

Despite our shared region, profession and convictions, I doubt that I crossed paths with Ralph McGill more than a half-dozen times. And of those six or so, the most memorable were at American Society of Newspaper Editor conventions in the 1950's. Back then, as a high school and college student, I would tag along with my newspaper editor father, sitting on the edge of the barroom circle while he, McGill, the inimitable Harry Ashmore, and a handful of their cronies indulged two of their favorite pastimes: hard drinking and non-stop talking. The latter they did with passion, eloquence and occasionally cruel wit, not much deterred by the programs going on within the convention hall. To get right down to it, they did not think much of the ASNE career ladder and those who sought its rungs. As I best recall, they were inclined to speak of much of the ASNE leadership as "those country club Rotarians," a phrase that did not arise out of envy. (Dad himself was a Rotarian.) Considering ASNE's bad habit in those days of too frequently electing rabid racists to its presidency, they could have said much worse, and probably did.

First digression: not having had much first-hand connection with Ralph, I decided to surf the web to fill out the vast gaps in what I knew compared to what I thought I knew. In the course of that search, I garnered, among other things factoids about his career at Vanderbilt. To be precise, competing factoids. According to one source he was, quote, "**expelled after a fraternity prank during senior year.**" But another began its second sentence as follows, "**Upon graduation,** he joined the staff on the Banner in Nashville." But the online version of The Columbia Encyclopedia, Sixth Edition, said

that “he was expelled from Vanderbilt University for expressing his (civil rights) beliefs.” And finally, in a review of Teel’s biography of McGill, a writer in the Columbia Journalism Review of March/April 2002 said that “McGill quit Vanderbilt University to become a sports writer.” And we wonder why they don’t trust us out there. Me ---I think that Ralph McGill told better stories than most people (Dad and Ashmore excepted) and at one time or another probably told all four versions...embellishing as Dad could and would about his own life at the drop of a conversational hat.

Let me add a second admission. I did not look to far-off Atlanta or to across-the-river Arkansas for my journalistic role-model in those days. I lived at home with mine. My father had won a Pulitzer Prize for editorial writing in 1946. The subject was racial tolerance, and he had written the 12 winning editorials in a white-hot period between his medical discharge from the Army in the late of ’45, living under a later-revoked sentence of blindness, and the end of the year. I was 10, and for the rest of his life I was to hear it whispered, muttered and shouted around our small Mississippi Delta town, spit out in the schoolyard and spewed from the stump that Dad was a nest-fouling, nigger-loving, Jew-brought commie. From the moment I became aware of my surroundings, there seemed to be a gun in every room in the house in case the frequent venom-slobbering callers ever decided to make good on their threats. Organized segregationist boycotts of one kind or another against his six-day daily, which he had founded in the Mississippi Delta from scratch in 1936, persisted until shortly before Dad died in 1972. Our editorial support was, with good reason, considered a political kiss of death.

Illustratiocily, the man the Delta Democrat-Times backed for governor in 1971—I had been editor by then for five years--- went on television to cry piteously that the

Carters' endorsement had been purchased by his runoff opponent in an effort to ruin him. [In truth, the decision to endorse might be considered a little suspect. We had in past years backed the other man for supposedly excessive "moderation." Our editorial board- me, myself and I at the time- asked two questions on the way to the endorsement. Why ass to his burden again? Why not spread the fallout of our anointment around?} If that was meant to be Machiavillian, it didn't work. For the first time since 1959, a statewide candidate we endorsed actually won.] Like McGill, and Ashmore, and the rest of that band of Southern brothers and sisters in the fellowship of journalistic bravery, Dad persevered putting at risk the daily newspaper he had created, his standing among his fellow white Southern and the safety of himself and his family.

The really hard times came after 1954, after Dad had written an editorial saying that Brown v. Board was the law of the land was morally and democratically correct and should be given a chance to work. They came after he attacked the Citizens Councils--- the "uptown Ku Klux" as he termed them--- in a Look Magazine article and repeated editorials. After the Look Piece, given the understated head "A Wave of Terror Threatens The South," the Mississippi House of Representatives prompt. In a front-page editorial titled "Liar By Legislation," he concluded as follows:

"If this charge were true, it would make me well qualified to serve with that body. It is not true. So to even things up, I here with resolve by a vote of 1 to 0 that there are 89 liars in the State Legislature, beginning with Speaker Sillers and working on down to Rep. Eck Windham of Prentiss, a political loon whose name is fittingly made up of words 'wind' and 'ham'...Meanwhile, those 89 character jobbers can go to hell collectively or singly and wait there until I back down. They needn't plan on returning."

Here, the first of two points I want to make today. If we fail to understand where Dad, McGill and their counterparts stood, who they actually were, many of us might find it impossible to follow their lead in the here and now. Made mythic and godlike, they would defy emulation.

So let me offer a straight-forward proposition. Not one of these Southern dissenters emerged fully armed from the brow of some liberal Zeus. Each was a child---a product---of the white South. Each had to wrestle his or her own way---basically alone---from the clutch of white supremacy's verities. As significant change finally burst upon a raging, reluctant South, each had to pass from uneasy accommodation to public acceptance to full-throated endorsement--- and some came much faster to that last step than others. To abbreviate what would otherwise require volumes of explication:

- These Southern journalists of conscience were heroes, but not saints
- They were brave, but not suicidal
- They were prophets, but had no intention of becoming martyrs.
- They were non-conformists in the nation's most conformist society, but were neither revolutionaries nor radicals nor even liberals of the Bowash variety, and were therefore always suspect in the minds of those Northern liberals who marched to their own drummers of ideological conformity
- They were persistent, penetrating critics of their land and its mores--- Jeremiahs about its vicious inhumanity---but were always at core loving members of the region's extended white family. They refused to be written out of their own heritage, refused to be driven to the margins by those who saw the issue of race as a matter of either/or, friend of foe, for or against.

- In short, neither cardboard Lancelot nor movie-script Shanes, they were complex folk who, living in a tortured society sickened by white supremacy, did yeoman work in illuminating its excesses, calling forth its best instincts and facing down its most egregious demagogues.

They did it, of course, as journalists and writers--- dependant, in the end, on the market, on people being willing to buy their newspaper or engage their ideas in magazines and books. They did it in the real world. And they did it, to repeat, in the face of enemies whose hate had historically found outlet in murderous violence and in a region which was then, as it had been from the beginning and is even now, the most violent in America. Thus, they were often afraid--- but they preserved.

I came back to that South, fresh out of the Marines, in 1959, the year Ralph McGill won his long overdue Pulitzer. Ashmore had won two for the Arkansas Gazette the year before and Buford Boone of Tuscaloosa was honored the year before that, each for standing up for obedience to law as mobs sought to impose a different order in their home town. Lenoir Chambers, cerebral and committed, won his at the Norfolk Virginian Pilot in 1960 for a series of editorials dissecting the idiocy of closing the schools to forestall desegregation. Ira Harkey of Pascagoula, Mississippi, railing ferociously and with biting humor against Ross Barnett's calculated sedition that inspired insurrection and federal occupation at Ole Miss, won it in 1963. Hazel Brannon Smith, owner-editor of two tiny weeklies in one of the nastiest of Mississippi's meanly racist counties, won hers for persistent decency the next year. Gene Patterson, that worthy friend and successor to Ralph McGill, whose brilliant work needs no introduction here, won it in 1967, Paul Greenberg of the Pine Bluff,

Arkansas, Commercial in 1969 and Horace Davis of the Gainesville, Florida, Sun in 1971. Seventeen years from the '54 desegregation decision to 1971 and in nine of those years---over half---the Pulitzer for editorial writing went to Southern journalists battling the South's attachments to never-never racism, head-on.

Another admission here: Everyone I know who serves on the Pulitzer board these days claims, publicly and privately, that things are different now, that internal politics plays no role in how the prizes are doled out. I'll take their word for it. But Dad was on the Pulitzer board during many of those days of Southern hegemony and he went at his work in the conviction that moderation in the pursuit of Southern Pulitzers was no virtue and logrolling to that end was no vice. He knew how desperately some of the homegrown dissenters needed outside recognition and support---just as human rights activists of later years knew the same about the needs of those suffering under the tyrants' boot in pretty dictatorships and major-league gulags. He loved the tradeoffs that brought home the bacon.

Then the editorial writing Pulitzers began to go elsewhere, (and not just because Dad went off the board) as massive resistance was shoved into its bloody grave and the South was pulled, kicking and screaming, up to the same high moral plateau as the rest of the country. Which was when everyone discovered the truth of the rest of what cynical white Southerners and virtually all black folk had always said: the plateau was not very high and the nation did not have much taste for climbing higher.

To repeat, though, it was a time for courage in the 1950s and 1960s, and the line was very bright and very clear. As the segs liked to put it, you were either on one side or the other, ready to bring the South into line with conscience and the law or

determine to prevent it, and the overwhelming majority of all Southerners newspaper editors were on the wrong side. That must never be forgotten, particularly in a region which has made a habit of either forgetting, denying or rewriting its past. When the editorial trumpet sounded, it was far more often to summon white Southerners to yet one more charge with Pickett at Gettysburg, one more secession convention, one more obscene Richmond-based resurrection in stylish prose of the doctrine of interposition, thought settled for all time in the killing fields of the Civil War but revived to spark one last reign of terror in the name of the ancient white verities. The nine who won Pulitzer did not represent some visible crest of a wave of like-minded.

Why all this dwelling on this ancient history, on a time barely past the mid-point of the 20th Century, when we are now well-launched into the 21st? Because it is important to remind ourselves, facing issues of fundamental importance to the health of this democratic republic, that were people shaped from the same clay as each of us today.

They were thunderers, sure enough, but about what did they thunder? What the McGills, Ashmores, Pattersons, Carters and company were saying went something like this:

This is America, for God's sake. We are a nation of laws and not men. The Constitution trumps all. Our founding documents and our religious faith are aligned in saying that we are all created equal, in the eyes of God and necessary of the state. No cause, no tears, no doctrine can be allowed permanently to subvert that heritage. America did not invent human rights; human rights created America, and only in being true to them can we truly American.

They said all this, not causally, not sporadically and not with shuffling diffidence. They put their message before their readers again and again and again. They preserved. They didn't need polls to tell them that many--- no, most--- of their fellow white Southerners hated what they wrote. But they would have spurned poll-driven advice to concentrate on subjects their readers would find more congenial. They were, quite literally, wrestling for the soul of their region, not as saints but as flawed children of the place about which they cared so passionately.

Now, over three decades later, what strikes me is how history is suffused with irony and circularity. Events cascade in bewildering profusion; fundamental issues never die. They change shape, reorient their presentation and are poured for new bottles--- but they are the same wine.

The editorials for which Dad won the Pulitzer were heavily focused on Mississippi, but the editorial cited was titled "Go For Broke." It spoke of what the nation owed the heroes of the Japanese-American 442nd Regiment, the Army's most decorated unit, and, by direct connection, their folks back home. Many of those relatives had been interred in "relocation camps", a nice name for concentration camps, in the period of spasmodic fear that followed Pearl Harbor. They were held to be guilty of potential disloyalty and worse simply because they were Japanese ancestry. And from a gutless or bigoted or politically intimidated Supreme Court to the editorial pages of almost all American papers, there was either approval or silent assent. It was shameful blot on the nation's history.

I do not need to connect the dots. Here we are again, in a period of spasmodic fear---no less understandable after September 11 than it was after Pearl Harbor and no

less intolerable. Here we are again in a time of Alien and Sedition Laws now tarted up with audience-tested names like “The USA Patriot Act” and “The Homeland Security Act.” Here we are again with the Red Scare replaced by the Muslim Munace, a thug attorney general in post World War I America named Mitchell replaced by a dissembling Savaronella of the rigid right named Ashcroft. Here we are with a wounded society---and its highest courts---again giving approval to repressive excess in the name of self-preservation.

Another aside here: The nation faces real dangers. Our enemies are implacable, murderous and faceless. Inevitably, they will strike again. The first requirement of any state is the security of its citizens. But that is a statement of reality, not a prescription for action. What faces us is not a matter either A or Z, of vulnerability or perfect security. We are in a war to preserve not just any society, but a just society---a free society---a war with people who detest the kinds of individual freedoms the Bill of Rights was adopted to guarantee. In this war, we must not repeat past mistakes. We must not destroy the village in order to save it.

It was my misfortune to be a government spokesman during a period that was tagged by Walter Cronkite (and ABC) for over 400 days as “America Held Hostage.” It was a tag that stuck, primarily because it was repeated each and every day after its coinage.

Well, America is close to being “held hostage, again this time not by foreign radicals trashing international law but by our own government, trashing both international law and American liberties. It is doing so with what the polls tell us in the approval of either a majority or, depending on the wording, a significant plurality

of the American people. It is doing it in order to preserve “our way of life.” And this hostage-taking, now approaching its second full year, with no sign of diminution, contribution or change for the better.

Hear the indictments:

U.S. District Judge Robert Douma in the case of suspected terrorist Yaser Esam Hamdi: “This case appears to be the first in American jurisprudence where an American citizen has been held incommunicado and subjected to indefinite detention...without any findings by a military tribunal and without access to a lawyer.”

The Economist, referring to another case: “it is hard to imagine that America would look kindly on a foreign government that demanded the right to hold some of its own citizens in prison incommunicado, denying them to access to legal assistance as long as it though necessary, without ever charging them with a crime.”

Tony Ridder, chairman of Knight-Ridder and no raving liberal, one of the few, of not the only , leader of a major media conglomerate to speak out vigorously: this administration has launched an “unsettling trend toward governmental secrecy” from tightening Freedom of Information requirements to cutting off reporters access to the president.

Finally, the International Red Cross, breaking precedent to question sharply Washington’s handling of prisoners captured in Afghanistan and held at the US base at Guantanamo: “The main concern today after more than 18 months of captivity is that essentially the internees in Guantanamo have been placed beyond the law. They have no idea about their fate after 18 months. And have no legal recourse.”

It is time for the thunderers again. It is time for the editors and commentators, patriots all, men and women who love their country as they love their families, to echo the McGills and Ashmores and Pattersons:

For God sake, this is America.

We are a nation of laws, not men.

The Constitution and the Bill of Rights in particular, trump.

Let's get our beloved country back into alignment with our heritage.

It cannot be said once or twice, then put aside for more pressing matters such as mustering support for legislation to allow the big to grow bigger in the media world. This is no time for a let's pretend campaign by editorial dilettantes dabbling in the defense of American values. This is not the occasion for a once a-year July 4th editorial. It is time for sustained, un conditional advocacy on behalf of those values, so sustained that it risks alienating some readers, so unconditional that it will alienate still others.

For those who will protest that we are at war and that in wartime no one should question the government of its policies, there is this rejoinder from that quintessential conservative Republican, Sen. Robert Taft, in the dark day shortly after Pearl Harbor:

“...I believed there can be no doubt that criticism in time of war is essential to the maintenance of any kind of democratic government...To many people desire to suppress criticism simply because they think it will give some comfort to the enemy...If that comfort makes the enemy feel better for a few moments, they are welcome to it...because the maintenance of the right of criticism in the long run will do the country maintaining it a great deal more good than it will do the enemy...”

Ralph McGill labored in the editorial vineyard for decades, pruning his message and then putting it on the breakfast table of his fellow Georgians week-in and week-out. So did that handful of his counterparts in Arkansas and Mississippi and Alabama and Tennessee and Florida and North Carolina and Virginia who shared his attachment to basic American values.

So can---so must---their heirs in the newspapers, broadcast and internet centers of today. The likely cost would be nowhere near as high; The good is no less vital to our nation's future.