

Rivers: The Opinionmakers

William C. Shannon

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Sinclair, Lincoln Steffens and Oswald Garrison Villard were in their heyday well before the 1920's, and only moved in later to reinforce another bastion in their attack on America's social order. Had there been no great depression, no one can say whether Franklin Roosevelt could have engineered the social revolution which is still raging among us. Possibly, therefore, the author gives far too much credit to the social reformers who made common cause with their charges of venality in the American judicial system, as evidenced in the alleged injustice in the Sacco-Vanzetti trial—and not enough to the socialism which was their common character.

Nevertheless, the book is a fascinating study for social philosopher, and latter-day historian, as well as the student of contemporary social reform movements. It foreshadows the effectiveness of organization by the masters of communication media were there to be a similar occasion in the future, and bodes ill for the community's defense against violence in aid of a concerted attack on laws distasteful to any substantial minority of the population.

An impressive bibliography is included and a helpful index. Further writings by this author in his chosen field of intellectual history should be welcome.

PHILIP R. TOOMIN*

* Member of Illinois Bar. LL.B., University of Chicago, 1926.

The Opinionmakers. BY WILLIAM L. RIVERS. BOSTON: Beacon Press, 1965. Pp. 1-207. \$4.95.

Why did President Kennedy find it necessary to appeal to the New York Times to withhold publication of a story it had been working on for months?

What are the bases of President Johnson's relationship with the press in Washington?

These and other quotations from the book jacket might lead the prospective reader to believe that between the gray covers is contained a startling exposé of the world of political news reporting. However, Dr. Rivers musters at best a concise report, written in a clear and straightforward style, of the "Opinion-makers" in action.

The notion that startling revelations are in store for the reader who can contain his anticipation is continued in the introduction. The first few pages are riddled with quotations from such historically notable figures as Patrick Henry, Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln. The reader, as he plows through each quotation, attempts to glean the precise purpose for their at-length inclusion. It appears at first incomprehensible that the quotations were selected at random, and as one passes from Henry to Jefferson and Jefferson to Lincoln, the author's scheme appears subtle, so subtle, in fact, as to be indiscernible. By the end of the introduction, the reader experiences but one revelation and that is that no exposés, or even state secrets, are to be found, but that the author's "long background of experience in Washington, D.C."¹ has prompted the writing of an insider's presumably factual account of the Washington news scene.

While the reader can feel an acute sense of disappointment at the prospects for the remaining chapters of the book, the balance is possibly worth reading. "All I know is what I read in the newspapers" is the quip offered by Will Rogers. Even out of context, the statement indicates that most, if not all, of the Ameri-

¹ THE OPINIONMAKERS, back of book jacket (1965).

can populace exercise their political judgments based upon news reports of one sort or another. On this basis, *The Opinionmakers* is informative for one who is unfamiliar with the nature, character and methodology of political news reporting.

Dr. Rivers makes but one point in the two hundred pages of bold print and that is that the system by which the American public becomes "informed" is imperfect. This is not necessarily insignificant, but certainly the average reader is not excessively shocked or even greatly dismayed by this point, and the author offers no genuine suggestion for solution of the problem as presented.

If the reader continues to the first chapter and the remainder of the book, it is soon discovered that the author follows a logical outline in dealing, in turn, with each segment of the Washington press scene. He commences his survey with a group labeled the "Elite." Under this caption, Dr. Rivers describes the modern historical evolution of the reporting process and continues his principal theme of the imperfection of that process with a quotation from Lester Markel of the New York Times to the effect that objective reporting is impossible.² After a general discussion of the "Elite," the author proceeds with a more particular discussion of individual personalities.

A glowing tribute to the man and institution, Walter Lippmann, follows. Quite obviously, the author feels that Lippmann typifies all that is noble, worthwhile and genuine within the reporting *mélange*. Lippmann is quoted as saying: "It is altogether unthinkable that a society like ours should remain forever dependent on untrained accidental witnesses. . . . The better course is to send out into reporting a generation of men who will, by sheer superiority, drive the incompetents out of the business."³ It is apparent that Lippmann has not "driven the incompetents out of the business," but Dr. Rivers feels that if there were more of Lippmann's caliber this noble goal would be reached.

James Reston, his power and influence, is described in Chapter 4 and characterized as representing the best of the traditional newspaper reporter, while in the following chapter, the new breed of television reporters are discussed and their influence noted.

In the final chapter dealing with news personalities, Dr. Rivers expends his vengeance on the "Outcasts" and attempts to demonstrate, with specifics, that his point is valid, *i.e.*, the system *is* imperfect. Ralph Ingersoll, a former publisher of *Time* magazine, is quoted to the effect that: "The way to tell a successful lie is to include enough truth in it to make it believable—and *Time* is the most successful liar of our times."⁴ This chapter is cluttered with quotations and examples of specific situations where the press has been less than completely truthful with its reading public. The chapter was obviously designed to shock the reader into a complete appreciation of the author's main theme. While the conduct described by Dr. Rivers is shocking as such, it is apparent that only the rarest of readers would find it a revelation, especially in this book.

Just as the book jacket leads a prospective reader to believe startling exposés are to be found, the author has inserted two chapters, both entitled "The News Managers," and with numerous quotations leads the reader to believe that his anticipations may finally be realized.

All government handouts lie; some lie more than others.

News is a weapon in the cold war like any other weapon.⁵

² *Id.* at 43

⁴ *Id.* at 111

³ *Id.* at 69

⁵ *Id.* at 129

While these quotations might appear to set the tempo for a penetrating analysis of controlled press, Dr. Rivers spends the better part of forty-five pages discussing the relationship between various Presidents and the press. The discussion centers on Presidents Franklin Roosevelt through Lyndon Johnson and is in substance a colorful account of their varied personalities.

Touching on analysis, the author indicates that while Roosevelt, Truman and Eisenhower were skillful news managers, John Kennedy apparently employed more deceptive practices. Arthur Sylvester, who had been Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs under Kennedy, is quoted as saying: "I think the inherent right of the government to lie—to lie to save itself when faced with nuclear disaster—is basic, *basic*."⁶ It appears that the author, in Chapter 8, finally strikes out and away, if only momentarily, from the clinical report tempo set by the book in its first seven chapters.

In dealing with President Johnson, Dr. Rives has something to say, something of his own to say: "He [Johnson] is a devious man who seems determined to enhance his reputation as an operator."⁷ These words belong to the author, and in nine pages he suggests that President Johnson not only manages the news, but speaks in half-truths and has an inability to get along with the news reporters.

In spite of these apparently harsh thoughts, one has the feeling that Mr. Johnson's news techniques would be less than objectionable, in the author's view, if Johnson's personality were more charming, for it seems that while Kennedy may have used deceptive practices, his charm made his news activities acceptable.

In the book's final chapter, "Our Synthetic World," the author gathers together in conclusion form, the first eight chapters. He makes reference to certain indications of improvement within the world of news reporting, but the final page is reached without hearing the author's view of how the imperfections of the news system can be cured.

Except in those few pages devoted to the discussion of President Johnson and his news techniques, the author has left himself outside the confines of the book; on this basis, *The Opinionmakers* possibly can make interesting, though not stimulating, reading.

WILLIAM C. SHANNON*

* Member of the Illinois Bar, J.D., Loyola University, and an associate in the firm of Kirkland, Ellis, Hodson, Chaffetz & Masters.

⁶ *Id.* at 154

⁷ *Id.* at 169

Law and Lawyers in the United States: The Common Law System Under Stress. By ERWIN N. GRISWOLD. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965. Pp. 152. \$3.95.

The lectures that make up this slim volume were delivered as the Hamlyn Lectures in England in 1964, under the auspices of the Hamlyn Trust, by Erwin N. Griswold, Langdell Professor of Law and Dean of the Faculty of Law at Harvard University. The purpose of the Hamlyn lectureship is

to increase the knowledge of comparative jurisprudence among the common people of the United Kingdom in order that they "may realize the privileges which in law