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Telling People What They Don't Want to Hear

SF Sunday Examiner + Chronicle
Oct 22, 1972, p. 3 Sunday Punch

Washington

IT HAS BEEN disclosed by the Times Literary Supplement in London that George Orwell wrote a preface to "Animal Farm" on "The Freedom of the Press," which had never been published until this month.

In that preface, Orwell was defending his right to publish unpopular or unorthodox ideas — specifically his anti-Soviet ideas during the last world war when the Soviet Union was an ally — that may be relevant to the current controversy in the United States about politics and a free press.

"Tolerance and decency are deeply rooted in England," he wrote, "but they are not indestructible, and they have to be kept alive partly by conscious effort . . . If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear . . ."



James Reston

This, of course, is simply a good rewrite of Voltaire's famous declaration: "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." And while this idea has often been challenged in England and the United States and always been condemned and vilified in totalitarian countries, the mail coming into this office during the election campaign has never seemed less sympathetic to the old hard Orwellian principle than it does these days.

★ ★ ★

IT WOULD BE silly to draw general conclusions about the state of public opinion in America from letters written to newspapers and columnists. The public letter-writers are usually deeply engaged personally for various reasons on one side or the other, and therefore are not typical of the disillusioned or indifferent voters, who probably outnumber the enthusiastic supporters of either President Nixon or Senator McGovern. Nevertheless, the unsolicited letters coming into this office tell us something.

A lot of them are saying in effect: "I wholly disapprove of what you say and will fight to the death (preferably yours) your right to say it." Their assumption — and they are passionately self-righteous about it — is that if your opinion differs from theirs, you are not only wrong but wicked and should be suppressed or destroyed as an enemy of the Republic.

If you support the letter-writer's candidate all the way, you are a "wise" and "objective" observer, but if you don't, you are a "biased" and "subjective" numbskull, probably in the pay of the opposition, or under the malevolent instructions of your villainous publishers.

AND THIS IS NOT a partisan point. For if you suggest that McGovern's campaign has not been a masterpiece of professional competence, but that he has wasted a good case against the Nixon Administration, his enthusiastic supporters, many of them your old friends, write, not in sorrow but in anger, that you have deserted the liberal cause and are getting conservative in old age.

The root principle Orwell was writing about and that the Founding Fathers insisted on at Philadelphia seldom comes up in these letters. On the Republican side, seldom does anybody say: "I'm for the President and I'm going to vote for him, but the Watergate, and all this deceptive trickery about unauthorized bombing, and illegal bugging and burglary and special privileges for grain dealers and milk producers makes me sick."

Nor do the McGovern supporters recognize that when he is nominated for the Presidency, he must expect to be judged more harshly by the press as a potential president. The enthusiasts on both sides seem to be baffled when a columnist praises the President one day for his historic opening to China and condemns him the next for the unexplained opening of the Republican party to the bugging of the Democratic party.

Or when he praises McGovern one day for insisting on ending the war and reconciling the races and the generations, but condemns him the next for supporting policies without checking out their probable consequences.

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IT IS NOT ONLY the letter writers of today who I would have worried Orwell. What concerned him was not only the power of governments to suppress opposition, but the "sinister fact," as he put it, that most suppression of dissent tended to be "voluntary opposition" to "unorthodox thought."

Fortunately for him, he didn't live long enough to see the day when governments proclaimed his principle and then used the free press, radio and television to overwhelm it.

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