

WHERE DID THE THUNDER GO?

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Words, words, words, words. In many ways, we are the creatures of our own words; what we say, and how we say it, to a large degree define us and our times. And our words, such as they are, gather authority on the printed page. This essay will attempt to examine the slow, sad, and steady decline of a venerable American institution: the newspaper editorial. This powerful voice, once capable of thunder and thoughtful reasoning that could move the pillars of city, state and national structures, now seems to have dwindled and dissipated to have become just another element in an omnipresent cacophony of background noise that constitutes our modern media - electronic and otherwise - with its appetite for "relevance" and immediacy. Talking heads, marvelously glossed and possessed of sterling elocution, provide cautionary admonitions concerning every turn and twist of life. Those powerful pundits of the past, whose anonymous preachments at one time persuaded presidents, constitute but an echoing memory.

In the context of this critique, I'm going to stick close to these American shores. There has always been a lively tradition of pamphleteering and august thundering abroad, particularly in Great Britain and France, but I feel a bit more confident in comment that stems from both personal experience and my own general reading.

Well, it wasn't always this way. Back in the days of a young, boisterous San Francisco, differences political and personal were often settled with actions, not words - although words - harsh ones - were usually the instigators of such action.

Take the case of the minister and the editor, of the Reverend Mr. Kalloch and one of the old Chronicle's founders, Charles de Young. Here I'm using as sources John Bruce's "Gaudy Century, 1848 - 1948, San Francisco's One Hundred Years of Robust Journalism" and the recently published Gray Brechin's "Imperial San Francisco, Urban Power, Earthly Ruin." Here I can show my age a bit. When I first joined The Chronicle way back in 1949, as a very wet-behind-the-ears and most improbable hiree of the "boy wonder" editor, Paul

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Smith, John Bruce was there, having been put out to pasture as an editorial writer after a distinguished career in the demanding job of City Editor. I well remember his brightly curious eye and sympathetic manner.

But to get back to the story. "Isaac Smith Kalloch," as Bruce tells us, "was about 45 years old when he came to San Francisco. He was a huge fellow, 240 pounds, slim-hipped, big-shouldered, with a great mop of flaming red hair and well-trimmed whiskers. He was soon pastor of the Metropolitan Church, a great edifice on Fifth street, between Mission and Market streets. In it were classrooms, a gymnasium, day nurseries, sewing and manual training centers and a large library. Its main auditorium seated 3000 on the ground floor and its balconies and standing room could hold another 2000. It had a pipe organ that cost, in those more reasonable days, \$16,000."

But the Reverend Kalloch also came encumbered with a past. At the age of the 23, he had been minister of the famous Tremont Temple of Boston, then the largest church in the nation. As Bruce relates: "In the winter of 1857, Kalloch went to deliver a lecture at East Cambridge and took a woman friend, not his wife, in his sleigh." A penny dreadful of the time took up the story - "Who was the Lady in Black who stayed a few hours in the Lechmere House on the night of January 12th? And who drank a whiskey skin there? It was none other than the famous Reverend Isaac S. Kalloch of Temple Tremont, Boston, and the lady was *not* his wife." Emphasis on not, at a time when the Scarlet Letter still had meaning .

Despite such, and similar, lapses, Kalloch thrived - perhaps because of the notoriety. Indeed, in Kansas, he founded his own newspaper and railroad; bred prize horses and raised game cocks. Once in San Francisco, though, Kalloch ran for mayor on the Workingmen's Party ticket. The Chronicle revealed details of past indiscretions that had earned Kalloch, the nickname, as Brechin points out, "The Sorrel Stallion."

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When Kalloch responded from the pulpit to a packed house that “the de Youngs approach nearer than any persons mentioned in history, to the monstrous model of consummate and unrelieved depravity,” he was merely warming up, for he then repeated libelous and irresponsible charges about the nature of the de Young brothers’ mother’s early employment.

The following day, Charles de Young hired a cab and from it fired on the minister at close range in front of his church. Though seriously wounded, the Reverend Kalloch recovered and was elected mayor. The end of the story came when Kalloch’s son, also a minister - after a period of brooding and drinking - walked into the Chronicle’s offices and shot Charles de Young fatally. The editor had been desperately trying to get his own pistol out of his rear pocket. But he had an overcoat on and this stayed his hand.

Well, that dramatic and thoroughly sordid ^{incident} may merely be of parochial relevance to the boisterous, brawling San Francisco of the time. Still, it demonstrates that words could have a mortal sting; a sting that prompted recourse to gunpowder and pistol ball. I’m not advocating a return to that method of settling disputes, just taking note how deeply embedded it once was in the American grain.

LOOKING BACK over flaking, yellowed files prompts the question: What made for the kind of editorial authority I am talking about? Was it the fact that newspapers were the only communications game in town? And a rather elite one at that? Was it the temper of the times? Or was it the caliber of the people involved?

Horace Greeley, legendary editor of the New York Tribune who practically invented the newspaper as we now know it, was certainly given to lofty sentiment. Hear him: “Fame is a vapor; popularity an accident, riches take wing; the only certainty is oblivion; no man can foresee what a day can bring forth; while those who cheer today will often curse tomorrow; and yet I cherish the hope that the journal I projected and established will live and flourish long after I shall have mouldered into into forgotten dust, being guided by a larger wisdom,

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a more unerring sagacity to discern the right, though not by a more unfaltering readiness to embrace and defend at whatever personal cost..." The sentiment is high-flown, the cadences stately, the authoritative voices brooks no nonsense.

Yet Greeley himself was no man-on-a-pedestal. Here's a fine vignette from that splendid book about the New York Herald-Tribune by Richard Kluger, entitled simply: "The Paper." "His person is as heavily freighted as his mind. Scraps fill his pockets, notes to himself after a morning at home with the newspapers and his correspondence. One arm bears a bundle of material to dispatch, letters written, books and manuscripts to return, implements to exchange; the other arm wields a fat umbrella. If Horace Greeley did not most emphatically exist, Charles Dickens, his almost exact contemporary, would have had to invent him. Indeed, Greeley on the go resembles no one so much as Cruickshank's rendering of Mr. Pickwick. Mr. Greeley you would not take for a gentleman, but you would never mistake him for a common man. In fact, he is at this very moment among the most influential and celebrated of his countrymen and, arguably, the most widely and fervently read writer of the land."

It was a fervency that worked both ways and inhabited Greeley's own columns. When war with Mexico broke out in 1846, Greeley's Tribune had this to say: "Our Country Right or Wrong' is a maxim as foolish as Heaven-daring...If your country be wrong...it is madness, it is idiocy, to wish to struggle for her success in the wrong; for such success can only be calamitous, since it increases our nation's guilt." And later: "Uncle Sam, you bedazzled old hedge-hog! don't you see "glory" is cheap as dirt, only you never get done paying for it! Forty years hence, your boys will still be paying taxes to support the debt you are piling up, and the cripples and other pensioners you are now manufacturing. How much more of this will satisfy you?"

No wonder that Lincoln wrote of Greeley as Civil War approached: "Having him behind me will be as helpful as an army of one hundred thousand men."

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For a different exemplar of that time, Kluger's portrait of Greeley's great rival, James Gordon Bennett of the Herald, is illuminating. "Tall and straight-backed, with chilly, blue eyes and a hussar's tawny, upturned mustache to light his long, bony face, he dressed elegantly, talked bawdily, and marched about with a hauteur that took the finest drawing rooms of the city (New York) by storm. "

"I want you fellows to remember," he once told a gathering of his top executives, "that I am the only reader of this paper. I am the only one to be pleased. If I want it to be turned upside-down, it must be turned upside-down. I want one feature article a day. If I say that feature is to be black beetles, black beetles it is going to be." Bennett cut a fabulous figure, and, as Kluger points out, "his arbitrariness was only matched by his self-indulgence."

THE NAMES change, of course, over the years, but the cut of the players involved remains complex and interesting. I'm going to fast-forward now to a time that I can personally recall - the thirties and forties in New York - and cull a few details about the man who sounded the voice of the paper that had become the Herald-Tribune. Geoffrey Parsons's "was very well educated indeed, with bachelor and law degrees from Columbia, and had the kind of lineage that sat well with the Reids (owners of the paper). His great grandfather had been the chief justice of Massachusetts; his grandfather served as dean of the Harvard Law School. A man of wit and *joie de vivre*, Parsons himself had practiced law for three years before joining The Sun as a reporter, later writing for its editorial page and then directing it . His civility and broad learning added both style and substance to the Tribune editorial page ..."

Those were times that demanded eloquent and penetrating comment from the country's editorialists, and some, at least, were equal to the challenge. Here's what Walter Millis had to say for The Trib during the perilous last week of 1940.

Christmas brought no respite, truce in the air brought no relief, to the armed men who watchon Dover's cliffs. Each moment of calm upon the Narrow Seas, each hint of mist,

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drifting across the waters that England's slender moat, redouble the menace banking in the East. * * *

But Dover Beach is not a military problem primarily. It is a problem in what men believe in, in how they will stand, in whether they are overcome by the essential blankness of the external world or whether they are resolved to overcome it, to impress upon its pain and horror their own conviction, to wield their Bren guns, not as the instruments of a shrinking defense but as the weapons with which they will shape their world to what they believe worthwhile. Such matters unavoidably escape the military expert. They are the larger part of what wins wars.

Well, so much for a bit of background. And as I look back over some of the personalities I have cited, one can't avoid the fact that they have all been male and pretty WASPY, to boot. But that was, unfortunately, the nature of the times, and these were changing; have changed, happily, for a very much more representative and balanced cast of editorialists. Indeed, I can recall that during my first newspaper job in the late 1940s, as a lowly copyboy for the editorial writers of the New York Times, that one of that great paper's most respected editorial board members was the distinguished journalist, Anne O'Hare McCormick.

Now a few comments on the present day. I've managed to witness, probably for no more reason than relative good health and the ability to occupy a chair at the same institution for many years, a period of extraordinary change in the journalism business. My journey began in the traditional City Room din - clattering typewriters, shouts of "boy" to harassed copyboys on deadline (such calls have been eliminated as politically incorrect, and the errand-takers are referred to as "copy people"), spittoons on cigarette-scarred, wooden flooring and the laborious committing of all those words to hot type forged in lead - and the concomitant difficulty of making editing changes in same.

Enter a newspaper city room now, and the atmosphere is mortuary-like in its hush.

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Reporters and editors stare into the glassy, flickering faces of computers. You can hear the proverbial pin drop in the lifeless air. And the actual business of writing, correcting articles and putting together a paper has been made easier and more efficient to an almost incredible degree. It is a change that has been likened to going from use of the quill pen to the typewriter.

There were also giants in the land at the time. One of them most certainly was Chronicle Editor Scott Newhall, the man mainly responsible for making his paper the dominant one in the Bay Area. Just to give you a sense of the man, I'm going to poach on a recent column by my old boss, Bill German, in which he discusses a report by Stanford Scholars William Rivers and David Rubin on the local journalism of the 1970s. Here's what German says: "Discussing opinion pages, the two scholars condemned all the area's papers for the pandemic blandness of their editorials. The report mentioned only one exception, the work of Scott Newhall. The same unrestrained vigor they denounced on the news pages won high praise on the editorial page.

"The editorial they admired had to do with a Board of Education hearing on integrating schools by busing. Several pro-busing citizens, as well as a Chronicle photographer were beaten up outside the meeting room by a group opposed to the busing plan. The attackers escaped unidentified.

The Chronicle editorial began conventionally enough, referring to the ruffians as 'heirs of Hitler's brownshirts...intellectually underprivileged...overnourished apes...social Neanderthals...' then:

If this phantom squad of bullies cares to take umbrage at these remarks and wishes to continue its typically cowardly and disgraceful activities, it can catch the editor of this newspaper almost any weeknight at the side entrance to The Chronicle. He leaves the building at approximately 8 p.m.

Or, if they prefer, they can catch him quite alone at his San Francisco residence. He lives at (

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(and here the address was specifically spelled out)...

It was a pleasure, the Stanford critics said, to read an editorial that indicated 'the writer really cared about what he was saying.' No surprise here, German concludes, for Newhall has long had our Oscar vote for leading actor in the Chronicle Saga, Part I.