



John Seigenthaler delivered the seventh Ralph McGill Lecture in the Chapel on The University of Georgia campus.

THE McGILL LECTURE

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I am pleased to be here at this institution dedicated to excellence in journalism and pleased to speak at the school which bears the name of Henry Grady, whose editorship stands as a symbol of journalistic light in a time that was shadowed by the dark of ignorance.

But more than pleased, I am truly honored and deeply moved by the invitation to become a part of this distinguished lecture series memorializing the life and work of Ralph McGill.

To a journalist, Southern by birth and upbringing, who worked in this region when it needed and relied on McGill's powerful editorial voice, it is impossible to think of him in less than heroic terms.

As a young reporter, I read him daily and avidly on the opposite editorial page of the *Tennessean*. He was, at times, the only regional voice of reason.

Our newsroom in the mid and late 1950's was populated by outstanding young journalists: David Halberstam, now an author but a reporter still; Tom Wicker, currently a voice of reason in the opinion pages of the *New York Times*; Creed Black, presently publisher of the *Lexington Herald-Leader*; Dick Harwood, who serves as deputy managing editor of the *Washington Post*; Fred Graham, who is the Supreme Court correspondent of CBS News; and Wallace Westfeldt, who most recently was the executive producer of the 1984 televised presidential debates.

That place, as you might imagine, was alive with intellectual ferment.

I could not begin to speak for such a diverse group of personalities on any subject—save one. In a real sense McGill was for them what he was for me and so many other younger journalists: a guiding star by which we set our professional compasses.

He influenced our lives, our thinking, our careers, and the course of conduct of progressive editorial thought throughout the region.

As a Tennessean I felt special identification with him, a Tennessean. I was proud of the fact that he had studied in Nashville, at Vanderbilt. I was glad that I worked for the paper in my home town that espoused an editorial point of view akin to his own. I gloried in the irony—and later needled him about it—that our local competition, the *Nashville Banner*, where McGill began his career, studiously ignored his positions when it could and opposed him when it could not.

For me, any vicarious identification with McGill was fulfilling. And as rewarding as my own associations were on the *Tennessean*, I sometimes felt a twinge of regret when I thought of the excitement that must have been part of the *Atlanta Constitution*'s newsroom when McGill gave that newspaper its moral force.

How lucky Gene Patterson was to have had that time with him; how fortunate the editors who have had the opportunity to sit in his chair. And how difficult the challenge he left them. My friend Jim Minter, who is here, holds that chair today with distinction. He carries on the legacy of McGill.

But then, so do we all; so do all who seek to serve journalism by the standards McGill set.

It is appropriate to reflect in 1985 on that legacy because McGill symbolized journalistic credibility—and right now the news media is said to suffer from a crisis in credibility.

If we trust the opinion polls—and most often I do—the public holds the news media in lower esteem today than at any time during the more than 35 years that I have worked as reporter, editor, and publisher.

A crisis in media credibility means that often we—and when I speak of “we” I mean all who are in news media—are not believed by large segments of our constituencies of readers,

viewers, and listeners.

It means that readers of newspapers and viewers of television news and listeners to radio news have lost a good deal of the confidence they once held in us. It means that other institutions—according to one poll, *all* other institutions except Congress and organized labor—are held in higher esteem than the news media.

A crisis in credibility means that there is an indefinable but perceptive mood of hostility and rancor generated when the subject of the news media comes to many minds. Groups, disparate but discernable, have organized themselves to monitor us, censure us, critique us—and in one instance to buy controlling interest in a network to censor us.

A crisis in credibility means that more citizens are finding themselves disposed to sue us—for defamation, for invasion of privacy, or simply because they wish to harrass us or have a chance to punish us. And while the federal courts continue to provide a bulwark of constraint, there have been too many suits with too many judgments for too many millions to pretend that this is less than a crisis.

Nor should the intelligent responses of informed judicial officers and enlightened juries in the recent cases involving *Time* and CBS News give us any consolation.

Indeed, the danger is that these “victories”—and considering the contradictions embodied in both cases, the victories are tarnished—will further feed the feelings of the public that we are arrogant, insensitive, unchecked, unassailable, uncontrollable.

The failure of Gen. Ariel Sharon and Gen. William Westmoreland to collect money judgments from *Time* and CBS saves those news media agencies from the financial and professional pain of a negative court verdict.

But the more *Time* and CBS cheer, and the more that others of us join in a chorus of cheers, the more those who believe us least and condemn us most will jeer and others who have remained doubting but neutral about our credibility will join the chorus of jeers. The credibility crisis will deepen.

There is nothing to assure that Congress and organized labor will continue to hold less public favor than we. Congress' only crime is that the public elects its members. And, insofar as I can

tell, labor's only offense of late was that it passionately loved and was passionately loved by Walter Mondale.

We are elected by nobody. We are passionately loved by nobody. We passionately love nobody.

We are puzzled and perturbed by our loss of credibility.

We don't want to stand, like pandering politicians, for approval in a popularity referendum. We don't crave to be loved—or even liked.

But we do want to be credible. We want to be believed. And if we are to continue to serve the national weal, we must be believed.

I speak of concerns that are shared, to a greater or smaller degree, by every journalist I know.

We are hurting because we know that we have been taking fire from hostile forces. And we sense that neutrals and noncombatants are joining the enemy.

Every professional news organization and every society of publishers, editors, and working journalists are seeking to deal with "the crisis."

We are sweating blood to analyze why it has happened. We are trying to wipe away that bloody sweat with studies, surveys, audits, and polls of our own. We are conducting seminars, think-tank sessions, workshops, public relations campaigns to try to dry up the blood.

Journalism educators smell the blood and seek tourniquets. Journalism students smell it and are often repelled by it.

At least one member of the United States Senate smells it and has taken out his knife. Other public officials, like colleagues of Cassius, wait to slash away.

Some of us are blaming others of us. Creed Black, once my colleague at the *Tennessean*, now immediate past president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, blames the abuses of television news for damaging the credibility of newspapers. Because his thesis has attracted considerable attention and support, I want to dwell on it. Initially, I was infatuated with that idea. But on reflection, the evidence that I weigh does not support the verdict of my old friend, Creed Black.

But I want to acknowledge the words of one who came to an independent but attendant point of view. Charles Kuralt, a

distinguished television journalist who grew up worshipping at the altar of Edward R. Murrow, said last year in delivering the annual Scripps lecture at the University of Nevada at Reno:

"I am afraid I must say that television news, as it is practiced in most places, is not the field in which a serious journalist would wish to live."

He criticized so-called TV "consultants" who tell station managers that they need ringing bells and flashing graphics to seize the attention of the sap at home who might be inclined to read a book to his children.

"The giants are all gone," Kuralt said. "I don't know where the great reporters will come from to hold up standards for another era of journalism."

According to Kuralt, these TV consultants urge stations to put reporters on the scene live, where they "talk loud and fast... masters of the staccato pace and one-sentence interview."

Kuralt certainly knows more about that than I. But each of us is victim of our own experience. I do not find the mosaic of television news coverage nearly so negative. I wake up each morning to three network programs, and I usually find something informative, interesting, and, at times, fascinating. Throughout the day I have access to two cable networks—one of which provides me with in-depth coverage of events in the nation's capital.

In the evening in my home town of Nashville I find strongly competing local news stations followed by wrap-ups of network news. I have the chance to watch an hour news program with a team of expert anchors. They usually explore a subject in depth for most of that period. Before I go to bed, I see more competitive local news and another hour-long program, again, most often, focusing on a single subject. Then there are the network investigative reporting programs that add to my insights each week.

On Sunday, there is an intellectual ghetto of TV inquiry to further enlighten me.

Sure, I have to channel hop. And I find that some of it is hype. Some of it is insipid. Much of it is show business. And some of it is just plain bad: Bad interviews. Irrelevant stories. Wrong questions. Silly comments. The early evening local TV

crime roundup can be discouraging, dull, and boring. Some, true enough, is bad.

But I find more of it is good. When I think of it, I am reminded of that great line in [director] Martin Ritt's *The Long, Hot Summer*, in which Orson Welles says to Anthony Franciosa: "You got hellfire and damnation in you, Jody Varner. But you got redemption, too."

Sure, there is hellfire and damnation in *all* of the news media. But there is redemption, too. And I find more redemption than hellfire and damnation. Despite his frustration with the consultants, I hope Kuralt does too.

In most cities where I have a chance to watch television news I seek to determine which of the stations has the highest rated news show. Usually it earns its ranking.

Most often that station provides its viewers with a measure of quality coverage of the total community.

I respect Kuralt and Black. But I demur from the suggestion that superficiality in TV news coverage threatens to drain all quality from the future of the electronic news business. And the evidence does not support the idea that distortion washes from TV news screen onto the pages of newspapers and denies the print media its chance for believability.

Were the attacks made on the so-called television docudrama, which demeans reality, rips off truth, rapes history, and postulates fiction for fact, I would agree.

In recent months I have observed myself, depicted in three separate so-called historical docudramas, being attacked in Montgomery, Alabama—a historical fact—coming (1) off a bus, (2) out of a telephone booth, and (3) out of an automobile.

I am more amused than offended by all of that. I find those aberrations among the milder distortions in the three programs.

But I am offended by the bald dishonesty that characterized the Atlanta child-murder docudrama. That was falsehood compounded.

The docudrama, as the line in *H.M.S. Pinafore* goes, is where "Things are seldom what they seem,/Skim milk masquerades as cream."

And those who argue that the distortions are no more serious than Shakespeare's account of Richard III or Henry V or An-

thony and Cleopatra simply have not the taste to tell the difference between skim milk and cream, or to tell the difference between trash and class.

But that is an argument for historians, not journalists. And I am not a historian.

Still, to the extent that the market-share pressure cooker can produce TV news sensationalism and distortions—in the same that circulation-war pressures (and there are fewer of them in today's world of one-owner newspaper towns) can produce sensationalism and distortion—we must be concerned.

If I were a television producer, I certainly would not ignore criticism from people like Kuralt and Black. In fact, all of us should weigh carefully such criticism. Black's speech produced three recent days of face-to-face confrontation between print and electronic journalists at the Poynter Institute in St. Petersburg, Florida. And Kuralt's remarks must have sent waves of hysteria through the hierarchy of his own network.

But for every flawed or superficial television newscast, there are matches in print news.

I know that television is a medium that is "hot" and can arouse more passion in a moment than the print medium in a week of publishing. But it simply is not accurate to blame the more compelling influence of television for the overall loss of journalistic credibility. *The same polls that tell us that we have lost credibility also tell us that the public has more confidence in TV news than in print news.*

I do not contest that some network reporters at the national level sometimes lack balance on some stories. The report CBS News commissioned on the Vietnam documentary that led to the Westmoreland lawsuit found that the program lacked balance and was unfair.

I do not contest that some Washington reporters in some situations perform badly. And when the TV news from Washington shows reporters screaming at a President who does not want to answer—and isn't going to answer—it may leave some viewers feeling badly toward all journalists.

But relating any of that to the loss of trust in newspaper reportage requires a quantum leap I am not prepared to make.

First of all, I find bad television reporting the exception,

rather than the rule. Most TV reporters treat most public officials with respect most of the time. And the shouts at the President during the novel "photo opportunities" are not meant as disrespect, however they are interpreted by viewers.

Print journalists can be more abrasive, more contentious, and more offensive with subjects of interviews and press conference than their TV peers. I know. At times, I have been.

We delude ourselves if we deny all the empirical data that demonstrates that TV news is held in higher esteem. The polls consistently show that the Dudley Dooright Anchor with the shock of dark hair and the gleaming rows of pearly teeth is viewed as a nice guy.

Even with his flashing graphics and ringing bells and reports of death from the scene, he has more identity and personality than an anonymous by-line in a newspaper. And those "live" reports he reads have the appearance of unfiltered fact—word from the mouth. The story in print, most often, appears to be filtered by the reporter. So the burden of the print journalist to be believed is heavier.

No, if we are to understand the loss of credibility—and both print and electronic journalism clearly are adversely touched by it—we must get beyond gut responses, finger pointing, and clichés like the glib suggestion that the public, like the king, wants to murder the messenger who bears bad news.

When have we been bearers of anything but bad news when the news was bad? The question that the public may be asking is whether we ignore or down play any news that is not bad.

We must not misread or understate the public's will to face hard facts—when those facts are relevant, pressing, important.

If we accept the fact that the public's attitude toward us has changed, we must look to ways that we have changed, ways that our relationships with institutions we regularly cover have changed, ways that the public has changed.

Where have the changes occurred?

Generalizations are dangerous, but for most of 50 years our society relied heavily on our national government to solve its most critical problems.

And for all of that time our media reported in a manner that most often supported government action to solve crises. The

government action also was supported by the public.

It was true in the Great Depression. It was true in World War II. It was true in the Cold War era—although during the venomous McCarthy period both the national government and the news media lost their courage for a time but finally muddled through, pretty much in lockstep.

It was true during the Civil Rights revolution, although some Southern papers attacked the government.

It was true during much of the Vietnam War.

And so for decades our people came to have a greater and greater reliance on the ability of the federal government to save them from a crisis, to give them economic stability, to lead them through war to peace, to protect them from foreign totalitarianism, to provide them social justice. And the public developed great reliance, too, on the news media—which seemed to trust and generally support government.

Then, midway through the decade of the 1960's there was a change. We were in a war that was undeclared. As the nation began to lose troops and treasure, the public began to lose faith in the government that had provided for and protected the country.

For the first time since 1932 there was a clean, sharp break in the media support for government.

It was, without doubt, an unsettling time. The country impaled itself on the Vietnam spear. The news media held the mirror of reality up to the war.

The public gradually followed the logic that the mirror reflected a scene too horrible to behold, too terrible to tolerate. The public was forced to choose between media and government.

Swiftly, we in the news media moved into another critical confrontation with the government. Watergate was the new trauma. At first, when the public read of it on the front pages and viewed it on the television screens, there was a tendency—as initially in the Vietnam experience—to support the government and back the President. But soon the people were impaled on another spear.

Again, the news media held the mirror of reality up to the scandal called Watergate. The scene reflected was too unpleasant to live with, too tragic to endure. Again, the public was forced

to choose: the media's story or the executive branch of the government's.

Democratic independence, again with a small *d*, took hold. And again the government was shaken.

We reported those crises every day, as we saw them, as they were. Our reports on back-to-back crises were credible. The news media, as the watchdog on government, was believed.

And so, our relationship with the institution of government changed dramatically. The media, during that time, had more faith from the public than even the institution of the executive branch of the government.

But as the change in that relationship occurred, and was at least tentatively approved by the people, so was their perception of us changing.

When the public was forced to choose—to believe “us” or “them”—it was inevitable that there would be a change in the way the public viewed us. There, I submit, may be the genesis of our loss of credibility.

We have changed since Vietnam and Watergate. Many editors push their reporters to treat every local conflict like the war in Vietnam and every miniscule scandal like Watergate revisited. We force the public to choose—us or them—every day. Sometimes we force them to choose several times a day. The watchdog sometimes is seen as a yapping cur.

And an institution that could create a challenge to a war the government was committed to wage was obviously a big, powerful juggernaut.

That impression was only reaffirmed when the same institution—the media—demonstrated that it also could create a challenge to the executive branch and bring down that branch.

The news media was viewed, then, as a gigantic force, larger than the government and larger than life.

In the times that have followed, we have continued to pursue this course of constant and absolute adversary to the government which for decades we had supported.

And we have become a constant and absolute adversary to institutions of local government—and to nongovernmental institutions—as well.

I am not suggesting that this adversarial role is not our

legitimate mission. It is a mandate under the First Amendment. We drifted from it from the early 1930's through the mid 1960's. Now, the drift is gone.

We criticize individuals who are not nearly so big and powerful as Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon. Only a few—Westmoreland and Sharon—are seen as strong enough to challenge us. And then without success.

Thus we come off, too often, as arrogant.

We are seen as holy crusaders. And who ever knew a fair-minded crusader?

No one should doubt for a moment that we have the constitutional right to be unfair. The Supreme Court has made it clear. And two judges in New York said as much to juries on behalf of CBS and Time. The constitution protects and the courts support unfair expression to encourage robust, lusty debate.

But the public sees little in the way of debate on newspaper pages or on TV screens.

Sam Ervin, the former senator from North Carolina, in his recent book, *Preserving the Constitution*, said something about the rights of the media that is worth considering.

“The Founding Fathers embodied these guarantees [of freedom of speech and press] in the Amendment for two reasons, one philosophical and the other pragmatic,” he said. “As philosophers, the Founding Fathers believed that free and full flow of information and ideas teaches men the truth which frees them from the worst sort of tyranny, i.e. tyranny over the mind; and as pragmatists, they believed that free and full flow of information and ideas is vital to the civil and political institutions they established.”

Ervin detailed his view of how the media should function: They should “uncover and bring to light information which is accurate”; they should “interpret it as fairly as the humanity of editors and commentators permits”; they should “seek to engender in the public mind confidence that they [the media] are fair as well as free”; they should afford “opportunities for reply to those who disagree with their editorializing and those whom they chastise”; the media should “keep themselves intellectually free by denying to government and advertisers alike control over the information they present and the views they express.”

That is a thoughtful injunction. Elsewhere in his book some of what Sam Ervin suggests about the First Amendment leaves room for dissent. But let me embrace his conclusion:

"Like all freedom, freedom of speech and of the press are always in peril; and the price of their keeping is eternal vigilance....freedom has many foes, even among those who profess to love it....government itself tends to dislike freedom in general because it obstructs the exercise of arbitrary power and freedom of speech and of the press in particular because they are the instruments which expose official mismanagement and misconduct."

Well, if that sounds like an invocation to crusade, it isn't. Crusaders are zealots. They are fire-eaters. They slaughter innocents in the name of religion.

A word about crusaders from McGill.

A drunk had telephoned him at home one night demanding that he become a crusader in a political situation that the caller said smelled bad. McGill wrote: "I cannot be a good crusader because I have been cursed, all my life, with the ability to see both sides of things. This is fatal to a crusader. A real, burning crusader must be able to see only his side. I do not criticize this, because much of our progress has been brought about by crusaders. But often...in their furious laying about they undo almost as much as they accomplish."

He went on to acknowledge that he had helped serve some causes and had tried to put his shoulder to the wheel if a worthy one needed pushing.

"I like a fight," he said, "and I have had my share. I expect to have more....I am, for instance, strongly and publicly committed against the Ku Klux Klan," he went on, "and associated industries which exist to take money from suckers. I know that many of those who administer the Klan...are hypocritical rascals, who live in ease selling hate to boobs. But I also know why some of the suckers join—the society in which they live offers them so few answers to their troubles and problems. It is difficult to sell any people on attacking the causes of Kluxerism. This is where my real crusade lies."

And he concluded by agreeing with the caller in the night: "I am not a good crusader. I call my shots. And aim where I think

a shot is needed. And I recall often the old motto, 'Lord, give me this day my daily idea and forgive me the one I had yesterday.'"

Embodied in that column four decades old is the essence of McGill's credibility. He asserts his independence from the other fellow's cause. He asserts his willingness—indeed he calls it an affliction—to look at both sides. He admits that he has a cause. He rakes, once again, the Klan and its scam. He expresses empathy for misled members. He hits the failure of society to treat with the problems of those who are misled. And in the end he asks forgiveness because he saw one side of an issue yesterday and may look across at the other side tomorrow. There is an acknowledged vulnerability and fallibility there so often absent in today's news media. Again and again those who read McGill will find him using three words that are nowhere in the vocabulary of many of today's journalists. The words are these: "I don't know."

Those who think of McGill as an avenging journalistic angel wielding a deadly pen misread, I think, his commitment to basic tenets of what all reporters must be about.

Those who think of him as hammering away each day on the anvil of civil rights misunderstand that his power rested in his restraint and his ability—as he said it in that column—to call his shots.

He was, like Thomas Moore, a man for all seasons.

And his columns, while we relate them to the travail of the 1960's, were timeless and tireless.

Unlike H.L. Mencken, whose columns were pithy but lacked permanence, McGill is as relevant today in much of what he wrote as he was when his columns appeared in our newspapers.

It is simplistic to suggest that from his words and his work we can find an overriding answer to our credibility crisis today.

But as we wait for more complex answers to credibility studies and as we engage in Socratic dialogue in search for a means of reforming our procedures, it is good to remember that McGill, the most effective and credible journalist of my lifetime, was a man of simple truths.

And a simple truth is that humility—sincere and unapologetic—is an antidote to the impression of arrogance. Of course,

McGill was a proud man. But he was, at once, humble. That virtue infiltrates his writing as it infected his life and adds a loud ring of believability to his expressions.

And a simple truth is that balance is an antidote to the impression of unfairness. And McGill had that balance.

And a simple truth is that independent thought is an antidote to the impression of a gigantic monolithic press. McGill expressed independent thought.

And a simple truth is that a serious search for truth can be an antidote to the perception of a lack of integrity. And McGill sought truth.

And a simple truth is that a correction is an antidote to error. And McGill was never above admitting he was wrong.

Still another simple truth is that there is no quality so compelling, no personality trait so attractive, as the ability to laugh at one's self. That is an antidote to the danger of taking ourselves too seriously. McGill could laugh at himself. And, God, we are a serious and unsmiling media when we wear our mantle as guardian of the truth and right.

Those simple truths are devoid of much profundity.

But were I a journalism educator, concerned about the credibility of the institution for which I was training young minds and to which I was committing young careers, I would teach those truths.

And were I a student of journalism, determined to practice this profession and to do all I could to protect and preserve free expression, I would emulate those truths, those simple truths.

McGill was not a simple man. Sure, sometimes his work reflected passion, even anger. He was human.

But he was cerebral as he was visceral. His head ruled him as his heart moved him.

It would be a profanation, it seems to me, to the spirit that brings us together—the spirit of Ralph Emerson McGill—not to entertain, in closing, some of those thoughts of his which made him credible above all.

Mine is a random selection, drawn from a recent rereading of columns from our morgue in Nashville; from two of his books, *The Fleas Come with the Dog* and *The South and the Southerner*; and from the handsome volume Mary Lynn and Ralph

McGill, Jr., published the year after his death, *Ralph Emerson McGill 1898-1969*.

A lady had written him that the South was the finest place in the world with the finest people and said that those who believed otherwise should go elsewhere.

"This," wrote McGill, "is the philosophy of decay, of dry rot, of the legendary three monkeys....It is wearing a new evening gown with a dirty slip showing. It is using perfume when a bath is needed."

During the height of the McCarthy era, he wrote: "We must maintain security without surrendering our rights, without losing faith in one another. This is our essential dilemma, and Americans,...with their hysterical denunciation of one another as Communists in the ignorant manner of realtors [I don't know why he was mad with realtors that day], make it even more difficult to meet."

"America," he wrote during that time, "is vast and huge and wonderful, and worth dying for, but more worth living for, and the people are what matters most."

He loved college sports. But he wrote: "College football has come to be an entirely professional game in all but name.... There isn't a major, or 'big time,' team in the nation today that isn't bidding heavily for football talent and paying each man in some manner, openly or through the several subterfuges of some alumni group....I think they earn it. But it isn't amateur sport, and it isn't amateur in spirit."

He had such a burning faith. "There is no fear," he wrote, "quite like that of the comfortable who have sent to know for whom the bell tolls and who know but will not admit the truth that they are involved in mankind...concerning themselves only with their own goods....The time of the idea of the Galilean has not yet come. But it will come."

I love his recounting his days at Vanderbilt. Allen Tate, the poet, was his classmate. One evening they were walking to a poetry-reading at a sorority house where Tate was to have been part of the program. Tate, rehearsing, read as they walked.

"I recall the closing line," wrote McGill, "...heavy with symbolism...: 'They bore on high the phallic symbol bold.'"

"One of the group protested. 'Gee, Allen,' he said, 'don't you

think you might embarrass them?"

"No," said Tate, "all these girls come from Middle Tennessee high schools. They won't have the vaguest idea what a phallic symbol is."

McGill added, "As far as one could tell, none did."

He took his stands, never with bitterness, but he didn't back up.

He wrote a column exposing the blatant racism of Mississippi Senator Theodore Bilbo. Bilbo denounced McGill on the floor of the Senate as "a limicolous person."

"I looked up the word," wrote McGill, "and found it to refer to shore-dwelling birds. I assumed he meant I was throwing mud at him."

A short time later, while in Washington, McGill encountered Bilbo and introduced himself. He recounted: "I walked up to him, and, smiling, introduced myself. He was a small man, who looked like the cartoons of himself. He stepped back and half raised his hands."

"Senator," I said, "all I want to ask is where you learned the word."

"He smiled back and said, 'I learned it as a boy,' and moved on...."

"Other demagogues were to come," McGill wrote, "but they would never try to match Bilbo's crassness and insults."

During the 1952 presidential campaign he wrote:

"Always I am spellbound by my country—but especially so was I during the hot, dry days of slow-dying summer on the Eisenhower campaign train, watching the states go by, seeing then by day, feeling them through the long night, as the cars clicked their steel-cricket tune at the rail ends; and in the lights of small towns, and the brief snatched-away glimpses of people at the stations."

"The corn states; the wheat states; the mining states; the cotton and prairie states; and those pulsing with huge industrial cities, dirty and often ugly, but with all the strength of a tough-muscled man begrimed with his honest work—all cast a spell."

And he wrote this: "Whenever you cast a ballot—think over it, pray over it, and never cast it lightly on the side of prejudice and intolerance."

And: "I distrust those persons who seem to have God in their vest pocket, or speak of Him as if he were a member of the local civic club, mentioned in the sunshine report and called to the speaker's table to be decorated...on His birthday."

And: "Lynching is not mere murder and there is little comparison between the crimes. A lynching reaches a victim ahead of the searching law, or it takes him from the law, and then executes....It defies the law....If we fail the law, then we will live in fear....The law must rule."

And: "Shortly after the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., I saw his faith-sustained, grief-burdened father. 'No one man did this,' he said, controlling with difficulty his emotions. 'There were a lot of fingers on that trigger.'"

"But no matter who did it," McGill said, "the killing of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was, in major part, a product of the vicious hatreds that stew in the minds of those whose racist attitudes and emotions are...at, or near, the paranoia state. 'Daddy' King was right. *There were many fingers on the trigger.*"

And: "The Ku Klux [Klan] mentality prostitutes the Christian religion by making over the New and Old Testaments into a KKK revised version....To the Kluxer mentality the Christian communion cup must be a Dixie cup."

And he wrote this:

"Cup your hands to your ears and listen....You can hear plenty of those who are afraid inside themselves, asking us to hate the Jew, to hate the Negro, to distrust the Roman Catholic, to fear any man or woman of any other nationality. Listen:

"...the Jews...own the country....They have the big say.' 'The Catholics want to bring the Pope over here.' 'Watch the Negroes. They are trying to take over.' 'Keep all the foreigners out. They aren't any good....'

"You can hear the selfish groups of greed without cupping any hand to ear."

He wrote:

"It is absurd to assume we can go on thinking in terms of the old concepts and formulas. It ought to be rather obvious that all this crowding into cities and urban regions, with the influences of group thinking and psychology, requires some new formulas. We must meet the awful challenge of what widespread

unemployment would mean to our burgeoning cities. We must grapple with growing populations, crowded schools, burdened social services, and the need for more taxes—and solve that sensitive, wistful fear that is in all cities.

“Great moral courage and force, and a true sense of spiritual values, are needed....we must find a way to make the great teachings of books, of minds, of religious truth, freely available....We must learn to take the fleas with the dog—the bad with the good—and press on through faith in our selves, our country, and our God.”

In all of that, and in the way he practiced the profession that was his life, the simple truths emerge, clear and cogent.

Sam Ervin warns that liberty of expression is always in peril. Surely it faces its greatest peril when its practitioners suffer a disturbing loss of credibility.

When the lengthy analyses of our failings are finally evaluated and when reforms are recommended and when the short-term and long-term cures are at work, we may still find value in the simple truths:

Humility can combat arrogance; balance can combat unfairness; independent voices can combat the image of an insensitive monolith; a search for truth can combat a perceived absence of integrity; a correction can combat error; a sense of humor can combat exaggerated self-importance.

These are the simple truths that McGill naturally relied on, and in the process he never gave up principle or resorted to hype or ran from a fight, or forfeited an ideal.

A confusing conundrum is that our credibility is lowest at a time when our talent is better than at any time in history. Today's journalists, without question, are better educated, better informed, better trained, better equipped, more aware, more dedicated, more perceptive, more concerned, than ever in my professional lifetime. But still, they suffer this lack of credibility.

It is only part of an answer, I know. But there are lessons to be learned from McGill who was at once the most credible and, in the eyes of many, the most controversial journalist of his time.

They are the lessons of simple truths. We should grasp them. We should hold them fast. We should apply them. In this time of peril those truths may be all that will keep a free press free.