert the controls that the architects of the Bill of Rights, and particularly the First Amendment, expressly sought to prevent. Moreover, it may well be able to nullify the First, in a relatively short time and with public support. In the terms of Presidents Nixon and Reagan, we have already felt the first effects of that power.

By providing a view of the past which tells us how we have come to that point, we hope we will give some readers, at least, an understanding of what we may expect in the future and equip them with the kind of information which, as James Madison believed, is the way to make democracy work—that is, information pointing the way toward controlling the power of government and thus preserving the freedom of the governed.

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John Tebbel
Sarah Miles Watts

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THE PRESS AND THE PRESIDENCY

PART ONE

Foundations

Washington and the Federal Presidency

In the shifting relationship between the press and the presidency over nearly two centuries, there has remained one primary constant—the dissatisfaction of one with the other. No president has escaped press criticism, and no president has considered himself fairly treated. The record of every administration has been the same, beginning with mutual protestations of good will, ending with recriminations and mistrust.

This is the the best proof we could have that the American concept of a free press in a free society is a viable idea, whatever defects the media may have. While the Founding Fathers and their constituencies did not always agree on the role the press should play, there was a basic consensus that the newspaper (the only medium of consequence at the time) should be the buffer state between the rulers and the ruled. The press could be expected to behave like a watchdog, and government at every level, dependent for its existence on the opinions of those it governed, could expect to resent being watched and having its shortcomings, real or imaginary, exposed to the public view.

Reduced to such simple terms, the relationship of the presidents to the press since George Washington's first term is understandable only as an underlying principle. But this basic concept has been increasingly complicated by the changing nature of the presidency, by the individual nature of presidents, by the rise of other media, especially television, and by the growing complexity of beliefs about the function of both press and government.

In surveying nearly two centuries of this relationship, it is wise to keep in mind an axiom of professional historians—that we should be careful not to view the past in terms of our own times, and make judgments accordingly. Certain parallels often become obvious, to be sure, but to assert what an individual president should or should not have done, by present standards, is to violate historical context. Historians occasionally castigate each other for this failing, and in the case of press and government, the danger becomes particularly great because the

words themselves—"press" and "government," even "presidency"—have changed in meaning so much during the past two hundred years.

Recent scholarship, for example, has emphasized that colonial Americans believed in a free press, but not at all in the sense that we understand it today. Basic to their belief was the understanding, which had prevailed since the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century, that whoever controlled the printing press was in the best position to control the minds of men. The press was seen at once as an unprecedented instrument of power, and the struggle to control it began almost as soon as the Gutenberg (or Mazarin) Bible appeared at Mainz in 1456, an event which meant that, for the first time, books could be reproduced exactly and, more important, that they could be printed in quantity.

Two primary centers of social and political power—the state and the church—stood to benefit most from the invention of the printing press. In the beginning it was mutually advantageous for them to work together; consequently it was no accident that the first printing press on the North American continent was set up in Mexico City in 1539 by Fray Juan Zumárraga, first Catholic bishop of that country. It gave the church an unprecedented means of advancing conversion, along with the possibility of consolidating and extending its power, thus providing Catholic Spain with the same territorial advantages that would soon be extended elsewhere in the Americas.

When British colonies were established in North America during the early part of the seventeenth century, it was once again a religious faith, this time Protestant, that brought the first printing press to what is now the United States. But while colonial printing in Central and South America remained the province of the Catholics for some time and was used primarily for religious purposes, in North America secular publishing became an adjunct of a church-dominated press almost at once and was soon dominant.

It is part of American mythology that the nation was "cradled in liberty" and that the colonists, seeking religious freedom, immediately established a free society, but the facts are quite different. The danger of an uncontrolled press to those in power was well expressed by Sir William Berkeley, governor of Virginia, when he wrote home to his superiors in 1671: "I thank God there are no free schools nor printing, and I hope we shall not have these hundred years; for learning has brought disobedience, and heresy, and sects into the world, and printing has divulged them, and libels against the best government, God keep us from both." There are those in twentieth-century America who would say "Amen" to Berkeley's view of printing and "libels against the best government."

At home in England the danger was also well understood by those who controlled the colonies. After he ascended the throne in 1685, King James II sent these instructions to his governor in the colony of New York, Thomas Dongan: "And for as much a great inconvenience may arise by the liberty of printing within our province of New York, you are to provide by all necessary orders that noe person keep any press for printing, nor that any book, pamphlet or other matters whatsoever bee printed without your special leave & license first ob-

tained." This paragraph was retained in instructions to royal governors for the next forty years.

There was no conception of a "free press" in the mind of the Reverend Jose Glover, the man who was first charged with bringing a press to America in 1638. He was merely a pious instrument in the hands of pious men, English Puritans who were struggling against the censorship imposed by the Crown. In his relentless drive in England to purge the Anglican faith of all nonconformist elements, Archbishop William Laud not only had succeeded in dissolving some of the Puritan churches in Holland, where the English Puritan ministers were getting their works printed, but he had made life so difficult for Dutch printers that their Bible exports to England virtually stopped. As a consequence, those who had already fled from High Church oppression to the Massachusetts Bay Colony were in a position to form a new center for producing Puritan tracts, which would then be smuggled into England as they had been from the Netherlands. The church was also well aware that in the New World a printing press would be a most useful tool for propagation of the faith, as it had been for the Catholics in Mexico.

In the colonies control of the press eventually passed from church to state, as it did elsewhere, but when the inhabitants began to urge its freedom early in the eighteenth century, they did not understand "freedom" as we do today—or at least as it is understood by American libertarians. When John Adams declared in 1765, in his *Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law*, that he knew of no "means of information . . . more sacred . . . than . . . [a free] press," he did not mean it in twentieth-century terms. Adams and others of his time saw press freedom as the essential weapon required in their power struggle against the Crown.

So well was this lesson learned before the Revolution that ten of the first thirteen states included a free press provision in their constitutions, and when the federal Constitution was drawn up, the failure of the delegates to include a similar clause, along with other basic freedoms, ignited a grassroots revolt that ended in the enactment of our Bill of Rights, in which Congress deliberately placed freedom of the press and religion as the First Amendment.

In practice, however, what the colonial people meant by "freedom of the press" was the freedom to express their own beliefs as against those who were loyal to the Crown. They saw nothing wrong, consequently, in suppressing opposite opinions. When John Mein's Boston *Chronicle* offended them with what they called Tory propaganda, a patriot mob attacked and beat the publisher so badly that he felt compelled to flee from the colony. When the flamboyant James Rivington's New York *Gazetteer* fought the rising tide of patriotism there, these same believers in the sacredness of a free press closed his shop and drove him out. (He returned, however, during the British occupation as the scourge of the Revolution and its leaders.)

There were many other such examples in pre-Revolutionary America, and, in fact, instances of violent censorship by the mob persisted through the Civil War and are not unknown in our own times. Those who promoted and sanctioned

such actions believed they were making a distinction between liberty and license. In approving a boycott of Rivington, the Committee of Inspection in Newport, Rhode Island, set forth this distinction clearly. Asserting that it was the duty of "every friend of Civil Government" to protect and encourage a free press as long as it was employed in promoting "beneficial purposes," the committee then outlined a vital qualification:

But when, instead thereof, a Press is incessantly employed and prostituted to the vilest uses; in publishing the most infamous falsehoods; in partial or false representation of facts; in fomenting jealousies, and exciting discord and disunion among the people; in supporting and applauding the worst of men, and worst of measures; and in vilifying and calumniating the best of characters, and the best of causes; it then behoves every citizen . . . to discountenance and discourage every such licentious, illiberal, prostituted Press.

This is more or less the philosophy of many Americans in our own time, and quite probably the inner belief of many presidents—that freedom of the press must be maintained unless it attacks us with what we think are lies, whether in fact they are or not. What is the "best of characters, and the best of causes" to one political party or set of activists may be the work of scoundrels to another. Often, too, it has taken the press, "exciting discord and disunion among the people," to depose those advertising their characters and causes as "best."

Put more succinctly, perhaps, by William Livingston in his essay, "Of the Use, Abuse and Liberty of the Press," which first appeared in the *New York Independent Reflector* in 1753, freedom of the press meant to the colonists, the men of the Revolution, and many of those who came after, "a Liberty of promoting the common Good of Society, and of publishing any Thing else not repugnant thereto." If the press was "prejudicial to the public Weal," said Livingston, "it is abused," and he added that "if . . . we suppose any broader Foundation for the Liberty of the Press, it will become more destructive of public Peace, than if it were wholly shut up."

If these early patriots were inconsistent in their beliefs, as seems so obvious now, they were not so within the ideological framework of their time. Few shared with Thomas Jefferson and James Madison the absolutist view of a free press that we call "strict constructionism" in the First Amendment debates of today. Jefferson's conviction that the First meant exactly what it said when it asserted that Congress must make "*no law*" restricting freedom of speech or the press, found little agreement among his contemporaries, no more than it does today. Colonial people, in fact, viewed the press as little more than a potent means of combating what they saw as excesses of power by those who governed them, and as a means of unifying people around the cause of freedom from these governors as the Revolution approached. In the years before the war the press had been chiefly valuable as a pamphleteering, propagandizing mechanism to unite the patriots behind a cause.

The concept of a free and *impartial* press lay far in the future. Those printers who issued newspapers were in the service of either Tory or patriot factions

(mostly the latter), or they were political entrepreneurs in their own right. In any case, newspapers were not usually their chief business. Their presses turned out books and magazines as well from the same shop, and in the front of the building they sold these printed products along with a range of other items that made them the forerunners of the modern drugstore.

More important, however, the offices of these early printers were often intellectual centers, the breeding ground for growing rebellion against the Crown. In the case of the Boston Tea Party, the Boston *Gazette* provided at least one changing room for those activists who put on war-paint and feather disguise to dump tea in the harbor. Later, in reporting the war, the newspapers of the day made no pretense at coverage in the modern sense. Although they did print whatever news was available, they were primarily propaganda organs for one side or the other, and little of what they printed could be considered factually accurate.

When we talk about the "press" that awaited the first president, we are speaking of an institution that was only beginning to find a place for itself in American life. The end of the Revolution itself created a period of transition, during which many of the newspapers that had led the charge and helped sustain the war collapsed and died, their real purpose gone. In the decade before George Washington was elected as first president, others rushed to take their places. More than 60 new papers were started during the mid-1780s, and this growth continued for another decade; between 1783 and 1801, about 450 papers began publishing. Most failed to survive, but others flourished and a few attained a measure of brilliance. At the end of the century, however, only a dozen or so of the newspapers that had been important during the Revolution remained.

Growth did not mean a radical change in character. The press of Washington's two administrations was as partisan as it had ever been, and even went on to new excesses in the great struggle between the Federalists and Anti-Federalists, which divided citizens more thoroughly and bitterly than George III had done. Two major changes did occur, however. Where newspapers had been regarded earlier as only one of a printer's products in his efforts to make a living, now they were more often established to represent political parties and advance causes. That meant a change in their management. Now they were no longer the product of some printer but the work of an editor, a man who, for the first time, stood between the printer, whose work was merely mechanical, and the party men who supplied the money and the point of view, which the editor expressed well or badly, according to his capabilities. In that sense, the modern newspaper had been born.

II

When George Washington assumed the presidency, he brought with him a view of the press that could be expected from a Virginia Tidewater conservative and, in addition, a more personal antipathy derived from his experience as General of the Army. During his brief political career in the Virginia House of Burgesses he had regarded with satisfaction those newspapers that supported him, and with mild disapproval those that did not.

During the Revolution, however, Washington had been given far more reason

to dislike the press. It was not entirely personal, by any means. In common with his field commanders, he deplored the carelessness of newspapers in printing information that would be useful to the British. In May of 1777, for instance, he complained to the president of Congress, "It is much to be wished that our printers were more discreet in many of their Publications. We see almost in every Paper, Proclamations or accounts transmitted by the Enemy, of an injurious nature. If some hint or caution could be given them on the Subject, it might be of Material Service."

The government did nothing, and there was little it *could* have done in its unstable condition, beset by far more serious problems and struggling against its own weakness. Washington consoled himself by having his aides carefully scrutinize the Tory press, which was equally as careless about valuable information and was frequently just as helpful to the patriots. The general also relied on patriot newspapers for news of what was occurring elsewhere, and he used the press adroitly to publicize court martial cases as object lessons to his frequently disgruntled troops.

Washington's feelings about the press in general when he came to the presidency were largely the result of the abuse he took from opposition newspapers, which had begun during the Revolution. He was particularly incensed during the war by James ("Jemmy") Rivington's New York *Gazetteer*, which was considered by the publisher's rival, Isaiah Thomas of Worcester, as an admirable publication even though it was on the other side. Thomas, the best of colonial printers and publishers, had little reason to love Rivington for any reason, yet wrote of him that "few men, perhaps, were better qualified . . . to publish a newspaper," and of his *Gazetteer* declared flatly, "No newspaper in the colonies was better printed, or was more copiously furnished with foreign intelligence." Yet this was the paper that did not hesitate to print the most scurrilous forgeries involving Washington, was ready to spread any kind of rumor that might damage the Continentals, and repeated every piece of gossip that came to hand.

General Washington was horrified by Rivington and his paper, and he was particularly sensitive to the editor's ridicule, an art at which Jemmy was a master. In the *Gazetteer* of August 6, 1780, Rivington wrote: "Our old acquaintance Mr. Washington we learn is approaching us Polyphemus-like, with hasty and ample strides, his dire intents (supported by myriads of heroes and in his train a thirteen-inch mortar drawn by eight charming lively oxen) are given out to be another coup upon Powles Hook." In one sense, however, Washington had the last word in the Revolutionary war of words. He gave his two-sentence dispatch reporting the surrender at Yorktown as an exclusive to the Philadelphia *Free-man's Journal*.

As president, Washington understood that newspapers represented a valuable means of communicating with his constituents, as they would always be for occupants of the highest office, but there were two obstacles. Not all of the voters could read, by any means, and the circulations of the papers were not large. Their combined subscribers numbered about forty thousand, but the readership was considerably higher since every copy was read by several people, a total impossible to determine exactly. One advantage was that those who did read the

papers absorbed them carefully, down to the last advertisement. Americans had acquired the newspaper-reading habit during the Revolution to an extent unknown before, and their interest did not diminish in the turbulent days ahead.

One of the most devoted readers was Washington himself, and, as a result of his war experiences, he came into office well aware of what he could expect from a partisan press. It was as though he expected a hundred Rivingtons might be waiting for him, which was not far from the truth, but, on the other hand, he was human enough to believe that the adulation showered on him as war leader and as the first elected president, of a kind not seen before in public life, might silence most of his critics.

At the beginning of his first term Washington subscribed to at least five newspapers and three magazines, a number that steadily increased to about thirty as time went on. Stephen Decatur, Jr., described him as "an omnivorous newspaper reader, as he was anxious to keep in touch with public opinion, and for a time subscribed to all papers regardless of their political prejudices." Later, when Washington refused to subscribe to the journals that attacked him most virulently, he nevertheless contrived to get copies of them to read.

A man given to gloomy notions of himself and his future, Washington characteristically viewed his presidency as a duty fraught with peril. He had been elected unanimously (the only president ever to enjoy that distinction), but he was still able to write to Edward Rutledge shortly after he took office: "I fear, if the issue of public measures should not correspond with their [the people's] sanguine expectations, they will turn the extravagant (and I may say undue) praises which they are heaping upon me at this moment, into equally extravagant (that I will fondly hope unmerited) censures."

Washington's premonition was correct beyond his worst fears, for the press was now embarking upon what some historians of the media have called the "Dark Ages of Journalism." The great struggle between Federalists and Republicans needs no rehearsal here, but it is not an exaggeration to say that the rise of the two-party system which it signaled had the most profound influence on the relationship between the press and the presidency, although the nature of that influence changed radically with time.

From the beginning, and until about 1835, the press was a tool of these two contending philosophies in a struggle for power that not only shaped party politics as an institution in America but resulted in the rise of an entirely different kind of press. It was not until the arrival of James Gordon Bennett, Sr., and his New York *Herald* in 1835, that the press began to be controlled by powerful individuals rather than parties, in a manner that had not existed before except in a limited way.

Ironically Washington, the idol of the nation, and Jefferson, the prime architect and unyielding upholder of press freedom, suffered most from a press that was now free to publish anything short of libel (a law not often invoked by politicians in those days). They were fated to rehearse nearly all the problems that were to plague the relationship between press and president from that time onward to our own. For Washington, it was particularly difficult to be so enmeshed because it had been his policy from the beginning to hold aloof from