

Thank you for the introduction. It's an immense and overwhelming honor to be here today, on a stage graced by so many of my personal heroes, to give a talk named after the legendary Ralph McGill.

If that introduction made me sound courageous, let us recall a white man in the segregated south who used his position at the Atlanta Constitution to challenge the institutions and ideologies of his milieu, to pull back the hoods of the KKK, and to advocate civil rights long before it became fashionable, politically correct or safe for southern journalists to do so. Now that's courage.

Today, near the end of an election season that once again brought issues of race and class to the forefront of public debate, I only hope we can channel that spirit to write about these lingering divisions in our country with the candor and bravery of Ralph McGill at his best.

To the students, faculty and staff of UGA, thank you for giving this Oklahoma girl a break from the chilly weather and unsweetened iced tea of the fine city of Cambridge, Massachusetts. True story: I told my mom a while back that I was going to Georgia and she said, "No! You promised you were taking a year off." I had to tell her, "No, Mom, not *that* Georgia."

And I also want to say a special thank you to Grady College for nurturing the talents of Tom Lasseter, a proud UGA graduate. I worked alongside Tom in Baghdad for nearly three years before he left to lead our Moscow bureau. He is a tenacious, fearless reporter and if you haven't seen the results of his 8-month project on former Guantanamo detainees, I ask you to visit the McClatchy web site for a firsthand look at how foreign reporting is valuable not just as a window onto other cultures, but as a mirror for our own.

OK, first things first: I'm not here today as a pessimist.

I won't lecture you on the existential threats to the daily newspaper, or get misty-eyed over the slow demise of our beloved broadsheet. It seems like all we hear about these days is buyouts, layoffs, closed bureaus and greedy publishers. Newspapers are dead! Reporters are relics! Readers find us partisan and predictable!

Ok, ok, we get it. The model needs some tweaking, if not a complete overhaul. But the business we love is still there, and still necessary. Others with a lot more experience have used this platform to discuss the issues of ethics, politics, economics and technology. I just want to discuss the mission: delivering information.

When I was growing up, I read about Ida B. Wells and Helen Thomas and Katherine Graham, and I remember how they were described as newswomen. Not just *newspaperwomen*. Newswomen.

They used the medium of their time, and we must use the multimedia of ours. When the celebrated foreign correspondent Nellie Bly traveled around the globe in 72 days, readers of the New York World followed her trip on a board game that came with their subscriptions. That was in 1889. If Nellie Bly were reporting today, readers could track her journey on Google Earth, comment on her blog posts from every destination, and listen to her voice in audio slideshows.

To me, that's not scary. It's exciting.

What *is* scary are the grim findings released in July by the Project for Excellence in Journalism about managers' attitudes toward foreign news. A survey of American news executives found that 64 percent of the respondents said space for foreign news had declined in their papers in the past three years. Nearly half – 46 percent – said they had reduced resources

devoted to foreign news. And only 10 percent of the surveyed executives said they considered foreign news to be “very essential.”

If foreign news isn't essential now, then I don't know when it ever was. In the past week, we've witnessed the global economy collapse before our eyes. We read about the worst seven-day freefall in the history of the Dow Jones Average. And then the domino effect on world markets: panicked selling in Britain, Germany, Russia, Japan and Hong Kong.

The term “bloodbath,” which we usually hear in reference to the violence in Iraq, suddenly appeared in news stories about market calamities in places that rarely make headlines – Iceland, Ukraine, Indonesia and Austria. Even powerful China and the oil-rich Persian Gulf – at first nervous bystanders to the crisis – found themselves vulnerable.

And then, in an instant, the Dow Jones industrials jumped again Monday, resulting in the best day for stocks since the 1930s. And that rally was prompted by gains in Asia and Europe.

The world is more interconnected than ever, and we have an obligation to our readers to show how this crisis not only affects their own pocketbooks and credit prospects, but threatens to shift the global balance of power, weakening the United States and its allies while emboldening rival nations that are only too eager to fill the vacuum.

This mission takes on a special urgency as we shepherd our readers into the post-Bush era. Election Day is right around the corner, and as Ida B. Wells put it: “The people must know before they can act, and there is no educator to compare with the press.”

Domestic reporters are covering how the candidates will address chief voter concerns such as the economy, health care, climate change and energy dependence.

Foreign correspondents, however, have a complementary duty to show readers how each of the candidates would fare abroad, where in addition to the global financial meltdown, the next president will inherit wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the showdown over Iran's nuclear program, a hostile Russia, an ambitious China, and a Latin America in which the United States is no longer the dominant influence.

In covering these and many other international issues of the day, we must look long and hard at places on the receiving end of U.S. foreign policy and arm our readers not only with the information they need to pick a president, but also the tools to evaluate President Bush's successor as he navigates a troubled globe that seeks American excellence rather than exceptionalism.

So, how do we go about this mission? I think of the job of a foreign correspondent as equal parts watchdog and interpreter.

On the watchdog role:

Iraq provides perhaps the perfect case study for why we still need foreign correspondents to hold our leaders accountable.

I'm proud to say that Knight Ridder, now McClatchy, was one of the very few news organizations to challenge the administration's intelligence claims before the invasion in 2003. Now it's common knowledge that the United States marched into war with what turned out to be exaggerated or bogus intelligence about the threats posed by Saddam Hussein's regime.

That was not common knowledge in 2003. For a long time Knight Ridder's reporting was overlooked by all but a handful of industry observers and readers who made the effort to seek out alternative views at a time when 9/11 was still a fresh wound and there was more jingoism than journalism going on. Even the venerable New York Times had to issue a front-page apology for its reporting in the run-up to the war.

I don't bring this up as schadenfreude – this is not about media rivalries. It's the public that loses when we don't have vital and accurate information before such an investment of our blood and treasure. I am revisiting this to underscore why it's just not enough to rely on the AP and the two or three national newspapers to let readers know what the executive branch is up to, whether at home or abroad.

As Knight Ridder's first Baghdad bureau chief, I set my sights on extending our Washington bureau's unblinking and unpopular pre-war reporting to this massive deployment of American men and women. I was lucky in that I got to work with Tom Lasseter and the best Iraqi staff in Baghdad. I was also lucky in that I had editors back in Washington who put more stock in our bureau's on-the-ground observations than in briefings from the generals and the State Department.

That was a good thing for me because, truth be told, our bureau didn't have much access in those realms. We weren't the Washington Post or the New York Times, so when I introduced myself to American and Iraqi officials, a lot of times they would look at my business card and say, "Knight Rider? Like the talking car?" And when we had finally convinced our sources that Knight Ridder was in fact a large and legitimate news organization, we became McClatchy and had to start all over again.

Indeed, access to the U.S. command in Baghdad is important for balanced reporting, checking in on the morale and concerns of troops, and getting good slots in the embed program. But, as media critics have pointed out, some of the nation's best journalists became blinded by their access and failed to foresee major turning points in the war.

I believe Knight Ridder, and now McClatchy's, finest moments in Iraq came about because we were *not* invited to go jogging with General Petraeus or to dine with the American ambassador. When you're not at the big table, you go out and find scraps elsewhere, and that's exactly what we had to do.

One of my most indelible memories from the war was General Petraeus summoning me to his office in the Green Zone and launching into an uncharacteristic tirade over a story I was working on about \$1 billion that had gone missing from funds to equip the new Iraqi army. I'd received tips about the missing money from Iraqi sources, not American ones. I'd sent repeated requests to the general's office for comment, but none came until I emailed the top of my story to his press secretary with the subject line: "for publication tomorrow."

Inside that office, I could feel my hands trembling as this brilliant leader with all those stars on his shoulders yelled at me from behind a desk. He yelled sitting down, he yelled standing up. But at some point during this dressing-down, I realized he wasn't attacking the facts of my reporting – he just wanted to make sure the Army didn't take all the blame. My story, if not my dignity, was intact as I left his office licking my wounds and thinking, "I didn't want go jogging with you, anyway."

In the end, the story ran, and soon after there was an overhaul of the weapons procurement program and the issuing of arrest warrants for the top

weapons buyers. I should note that I've seen General Petraeus on several occasions since and he's been as nice as can be, though that's probably because he doesn't remember me.

Allow me to point out that McClatchy was in very good company on that second tier of the Baghdad press corps. We were with Cox Newspapers, the Christian Science Monitor, the Boston Globe, USA Today, Newsday, the Chicago Tribune, the San Francisco Chronicle, the Baltimore Sun and several freelancers before it became too dangerous for them to work there. Would you believe that in those early days of the war even High Times magazine sent a reporter to Baghdad?

So, we had all those eyes, plus the big papers: The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, the LA Times. And not to forget the weeklies and monthlies: Time, Newsweek, and occasionally The New Yorker, the Atlantic and Rolling Stone. Of course, this was just the American press corps.

The presence of all those publications bred competition, which in turn made for good journalism. If the press was a little slow out the gates with Iraq, I think we made up for it on the ground in Baghdad. Think of all the things we wouldn't know about Iraq were it not for the presence of a diverse and competitive press corps:

- Saddam Hussein had neither WMDs nor links to al Qaida, and al Qaida in Iraq emerged only as a response to the U.S. presence
- There was systematic abuse, tacitly approved at the highest levels, at Abu Ghraib prison
- Iraqi women had more rights under Saddam, a secular dictator, than they do now under the new crop of ultraconservative religious leaders

- Sectarian cleansing destroyed Baghdad neighborhoods and led to the deaths of hundreds, if not thousands, of civilians
- The exiled Iraqi leaders who were handpicked by the U.S. before the war turned out to be corrupt and unpopular once they arrived in Baghdad
- For far too long, American soldiers were locked in a fierce urban guerrilla war without vehicles that were fully armored to protect them from sophisticated bomb attacks
- Nearly five million Iraqis are displaced from their homes both internally and as refugees in other countries

Just as it was the duty of foreign correspondents to report those bleak facts, it is our duty now to deliver the good news: In the past year, violence has decreased dramatically in Iraq and people are eagerly rebuilding their shattered lives.

So, we can all go home now and save our newspapers a whole lot of money, right? Not yet. This is when our watchdog role is more important than ever, as the next president determines how we get untangled from Iraq and what kind of country we leave behind.

We can – we must – write the feel-good stories about blast walls coming down in Baghdad, the markets bustling again, more women feeling safe enough to drive.

But it's too early to disband our truth squads or store away our skepticism. We need to report on what's happening now as well as what's around the bend. And as much as I hate to rain on the parade, things just aren't as rosy as they may seem in Iraq. Let's examine a couple of claims made by the candidates in the debates:

1. **True or false: Victory is closer than ever in Iraq.** Well, what you never hear is a definition of victory. A weak and violent state with a highly sectarian leadership? Five million people still living outside their homes? Five years into the war and Iraqis still don't have more than two or three hours of electricity a day? What's an acceptable level of violence? Demand that victory be defined, or don't use the term because it misleads your reader.
2. **True or false: The surge has succeeded beyond our wildest expectations.** No doubt about it, the arrival of thousands of U.S. reinforcements helped to tamp down the violence, but it was not the sole and probably not even the primary reason we are seeing a decrease in violence. At the same time as the surge, the U.S. military expanded its program of paying off Sunni militants in a program known as the Sons of Iraq. On the Shiite side, the rebel cleric Muqtada al Sadr stood down his militia and went to Iran to plot his next move. And one more factor in reducing the violence: these neighborhoods had been totally segregated according to sect and surrounded by huge concrete walls. Sure, violence decreases when there's nobody left to kill in your neighborhood. So, it was a combination of these four elements – more American troops, Sunni militants on the U.S. payroll, Shiite militants under a ceasefire agreement, sectarian segregation – that helped to reduce the bloodshed.

And it's important to remember that what we're seeing are fragile gains that could be undone at any moment.

Conflict zones are complicated and we need as many journalists as possible looking at Iraq, or for that matter at Afghanistan, Pakistan, China, Africa and Latin America. As the global economic crisis has shown us, this is the time for more eyes in the world and not fewer. And in that watchdog role, foreign correspondents must exercise vigilance and honesty, avoid euphemism and find the stories those in power don't want us to, even if we upset the occasional general in the process.

On the interpreter role:

In late 2003, I was with an Iraqi friend and colleague, Ban Adil, driving along the Tigris River when we saw a U.S. raid in progress.

Ban and I got out of our car and mingled with other bystanders to see what was going on. There'd been an explosion nearby, and someone told the American soldiers that a young man named Ali had planted the bomb. The unit immediately went to question an Ali who lived in a house by the river.

The first thing I noticed was that the American soldiers didn't have an Arabic interpreter with them. Ali's father, an old man with gray hair, stepped forward, confused as to why the Americans were swarming his house. One of the Americans approached him and asked, loudly and in English: "Did Ali plant that bomb? Did Ali put that bomb in the street?"

It was clear the old man didn't know English, but he'd heard his son's name and spoke what seemed to be the only word he knew: "Yes, yes, Ali."

And with that confirmation, the troops arrested Ali, who burst into tears as he was led away in flexicuffs, screaming that he was innocent.

Ban, my Iraqi colleague, approached the father and asked him in Arabic whether he had understood the soldier's question. He replied that the question was whether Ali was his son, right? There were several Alis on the block – the name is as common as John or Bob in America – and the father didn't have a clue as to why the soldiers had detained his son.

That sort of mix-up arises all the time in Iraq when language and cultural barriers prevent communication. I see the role of a foreign correspondent as an interpreter not in the linguistic sense, but as a bridge to help American readers understand the world beyond our borders. Without a robust international press corps to facilitate communication across cultures, we end up with the scene we saw on the street that day, writ large.

McClatchy has reporters in Beijing, Moscow, Rio de Janeiro, Caracas, Nairobi, Jerusalem, Baghdad and my bureau, Cairo. Each correspondent has the task of interpreting how the places he or she covers influence U.S. trade, national security, immigration and other aspects of foreign policy. And, from time to time, we also get to write feature stories that offer Americans a glimpse of what it's like to live in places that are richer, poorer or less democratic than the United States.

From my bureau in Egypt, I cover more than a dozen Middle Eastern countries that I call EBII – Everything But Iraq and Israel. It's a big and daunting beat, but to cover it solely as a war beat does a disservice to readers at home.

The Middle East is a mosaic of authoritarian states, dictatorships and monarchies, most of them propped up by the United States through foreign aid and weapons shipments, which often are tied to oil. Just like in America,

each of the countries on my beat has communities of militants, dissidents, intellectuals and ordinary families just trying to make rent and send their children to good schools.

After growing up in the Middle East and now covering the region as a journalist for five years, I can tell you with certainty that Muslims don't hate American freedoms. They are, however, angry that sometimes those freedoms come at the expense of their own. They are eager to engage with the West, to borrow from the technology and pop culture of America and rework it to fit their own traditions and sensibilities. They're still working on that equation, leading to contradictions and tensions that make for some interesting stories for the papers that make the space to publish them.

I cover the nuclear ambitions of Iran, but I've also written about the life of an Iranian fashion model, and Tehran's trailblazing program to fight the spread of HIV. I cover the exploitation of South Asian laborers in the United Arab Emirates, but I've also written about the stunning new opera house in Abu Dhabi. Syria: Repressive government, great chocolate. Lebanon: home to Hezbollah and the highest number of Arab women with breast implants. The first place I saw Borat was Saudi Arabia, where there are no cinemas.

Without foreign correspondents on the ground as interpreters of the social and political changes taking place in areas of strategic importance to the United States, the context is lost and readers are left with the same tired stereotypes and the fearmongering that led my fellow Oklahoman, Will Rogers, to say: "I hope we never live to see the day when a thing is as bad as some of our newspapers make it."

Ok, so there's no substitute for a resident correspondent to keep an eye on where our tax dollars are going overseas or to tell us what the rest of the world thinks of the United States. But we've already cut the movie critic and the book section, so how can we possibly afford to keep overseas bureaus?

The lofty answer is: We can't afford not to, for all the reasons I've outlined.

The practical answer is: Not every news organization can shoulder the costs of overseas bureaus, but we need to keep enough that we give papers a choice that goes beyond the AP and one or two other wire services.

In the past couple of years, several respected papers lost their foreign staffs: The Boston Globe, The Philadelphia Inquirer, Newsday, The Baltimore Sun. Gone. All those freelancers in Iraq who gave the mainstream media a run for their money: Gone. The McClatchy bureaus in Mexico City and Berlin? Gone as well.

Those of us fortunate enough to have survived the chopping block – for now, anyway – are trying our best to adapt and hold onto our jobs.

You still keep your bag by the door in anticipation of the next big story, but gone are the days when you just hopped the first plane, regardless of cost. To cover Iraq, maybe you pass on Pakistan or Colombia. Expense accounts, yes, but you'd better be darn sure you've stayed at the cheapest hotel in town when the auditors come calling. The best fixers? They charge \$150 a day. Private security guards for Iraq -- \$1,000 a day. Each. And filing just one story? Nope, now there's the early Web edition, the updated Web edition, and the final.

Then there's the blog, the audio slideshow, the narrated video, maybe an online chat with readers and, finally, uploading the pictures you took

yourself because the home office just eliminated the budget for photographers. In places with no reliable Internet, all these parts are transmitted back to the States on a personal satellite, at a cost of \$12 a minute. Cautionary tales abound of hapless reporters running up \$50,000 bills checking football scores and then forgetting to log off.

Yes, like every reporter at just about every newspaper, foreign correspondents are expected to do much more with much less.

We have to make every dollar count, and while all the gadgets sound really, really expensive, in fact technology has made it much cheaper and easier to cover the world.

First off, war-zone bureaus such as in Iraq and Afghanistan are the exceptions rather than the rule. The security vacuums and dilapidated infrastructures make for a unique set of problems that are mitigated only by lots and lots of cash. And even in Iraq, for example, we are finding ways to cut those costs without jeopardizing the lives of reporters or the quality of story we can produce. Increasingly, news organizations are pooling their resources on security, with three or more bureaus sharing the bill for those \$1,000-a-day guards.

Unlike in the first year or two of the war, most reporters in the field now have access to 24-hour Internet and cell-phone service, which greatly reduces our reliance on the expensive personal satellites. These days, you only use the \$12-a-minute satellite phone if you're embedding with the military at a remote outpost or are visiting some far-flung mountain region with no cell phone towers.

Last week, one of my editors, Mark Seibel – himself a veteran foreign correspondent who specialized in Latin America – reminded me that in his day, it cost a nickel a word to file his stories from abroad. And that was

nearly 30 years ago, when 5 cents was real money. He barely even talked to his editors because it simply cost too much. So, in his mind, we're getting a bargain, even on the occasions when we have to fork over the \$12 a minute for an Internet connection.

And once online, we have so many more tools available -- Skype, FTP, chat services -- that help to keep our international calling charges down. And I'm talking now not just about the Middle East war-zone bureaus, but also Beijing and Moscow and Rio.

What are the other expenses? Rent, for one. We've addressed that by creating home offices instead of renting both apartments and newsroom space. I know some reporters, particularly those with children, prefer to separate their home lives from their work lives, but I like the convenience of living in my bureau. If news breaks late in the evening, I don't have to rush to another place to jump on the story, though I admit it can be a little weird to call up members of parliament and interview them in your pajamas.

Employees are another big expense. In most countries, there is a sort of "fixer mafia" run by a few local journalists with the most connections. They can charge whatever they like and they can deliver the goods, but too often it's the same old sources they've already introduced to the five correspondents who were there before you. Now we're starting to recruit right out of the English departments of local universities, an innovation that yields fresh eyes and sources as well as lower costs for salaries.

Will the scrimping be enough to save our bureaus? I certainly hope so, at least until we figure out how to make money online. Surveys show that about a quarter of all Americans now get their news from the Internet. Last week, my Nieman class had a lively debate on the challenges of delivering news in an ad-dependent online format. In short, as one of my colleagues

argued, when the metrics are clicks per story, the Guantanamo project gets pushed off the page to make room for the Dallas Cowboys cheerleader slideshow.

Sure, we need our guilty pleasures on the Web. Mine happens to be Perez Hilton. And if you're a regular reader of Perez, then perhaps you've noticed that he no longer writes solely about the hemlines and love lives of Hollywood starlets. Just this week, sandwiched between items on Jennifer Aniston and the Jonas Brothers, Perez posted entries about the hospitalization of the Dalai Lama, opposition to Amendment 2 in Florida, a charity in Africa that converts old shipping containers into nurseries, new revelations about Sarah Palin and how the Dow bounced back with a record 936 points.

In April, Perez posted a video editorial in which he called on tourists to boycott Egypt because the government in Cairo had rounded up gay men in mass arrests. That video got more than 400 reader comments, including this one: "What about Guantanamo Bay? There are people languishing in there who have not even been charged with anything. It is well known that torture is used there. Whatever they have done, these people deserve a proper trial according to the laws of the United States...Sure what is happening to those guys in Egypt is very, very wrong, but sometimes Americans also need to look closer to home."

I was sitting in Egypt, thinking, "Great. Now, I'm getting scooped by a guy in LA with blue hair?"

It's simply condescending for news executives to decide that Americans, especially the under-30 set, aren't interested in what's happening in other places. They do care – and we should keep them engaged with stories that are compelling, timely and revealing.

I'll wrap up with a message to the students. It's an abbreviated version of a talk I gave to college reporters last month at the Society of Professional Journalists convention in Atlanta.

You're going to graduate soon and enter into a job market that is as bad as I've seen it. You will encounter people who want to dissuade you from your dreams, who will tell you to be practical and accept that job you really don't want. You will also find opportunity in the strangest places, and as one of my mentors told me early on, 'When the time comes, you're just going to have to go for it.' How can you prepare now?

- Be resourceful in your networking. I wish I could say you can succeed on merit alone, but that is just not true. Perhaps now more than ever, with jobs so scarce, it's still about who you know.
- Learn radio, photography, videography, broadcast, Flash, Excel, all those tools. In these dark days of budget cuts, I have to shoot, blog, film and write. You're going to be expected to do even more.
- Learn another language. If you just cannot find a decent job, sit out the slump in another country. Go teach English in China or Russia or some other newsmaker nation. Offer yourself up as a stringer, develop a specialty there. Join that 27 percent of Americans with passports.
- Focus on your writing. No matter where you end up in journalism, writing is going to be the foundation. The medium will change, but there will always be a demand for information. If you're an accomplished writer, think of the avenues that will be open to you: online editing, ad copy, broadcast, political speeches, books and so on. Blogs are a great way to get yourself in the practice of writing a little something every single day.

Keep in mind that *you're* the ones we'll turn to as our watchdogs and interpreters in the next incarnation of international journalism. It's your demographic fighting and dying in Iraq and Afghanistan. You're the ones advertisers covet. You know the technology that will save this industry – as the best-selling book says, you were born digital; people my age and older are digital immigrants.

So, take the fine tradition of American foreign correspondence, play with it, experiment with it, and make it work for today. But, please, don't abandon it.