

## WHITE HOUSE CORRESPONDENTS' DINNER

THANK YOU FOR THAT LOVELY INTRODUCTION OLIVIER. I CONFESS THAT I WAS SURPRISED WHEN I RECEIVED THE INVITATION TO SPEAK HERE TONIGHT. I MEAN, I KNEW THEY WEREN'T APPROACHING ME AS AN INTERNATIONAL SEX SYMBOL, RIGHT? THEN OLIVIER TOLD ME THAT THEY WANTED TO TRY BORING AT THIS YEAR'S DINNER AND I SAID, OH, I CAN DELIVER ON THAT. BIG TIME. NOW YOU'RE TALKING MY LANGUAGE. SO HERE I AM, YOUR TWENTY-MINUTE SEDATIVE FOR THE EVENING.

IT'S NICE TO SEE SUCH A HEALTHY TURNOUT TONIGHT. YOU ALL KNOW THAT ON TUESDAY THE PRESIDENT REPORTEDLY SAID THAT MEMBERS OF HIS ADMINISTRATION SHOULD BOYCOTT THIS DINNER. AT FIRST I WAS PUZZLED BY THIS, BUT THEN I LEARNED THAT A RUMOR WAS CIRCULATING IN WASHINGTON THAT I WOULD READ ALOUD THE REDACTED PORTIONS OF THE MUELLER REPORT AND EVERYTHING WAS EXPLAINED.

OF COURSE THERE'S ALSO BEEN SOME SQUAWKING FROM THE COMEDIANS AND I'M SORRY ABOUT THAT. FRANKLY I THOUGHT THOSE FOLKS WOULD HAVE A LITTLE MORE OF A SENSE OF HUMOR ABOUT MY SELECTION—AFTER ALL, THEY *ARE* COMEDIANS—BUT WE NEED THEM MORE THAN EVER DURING THIS SURREAL INTERLUDE IN AMERICAN LIFE. AS WILL ROGERS ONCE OBSERVED, “PEOPLE ARE NOW TAKING THEIR COMEDIANS SERIOUSLY, AND THEIR POLITICIANS AS A JOKE,” AND THAT DESCRIBES OUR TOPSY-TURVY MOMENT. I HOPE THE COMICS WILL BE BACK FOR MANY MORE STAR TURNS IN THE FUTURE. MEANWHILE, IT'S ALWAYS FUN FOR A SERIOUS HISTORIAN TO STAND IN THE CROSS-FIRE OF AN ACTIVE WAR ZONE. WHEN I ASKED A FRIEND WHAT THE ATMOSPHERE WOULD BE LIKE AT THIS DINNER, HE REPLIED, “OH, THE ROMAN COLOSSEUM.” NOW BEING A DUTIFUL HISTORIAN, I THOUGHT I SHOULD RESEARCH MY AUDIENCE, SO I PICKED UP A COPY OF HENRIK IBSEN'S GREAT PLAY, ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE. I HADN'T REALIZED BEFORE THAT THE PRESIDENT WAS A STUDENT OF NORWEGIAN LITERATURE. THE DRAMA TAKES PLACE IN A SMALL NORWEGIAN TOWN THAT HOPES THE DISCOVERY OF MINERAL SPRINGS WILL TURN THE SLEEPY

**BACKWATER INTO A THRIVING SPA. THEN THE HERO OF THE PLAY, DR. THOMAS STOCKMANN, DISCOVERS THAT THE MIRACULOUS SPRINGS ARE POLLUTED AND BREEDING TYPHOID AND OTHER DISEASES. IN HIS NAIVETE, HE IMAGINES THAT THE TOWNSPEOPLE WILL APPLAUD HIM FOR SAVING THEM FROM CALAMITY. THEN HE DISCOVERS THAT TRUTH IS A POLITICAL COMMODITY DEFINED BY THE TOWN'S BUSINESS INTERESTS AND HE'S PERSECUTED FOR TRUTH-TELLING. HIS HOUSE IS STONED, HIS WINDOWS ARE SHATTERED, AND ANGRY MOBS BRAND HIM, YES, AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE. SO THE NEXT TIME YOU'RE DUBBED AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE, PLEASE THINK OF THE TERM IN THE NORWEGIAN SENSE AND WEAR IT AS A BADGE OF HONOR.**

**I'M DELIGHTED TO MAKE A SPIRITED CASE TONIGHT FOR THE FIRST AMENDMENT. WE NOW HAVE TO FIGHT HARD FOR BASIC TRUTHS WE ONCE TOOK FOR GRANTED. WE GATHER HERE IN PERFECT SECURITY BECAUSE OF A LITTLE PIECE OF PARCHMENT CALLED THE BILL OF RIGHTS THAT HAS ACQUIRED THE STATUS OF AMERICAN SCRIPTURE. IN THE LAST ANALYSIS, THAT PAPER BARRIER STANDS BETWEEN A FREE PRESS AND EXECUTIVE TYRANNY. ITS AUTHOR, JAMES MADISON, WAS A TINY, OFTEN SICKLY MAN, WHO PROBABLY WOULDN'T HAVE GOTTEN PAST THE BOUNCERS IN THIS BALLROOM AND WHOSE LOW VOICE WOULD SCARCELY HAVE PROJECTED FROM THIS PODIUM.**

**SO FERVENTLY DID MADISON BELIEVE IN THESE TEN AMENDMENTS THAT HE DIDN'T WANT THEM TACKED ON TO THE END OF THE CONSTITUTION, AS AN AFTERTHOUGHT, BUT WOVEN STRAIGHT INTO THE ORIGINAL TEXT. OF THOSE TEN LANDMARK AMENDMENTS, MADISON CONSIDERED THE FIRST INDISPENSABLE. LIKE ALL OUR FOUNDERS, HE REGARDED A FREE PRESS AS THE CORNERSTONE OF DEMOCRACY. AS JEFFERSON FAMOUSLY SAID, IF FORCED TO CHOOSE BETWEEN A GOVERNMENT WITHOUT NEWSPAPERS, OR NEWSPAPERS WITHOUT A GOVERNMENT, HE WOULD UNHESITATINGLY PREFER THE LATTER.**

**THE FIRST AMENDMENT WASN'T WRITTEN FOR THE EXCLUSIVE USE OF SAINTS AND CHOIRBOYS, NOR WAS IT GRANTED ONLY ON GOOD BEHAVIOR. AS MARK TWAIN NOTED, RUEFULLY, THE RIGHT TO STUPIDITY IS PROTECTED BY THE U.S. CONSTITUTION. THAT BECAME PATENTLY CLEAR DURING GEORGE WASHINGTON'S FIRST TERM IN OFFICE. AS BEST I CAN TELL, WASHINGTON**

**COMMITTED ONLY ONE MAJOR BLUNDER AS PRESIDENT: HE FAILED TO PUT HIS NAME ON MOUNT VERNON AND THEREBY BUNGLED AN EARLY OPPORTUNITY AT BRANDING. CLEARLY DEFICIENT IN THE ART OF THE DEAL, THE POOR MAN HAD TO SETTLE FOR THE LOWLY TITLE OF FATHER OF HIS COUNTRY.**

**THE PRESS OF THE EARLY REPUBLIC WAS AS FEROCIOUSLY PARTISAN AS ANYTHING WE SEE TODAY. IN THAT GOLDEN AGE OF CHARACTER ASSASSINATION, WRITERS MURDERED REPUTATIONS WHILE HIDING BEHIND ROMAN PSEUDONYMS. WASHINGTON BECAME THE VICTIM OF PREPOSTEROUS SLANDER WHEN THE OPPOSITION PRESS SAID HE'D BEEN A BRITISH SECRET AGENT DURING THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR. OBVIOUSLY THE BRITISH HAD GOTTEN A LOUSY RETURN ON THEIR INVESTMENT.**

**SOME OF THE MOST BLISTERING ATTACKS AGAINST WASHINGTON CAME FROM AN UNEXPECTED SOURCE. HIS SECRETARY OF STATE, THOMAS JEFFERSON, HAD HIRED A POET NAMED PHILIP FRENEAU AS STATE DEPARTMENT TRANSLATOR. NOW FRENEAU WAS PERFECTLY QUALIFIED FOR THE TRANSLATOR JOB EXCEPT FOR ONE SMALL DETAIL: HE KNEW ONLY A SINGLE FOREIGN LANGUAGE. IN TRUTH, JEFFERSON HAD RECRUITED HIM TO FOUND A PARTY ORGAN CALLED THE NATIONAL GAZETTE THAT WOULD PUBLISH SLASHING BROADSIDES AGAINST THE VERY PRESIDENT JEFFERSON SERVED. FRENEAU PERFORMED HIS TASK WITH SUCH MALICIOUS GUSTO THAT HE DROPPED OFF COPIES OF HIS INCENDIARY PAPER ON WASHINGTON'S DOORSTEP EVERY DAY.**

**IT'S HARD TO CONVEY THE ANGUISH THAT SEIZED WASHINGTON'S MIND AS HE REELED FROM PRESS CRITICISM. ONE DAY FRENEAU PRINTED A CARTOON SHOWING WASHINGTON BEHIND BEHEADED A LA LOUIS XVI. IN HIS DIARY JEFFERSON RECORDED WASHINGTON'S TOWERING RAGE: "THE PRESIDENT WAS MUCH INFLAMED, GOT INTO ONE OF THOSE PASSIONS WHEN HE CANNOT COMMAND HIMSELF" AND SAID "THAT *RASCAL FRENEAU* SENT HIM 3 OF HIS PAPERS EVERY DAY, AS IF HE THOUGHT HE WOULD BECOME THE DISTRIBUTOR" OF THEM. A VERY 18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY FORM OF CHUTZPAH, EH?**

**BUT DESPITE THIS EXTREME PROVOCATION, WASHINGTON ALWAYS**

**HONORED THE FIRST AMENDMENT, SAYING SUCH EVILS “MUST BE PLACED IN OPPOSITION TO THE INFINITE BENEFITS RESULTING FROM A FREE PRESS.” LIKE EVERY FUTURE PRESIDENT, WASHINGTON FELT MALIGNED AND MISUNDERSTOOD BY THE PRESS, BUT HE NEVER GENERALIZED THAT INTO A VENDETTA AGAINST THE INSTITUTION. IN FACT, WHEN HE WROTE HIS FAREWELL ADDRESS, HE NEVER DELIVERED IT IN PERSON, BUT HAD IT PUBLISHED IN THE NEWSPAPERS FOR READERS TO DIGEST. MY MAIN THEME HERE TONIGHT IS THAT RELATIONS BETWEEN PRESIDENTS AND THE PRESS ARE INEVITABLY TOUGH AND ALMOST ALWAYS ADVERSARIAL, BUT THEY DON’T NEED TO BE STEEPED IN VENOM.**

**OUR FOUNDERS WERE HIGHLY LITERATE PEOPLE AND NONE MORE SO THAN ALEXANDER HAMILTON, AN IMMIGRANT WHO ARRIVED, THANK GOD, BEFORE THE COUNTRY WAS FULL. I DON’T KNOW WHY THEY LET HIM IN. CLEARLY SOMEBODY SLIPPED UP AT THE SOUTHERN BORDER. YOU KNOW, HAMILTON WAS A HUMAN WORD MACHINE. WHEN COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS PUBLISHED 27 THICK VOLUMES OF HIS PAPERS, THE EDITOR JOKED THAT HE WANTED TO DEDICATE THE ENTIRE VOLUMINOUS EDITION TO “AARON BURR, WITHOUT WHOSE COOPERATION THIS PROJECT WOULD NEVER HAVE BEEN COMPLETED.” HAMILTON HAD A FLOURISHING CAREER AS A JOURNALIST AS WELL AS A GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL, FOUNDING THE NEW YORK POST LONG BEFORE ITS PAGE SIX INCARNATION.**

**WHEN WRITING THE FEDERALIST PAPERS, HAMILTON CRANKED OUT AS MANY AS FIVE OR SIX ESSAYS PER WEEK AND THIS, MIND YOU, WITH A FULL-TIME LEGAL PRACTICE. HE WOULD BE SCRIBBLING THE FINAL SENTENCES OF AN ESSAY AS THE PRINTER WAITED IN HIS OUTER OFFICE, READY TO RUSH THE LATEST INSTALLMENT INTO PRINT. AFTER LEAVING AS FIRST TREASURY SECRETARY, HAMILTON DEFENDED IN THE PRESS A MAJOR TREATY WITH ENGLAND. HE WROTE ONE SET OF ESSAYS UNDER THE PEN NAME CAMILLUS, THEN LAUNCHED A SECOND SERIES UNDER THE PEN NAME PHILO CAMILLUS. NOW PHILO CAMILLUS HEAPED EXTRAVAGANT PRAISE ON CAMILLUS AND BOTH CAMILLUS AND PHILO CAMILLUS, FOR SOME REASON, WERE RAPTUROUS IN THEIR ADORATION FOR THE FORMER TREASURY SECRETARY, ONE ALEXANDER HAMILTON.**

**DURING THE ADMINISTRATION OF JOHN ADAMS, THE COUNTRY LURCHED**

INTO A PERIOD OF REACTION AMID A WAR SCARE WITH FRANCE AND RAMPANT FEAR OF FOREIGNERS. CONGRESS ENACTED THE INFAMOUS ALIEN AND SEDITION ACTS, WHICH MADE IT A CRIME FOR JOURNALISTS TO WRITE ABOUT THE PRESIDENT IN A SCANDALOUS OR MALICIOUS FASHION. AT THIS DARK MOMENT, JEFFERSON, WITH HIS SERENE FAITH IN THE PEOPLE, PROPHESED, “WITH A LITTLE PATIENCE...WE SHALL SEE THE REIGN OF WITCHES PASS, THEIR SPELLS DISSOLVE.” LET IT BE NOTED THAT BECAUSE OF HIS ANTI-PRESS RECORD, JOHN ADAMS NOT ONLY LOST HIS REELECTION CAMPAIGN IN 1800, BUT HIS JEFFERSONIAN OPPONENTS REIGNED SUPREME FOR THE NEXT QUARTER CENTURY. CAMPAIGNS AGAINST THE PRESS DON’T GET YOUR FACE CARVED INTO THE ROCKS OF MOUNT RUSHMORE FOR WHEN YOU CHIP AWAY AT THE PRESS, YOU CHIP AWAY AT OUR DEMOCRACY. THE TRIBUNAL OF HISTORY DOES NOT DEAL LENIENTLY WITH PRESIDENTS WHO PUNISH THE PRESS.

PEOPLE SAY THAT WE’RE NOW FIGHTING FOR THE SOUL OF AMERICA. BUT, FOLKS, WE’VE *ALWAYS* BEEN FIGHTING FOR THE SOUL OF AMERICA. WE’VE *ALWAYS* FALLEN SHORT OF THE HALLOWED IDEALS ENSHRINED IN OUR FOUNDING DOCUMENTS. AMERICA HAS *ALWAYS* BEEN A WORK IN PROGRESS, A PERPETUAL JOURNEY, A FREEDOM RIDE WITH NO FINAL DESTINATION. AND IT FALLS TO EACH NEW GENERATION TO RENEW AND REDISCOVER OUR COUNTRY’S LOFY PROMISE. DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. SAID MEMORABLY THAT THE MORAL ARC OF THE UNIVERSE BENDS TOWARD JUSTICE, BUT IT NEVER DOES SO IN A SMOOTH OR UNBROKEN LINE.

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OUR PRECIOUS REPUBLIC FEELS FRAGILE, EVEN PERISHABLE, AT THE MOMENT. I SHUDDER AT THE SHEER SAVAGERY TO WHICH WASHINGTON POLITICS HAS DESCENDED. BUT WE’VE ALSO SEEN THE WISDOM OF OUR CONSTITUTION AT WORK WITH A BOLDLY ASSERTIVE PRESS, AN INDEPENDENT JUDICIARY, AND A REJUVENATED CONGRESS PROVIDING CHECKS ON EXECUTIVE POWER. WE’RE BEING TESTED—FIERCELY TESTED—BUT I LIKE TO THINK THAT DECENCY WILL

**PREVAIL. HISTORY SHOWS THAT, IN THE SHORT RUN, THE AMERICAN PUBLIC CAN BE SWEEPED UP IN ALL SORTS OF MISGUIDED AND WRONGHEADED THINGS—THINK SCOTTSBORO BOYS; THINK JAPANESE INTERNMENT CAMPS; THINK JOE MCCARTHY—BUT IN THE LONG RUN DEMOCRACY ENDURES.**

**DURING THE CIVIL WAR, WE BATTLED EACH OTHER NOT WITH BALLOTS, BUT WITH BATTALIONS. WE SLAUGHTERED 750,000 OF OUR FELLOW CITIZENS, MAIMING MILLIONS MORE. AMPUTEES HOBbled THROUGH EVERY AMERICAN TOWN. TOWARDS THE END OF THAT BLOODY CONFLICT, A CHASTENED BUT STILL HOPEFUL ABRAHAM LINCOLN SAT AROUND A VIRGINIA CAMPFIRE WITH HIS CHIEF GENERAL, ULYSSES S. GRANT, AND HE QUOTED HIS SECRETARY OF STATE WILLIAM SEWARD AS SAYING, “THAT THERE WAS ALWAYS JUST ENOUGH VIRTUE IN THIS REPUBLIC TO SAVE IT; SOMETIMES NONE TO SPARE, BUT STILL ENOUGH TO MEET THE EMERGENCY.” LIKE LINCOLN, I BELIEVE DEVOUTLY IN THAT SAVING REMNANT OF GRACE IN OUR COUNTRY. WE’VE FOUGHT HORRIFIC WARS, WEATHERED MASSIVE DEPRESSIONS, AND ENDED THE UNSPEAKABLE CRUELTY OF SLAVERY AND JIM CROW. AMERICA HAS ALWAYS BEEN GREAT, NOT WHEN IT BOASTED, NOT WHEN IT BLUSTERED, BUT WHEN IT ADMITTED ITS MISTAKES AND SOUGHT TO OVERCOME THEM.**

**OKAY, LET ME MOVE ON TO THE PRESIDENT AND THE PRESS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY. BACK IN THE DAYS OF WILLIAM MCKINLEY, THERE WAS NO WHITE HOUSE PRESS ROOM, JUST A LONG TABLE FOR REPORTERS ON THE SECOND FLOOR. AS ONE JOURNALIST COMPLAINED, “IT’S PART OF THE UNWRITTEN LAW OF THE WHITE HOUSE THAT NEWSPAPERMEN SHALL NEVER APPROACH THE PRESIDENT AS HE PASSES...UNLESS HE HIMSELF STOPS AND TALKS TO THEM.” A RATHER ROYAL CONCEPTION OF THE PRESIDENCY WITH NO SHOUTED QUESTIONS ALLOWED.**

**IN THOSE MORE INNOCENT DAYS, REPORTERS STILL SHIELDED THE PRIVATE LIVES OF PRESIDENTS. LET ME TELL YOU HOW WARREN HARDING GOT THE REPUBLICAN NOMINATION IN 1920. PARTY BOSSES SUMMONED HM TO THE PROVERBIAL SMOKE-FILLED ROOM IN CHICAGO AND ASKED HIM POINT-BLANK IF HE HAD ANY DAMAGING PERSONAL ISSUES THEY SHOULD KNOW ABOUT. NOW HARDING, A MARRIED MAN, DRANK HEAVILY AND GAMBLED FREELY, HE’D HAD A**

FIFTEEN-YEAR AFFAIR WITH HIS BEST FRIEND'S WIFE, AND HE HAD A MISTRESS AND AN ILLEGITIMATE BABY DAUGHTER RIGHT THERE IN CHICAGO. IN FACT, HIS YOUNG MISTRESS SAT IN THE BALCONY OF THE CONVENTION HALL, ENJOYING THE SPEECHES. BUT HARDING ASSURED THE PARTY BOSSES THAT HE COULDN'T THINK OF A SINGLE PERSONAL PROBLEM TO WORRY ABOUT. OF COURSE THE PRESS CORPS WOULD GROW BIGGER AND MORE INTRUSIVE AS THE CENTURY PROGRESSED AND RELATIONS WITH THE WHITE HOUSE WOULD GROW EVER MORE ACRIMONIOUS.

EVEN THOUGH IT MAY SEEM WISTFUL AND NAIVE AND A TOUCH QUIXOTIC, I WOULD LIKE TO KEEP ALIVE TONIGHT THE FADING MEMORY OF MORE CIVILIZED DEALINGS BETWEEN CHIEF EXECUTIVES AND THE NEWS MEDIA. CALL IT A MUSEUM OF PRESIDENTIAL DECORUM. AT THIS CONFRONTATIONAL MOMENT IN AMERICAN POLITICS, WE MUST RECALL THAT CIVILITY HAS BEEN AN ESSENTIAL LUBRICANT IN OUR DEMOCRATIC CULTURE AND THAT OUR BEST PRESIDENTS HAVE HANDLED THE PRESS WITH WIT, GRACE, CHARM, CANDOR, AND EVEN HUMOR.

AFTER MCKINLEY'S WOODEN FORMALITY, TEDDY ROOSEVELT PROVED A VIRTUOSO IN DEALING WITH THE PRESS. THE PROLIFIC AUTHOR OF 45 VOLUMES, HE DEVoured A BOOK A DAY IN THE WHITE HOUSE AND RETAINED ALL OF THEM. ONE NOVELIST WHO BROUGHT A NEW WORK TO DINNER WAS AMAZED THAT THE PRESIDENT HAD READ IT BY BREAKFAST THE NEXT MORNING. SUCH A LITERATE PRESIDENT ENJOYED A NATURAL AFFINITY WITH THE PRESS CORPS. HE DEvised A MIDDAY RITUAL CALLED THE 'BARBER'S HOUR' IN WHICH REPORTERS WOULD CLUSTER AROUND HIM AS HE WAS BEING SHAVED. THE BABBLING PRESIDENT WOULD SPOUT A NEVER-ENDING STREAM OF OPINIONS WHILE HIS POOR BARBER, BOBBING AND WEAVING WITH HIS RAZOR, GAmELY TRIED TO SHAVE HIM WITHOUT SLITTING THE PRESIDENTIAL THROAT.

WHEN CALVIN COOLIDGE WAS PRESIDENT IN THE 1920S, HE INAUGURATED THE FIRST REGULARLY SCHEDULED PRESS CONFERENCES. REPORTERS HAD TO FILE THEIR QUESTIONS IN ADVANCE AND SILENT CAL SAT STIFFLY BEHIND HIS DESK, WORKING HIS WAY THROUGH A TIDY STACK OF INDEX CARDS. SMALL WONDER THAT DOROTHY PARKER, WHEN INFORMED OF COOLIDGE'S DEATH,

RETORTED, “HOW DO THEY KNOW?” PRESS RELATIONS ONLY WORSENERED WITH COOLIDGE’S SUCCESSOR, HERBERT HOOVER. MIRED IN THE GREAT DEPRESSION AND HIS OWN PERSONAL GLOOM—EVEN HIS OWN SECRETARY OF STATE BEMOANED THAT CHATTING WITH HOOVER WAS LIKE “SITTING IN A BATH OF INK”—THE PRESIDENT HIRED A HAPLESS PRESS SECRETARY WHO PROVED SO UNPOPULAR THAT ONE REPORTER QUIPPED IT WAS “THE FIRST KNOWN INSTANCE OF A RAT *JOINING* A SINKING SHIP.”

WHEN FRANKLIN ROOSEVELT CAME INTO OFFICE, HE SWEEPED AWAY RESTRICTIVE RULES AND TREATED REPORTERS, LO AND BEHOLD, LIKE GROWNUPS! “WE’RE NOT GOING TO HAVE ANY MORE WRITTEN QUESTIONS,” THE GENIAL PRESIDENT DECLARED AT HIS FIRST PRESS CONFERENCE. “OF COURSE WHILE I CANNOT ANSWER SEVENTY-FIVE OR A HUNDRED QUESTIONS...I SEE NO REASON WHY I SHOULD NOT TALK TO YOU LADIES AND GENTLEMEN OFF THE RECORD.” PLEASE NOTE THE LADIES AND GENTLEMEN. THE 125 REPORTERS PACKED INTO THE OVAL OFFICE WERE SO IMPRESSED BY FDR’S CLEAR, STRAIGHTFORWARD RULES THAT THEY GAVE HIM A STANDING OVATION AT THE END—THE FIRST AND UNDOUBTEDLY LAST TIME THAT WOULD EVER HAPPEN.

IN THE END, FDR CONDUCTED NEARLY A THOUSAND PRESS CONFERENCES, NOT TO MENTION THIRTY FIRESIDE CHATS, AND EVEN ELEANOR ROOSEVELT HELD HER OWN PRESS CONFERENCES, WHERE SHE INVITED ONLY FEMALE REPORTERS. THIS PROVED A TREMENDOUS BOON TO WOMEN JOURNALISTS ACROSS THE COUNTRY SINCE EVEN THE MOST HIDEBOUND PUBLISHERS WERE NOW FORCED TO HIRE THEM.

OF COURSE, WHEN IT CAME TO WIT AND CHARM, JOHN F. KENNEDY PROBABLY RETIRED THE PRIZE. HIS MEMORY REMINDS US HOW FAR A LITTLE SELF-DEPRECATING HUMOR CAN GO. REMEMBER MODESTY? WHEN A SMALL BOY ASKED KENNEDY HOW HE BECAME A WAR HERO, HE REPLIED, “IT WAS ABSOLUTELY INVOLUNTARY. THEY SANK MY BOAT.” IN 1958 THEN SENATOR KENNEDY WAS BEING TOUTED AS A PRESIDENTIAL HOPEFUL, BUT HE WAS SHADOWED BY SCURRILOUS RUMORS THAT HIS RICH FATHER WOULD BUY THE RACE. SO AT THE GRIDIRON CLUB DINNER, JFK DREW A SLIP OF PAPER FROM HIS POCKET AND PROUDLY ANNOUNCED THAT HE HAD A TELEGRAM FROM HIS



**“GENEROUS DADDY.” HE READ ALOUD: “DEAR JACK, DON’T BUY A SINGLE VOTE MORE THAN IS NECESSARY. I’LL BE DAMNED IF I’M GOING TO PAY FOR A LANDSLIDE.” THE PRESS WAS ENTHRALLED. WHEN JFK HELD HIS FIRST TELEVISED PRESS CONFERENCE IN JANUARY 1961, 60 MILLION CAPTIVATED VIEWERS WERE GLUED TO THEIR TV SETS, A RECORD ONLY ECLIPSED BY THE SEVENTY MILLION WHO WATCHED THE BEATLES DEBUT ON THE ED SULLIVAN SHOW THREE YEARS LATER. I OFTEN WONDER WHAT THE BEATLES’ POLL NUMBERS WOULD HAVE LOOKED LIKE IN IOWA AND NEW HAMPSHIRE IN THAT PRESIDENTIAL YEAR.**

**RONALD REAGAN WAS A NO LESS SUNNY PERSONALITY AND A PAST MASTER OF MEDIA RELATIONS. WHEN HE BECAME PRESIDENT, HE SAID, “I THINK THAT MOST OF THE TIME THE OVERWHELMING MAJORITY OF REPORTERS DO A FINE JOB, AND AS A FORMER REPORTER...I KNOW JUST HOW TOUGH THEIR JOB CAN BE.” NEVERTHELESS, REAGAN HAD A SOMETIMES BUMPY RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PRESS. THEN ON MARCH 30, 1981, HE WAS SHOT AND NEARLY KILLED OUTSIDE THIS VERY HOTEL, THE WASHINGTON HILTON, AS HE WAS ABOUT TO DUCK INTO HIS LIMOUSINE. A BULLET LODGED WITHIN AN INCH OF HIS HEART. REAGAN WAS SCHEDULED TO SPEAK, YES, AT THE WHITE HOUSE CORRESPONDENTS’ DINNER, SO HE TELEPHONED IN THIS LINE INSTEAD: “IF I COULD GIVE YOU JUST ONE LITTLE BIT OF ADVICE, WHEN SOMEBODY TELLS YOU TO GET INTO A CAR QUICK, DO IT.” THAT WAS A TOUCH OF CLASS THAT HAS BEEN SORELY MISSING IN OUR POLITICAL CULTURE IN RECENT YEARS. IT WAS A SUBTLE REMINDER THAT, WHETHER REPUBLICANS OR DEMOCRATS, WE ARE ALL BONA FIDE MEMBERS OF TEAM U.S.A. AND NOT MEMBERS OF ENEMY CAMPS.**

**OKAY, I KNOW I’M WALLOWING IN NOSTALGIA AND IGNORING LESS SAVORY MOMENTS OF THESE AND OTHER PRESIDENTS. RICHARD NIXON FORCED HIMSELF TO GO TO DINNERS LIKE THIS, WHERE HE HAD TO HOBNOB WITH REPORTERS WHO’D JUST WRITTEN EXPOSES ABOUT HIM. IN THE SPRING OF 1971, HE FOLLOWED THE ADVICE OF PRESS SECRETARY RON ZIEGLER AND DECIDED TO ‘PLAY THE GOOD SPORT’ AT THE WHITE HOUSE CORRESPONDENTS DINNER. HIS GESTURE DID NOT IMPRESS THE NEWS MEDIA. AFTER HIS NEXT PRESS CONFERENCE, NIXON GRUMBLED PRIVATELY, “THE REPORTERS WERE CONSIDERABLY MORE BAD-MANNERED AND VICIOUS THAN USUAL. THIS BEARS OUT MY THEORY THAT**

**TREATING THEM WITH CONSIDERABLY MORE CONTEMPT IS...A MORE PRODUCTIVE POLICY.”**

**WHEN NIXON HOSTED A PARTY FOR P.O.W. FAMILIES AND FELT BATHED IN FEMALE ADORATION, HE THOUGHT HIS MASCULINE APPEAL INSUFFICIENTLY ACKNOWLEDGED BY THE PRESS COVERAGE. “THAT’S WHAT THE GODDAMN NEW YORK TIMES AND WASHINGTON POST SHOULD BE WRITING ABOUT,” HE GROUSED. “I’M GOING TO KICK THEIR ASSES AROUND THE BLOCK.” SUCH PRESIDENTIAL ELOQUENCE. SHALL WE EVER SEE ITS LIKE AGAIN? DON’T ANSWER. OF COURSE THE ONE WHO ENDED UP GETTING HIS ASS KICKED AROUND THE BLOCK WAS...YOU KNOW WHO.**

**YOU KNOW, YOU FOLKS IN THE MEDIA WRITE THE EARLY DRAFTS OF HISTORY AND WE HISTORIANS THE LATER ONES. YOUR WORK GIVES FRESHNESS, COLOR, AND IMMEDIACY TO OUR SAGAS. I KNOW HOW EMBATTLED YOU FEEL AT THIS CRITICAL JUNCTURE AS YOU COMBAT THE MISTRUST OF A SIGNIFICANT PORTION OF THE AMERICAN ELECTORATE. I THINK YOU’RE DOING NOBLE WORK TO PRESERVE DEMOCRACY AT A TIME WHEN A RISING TIDE OF MISINFORMATION, MASQUERADING AS NEWS, THREATENS TO MAKE A MOCKERY OF THE FIRST AMENDMENT. THERE ARE SO MANY JOURNALISTIC FAKES AND FORGERIES OUT THERE THAT THE GENUINE ARTICLE BECOMES DEVALUED AND DEBASED. YOU MUST ALSO DEAL WITH A PERVASIVE WORLD OF SOCIAL MEDIA RIFE WITH SELF-APPOINTED PUNDITS WHO SEARCH OUT NEWS OUTLETS THAT ONLY STRENGTHEN THEIR PRECONCEIVED VIEWS.**

**STILL, THIS IS AS GOOD A TIME AS ANY TO TAKE STOCK AND REDEDICATE YOURSELF TO THE HIGHEST STANDARDS OF ACCURACY AND INTEGRITY. DONALD J. TRUMP IS NOT THE FIRST AND WON’T BE THE LAST AMERICAN PRESIDENT TO CREATE JITTERS ABOUT THE FIRST AMENDMENT. SO BE HUMBLE, BE SKEPTICAL, AND BEWARE OF BEING INFECTED BY SOME OF THE VERY THINGS YOU’RE FIGHTING AGAINST. THE PRESS IS A POWERFUL WEAPON THAT MUST ALWAYS BE FIRED WITH RELUCTANCE AND AIMED WITH PRECISION. WARREN BUFFETT HAS A HANDY SAYING: ALWAYS TAKE THE HIGH ROAD, IT’S FAR LESS CROWDED THERE. AND SOME DAYS IN WASHINGTON, LET’S FACE IT, A POLITICIAN CAN SAIL ALONG THAT UPPER ROADWAY FOR HOURS WITHOUT SPOTTING ANOTHER CAR.**

**YOU FOLKS SHOULD ALWAYS REMEMBER THAT YOU ARE HEIRS TO A GRAND CRUSADING TRADITION THAT DATES BACK TO IDA B. WELLS EXPOSING THE HORRORS OF LYNCHING; JACOB RIIS THE MISERY OF MANHATTAN SLUMS; LINCOLN STEFFENS MUNICIPAL CORRUPTION; IDA TARBELL THE MACHINATIONS OF STANDARD OIL; UPTON SINCLAIR THE SCANDALOUS MEAT PACKING INDUSTRY; RACHEL CARSON THE DANGERS OF PESTICIDES; WOODWARD AND BERNSTEIN EXPOSING WATERGATE; AND THE NEW YORK TIMES AND WASHINGTON POST PUBLISHING THE PENTAGON PAPERS. THIS IS A GLORIOUS TRADITION, YOU FOLKS ARE PART OF IT, AND WE CAN'T HAVE POLITICIANS TRAMPLING ON IT WITH IMPUNITY. H.L. MENCKEN ONCE WARNED OF A POLITICAL SYSTEM THAT WOULD "KEEP THE POPULACE ALARMED...BY MENACING IT WITH AN ENDLESS SERIES OF HOBGOBLINS, ALL OF THEM IMAGINARY." WE SIMPLY CANNOT ALLOW THE PRESS TO BECOME AN IMAGINARY HOBGOBLIN FOR POLITICAL GAIN.**

**THE THING THAT TROUBLES ME MOST AT THE MOMENT IS THE SUSTAINED ASSAULT ON TRUTH, OR AT LEAST A CAVALIER DISREGARD OF IT, BOTH HERE AND BY AUTOCRATIC REGIMES ABROAD. AS JOHN ADAMS SAID, "FACTS ARE STUBBORN THINGS" AND OUR WISHES CANNOT ALTER THEM. FACTS ARE THE FOOT SOLDIERS OF OUR RESPECTIVE PROFESSIONS, THEY DO THE HARD MARCHING AND SHOULD WEAR NO IDEOLOGICAL COLORING. WITHOUT THE FACTS, WE CANNOT HAVE AGREEMENT IN OUR BADLY DIVIDED NATION; MORE IMPORTANTLY, WITHOUT THE FACTS WE CANNOT HAVE AN HONEST *DISAGREEMENT*. I APPLAUD ANY PRESIDENT WHO ASPIRES TO THE NOBEL PRIZE FOR PEACE, BUT WE DON'T WANT ONE IN THE RUNNING FOR THE NOBEL PRIZE IN FICTION.**

**ULYSSES S. GRANT WASN'T A FLAWLESS PRESIDENT, BUT HE WAS A STICKLER FOR THE TRUTH. ONE DAY IN THE WHITE HOUSE GRANT WAS BUSY WHEN A STRANGER CALLED. KNOWING GRANT WAS OCCUPIED, AN AIDE INFORMED THE USHER, "TELL THE GENTLEMAN THAT THE PRESIDENT IS OUT." OVERHEARING THIS, GRANT GREW OUTRAGED. "NO, DON'T TELL HIM THAT," HE SAID. "TELL HIM I AM ENGAGED AND MUST BE EXCUSED. I NEVER LIE FOR MYSELF AND DO NOT WANT ANYBODY TO LIE FOR ME." THAT'S A POWERFUL EXAMPLE THAT ALL PRESIDENTS SHOULD EMULATE.**

**YOU KNOW, WE'VE SEEN PAST ADMINISTRATIONS THREATEN THE PRESS**

**DIRECTLY, WHETHER IT BE LINCOLN SHUTTING DOWN DISLOYAL PAPERS DURING THE CIVIL WAR OR WOODROW WILSON STIFLING DISSENT WITH THE ESPIONAGE ACT IN WORLD WAR I. BUT WHAT IS HAPPENING TODAY IS PERHAPS EVEN MORE INSIDIOUS: A RELENTLESS CAMPAIGN AGAINST THE VERY CREDIBILITY OF THE NEWS MEDIA. EVEN THE SMARTEST COURTROOM LAWYERS CAN'T DEFEND THE PRESS AGAINST SUCH VAGUE AND SWEEPING ATTACKS. YOU FOLKS CAN ONLY PRESERVE THAT HARD-WON CREDIBILITY IN ONE WAY: WITH SOLID, FAIR-MINDED, AND ENERGETIC REPORTING.**

**SINCE I'VE CRUELLY DEPRIVED YOU OF A COMEDIAN TONIGHT, I'D LIKE TO END WITH SOME PERTINENT QUOTES FROM MARK TWAIN, WHO CAST A SATIRICAL EYE ON WASHINGTON FOLLY. HE SAID, "THE POLITICAL AND COMMERCIAL MORALS OF THE UNITED STATES ARE NOT MERELY FOOD FOR LAUGHTER, THEY ARE AN ENTIRE BANQUET." AND I LOVE THIS QUOTE: "SOMETIMES I WONDER WHETHER THE WORLD IS BEING RUN BY SMART PEOPLE WHO ARE PUTTING US ON, OR BY IMBECILES WHO REALLY MEAN IT." HE COULD BE SCATHING ABOUT CAPITOL HILL, SAYING, "THERE IS NO DISTINCTLY NATIVE AMERICAN CRIMINAL CLASS EXCEPT CONGRESS." HE COULD BE EQUALLY SAVAGE ABOUT PRESIDENTS, SAYING THE U.S. WAS NEVER CONTENT "TO HAVE A CHIEF MAGISTRATE OF GOLD WHEN IT COULD GET ONE OF TIN." AND AS WE HEAD INTO ANOTHER ELECTION SEASON, I WILL LEAVE YOU WITH ONE FINAL GEM FROM TWAIN: "POLITICIANS AND DIAPERS MUST BE CHANGED OFTEN, AND FOR THE SAME REASON."**

**GOOD NIGHT AND GOD BLESS AMERICA!**