



Richard A. Oppel

THE McGILL LECTURE

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I am delighted to be here with you today. It is a distinct honor to be invited to follow newspaper people like Reg Murphy, Jack Nelson, and Eugene Patterson, people whom I have admired for many years. I have not earned the right, but I am thankful nonetheless.

Most previous McGill Lecturers knew Ralph McGill as a colleague, mentor, or editor. I grew up in St. Petersburg in the 1950s and '60s and gradually came to know McGill as a legend. Two editors stood out among all Southern editors at that time, McGill and Bill Baggs of the *Miami News*. But McGill towered over all. I learned of McGill through his book, *The South and the Southerner*, his columns, and because my father regularly denounced him, saying he caused unrest. McGill certainly caused unrest in those days in my thinking about people, fairness, and the South.

McGill was drawn to North Carolina by another great writer, Carl Sandburg, and the two would visit and talk in Sandburg's white farmhouse at Flat Rock. Author Harry Golden of Charlotte said Sandburg thought he would die in loneliness when he moved to North Carolina in 1945. However, Golden wrote that Sandburg once told him, "Down here in North Carolina, I got Frank Graham to the east and Ralph McGill in the south." Frank Graham was the revered president of the University of North Carolina in those days.

One of McGill's most important visits to our state was a low-key appearance he and Harry Golden made in 1962 at the annual dinner of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Council on Human Relations. Someone asked McGill, How does a city rise above racial friction? McGill had an answer that is as timely today as it was then. He said a city must have a government that wants to maintain the processes of law, a united

clergy, and an unafraid power structure. He said the chamber of commerce and the newspaper must be willing publicly to rise above prejudices.

When McGill died seven years later, Harry Golden's eulogy was reminiscent of that remark. Said Golden: "Atlanta had Ralph McGill of the *Constitution*. Birmingham had Bull Connor of the police dogs. This is the difference between the two cities. The difference between the two cities is the difference one man can make. Atlanta is a city of reason and Birmingham is a city that literally should arrest itself."

How would McGill or Golden today judge Southern cities and their newspapers? Imagine McGill sitting over there, irascible, rumped, frog voiced, and with that occasional bleakness that grew out of his Welsh ancestry. Imagine him looking across our tables, searching for the editor who makes a difference now, for the educator who inspires students to make a difference, for the student who 20 years from now will make a difference. Would any of us meet his test? Or would we be people who would allow our cities to be like the Birmingham of the 1960s?

Seven Southern newspapers went out of business in 1991. Most of these deaths reflected the destiny of afternoon newspapers. But some deserved to die, are unwept and unhonored, and were not up to the challenges we face today.

If he looked at the South today, I think McGill would be pleased to see that his region is mostly desegregated. The National School Board Association recently reported that segregated schools are on the rise again in much of the nation, with the notable exception being the South. But McGill, never one to sugarcoat or gild the lily, would remind us of the recent resurgence of racial incidents. He probably would skewer David Duke, who 20 years later displays the reptilian qualities of George Wallace—racial hatred and playing on fears.

McGill might be pleased that after his death the South became increasingly industrialized, and our standard of living closed on the rest of the nation.

He would not linger on the successes but would turn to work still undone. And there he would find grim news, many challenges left to us. He would find that drugs haunt our cities, as they do cities across the nation. He would write of the homeless. I was in both Nashville [Tennessee] and Greensboro [North Carolina] in December, and in each of those cities I saw women with small children standing on street

corners holding signs up to passing motorists, "Give me money so I can eat." He would see persistent unemployment, people who want to work but don't have the skills or education to find a job.

Fewer than a dozen cities of the South really glitter: Miami, Orlando, Tampa, and Jacksonville; Atlanta, Memphis, Nashville, and Charlotte; but even these cities have great interior wastelands. And between these cities are great stretches of rural poverty. Even the \$5- and \$6-an-hour jobs in the textile, furniture, and apparel factories tucked away in the mountain pockets and pine lands of the South are threatened by low-wage labor from offshore.

McGill saw unrest over civil rights; today we see unrest over joblessness, crime, and the shackles of drug abuse.

McGill also knew how hard it was to dish out criticism of the South, or for the South to take it. He criticized, but loved. He wrote: "I remember the late novelist Jimmy Street saying one night, as we talked of a Southern article he was writing, that those who truly love the South, love her as parents love a crippled child. They love her the more fiercely and defensively because they hate that which had crippled the child and which had, therefore, made her weaker and less capable of full participation in life than other children. This simple analogy explains much of 'The South.'"

I was reminded of that passage when I read a recent essay by C. Vann Woodward, the Arkansas-born dean of Southern historians, in which he explained why the South sees life differently: "Our nation has seen economic abundance and opportunity, the South has been a region of poverty. Our nation's history is that of invincibility, but the South was stung by defeat on the battlefield, military occupation, political and economic subjugation. In a nation of innocence, the South has borne the burden of guilt—first for slavery, then for white supremacy."

McGill knew how to criticize the South. What would he say to us today?

In *The South and the Southerner*, McGill wrote: "I do not hold with . . . extreme, almost compulsive partisanship. But I believe in being strongly partisan on issues which require a choice. . . . It seems important that newspapers should have . . . an acute sense of right and wrong. . . . There comes a time in all controversies when one must hit the issue right on the nose or turn tail and die a little."

That's what he said in 1963. I think that's what he would say today. Lead, be an agent for improving your community.

I think he would understand the concerns for marketing the newspaper today, for new sections, features to bring in the young and attract the working woman, and for suburban zones. His long-time friend, Harold Martin, said McGill had an unerring instinct for survival. But the commitment of resources we make to niche marketing and zoning must be held in balance with our commitment to the historic and core mission of the newspaper. That's especially hard to do, but especially important to do, in recessionary times.

We must have a mission as well as a market.

And today I would like to call for a deepening of mission—a mission that burns as fiercely as McGill's beliefs in taking a stand and in the qualities of good cities. I think this deepened mission is congruent with expectations of today's readers.

Too many newspapers today are without a mission and don't have the guts, as McGill would say, to hit the issue "right on the nose."

We must help our communities solve problems. Many other institutions in the South are under siege but can be restored to effectiveness with our coverage and leadership, in the tradition of McGill.

Public schools today battle not just for the quality of education but for the safety of children. Law enforcement and the courts are overrun with drug-related crime. Local and state governments, increasingly abandoned by Washington, face growing demands and dwindling revenues. The philanthropic and civic engines of business strain under the financial pressures of recession. Churches see membership declining, and higher education is challenged by flattening enrollments and tax support and reduced endowment earnings.

Amid this fragmentation, a newspaper cannot be a mere "information provider." It must provide critical, sustained coverage of public affairs and social issues. And I suggest a newspaper today must go farther and be the convener of its community. The newspaper has the power to bring together the fragmented parts of a community, provide them with the forum to set an agenda for solution of problems, and then grind away until solutions are found and implemented.

Ralph McGill used the *Constitution* to make a difference. He never had charge of the *Constitution's* newsroom, and that makes his accomplishments all the more incredible. He worked as a writer and regent, using his powerful voice and the moral force of the *Constitution's* nameplate to take on the greatest social blight of his time, segregation. He put his newspaper in service of the battle for racial freedom.

McGill was no bloodless marketer. And we are more than bloodless marketers in the South.

Taking on the role of the convener is a subtle step backward toward a more activist journalism. The press moved away from that kind of community engagement in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, as it became more professional: more journalism school graduates, more young reporters attracted by the glamour of Watergate and the romance of the investigative specialist, more corporate-owned papers. We moved toward a sophisticated, cold-eyed objectivity that was actually more like a detached neutrality. Judged by their writing, newspaper people of a generation earlier—McGill, for example—were more comfortable with the role of convener, with being a part of their community, than editors and reporters of the 1980s.

We live here in the South. We extract a living from our communities. Newspapers have become huge economic engines in our communities. I would ask publishers here: Do you live up to your philanthropic responsibilities? Does your giving compare with that of the other big businesses in your community? Are you giving as well as taking?

In these tight times, have you stolen from your readers by cutting the news hole? Readers have very long memories. Do you charge a political candidate the highest advertising rate possible while your editorial page knocks candidates for accepting special interest money? Does the company that owns your newspaper extract pre-tax profits of 40 percent and 45 percent while producing community newspapers that are anemic, vapid, banal, and have the spine of a jellyfish?

I ask the editors: Do we do more that string together snippets and brights, flashy quotes and people columns, designer graphics and do-dads? Do we defend stories as "essentially correct" and lag on correcting real errors? Do we provide critical, consistent coverage of things that matter most to readers?

I'm not speaking of the annual heavy-duty prize entry but the steady, unflickering watch on public affairs, social issues, and the institutions of our communities. Do we do more than provide information? Do we do more than audit? Do we lead? Do we help solve problems?

Ralph McGill did.

We have long presumed to judge who is fit to serve in office. We have long provided gratuitous advice. Is it too much to expect that we might actually participate in solving problems?

Critics will worry about boosterism, about the cuddly coverage of

government. They will fret over conflicts of interest. The Poynter Institute's Don Fry, playing devil's advocate with me as he does so well, challenges, "Aren't you stepping over the footlights?"

I say no. There is a danger of excess in anything we do. But a newspaper does not have to suspend its critical eye and give in to boosterism to be the convener of its community.

McGill wrote about right and wrong. Morally, there was no real "other side" to segregation, although we pretended for years there was. It was just wrong.

A lot of the problems that confront us today aren't so clean, and there are several legitimate approaches to solving them. They are going to be solved, if at all, in less than absolute terms. There will be deals, messy stuff, and we must report skeptically, credibly, and with toughness on that aspect of problem-solving, even as we act as the convener. Will the public see conflicts of interest? You had better believe it.

Yet, much of what we do represents a conflict of interest. How many of you here are members of churches? Is there a conflict in reporting on the activities of your church? How many of you send your children to public schools? Does it mean you won't audit the schools? How many of you accept money from the leading department stores in your cities? Does that mean your voices are silent in auditing their activities?

Ralph McGill did not hide from controversy. Remember what he said about the elements of a city necessary for rising above racial friction. A government that wants to maintain the processes of law. A united clergy. An unafraid power structure. A chamber of commerce and a newspaper willing publicly to rise above prejudices.

Implicit in that comment is McGill's view that the newspaper is one of several crucial elements in a successful community. He did not propose a cozy partnership with other institutions, but neither did he suggest that the newspaper sits out the fray and hovers on the sideline.

Newspapers today are quite practiced in publishing a series of well-reported, well-displayed articles identifying a community problem. They are also experienced in pounding away in the aftermath with editorials that seek action to address those problems. But there are relatively few examples of the newspaper acting as the convener—calling together community leaders and groups and individuals with shared interests. It could be a one-day symposium, a town hall meeting, a quiet conference of warring sides who have never talked to each other

before. It should be done in the sunlight, for all to see and hear, and be covered and reported by the newspaper.

Three important reservations apply if we tackle problems in this way:

Number 1. Thou shall not be superficial. A newspaper today has the capacity to tell the long, complex story—and to tell it accurately—and it owes it to its community to use this capacity.

Number 2. Thou shall not pick sides. In our news columns, an approach of openness and skeptical neutrality serves us best. We do give the reader a sense of where the weight of the evidence lies. We explain, we help understanding, we provide context, but we don't take sides.

Number 3. Thou shall not become a part of the story. If we are the convener, that does not mean we are the story.

The *Observer* stripped back a few scabs on some of the South's ugly stories in the past few years. A series called, "Brown Lung: A Case of Deadly Neglect," showed that the Carolinas' cotton textile mills were killing off workers because of unfiltered cotton dust in the plants. The criminal frauds of TV religion were exposed in the PTL scandal, and Jim Bakker is now serving a long stretch in prison. We documented the predatory sexual advances of a university president on his student interns, and he is gone from academia. In each of these cases and others, we declined requests for interviews and talk show appearances so that we would not, in the minds of our readers, slip into the role of adversary rather than neutral observer.

The newspaper can remain neutral and be the convener. Neutrality, balance, full explication of all sides should reign in the news columns. Before the newspaper calls citizens together to consider an issue, it reports on the problems without fear or favor. Turn the reporters loose. Let them find what they can. If community leaders have been afflicted with discomfort over what the reporters have found, you have fertile ground for action.

The editorial pages, of course, do not remain neutral. That's where we bang away for change, louder than ever when we are writing about issues so important that they warrant the newspaper's stepping in as the convener.

A number of newspapers around the nation have worked as conveners, probably without ever assigning that label to what they were doing. Some examples:

In Wichita [Kansas], the *Eagle* has worked with Wichita State University's Hugo Wall Center for Urban Studies to focus on community

decision-making. The *Eagle* published a series of articles on children at risk, and then the university convened a group of a hundred people, a cross section of the community, to tackle the problem.

In Columbus, Georgia, Jack Swift, the late editor of the *Ledger-Enquirer*, convened a group of influential citizens and ordinary people in June, 1988, for a symposium on how to improve the quality of life in Columbus. For more than a week before, the *Enquirer* published articles on the city's problems and opportunities. Jack wrote at the time: "This is a wonderful place to live. We can make it better. . . . We hope the series will help create unity for a new vision of what the community can and should be."

Jack's effort was hotly debated among editors. And his effort was right. Political leadership in Columbus was weak at the time of the symposium, and the *Ledger-Enquirer's* campaign provided a rallying point for change that had not been there.

In Charlotte, the *Observer* decided in 1990 to make a push for protecting the Catawba River, which is the most important river in the Central Carolinas, flowing 435 miles from the mountains to the ocean. It is our drinking water; from it our nuclear power plants draw cool water; we have dammed it to create recreational lakes.

Key decisions regarding the Catawba are made piecemeal, with each county on the river in charge of development on the river and lakes; and some counties have no restrictions. The state has no plan for protecting the watershed. Development has run amok.

Ed Williams, editor of our editorial pages, invited the University of North Carolina at Charlotte to co-sponsor a regional conference on the future of the Catawba. The conference brought together developers, lake residents and recreational users, Duke Power Company, local and state regulators, environmentalists. We had strong advance reporting on the issues. The one-day conference didn't solve all the problems. But it did define a lot of them, and it did introduce a lot of people to others who are concerned about the issues. We have continued our aggressive reporting on watershed issues and have hammered with editorial after editorial. The results? Since the conference, counties have started cooperating on watershed protection issues; some counties that had no zoning regulations have adopted them; voters of one county approved a \$1 million bond issue to buy land for a nature preserve on one of the lakes; and the state is well on the way to adopting tough state watershed regulations.

Now, we co-sponsor an annual regional conference with UNCC. Last year, the conference was on "Schools That Work"—how to create the school systems we need for the 21st century.

In January, we launched a new form of campaign coverage that we hope will improve voter participation in elections. We have several partners: The Poynter Institute, a leading professional education center and think tank for the media; the University of North Carolina's School of Journalism and Mass Communication; and WSOC-TV of Charlotte.

David Broder of the *Washington Post* said voters see "no connection between the concerns in their daily lives and what they hear talked about and see reported by the press in most political campaigns."

We are out to change that. We polled 1,003 residents of 14 counties in our area about their concerns and problems; and we organized a citizens' panel of 530 people, who will participate in focus groups, follow-up interviews, and perhaps a town hall meeting.

We are asking our citizens, our readers, to forge the agenda for the campaign. We are not leaving this critical mission to campaign managers and strategists. Poynter Institute associate Ed Miller, who conceived this idea, says this: "Once journalists accept the principle that voters, not candidates, should set the campaign agenda, we can encourage political discourse and deny the rewards of manipulation."

UNC plans to measure the effectiveness of what we are doing through independent research, and a UNC historian is writing a case study in public agenda-setting.

Both projects—the regional conferences and the campaign coverage—bring together a university and a newspaper. That is deliberate. The newspaper doesn't suspend its responsibility for balanced coverage and auditing the performance of a university, and the university doesn't forfeit its right to review and challenge the newspaper. We both seek truth; we both rely for our energy on First Amendment freedoms.

Today, the South faces many problems. In the 1890s, *Observer* city editor Isaac Avery climbed a 14-story tower in the center of Charlotte. He wrote that from that tower he could see the puffs of black smoke from the train coming to Charlotte from Atlanta as it rounded Kings Mountain, 35 miles away. Think of the haze created by auto pollution that hangs over much of the South today.

We face the fragmentation of governance. Cities and towns within strip metropolitan areas war among themselves, and rarely is there an institution other than the newspaper to unify and animate civic action.

Crime is spreading rapidly, with local law enforcement agencies in a tension with state-administered courts and prisons.

The problems of public education are growing, with increasing disparities between urban and rural areas and struggles between local and state funding agencies.

We have the highest infant mortality rates in the nation. Many of our citizens work in unsafe, unregulated work places.

There will be a continuing demand for reform, for greater social responsibility.

Newspapers will be around for many years in the South and in our country if the people who run them and work for them assume the calls of their communities.

I don't think you will be loved if you take on the role as convener of the community. Prepare for the assault of the purists. Prepare for some in your community to hate you or to continue hating you. Prepare for many readers to be skeptical; and love them for being skeptical, which is a healthy attitude toward any institution of power, the press included. Though our love may be unreturned, I think we gain deeper respect from our readers if they see us working honestly, openly to help our communities solve problems.

Eugene Patterson, the retired editor of the *St. Petersburg Times* and an editor under publisher McGill, said McGill's source of power was his character, and from that great well he drew plain truths and stated them with courage.

When McGill died, the editors of the *Observer* wrote: "At heart he was inclined to heal rather than hurt those with whom he disagreed. But he could not and did not hesitate to sting with the written word like a physician disinfects a wound before it can be bound."

I think if he were here today, he would be stinging some wounds with disinfectant and then applying the bandages for healing.

Good medicine for the 1990s.