

The Breakfast Club
Constitutional Minute for 14 February 2023
Right #4: Freedom of the Press

"Our liberty cannot be guarded but by the freedom of the press, nor that be limited without danger of losing it." said-Thomas Jefferson in a 1786 letter to John Jay. Little did Jefferson know that fourteen years later he would be unfairly vilified by that same press and almost lose a chance at the Presidency.

It is the year 1800. John Adams, a Federalist, has had a rather lackluster four years as President. His Vice-President, Thomas Jefferson, affiliated with the Democratic-Republican Party he and James Madison founded a few years before, is standing for election to challenge Adams. Word on the street is that this may be the most important election in American history (to that point at least). Americans know quite a bit about both men, they have each devoted a considerable portion of their lives to public service and held very visible and influential elected and appointed positions. Each has served as the American Ambassador to foreign governments. Each served in the Continental Congress, even on the same committee which drafted the Declaration of Independence. They come from different regions of the country where different denominations prevail. Each holds unorthodox views regarding Christianity.

Few Americans have access to Adams's three-volume "Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States," published in 1787 or his 1776 "Thoughts on Government." Although all Americans know the Declaration of Independence, few of the time know Jefferson was its author and fewer still have read his 1774 "A Summary View on the Rights of British America" or his 1787 "Notes on the State of Virginia." Political "campaigns" as we know them today had yet to be invented; there would be no debates, no speeches, no "meet-and-greets," no fund-raiser BBQs. Who would make the better President? How do Americans of 1800 decide as they prepare for their state's election day (because each state chose its own election day in 1800, the voting lasted from April to October)? Answer: they read their newspapers. Except...they must decide which newspaper to read.

In the Philadelphia *Aurora*, edited by William Duane, a printer whom Federalists charged, unsuccessfully, with sedition in 1799 (see last week's essay regarding the 1799 Alien and Sedition laws), they will encounter the "horror: of an Adam's administration compared with the "glory" of a Jefferson administration. Under Adams, America would experience:

"The principles and patriots of the *Revolution* condemned..."

"The *Nation* in arms without a foe, and divided without a cause..."

"The reign of terror created by false alarms, to promote domestic feud and foreign war."

"A Sedition Law..."

"An established church, a religious test, and an order of Priesthood."

A Jefferson administration, on the other hand, would bring:

"The Principles of the Revolution restored..."

"The Nation at peace with the world and united in itself."

“Republicanism allaying the fever of domestic feuds, and subduing the opposition by the force of reason and rectitude.”

“The Liberty of the Press.”

“Religious liberty, the rights of conscience, no priesthood, truth and Jefferson.”

If the Philadelphia citizen happened instead to pick up a copy of *Gazette of the United States*, the choice will be between: “GOD—AND A RELIGIOUS PRESIDENT” or “JEFFERSON—AND NO GOD!!!”

New England newspapers were even more virulent: “*We will not learn the principles of liberty from the slave-holders of Virginia,*” the *Connecticut Courant* declared. Another Federalist-aligned newspaper warned that “*Democracy in Virginia, therefore, is like virtue in hell.*”

And we think we are the first to experience biased public media.

Founding era newspapers made no claim to objectivity. The problem we face today is that today’s news media usually paints a veneer of objectivity while clearly being otherwise. CNN has become DNN (Democrat News Network), The Washington Post, New York Times, MSNBC and other “main-stream media” are irrefutably biased against the Republicans and conservatives in general.

But even more troubling today are the emerging calls to change the whole complexion of journalism by literally casting objectivity aside: “*Objectivity has got to go!*”ⁱ wrote Emilio Garcia-Ruiz, editor-in-chief at the San Francisco Chronicle. Breathtaking in its hubris, I’m certain the idea is finding fertile ground among the radical left who staff the majority of media positions. Columbia Journalism Dean and New Yorker writer Steve Coll complained that freedom of speech was being “*weaponized*” to protect disinformation.ⁱⁱ Lauren Wolfe, a freelance editor for the New York Times, proudly announced: [“I’m a Biased Journalist and I’m Okay With That.”](#)

This might signal the end of journalism as we know it. Certainly it casts a dark cloud over the entirety of the press. In the future will “freedom of the press” equate to the freedom to bend the public’s perception of truth? A lot of us have heard the meme that “you need only change the definition of five words a year to completely change a culture.” For people of my generation “the press” has until recently enjoyed a traditional definition: professionals who seek out the truth about an event or situation and then report that truth so everyone they reach has the same set of facts. Perhaps this will change in the near future.

If to have Freedom of Speech we must be willing to tolerate viewpoints we don’t agree with, to have Freedom of the Press I think we’ll have to put up with some in this Press who have an agenda. Caveat Emptor!

For further reading:

[Infamous Scribblers; The Founding fathers and the Rowdy Beginnings of American Journalism, by Eirc Burns.](#)

[America Afire, Jefferson, Adams and the First Contested Election, by Bernard A. Weisberger](#)

[Emergence of a Free Press, by Leonard Levy](#)

Next week: Right #5: Freedom of Assembly.

Prepared by: Gary R. Porter, Executive Director, Constitution Leadership Initiative, Inc. for The Breakfast Club. Contact: gary@constitutionleadership.org; 757-817-1216

ⁱ <https://jonathanturley.org/2023/02/01/objectivity-has-got-to-go-news-leaders-call-for-end-of-objective-journalism/>

ⁱⁱ *ibid*