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Edmund S. Muskie Papers

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Remarks by Senator Edmund S. Muskie to the New England Press Association

Edmund S. Muskie

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EXCERPTS FROM THE REMARKS OF
SENATOR EDMUND S. MUSKIE
New England Press Association
September 19, 1970

Politicians and the press are, I suppose, natural antagonists, and yet, in a sense, indispensable to each other.

We seem to have a knack for raising each other's hackles.

Tonight may be no exception.

Nevertheless, I thank you for inviting me this evening.

Political campaigns are a contest for political power.

They ought to be more than that if political power is to be effectively shared with the citizens of a free society.

They ought to be educational experiences for voters and politicians alike if we are to understand--

--the problems we face;

--the objectives to be sought;

--and the policy choices open to us.

The politician's responsibility, then, whether in or out of a campaign, is--

--to illuminate the issues;

--to inform the voters;

--to educate himself.

Newspapers have a similar responsibility--if they are to contribute to that enlightenment and understanding citizens must have to make their own judgments on the public matters which affect their lives.

It is this responsibility--that we share--which I would like to discuss briefly tonight.

I am particularly glad to be back in Maine, after traveling the past day and a half to California and back for people who had asked me to help them this election year.

Of course, we made our brief trip across country by jet--never stopping long enough to walk the streets of the cities...or to wander through the countryside...or even play a round of golf.

We couldn't fully appreciate the land and the people on it. And the distances we covered reminded me--as we came here this evening--of something Erwin Canham once wrote:

"The day of the printed word is far from ended. Swift as is the delivery of the radio bulletin, graphic as is television's eyewitness picture, the task of adding meaning and clarity remains urgent. People cannot and need not absorb meanings at the speed of light."

Nor, might I add, at the speed of jet planes.

There is a dimension to the news that almost no medium but the written word can offer.

For it is a medium that encourages reflection.

It assaults no one's ears.

It places no time limit on our comprehension.

It requires no twisting of a dial.

As important as radio and television newscasting is, the newspaper offers us something special--the luxury of detail...of intellectual exercise...of time for contemplation.

At its best, the newspaper lives up to what Wilbur Storey of the Chicago Times said of it more than a century ago:

"It is a newspaper's duty to print the news, and raise hell."

Recently, of course, the press has been harvesting some of what it is supposed to raise.

I do not intend to adopt the rhetoric with which the press has been attacked--

--to single out those articles which may annoy me from time to time;

--or to specially chastise the newspapers of any single region of the country.

But I do suggest there is some merit to the notion that the press does not always meet the high standards it expects of others--especially those in public life.

We ought to understand--when we speak of freedom of the press--that what is meant is not freedom of the news media to decide what is the truth, but the right of a free people to have access to the truth.

We believe in a free press as one of our fundamental liberties.

--not because we believe the press is always accurate--

--or always fair--

or always objective--

--or always balanced, in its presentation of the news, or in the expression of its opinions; but because we believe that if the press is truly free, the truth, in the long run, somehow emerges.

We understand that the press--owned, operated, and managed by human beings--is subject--as are politicians--to human failings.

The press can be--and sometimes is--reluctant to admit error.

It can--and sometimes does--leap to unfair editorial conclusions--on the basis of incomplete information.

It can--and sometimes does--grind its own political, economic and social ax--at the expense of the truth itself.

It can--and sometimes does--use its monopoly position in many communities--to abuse those with whom it disagrees.

It can--and sometimes does--in such situations, seek--not an enlightened public opinion, but a public opinion prejudiced by disproportionate exposure to its point of view.

To be truly free--in terms of the right of free citizens to obtain the truth--the press should undoubtedly be free from government control.

But that is not enough.

For it should also be free from the restrictive control of those who may be tempted to use their power of control to advance their own narrow interests or points of view.

If both these objectives are to be achieved, then freedom from governmental control requires a responsibility to use that freedom to advance, not restrict, the free flow of news and ideas.

--to present them in a balanced, not a biased, way;

--to be zealous in avoiding unjustified assaults--intended or unintended--upon the integrity and reputations of those with whom it disagrees.

And it is no defense to say that those of us who raise these points are subject to the same failings--as we are.

In brief the press, and politicians, should regard their human failings--not as excuses to say whatever they please--but as shortcomings to be overcome.

Certainly, politicians sometimes try to shift the responsibility for their own shortcomings to the press.

They may not always be as careful as they should be in presenting their views.

They may not always be as fair as they should be in appraising their responsibilities.

And frankly, I am pleased when you do not encourage these tendencies.

For we must recognize that the habits of the press are no more sacrosanct than those of the people it covers, and the readers it seeks.

Like every human enterprise, it has its limitations as well as its potential. It

And it has as much responsibility as anyone not only to confess error when/is found, but also to take the greatest pains to assure that error will not occur.

I do not doubt that the editor's task of selecting the news and deciding the play and space to give it may be the most difficult test of intellectual honesty in the land.

Still, that test must be recognized. It must be taken. And it must not be failed.

This caution happens to come in the fall of an election year--a time when I believe the press must incite people--

--to reflect;

--to choose;

--to cast their ballots.

In doing so, it must try--day in and day out...week in and week out--under the pressure of time and space and competition--to exhibit the keenest sense of fairness and accuracy and objectivity of which reasonable men are capable.

These qualities are as relevant to the community weekly and daily as they are to the metropolitan press.

Indeed, these qualities are essential to the very integrity of grass-roots journalism--journalism of the type that produced the year's winning editorial in the Newport Argus-Champion--on making New Hampshire's woods more secure.

It is this kind of communication we must foster--communication that is direct...that is uncomplicated...and that educates people about the things that matter.

Having said this much about the press and my view of its responsibilities, let me be as frank about my own profession.

Just as you are indispensable to a free society, so is the practice of the arts of politics by a free people--motivated to become involved in the decision-making processes of that society.

And yet, the politician is universally regarded as being apart from his people, rather than of them. Why? Let us consider our campaign behavior.

All too often, the quality of the political dialogue in American election campaigns is a disgrace to the Republic. And this campaign--from many of the early signs--is likely to reinforce that judgment. Consider some of the manifestations--the reaching out for a "cheap" headline in order to attract attention; the distortion of an opponent's views in order to make them more vulnerable to attack; the shaping of campaign advertising to play upon the emotions of a voter and divert his attention from the merits of an issue.

As the campaign progresses, and as its tempo escalates, the total impression is of raucous voices, flashing images, meaningless phrases, and total confusion.

Is there no way for politicians to treat their constituents as rational human beings who would truly like to know the pros and cons of every issue?

Is there no way for citizens to get a balanced exposure to the facts and the judgments which they should have to make intelligent decisions?

Is it possible to generate such a campaign dialogue in such a way as to attract the attention and the interest necessary to assure a turnout at the polls?

Such a way will not be found unless you and we find it.

The fact is that politicians indulge in the kind of campaign practices to which I have alluded in order to get news coverage and that they are persuaded to do so by the response of the press to such tactics as against the more rational approach.

The fact is that the charge and counter-charge kind of campaign does get more headlines.

The fact is that the smear does get more space in the daily paper, more time on the air.

The fact is that the rougher and tougher and nastier a campaign becomes, the more attention it does get from the press.

Our challenge -- and we do share it -- is to elevate the level of political dialogue to the uplifting clash of ideas, the illuminating cross-fire of constructive and intelligent disagreement, the clear identification of the choices available to the voter.

Anticipating the attention this speech may get from those who may misread it, let me make three points clearly:

I am not, by indirection, criticizing anyone specifically.

I am not, as some headline writers may be tempted to summarize what I say, "Attacking Politicians and the Press."

I am focusing on weaknesses which politicians and the press indulge themselves in, in the hope that by doing so, I may contribute to some improvement in the performance of each.

I believe such improvement to be essential to the best interest of our country.

When I was given the opportunity to campaign in other parts of the country in 1968, I wondered whether or not it would be possible to talk to people elsewhere in the same way that I have always spoken to my own people here in Maine.

I found that Americans everywhere want to preserve their own identity...to protect their own privacy...to develop their own potential.

They want to believe in this country again...to dream of a better future...to enjoy the life we have.

And they want plain talk...unevasive talk...and politicians who listen to them, which isn't a bad idea either.

And yet, over the past several years, the ability to communicate effectively seems to have broken down in many parts of the country.

People have a sense of drifting apart...of being dominated by events beyond their control...of facing challenges that our institutions seem unable to meet.

And so they are tired of hearing politicians talk.

They find rhetoric far outdistancing performance.

As a result, people are divided at a time when they should be working together.

They are suspicious of each other at a time when they should be learning to understand each other better.

And their spirit is low at a time when their courage is needed as never before -- the courage to try new directions --

-- for peace:

-- for economic growth.

-- for mutual tolerance.

At times, we seem to be on the verge of testing out Thomas Jefferson's proposition:

"Were it left to me to decide whether we should have government without newspapers or newspapers without government, I should not hesitate for a moment to prefer the latter."

I suggest, however, that both a free press and a vital government remain equally necessary...as distinct and independent expressions of the conscience of the nation.

But there is more than a need for friendly antagonism between the press and the President -- or unfriendly antagonism, for that matter.

There is more than a need to reaffirm the fundamental value of a free and vigorous press, although that too is important.

There is in 1970 -- and perhaps in the immediate years to come -- a need for the press to help reassess the values we share...reaffirm the potential of Americans working together...and rekindle their faith in what government can help them accomplish.

That does not mean printing only what is right about America.

Of course, there is much that is right about America.

If there were not --

--most young people would not be seeking to improve it;

--most disadvantaged people would not be trying to find a place in it;

--and most of us who have known its opportunity would not be working to preserve it.

One of the things that is right about America -- that the press has historically been associated with -- is the freedom to criticize the things that are wrong; to point out what needs to be done to arouse the public sufficiently so that their representatives get things done.

I suggest that being a gadfly remains a vital function for the press -- despite those who would rather talk of the press in terms of the horsefly.

Thomas Wolfe once wrote:

"I do not believe that the ideas represented by 'freedom of thought,' 'freedom of speech,' 'freedom of press' and 'free assembly' are just rhetorical myths. I believe rather that they are among the most valuable realities that men have gained, and that if they are destroyed men will again fight to have them."

Whether those realities remain tangible in our society...in our lifetime, and beyond...will depend to a great extent on your own conscientious and dedicated and enduring efforts.

Thank you.
