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UNIVERSITY PRESS CLUB OF MICHIGAN

Speech by Rep. Gerald R. Ford, Jr.

Friday, November 11, 1949

THE FOURTH ESTATE IN MODERN POLITICS

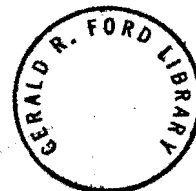
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"The Universe replied, 'That fact has not created within me a sense of obligation.'"

This imaginary dialogue between man and the universe very nearly sums up the dilemma in which we find ourselves today. Yes, our civilization does exist but we, as a part of that civilization, would be foolhardy to assume that our way of life



will continue to exist unless we solve the multitudinous problems that confront us, and those problems are more than a little staggering from whatever appraisal we make.

Those who are concerned and who do think of the possible consequences and who are capable of acting, have the greatest responsibility since Noah at the time of the great flood. Noah faced a world about to be engulfed by water--we face an equally terrifying phenomena, a world about to be engulfed by atomic disaster.

It is perfectly obvious to everyone except the most impractical of dreamers that there is no simple solution to the challenges of our generation. The myriad of problems calls for steady nerves, cool heads, unrelenting courage and above all else an awareness of the TRUTH in its purest meaning. We need the unvarnished, the undiluted truth of the facts as they exist. The truth of reality is a prime requisite in the dynamic days ahead.

There is no room for premeditated or careless inaccuracies,



nor should we foster or condone charlatanism. There's no room for bare-faced sensationalism or P. T. Barnum pettifogging. With each step we take in the era ahead we must be aware that we march with the appalling knowledge that misrepresentation of the truth means likely disaster. Our course must be guided by and tied to the truth. If we have the facts our day-to-day course will be unerring. If we do have the facts we can depend on the judgment of our citizens.

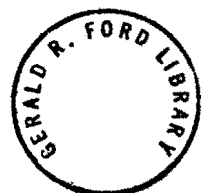
On whom does the burden rest most heavily for the guidance of humanity in this crucial hour? On the college professor or the education profession generally? The research expert? Is this a task for the clergy? Yes, a part of this burden unquestionably rests with our academic and spiritual leaders. But, they cannot carry the burden alone. Frankly, the strength of the forces at work is too great for even the best-intentioned educators and clergymen.



Next, shall we say that the politician will give us the requisite help. I would like to think that young men like myself with the aid of mellower leaders would be the answer to our problem but it is a fact, not necessarily derogatory either, that the politician, no matter how forthright his motives, is to some degree the weather vane of public opinion.

It is our job to do what the majority thinks fitting and proper. We would be usurping the representative posts to which we were elected if we made our own judgments decisive in complete disregard of our constituents' wishes. Under our form of government we are bound by the expressed will of the people, the real question, what will the "will of the people" be?

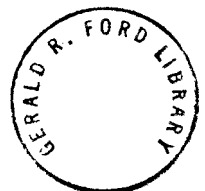
Thus, in the final analysis we inevitably come to the conclusion that the gravest responsibility rests with the day-to-day makers of public opinion and in this category I put the owners, editors, and reporters ^{who} ~~who by subtle indirection or by straight-~~



~~forward news reporting~~ make the news which in turn makes public opinion.

Gentlemen, you and your associates are the real key to the dilemma of modern politics. In the exercise of your daily business, ~~not necessarily in the weeks preceding an election~~, you determine to a large extent the course of things to come--be it war, peace, fascism, democracy. You are the hub of the big wheel that takes us toward our destiny. In all sincerity I am flattered to have this opportunity to discuss these matters with you. "The Fourth Estate in Modern Politics." Gentlemen, you are politics.

Perhaps some in the audience may question this statement. Is it really true? Those here who write daily editorials undoubtedly in the past on some occasions, have dispaired at public indifference to your expressions of scholarly opinion. It can be shown, and is admitted by most, that the last presidential campaign was won despite the editorial policies of most newspapers.



Perhaps our voters were misled by certain forces but the real question is yet unanswered: What produced this totally unexpected result?

Thousands of words have been written and spoken on the subject but most of the attempted explanations fail to analyze the real reason for the election of Mr. Truman. In my estimation the answer is not as paradoxical as one might think. The best answer is a true understanding of the medium in which you gentlemen work every day.

It is unfortunate but true that editorials are not as influential as they should be. A recent personal experience has rather conclusively proved the point to me that a well-written editorial fails to catch the eye of the general public, whereas a news story on the first page strikes home.

Early in this past session of the 81st Congress I voted for a new immigration bill that had the full support of the authorities in the field, including the State Department and the



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Within the past month a candidate in the Democratic Congressional primary in September, 1948 has been distributing printed match folders throughout the Fifth district informing the citizens that I voted to increase Japanese immigration by 85%. One of the Grand Rapids newspapers contacted me and wanted the full story. I gave them the facts and a front page story appeared with a good picture of Representative Judd, who happened to be in Grand Rapids to speak before the Michigan Educational Association. The following day the paper carried an excellent editorial on the same question.



Within the past several weeks a number of citizens have written commenting on the deceptive literature being distributed by this particular individual and in most instances the writers have enclosed a copy of the front page news story, not the editorial, despite the fact that the editorial, in reality, gave the true facts more lucidly.

This experience is the best evidence that a news story can directly affect public opinion. In the aforementioned illustration both the editorial and the news item related the identical facts without deviation, but if one had been different from the other, the news story would have been controlling to a large degree.

The true barometer of public opinion is news, daily news, its tone, its color. The ^{"slant" given The news} ~~insinuations that may be commonplace~~ ^{is} ~~are~~ most influential.

From time to time I have been thoroughly amused by the inconsistencies that exist between the facts as stated on the



editorial pages and the overtones implied on the same paper within news columns or simple headlines as they are written by the reporters down the line. An example might be an editorial entitled "Profits Make Progress" while in the same issue these headlines might counteract the effect of the editorial. These headlines are as follows: "General Motors Shows Greatest Income in History," and "Housing Conditions in City Revealed to be Barbaric."

These inconsistencies, although completely fortuitious, nevertheless seem to make a partial mockery of the seriously thought-out editorial, which is supposed to guide readers to a better understanding of a certain way of life or a political issue. These contrasts collide with each other head-on like two express freights on the same rails. Regardless of the merits of the particular ideological viewpoint of either the editorial or the news column, the fact is that they clash glaringly.

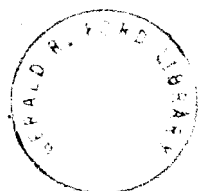
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I thoroughly appreciate that there is an almost sacred tradition in the newspaper business from the top to the bottom that "news is news" and that it must not be tampered with for the sake of any personal or political point of view. To this long-standing doctrine I heartily subscribe and certainly I hope that it will never be otherwise.

The deviations or the inconsistencies that seem to arise do not come from editorial quarters, nor from bosses who sit up nights plotting to maintain a certain point of view. It has been



my observation that more frequently the situation arises from the ardent headline writer who inadvertantly or otherwise may slant his story. How many times have you gentlemen had this happen in your own experiences?

I recently experienced a case that may be in point.

Several weeks ago, shortly after returning to the district from the first session of the 81st Congress, I was contacted concerning the recent coal strike. It was vividly brought to my attention that there was a serious coal shortage for home consumption in our part of Michigan. After an appraisal of the situation in detail

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This kind of indirect editorializing or fact making has become more and more frequent as newspapers have increased in size and administrative complexity. Is the answer better generalship by the owners and managers, or is it a greater realization on the part of the newsmen that their part in the day-to-day operation of the paper is of vital importance. I appreciate that authority must be delegated to the men in the news room and the men in the news field should rightfully assume the responsibility so delegated. However, in the production line of news coverage and reporting, on many occasions there may originate a personal point of view or slanting. The individual touch may originate on the spot where the news is



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This process of news shading is often the direct result of employees' personal philosophy of government. At a time when we need the truth and the facts, it may be ^{extremely} dangerous to have a disguised point of view set forth as pure news.

Can we say it is likewise dangerous to have a slant to our editorials? No, because to a greater degree the public knows the political leanings of the newspaper management. With that previous knowledge and information the reading public can properly balance the pros and cons, and no subtle harm is accomplished.

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