Mightier than the Sword

How the NEWS MEDIA *Have Shaped American History*

Rodger Streitmatter

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To my sister, Doris Boehle,
a good and selfless nurturer
who makes the world a better place

Acknowledgments

BECAUSE OF THE BREADTH OF THIS BOOK, it would be impossible for any one researcher to be a true expert on every topic covered in these pages, and I certainly will not claim that distinction. Instead, I want to acknowledge that I am deeply indebted to a host of talented and dedicated scholars who have previously examined many of the events that are the subjects of this book. Although I have listed those individuals in the bibliography, I also would like to describe their contributions here.

Rather than trying to discuss how each of these individuals contributed to my work, I wish to highlight one particular scholar and her research. In the bibliographical listing for Chapter 3, "Slowing the Momentum for Women's Rights," readers will find an entry for Karen K. List, "The Post-Revolutionary Woman Idealized: Philadelphia Media's 'Republican Mother.'" Professor List, a member of the journalism department at the University of Massachusetts, deserves far more credit than that brief citation, for it was Karen who pored over hundreds of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century women's magazines to identify and analyze the messages that those publications communicated to their readers, as well as to suggest the impact they had on American women *writ large*. In other words, Karen provided the road map that led me to the magazines that I quote from in my chapter. I went to those magazines and read the articles myself, but I readily acknowledge that without Karen's trailblazing efforts my work would have been enormously more difficult. I gratefully acknowledge her help—as well as that of numerous other scholars who preceded and guided me in researching many of the topics covered in this book.

With regard to the overall content and direction of this work, I want to thank the woman who has served as my mentor beginning with the first manuscript I ever submitted to a scholarly journal: Susan Henry. Not only is this the third book I have written but it also is the third book that has been profoundly shaped by Susan's personal commitment to the highest standards of scholarly research. I thank her.

I also want to thank the American University Senate Research Committee and Dean of Academic Affairs Ivy Broder for supporting

both me and my work through a university research grant. That support was invaluable both in encouraging me and in providing me with the time to proceed with this project.

On my own faculty in American University's School of Communication, I thank Dean Sanford J. Ungar for his confidence, trust, and friendship. Without Sandy's unwavering support, I would neither have begun teaching the course How the News Media Shape History nor have committed that course to paper through this book.

Because much of the material contained in this book has evolved from my classroom lectures and from the materials I have written for my course, I am indebted to the hundreds of students who have provided me with feedback on the material. In particular, I thank Deborah Acomb, Jim Montalto, Maureen Rich, and Kyle Rose for their substantive comments in the final stages of the writing. I still marvel at the fact that even though I wear the mantle of *teacher*, I learn so much from my magnificently creative students.

Some of the material in this book originated as conference papers and articles in scholarly journals. Among those persons whose contributions I want to acknowledge, therefore, are dozens of individuals I cannot name because their identities are masked behind the blind review process of the American Journalism Historians Association, International Communications Association, and Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. I especially want to thank those members of the AEJMC History Division who honored me in 1996 for my work on the 1920s newspaper crusade against the Ku Klux Klan.

Finally, I thank my children, Matt and Kate, and my life partner, Tom Grooms, for continuing to enrich my life and make its activities worthwhile—whether writing a book or walking the dog.

Rodger Streitmatter

Contents

Illustrations

Introduction

In 1990, I created a course titled How the News Media Shape History. The interdisciplinary course, which combined journalism and history, became part of the General Education Program at American University. After receiving positive responses from the students who had taken the course, the director of the program was soon urging me to teach the course not just once a year, but twice—or even more often, if I was willing. I still remember the vivid image that the director, Ann Ferren, used to persuade me: "Rodger, students are clamoring to get into this course. If you teach it only once a year, it's like putting one tiny little jelly bean in the middle of the quad and telling all 12,000 of our students to fight over who gets it."

Why have students been so eager to grab my little jelly bean of a course? They have been strongly attracted, hundreds of students have since told me, to the concept of the news media *shaping* this country.

Today's college students, as well as the public in general, recognize that the American news media are one of this country's most powerful institutions. They see journalism as so powerful, in fact, that newspaper publishers and television anchors are perceived as more influential than members of the United States Congress or Supreme Court. Many students and other observers criticize the news media as being *too* powerful; others praise the news media's power, arguing that a free press is fundamental to democracy. But the detractors and defenders both agree on one point: The news media have impact.

It is those perceptions that have made my course popular, and it is that continued popularity that has impelled me to commit the material I use in the course to paper. *Mightier than the Sword* describes fourteen discrete episodes in American history during which the news media have played a critical role in shaping landmark events.

I have chosen the word *shaping* with considerable care. For as I try to impress upon my students at the beginning of each semester, I do not mean to imply that the Fourth Estate single-handedly *causes* events to occur. To suggest such a causal relationship between the news media and American history would be simplistic, as it would ignore the interdependence among governmental, legal, social, and economic institu-

tions driving this nation. I am convinced, however, that journalistic coverage can *shape*—and profoundly so—an issue. More specifically, the news media can place an issue on the public agenda . . . can move it to the front burner . . . can get people talking about the issue. And once an issue has been moved into the spotlight, other institutions can cause real change to occur.

Each chapter in this book focuses on such a milestone in the evolution of the United States that was significantly influenced by journalism paying attention to it. Ultimately, these fourteen separate stories coalesce to relate a single phenomenon of singular importance to understanding the past as well as the future of this country: As the American news media report and comment on the events of the day, they wield enormous *influence* on those events.

I have selected the particular episodes in this book for several reasons. They span more than two centuries—from Thomas Paine's influence on the coming of the American Revolution to Rush Limbaugh's curiously similar role in the Republican Revolution of the 1990s. They represent a variety of print and electronic media, ranging from newspapers and news magazines to radio, television, and electronic mail. At the same time, these particular vignettes illustrate how the news media have interacted with a broad range of other forces—from foreign policy strategists to captains of industry to rabble-rousing demagogues—to have far-reaching effects on the political, economic, and social fabric of this nation.

Many of the topics are familiar to anyone with a rudimentary knowledge of journalism history, such as how William Randolph Hearst helped build public pressure for the Spanish-American War and how, a century later, television news played a major role in ending the war in Southeast Asia; other topics take communication scholarship in new directions, such as how 1920s newspapers helped defeat the Ku Klux Klan and how news organizations helped propel millions of American women into the World War II work force. The topics consciously expand the definition of landmark *events* far beyond wars and politics, as those milestones also include social movements, describing how the news media have treated—or *mis*treated—women, Jews, and African Americans.

Although each nexus between the news media and American history described in the following pages is important, by no means does this book provide a comprehensive history of the evolution of American journalism. Looking at such a limited number of episodes cannot document the myriad incidents and trends that have marked the development of this country's news media. Indeed, I have assiduously *avoided* compiling the mind-numbing lists of names, dates, and news-

paper titles that bog down the standard journalism history tomes. I also have attempted to keep this book focused and concise—seeking to create a work that is not only illuminating but also engaging and perhaps even, at times, vivid.

The examples I have selected include negative as well as positive assessments. As a former newspaper reporter and now a journalism professor, I firmly believe that journalism is a noble pursuit that can, at its best, shine the bright beacon of truth into the darkest corners of life—and then move the human spirit to clean up those dark corners. At the same time, however, I know the news media sometimes squander the rights guaranteed to them in the First Amendment. Several chapters of *Mightier than the Sword* focus on such regrettable instances when this powerful institution behaved to the detriment of the people it purported to serve.

This book concludes with a final chapter that focuses on *how* the news media have shaped history. More specifically, by drawing examples from the material described in the previous chapters, I identify some of the common characteristics displayed by the news media involved in shaping this nation. I am hopeful that contemporary newsmen and newswomen—as well as the news organizations they work for—may be inspired to adopt some of these characteristics while pursuing their work today and in the future.

Mightier than the Sword: How the News Media Have Shaped American History, like my two previous books—*Raising Her Voice: African-American Women Journalists Who Changed History* and *Unspeakable: The Rise of the Gay and Lesbian Press in America*—builds on both my professional background in daily journalism and my Ph.D. in United States history in an effort to increase our understanding of both American journalism and American history.

In writing this particular book, I had two specific audiences in mind. The first is journalism students. For young men and women entering the field, *Mightier than the Sword* provides a sense of the history, power, and responsibility inherent in a journalism career. The second and much larger audience is the broad one of men and women who want to learn more about the intertwining of the American news media and American history—as well as what that phenomenon means in the context of the 1990s. These readers are legion.

Indeed, it is difficult to name a more white-hot topic than the power of the news media. The contentious debate includes such thorny questions as: Is the media's job to *report* the news objectively or should they also *lead society*? Do the news media represent a public trust that is responsible for serving the people, or are the news media merely a business that is responsible only for serving its stockholders?

What are—or should be—the limits of news media influence? *Mightier than the Sword* speaks to each of these questions.

Some historians will criticize my tight focus on the news media, saying it does not provide sufficient context. Those critics will be on solid ground. I readily acknowledge, for example, that my chapter about the news media's role in Watergate could be expanded into a 200-page discussion of the various forces that brought about and helped expose the men responsible for that shocking episode of political corruption. Indeed, dozens of books *have* been written on that subject. What has not been written—until now—is a single book that synthesizes a sampling of major events, such as Watergate, that have been *shaped by* the news media. This is the unique perspective *Mightier than the Sword* offers.

Some critics also will find fault with several of the works I classify as *news* media. They will argue that Paine's essays are partisan rhetoric, not journalism, and that Limbaugh's and Father Charles Coughlin's jeremiads are social and political commentary, not journalism. I disagree. Paine's essays were news in the 1770s because they introduced new *ideas* into the most vital conversation of the day. The essays functioned as journalism, even though they sought not only to inform readers but also to persuade them to support a particular point of view. All colonial publications were partisan, as the concept of journalistic objectivity did not emerge until the nineteenth century. If 1700s partisan publications are not news media, eighteenth century American journalism did not exist. As for Limbaugh's and Coughlin's tirades, I see no difference between them and the opinions published on the *New York Times* editorial page. Indeed, if the words of these two radio commentators are not part of the news media, neither are *Times* editorials.

Before beginning the story of how the news media have shaped American history, I want to acknowledge the man who inspired the title for this book: Thomas Jefferson. In a letter to Tom Paine in 1792, Jefferson lauded Paine's critical role in propelling the American colonists toward independence from Great Britain and then wrote encouragingly: "Go on then in doing with your pen what in other times was done with the sword: show that reformation is more practicable by operating on the mind of man than on the body."[1]

1

Sowing the Seeds of Revolution

IN THE SUMMER OF 1776, a band of political rebels turned the world upside down. They showed, for the first time in the history of the world, that the discontent of a few colonists could swell into open rebellion so strong and so potent that it could create a world power all its own. Such impudence evolving into pure might was unheard of in the eighteenth century or in any of the centuries that had preceded it. The same process would occur again and again—in France, Russia, Cuba, the Philippines—but the events of 1776 stand alone. For they were the first.

Such redefinition of human history does not erupt overnight, as forces had been working long before the fifty-six rebels signed their names to the Declaration of Independence. Among those forces were the powerful words of determined men who possessed both the talent and the intellectual insight to craft graceful and passionate prose that demanded freedom from an oppressive government. Those words helped change the course of human events, transforming lukewarm patriots into fiery revolutionaries.

The transformation unfolded through a series of publications produced by several political dissidents. It was very much a continuum. Individuals expressing their outrage in those early publications laid the psychological groundwork for the fight that was to come. These journalists created the consciousness and mind-set that allowed for

political and social revolution—as well as armed conflict. Important milestones in the journalistic march toward independence included publication of the "Journal of Occurrences" in 1768 and 1769, followed by the extended verbal response to the Boston Massacre of 1770. Those two publishing phenomena set the stage for Thomas Paine's clarion call for independence in early 1776. Paine's *Common Sense* impelled thousands of mildly discontented subjects of the British crown to become political insurgents fully committed both to revolution and, ultimately, to shaping American history.

Dissension Takes Root

One place to begin the political background of the American Revolution is with the 1763 British victory in the decade-long conflict with the French. With that military triumph, the British defeated the French in North America as well as in India. The hard-fought victory meant the French finally were expelled from America, leaving the fur trade solely to the British. But the high cost of victory also left the British treasury near bankruptcy.

In search of ways to pay the cost of defending the wide frontiers that had been won in the war, officials in London decided the American colonists had gained so much in the victory over the French that they should pay the bulk of the war debts and defense costs. The colonists were willing to help—up to a point. Colonial legislatures were prepared to increase levies, but they did not raise enough revenue to satisfy the British.

Economics was not the only factor in the coming revolution, as ideas were stirring people, too. This is where the press played a pivotal role. The literature of the colonial era appeared in newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, and broadsides that expressed the arguments—as well as the passions—of the rebels. Revolutions seldom, if ever, occur because of logic. They require passion, and this emotional element was brought to the movement by a group of radical visionaries fully aware of the power of the press.

The earliest wave of rebels insisted that the people deserved a larger voice in their governance. Specifically, they believed the colonies needed to be granted home rule. They argued that citizens themselves, not the higher level of government, should make the laws governing the colonists—although all but the most radical of them continued to accept that the British crown should remain the final authority in their lives.

Sam Adams: Firebrand of the Revolution

The best known of the early radical writers was Sam Adams, the cousin of John Adams and the man who would, in 1773, organize the Boston Tea Party. In the 1760s, the firebrand of the Revolution became a prominent voice in the *Boston Gazette*, writing hundreds of political essays and news articles. Because other newspapers reprinted his pieces, Adams's radical message spread throughout the colonies.

Adams's words were worthy of note. As early as 1764 he argued that the British Parliament was overstepping its authority by imposing too many taxes on the colonists. If the House of Commons could compel New England to pay ruinous taxes on a staple such as molasses, Adams insisted, the colonists' liberty was held on uncertain tenure. Parliament would continue to increase taxes, he said, asking rhetorically, "If our Trade may be taxed why not our Lands? Why not the Produce of our Lands & every thing we possess or make use of? This we apprehend annihilates our Charter Right to govern & tax ourselves." Adams's protests, in short, represented one of the earliest cries against taxation without representation.[1]

Sam Adams and the other radicals who gathered around him in the *Boston Gazette* office firmly believed the only way the colonies could resolve their disputes with Britain was to secure home rule. That meant they had come to the position—considered extreme by the vast majority of British citizens in the 1760s—that it was imperative for the colonies, not the Mother Country, to establish the laws of governance for the colonies, although the crown would continue to hold veto power. This idea was highly controversial. To develop their own laws would be tantamount to a child determining his or her own limits of behavior.

Although Adams was Harvard educated and from one of the most prosperous families in the colonies, he was also a backstairs politician who understood, as well as any man of the age, the need to arouse public opinion as a step toward gaining grassroots support for the revolutionary ideas that he and his associates espoused. He wrote, "Where there is a Spark of patriotick fire, *we* will enkindle it."[2]

"Journal of Occurrences" as News Service

To this end, Adams conceived of what became America's first systematic gathering and distributing of news—a precursor of such modern-day operations as the Associated Press and United Press International.