

1910
15

The Navy and The Press

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
ARCHIVES
RECEIVED
JAN 24 1910

AN ADDRESS

—DELIVERED BY—

JOHN CALLAN O'LAUGHLIN

AT THE NAVAL WAR COLLEGE

NEWPORT, R. I.

JULY 13, 1909

PRESS OF SHAW BROS.
WASHINGTON

THE NAVY AND THE PRESS.

An address delivered by John Callan O'Laughlin, at the Naval War College, Newport, R. I., July 13, 1909.

It is a fascinating subject which has been given me to discuss before you this morning. It is as broad as human knowledge, as limitless as human endeavor. It is the co-operation of two great forces, one of which creates, molds, and even directs public opinion; the other, if efficient, which makes its activities possible and executes the will of that public opinion. It is the harnessing of the pen and the sword in the patriotic work of protecting American liberty and carrying on to its sublime destiny the nation in whose cause both are dedicated.

To men of your intellectual attainments, it is unnecessary for me to dwell upon the power of the press—those holy little letters of lead, to use the beautiful expression of M. Anatole France, which should carry right and reason throughout the world. United for good or evil, it is omnipotent. It has conserved freedom. It has made wars; it has averted them. It has planted the seed of reform in corruption, has given it assiduous care, and has produced social well-being and consequent national strength. It has developed progress and spread civilization. It is the force responsible for the means which give the country safety, and floods those means with a white light which begets confidence and resultant generosity, or exposes defects which may enable correction from within; and, if that be impossible, correction from without.

There is, of course, another side to the shield. Evilly used, the press is potent for evil. It can make or mar a cause for the moment; but if the cause be good, it will prevail. It can make or mar a reputation. It has made and unmade military and naval heroes. But truth has had, and must always have, its exponents, and ultimately will gain its rightful eminence. It has overawed, coerced, and controlled rulers, politicians, courts; but its victories, when won for evil purposes, have not been, and cannot be, of lasting effect.

"I would rather live in a country with newspapers and without a government," observed the wise Thomas Jefferson, "than in a country with a government, but without newspapers." The wisdom of the statesman is in this epigram, for analyzed it means that governments without newspapers speedily degenerate into governments of extravagance and tyranny, while a land without government and with newspapers would, at least, have knowledge, and with knowledge an organized public opinion.

So with the Navy. Deprive the service of publicity, and its develop-

ment will be arrested, and its decay inaugurated. Deprive the service of publicity, and the incentive to efficiency will be lost. Deprive the service of publicity, and tyranny and extravagance will reign. But let publicity, with rightful direction, prevail, and a united people will be behind the service, a united people will provide for its development, and a united Navy, with progressive administration, will furnish efficiency. "Don't wash dirty linen in public" has been the favorite advice of those who believe that the Navy is a private corporation which has something to conceal. But I say to you, throw open the doors to the people and to their agent, the press. It was a maxim of former President Roosevelt that no lie should stand uncorrected; and he was perfectly willing to be criticised editorially if he might say what he would in the news columns. His policy is one the wise will follow. If wrong be charged, investigate it; not in Star Chamber, but in the open light. During sixteen years it has been my privilege to have association with the Service. I have seen no harm result to it from sweeping and public inquiry. Who believes the ships are rotten because of the "blow-hole" scandal? Who believes the ships are rotten because it was necessary once to lengthen a couple of gunboats? Who believes the ships unfit to fight because experts differ as to the location of the armor belt or the location of the guns? Who believes the personnel is inefficient because of the Sampson-Schley inquiry, or the occasional court-martial of an officer? Who has not been impressed by the details of the cruise of the battle fleet around the world?

A short time ago I talked with a farmer living in Central Illinois. "I've read your articles," he said, "and I like what you say about the navy. We've got a great navy. We'll have a greater one. What I can't understand is, Why is there objection to a larger navy in New England? That section ought to understand that it is not the nation; that we here in the Middle West believe in the navy, want the navy, and propose to have it the most efficient in the world." That man voiced the sentiment of the Middle West, and he voiced mine.

Now, how was the interest of this farmer excited, and what does it mean? It was excited by the continual publication of information about the navy, good, bad, and indifferent. He talked this information over with his neighbors. He became a missionary of the service, and turned with them to his favorite newspaper for instruction and guidance. His Congressman and his Senator became imbued with the notion that as one of the conditions of election and re-election they must stand for a larger and an efficient navy. Now, suppose that all information had been withheld. Would Senators and Congressmen, except those with navy yards in their districts, or who hailed from coast States apprehensive of invasion, approve appropriations for battle ships, when the money could be spent, as they would believe, more advantageously on local improvements? Suppose mere official statements were published

without that wealth of imaginative detail which sometimes causes the expert to snort with contempt? The technical would have been interested, but the common people, who cast the majority of votes, would not. Look at the deep concern of every Englishman in the size and condition of his country's navy. How has this been produced? By education—education through the columns of the press. How has the German navy been created? By the wonderful activity of the German Emperor, by his speeches, which have been quoted in the press, and thus reached every German, and by his Navy League publications. Today, constant reiteration has ground into the German people the belief expressed years ago by the Kaiser: "Germany's future lies upon the sea." What caused Russia to send an inefficient fleet against the Japanese? Ignorance! The newspapers did not dare to criticise the naval service before the war began; suppression was the least of the punishment meted out. Why did Spain lack a fleet? Absence of an enlightened press, which could have created an intelligent public opinion. But Japan has not an enlightened press, and yet has an efficient fleet. Why? Because of racial traits which are the inheritance of a warlike people; because of an inborn acquaintance with the sea; because a group of ambitious statesmen, who happened to be at the head of affairs realized the need of sea-power, and were patriotic enough to develop it, using every available organ, particularly a subservient press, to that end. The vernacular press, by government direction, continues to manifest a lively interest in the navy, and is urging its enlargement.

It is evident that you find in me an ardent advocate of publicity. I am—in time of peace. I would conceal nothing from the intelligent observer save those technical inventions in cases of which secrecy is a valuable asset; and then if I had reason to believe there was danger of publicity, I would not hesitate to tell the facts under seal of confidence. The men with whom the Navy has to deal are patriotic, and where this confidence might be violated once, it would be observed a thousand times. Moreover, the fact must not be lost sight of that what the press wants in connection with any progressive invention is not details which would be of value to a foreign expert. What may be described as "glittering generalities" frequently meet any need of publication; and proper relations with the press once established would assure not merely the suppression of embarrassing information, but the publication of reports upon occasions which might mislead a prospective enemy. If I possessed the authority, I should, in time of peace, enlarge the present admirable policy which the navy observes. I should ask reputable journals to send reputable men as witnesses of maneuvers. I should invite them to be present at important tests. I should give them access to every bit of information in the possession of the Navy Department, subject only to the restriction that technical and strategic secrets be regarded as sacred. You know better than I how quickly you obtain facts in

reference to an advance made by a rival power, and frequently they do not come through the press. With a navy as large as ours is to-day, it is impossible to prevent leakages through the conversation, either of officers or enlisted men, not only with representatives, sometimes indiscreet, of the press, but with the hired agents of foreign governments which desire to keep pace with our sea development.

You will note that I have a comprehensive programme of publicity, but it has a limit. That limit applies when war is imminent or is actually in progress. In time of war, I would apply a censorship so strict, so thorough, that the operations of the navy, including the composition of the fleets assembled, would not even be referred to in the press. I would be Napoleonic in my severity. To quote the great French strategist, I would point out that "balls and opera furnish excellent subjects for editorials," and, I would add, for the news columns also; but at the same time enough discrimination should be shown to satisfy the public demand for news by permitting the use and discussion of intelligence of no possible value to an enemy. I would not have press boats following the fleets. I would not permit newspaper correspondents to accompany them, but if compelled by political pressure, I should limit the number to press associations, and then insist upon absolutely trustworthy men and require examination of all manuscript by the commander-in-chief, and by the Navy Department as well. It would be my effort to prohibit publication of all events in which the navy participates, except actions, and then in the case of the latter only when publication would do no possible harm, and might be productive of good. The navy suffered from one unfortunate publication during the war with Spain which has caused a historic controversy, and I would not permit anything of the kind to occur again.

It might be suggested that these are harsh views, and that they are of no value because they are individual. They are not harsh, and they are not individual. I have epitomized in them the opinions of practically all conservative newspaper men with whom I have talked. It was shameful how important information became public during the war with Spain. I had no difficulty whatever in learning the movements of the squadrons under command of Admiral Dewey, Admiral Sampson, and Commodore Schley. I was as patriotic as any other American, but I was young and lacked judgment, and I printed in the New York Herald items that were criminal. I remember on one occasion when Cervera was lost in the Caribbean Sea, but believed to be at Cienfuegos, orders were given to Schley to go south, stopping at Charleston for instructions. The Minneapolis was directed to proceed ahead and patrol the Windward Passage. I obtained a copy of the instruction and wired it to New York. The publication next morning was transmitted to London, where it was quoted in the Times, and then relayed to Madrid. Had Spain been provided with a real intelligence service and Cervera

with a strong fleet, this information would have been of untold service. When Secretary Long met me on the day of publication, he expressed the utmost indignation, declaring if the Minneapolis and its crew of half a thousand men were lost I would be responsible for the catastrophe. My state of mind will be appreciated. I at once sent a denial direct to London, and then, at the instance of the Secretary, cabled an entirely incorrect item in regard to the orders of Schley and Sampson and their plan of operations. These two dispatches also reached Madrid.

But the incident taught me a lesson which I have never forgotten. It points a moral for application in future wars. Censors—*men of common sense*—should not only control the wires at points where armies are mobilized, but in Washington. Outgoing cables also should be strictly watched. If a newspaper published any information harmful to the operations in progress, it should be punished. There should be no half-way measures. The nation's safety transcends individual enterprise.

So much for peace and war. What about that borderland between, the "twilight zone," where none can foresee the outcome, and where, naturally, the greatest interest is manifested in the preparations for hostilities? Here liberty of publication cannot be interfered with, but it may be controlled. The attempt to stop all publicity should not be made. It would be foolish to try it. But an appeal by the Navy Department to press associations and to newspapers, conservative and yellow, to print no information respecting mobilizations, movements, and anything which might affect injuriously our operations, unquestionably would be respected. You think I have faith. I have. I believe patriotism in the average newspaper office is as earnest, as vigorous, as it is on a battle ship. We are all Americans. And I believe, moreover, that such a course would result in a moral boycott of any journal which dared to print an item in violation of an agreement. It might even be possible to induce the press associations to adopt a rule penalizing offenders by the withdrawal of the news service. Besides aiding in this way, the press could be used for the collection of information respecting conditions in the country of the expected enemy. It would not be difficult for newspapers properly coached to employ neutrals to obtain and transmit facts. To some slight extent this service was rendered during the Spanish war, but it is capable of development into an efficient intelligence corps that would produce valuable results. When I worked in London I was struck by the solidarity of the English press. In a national emergency, the Prime Minister called the principal editors into conference and explained thoroughly the situation. Thereafter, united support was accorded the policy of the government, and frequently information was suppressed. I am satisfied American editors are as patriotic as their confreres on the other side of the Atlantic.

It is hard for the press to learn the responsibilities of its power, and to shackle itself with obligations. To-day, it is the great medium which

transmits the sympathy of one nation for another, the dislike of one nation for another. It is the great medium which carries words of friendship or words of insult. It creates feeling where there is no feeling, and inflames when there is no ground for it. No modern government can withstand its united assault; no branch of that government can resist its constant attack. "Where is the country, rich, prosperous, moral, peaceful," said Édouard de Laboulaye forty years ago, "which can, without inquietude, look into the future? It is the country where the press, with all its passion, all its errors, publishes the truth and compels every one to do his duty by force of its opinion. Which are the countries where honest, capable, courageous men are at the head of affairs, where moral superiority is joined to political superiority? They are those where each morning one can say what he pleases, without fear or favor. What state is more powerful than England, richer than Holland, more patriotic than Switzerland, more valiant than America, more industrious than Belgium? And how these terrible journals flourish in those countries; they criticise everything and are not punished. It is life, with all its mistakes, but with all its force and all its energy. On the other hand, look at the unprogressive, poor, corrupted peoples, by turns violent, by turns servile; among them the press is mute, where one suppresses the newspapers under pretext of preventing the spread of lies and calumny. Who does not realize the alliance between liberty of the press and the fortune of the people, is blinded by ignorance or prejudice."

And I say as emphatically as I can that that Navy is and will be best which courts publicity, which has no fear of the light that beats upon it from editorial sanctums. In the conference of the Press of the Empire, which has just occurred in London, the British government has shown just appreciation of the power of the pen. In time of what it construes as need, it has called together representatives of colonial newspapers and local organs. It has shown them the fleet as it is, and has asked them to describe what they saw in their native communities, so that the bonds of the Empire might be tautened. And it has also, by this act, insured a united purpose on the part of Englishmen at home and in the dominions thousands of miles away to contribute to the strengthening and upbuilding of those steel walls which are the bulwarks of English sovereignty.

Why should our Navy not follow the example which the London conference sets? Why should it not, on an inspiring anniversary, such as that which will mark the centenary of the battle in which the Constitution reduced the *Guerriere* to a hulk, give a review for the benefit of the journalists of the United States? It would be an epochal occasion, rich in instruction, rich in interest, productive of good, both for the country and the service.