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Dr Lucinda A Davenport

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THE MAKINGS OF A GADFLY -- GEORGE SELDES

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Helen Ann Fordham

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ABSTRACT

THE MAKINGS OF A GADFLY -- GEORGE SELDES

By

Helen Fordham

George Seldes' persistent criticisms of the daily press developed out of his experiences in the First World War, Fascist Italy, Mexico, the Spanish Civil War, his meeting with Dr. Alfred Adler, and his editorship of the intellectual magazine Ken. Each of these experiences reinforced Seldes' view that the American press during the 1930s and 1940s was corrupt. This study examines Seldes' experiences in each of these events and integrates them with his writings and his vision of the press, thus defining the factors that influenced his criticisms of the press.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Journalist George Henry Seldes has finally come in from the cold. He has gone from being a press critic pariah to a man of vision. After a lifetime of being labelled a "Communist" and "Intellectual Saboteur" he is now being described by some as one of the most "effective muckrakers of our time, better than Upton Sinclair and on a par with Lincoln Steffens."[1] He has been hailed as an inspirational journalist and the key link in America's new generation of investigative reporters."[2]

This amazing metamorphosis has taken a long time. Seldes turned his back on a successful career as a foreign correspondent in 1927 to become a press critic, a role that brought him public ridicule and ostracism. For almost 60 years Seldes wrote books and articles that crusaded against the suppression and censorship of news in the mainstream press. He, like many other press critics during the 1930s and 1940s, demanded free and uncensored news at a time when the press was powerful, profitable and reactionary.[3] Unlike other press critics, however, Seldes had his contribution repeatedly overlooked by history and his

criticisms stifled by a mainstream press that appears to have black-balled him for his views.[4]

Despite this persecution, Seldes' commitment to an ethical, responsible and free press remained unwaivering, and it is worth investigating what experiences made him write the way he did. By looking at these experiences one might be able to understand what influenced the formation of his criticisms and turned him into such a staunch defender of the rights of a free press. In addition, by examining Seldes' evaluation of the press it is also possible to illuminate aspects of this period of press criticism, which has been described by journalism historian Edwin Emery as one of the most active and vehement since the 1790s, when people objected to the press' political power.[5]

Seldes' career as a journalist and press critic spanned 80 years. It began in 1909 when he started as a cub reporter at the Pittsburgh Leader. He went on to become a foreign correspondent and then head of the Berlin Bureau for the Chicago Tribune. After he left the newspaper business in 1929, he wrote twenty-two books and authored a radical newsletter devoted to press criticism.[6] The newsletter, In Fact, launched in 1940 was the first of its genre and it provided Seldes with a forum for his criticisms.[7]

Despite Seldes' twenty-two books, most of which are semi-autobiographical, there is no precise objective explanation as to what shaped and influenced his criticisms.

Seldes, himself, gives tantalizing glimpses of how his experiences affected him, but the reader is left with only half-formed pictures of an idealistic man who was concerned with the way the press operated and who was driven to take on the impossible task of trying to change a press that he felt was "venal, corrupt and prostituted."[8]

Seldes' denouncing of the press appears to have evolved from of his experiences as a reporter in both America and Europe during the first three decades of the 20th century. In many of the books he wrote during the 1930s and 1940s, he described his encounters with men and women of history against the panorama of a changing and revolutionary Europe. He detailed events in Bolshevik Russia, Fascist Italy and Franco's Spain, and his observations were to provide him with press criticism material for several decades. It is important to note that Seldes' experiences as a foreign correspondent during these early years did not differ radically from those of his colleagues. Some, like Heywood Broun and Ruth Hale, shared similar views about the press but few turned into quite the same uncompromising, vocal crusader against the mainstream press that Seldes became.

Other peers during Seldes' five decades as a critic ranged from Upton Sinclair and Oswald Garrison Villard to Bruce Blixan of the New Republic and I.F. Stone of The Nation. Seldes corresponded with them and many of them raised the same issues as Seldes during the 1920s, 1930s and

1940s.[9] Yet, Seldes differed from his peers in the method and vehemency of his protest. He published his own newsletter and therefore wrote what he believed, without compromise.

Many of the press critics did not have the luxury of being an independent. They worked for mainstream or liberal papers and were limited in what they could say and how they could say it. They criticized the press from within the system and were kept hostage, wrote Seldes, by the security of their jobs as well as "age, routine, the pleasures of the press club...marriage...and fortune."[10] They were forced to compromise and wrote in a much more conciliatory, less sensational manner and were more willing to acknowledge the technical and financial constraints under which papers worked. Furthermore, other critics were inclined to present the positive aspects of the daily press, whereas Seldes focused almost exclusively on the ills of the newspaper business and would settle for nothing less than his utopian view of what the press should ideally be. Seldes admitted in an interview with the author, "I never thought I'd reform journalism." However, through his aggressive criticisms and repetitive attacks he tried to draw attention to its flaws, with the hope of change.[11]

LITERATURE REVIEW

Journalism researcher Pamela Brown suggested Seldes

alienated many of his supporters through his uncompromising manner of protest.[12] Seldes, himself, acknowledged his forceful style, saying: "If you see something wrong you may as well go after it."[13]

Previous studies have focused on Seldes' newsletter, In Fact, which was the culmination of his years of protest and represented the essence of his criticisms. Pamela Brown in her analysis of In Fact wrote that the ideas and criticisms in the newsletter remained largely unaddressed by Seldes' peers because they were neither practical nor compromising. She wrote that they were "an assault on the very foundation of the press in the United States."[14]

Four other studies of Seldes' work exist, and those written during the Second World War and the Cold War focused on the anti-establishment tenor of his writing and dismissed him and his work as communist. In 1943, Frederick Woltman, a reporter for the New York World Telegram, completed an analysis of In Fact and labelled it extremist. He wrote, "Seldes' dopesheet ... provides a perfect object lesson in camouflaged communist assaults on public opinion."[15]

Helen Jean Williams also concluded in her 1947 thesis on In Fact that "Seldes' publication is nothing more than a propaganda organ disguised as a legitimate vehicle for criticism."[16] Williams compared events in In Fact with nineteen daily papers, and suggested that some of the events that Seldes claimed were suppressed by the mainstream press

had in reality received scattered coverage in the daily papers.

More recently, following Seldes' first positive national recognition in 1980 by the Association for Educators in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC), studies have examined Seldes' apparent historical oversight. Researchers Everette E. Dennis and Claude-Jean Bertrand looked closely at why Seldes had been overlooked and concluded, "His monumental output dwarfs the frail and unconnected fragments that regularly win awards, but there is no Pulitzer Prize for the Seldes' style of criticism."[17]

Carl Jenson, a communications historian, agreed. In his 1987 analysis of Seldes' work he stated: "And finally it is time for the press to correct a gross miscarriage of justice. George Seldes has devoted more than three quarters of a century to journalism and improving journalism. Yet he has never been awarded a Pulitzer Prize."[18]

GOAL OF THE STUDY

The previous studies on George Seldes have raised important questions about the quality and value of his contribution to press criticism. This study, however, will focus on <u>why</u> he wrote about the subjects that he did. The objective will be to understand how Seldes' experiences influenced his criticisms. It will examine six experiences that appear to form the basis of Seldes' criticisms and

provided themes that often reoccur within his work.

The parameters of the study will be confined to Seldes' experiences prior to 1950 because he seems to have cemented his basic views of the world by this time, views that were to change very little in his post-1950 books. The theme dominating all of Seldes' criticism was censorship and distortion of the news by the daily papers. Integral to this criticism was Seldes' views on the impact of big business on the press. Historically, the press had been considered, in theory, the watchdog of public interests. However, in reality the press survived financially because it served as a vehicle for big business advertising. Big business, through its advertising dollars, was able to influence newspaper content in such a way that it increasingly conflicted with the best interests of the public, which the press professed to serve. Seldes detested this control, believing that big business was Fascist, anti-labor and anti-liberal and, consequently, detrimental to a free and objective press.

METHOD

The themes that run throughout Seldes' writings are: 1) suppression or distortion of the daily news, 2) impact of Fascism on the daily press, 3) impact of big business on the daily news, and 4) anti-labor slant of the news. These themes appear to have evolved out of Seldes' experiences as

a journalist. This study then will focus on six of Seldes' influential experiences and link them to his judgmental themes. A total of six personal experiences were selected because each one of them marked a new awareness for Seldes and was significant in reinforcing and extrapolating his basic themes.

This focusing on events should not imply that they alone were responsible for Seldes' development as a press critic. Undoubtedly the assortment of people he met during his years as a reporter were also crucial to his growth as a critic. However, this study will focus on the events because they serve as a vehicle to look at both the event and the people he met.

The six selected experiences are:

1) Seldes' coverage of the First World War
2) Seldes' expulsion from Italy in 1924
3) Seldes' meeting with Dr. Alfred Adler in 1927
4) Seldes' coverage of Mexico
5) Seldes' coverage of the Spanish Civil War
6) Seldes' involvement with Ken Magazine

The author acknowledges that it is impossible to determine the influences on a person's work from a study of six experiences, particularly in a life as full as Seldes'. However, the experiences selected have all been repeatedly mentioned by Seldes as being significant.[19] And by examining what he wrote about them the author may be better

able to discern the origins and patterns of Seldes' criticisms.

The following questions will provide the navigation of research investigation:

1. What did Seldes write about his experiences at the time he experienced them?
2. How did the experiences affect his criticism of the press?
3. What did others have to say about Seldes' criticisms?

By looking at how others responded to Seldes' criticisms it may be possible to determine the validity of his criticisms and thus evaluate whether he created an accurate picture of how the press functioned during the first four decades of the century.

This last question may be difficult to answer considering it is generally accepted that Seldes was ignored by the mainstream press for more than fifty years. However, some critical reviews of some of his earlier books have been located in The Daily Worker, The New Republic and Journalism Quarterly. These reviews provide the opportunity to assess what others were saying about his books at the time of their publication.

This study will attempt to integrate: 1) Seldes' experiences, 2) his writing of those experiences and 3) his denouncement of the press. By establishing a connection between these three aspects of his life it is possible to

better understand why he wrote what he did and in the manner he did.

In order to examine the six experiences from Seldes' point of view this study will look at Seldes' published books and unpublished private papers. An investigation of his private papers at the Van Pelt Library of the University of Pennsylvania may yield further information that will illuminate aspects of Seldes' career. In addition, a personal interview with Seldes, who lives in Vermont, was conducted by the author in December 1990 and provided insight into why Seldes became a crusader. A qualitative study is the best method of processing this material because much of the work deals with Seldes' opinions and belief systems, which are difficult to quantify.

Chapter Two of this thesis provides a biography of Seldes so the following chapters can be placed in the context of his life. The chapter will look particularly at the influence Seldes' father had on his son's paradigm of the world and also examine the impact Seldes' early years as a reporter had on his later writings. It should be noted that trying to ascertain whether Seldes' criticism evolved from his heritage or his later environment is a study more suited to a psychologist. For the purposes of this study it will be assumed that Seldes is the sum total of his experiences and that his criticisms were a combination of who he was - that is, his philosophical background and what

he later experienced.

Chapters Three through Eight examine each of Seldes' influential experiences and how he wrote about them. Each chapter will consist of an explanation of the event, followed by what Seldes wrote about the experience and finally how the experience influenced his criticisms.

Chapter Nine looks at how critics responded to Seldes' work and how their responses may have validated Seldes own criticisms.

Finally, Chapter Ten draws some conclusions about why Seldes wrote the way he did.

This study originated out of the observation that Seldes' work appears to have experienced a renaissance in the last two decades. He received an award by the AEJMC for professional excellence in 1980 and several articles have attempted to restore him to a place of honor in press critic history. Yet, despite this return to grace, no comprehensive biography of George Seldes exists. Perhaps this study can serve to cast new light on whatever knowledge already exists about a man who has spent more than eighty years in protest against a press he considered corrupt.

SUMMARY

It is anticipated that this thesis will look closely at what experiences formed the basis of George Seldes' criticisms and led him to write about the issues that he

did. Previous studies have focused more upon what Seldes wrote rather than what lay behind the criticisms; thus, this study may reveal what motivated Seldes as a press critic and persistent gadfly. And he does appear to have been a gadfly - annoying, tenacious, unrelenting in his bites at the established press. How he got that way can perhaps be partially explained by his childhood and early years as a reporter.

NOTES -- CHAPTER 1

1. Sylvia Ravitch, "George...The Anti-Fascist," News Story, May 1945, 25.
and
Paul Blanshard, "Battling For A Free Press, The Saga of George Seldes, Journalistic Muckraker," The Churchman, February 1977, 11.

2. Carl Jenson, "Three Cheers for George Seldes," The Quill, September 1987, 15. Jenson claims that Seldes influenced several famous investigative reporters including I.F. Stone, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein.

3. Herbert Altschull, Agents of Power (New York: Longman Inc., 1984), 82.

4. George Seldes, Witness to a Century (New York: Ballantine Books, 1987), 349.

5. Edwin Emery, The Press in America, 3rd ed., (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1972), 571.

6. George Seldes, Interview by Helen Fordham, 10 December 1990, Four Corners, Vermont, tape recording. Seldes said that he had written 22 books, three of which had been best sellers. However, when counting up his books they number only 21.

7. Everette E. Dennis and Claude-Jean Bertrand, "Seldes at 90: They Don't Give Pulitzers for that Kind of Criticism," Journalism History 7 (Winter 1980): 120.
also
George Seldes, Interview by Helen Fordham, 10 December 1990, Four Corners, Vermont, tape recording.

8. George Seldes, Tell the Truth and Run (New York: Greenberg Publisher, 1953), 4.

9. Helen Fordham, "George Seldes and the Left Wing Press" (Class paper, Michigan State University, 1991). This study compared selected issues of In Fact, The Nation and The New Republic and concluded that Seldes' issues were being raised in other left wing magazines and that many of the same criticisms levelled at the establishment. There was, however, considerable difference in the tone and approach

used by the respective publications.

10. George Seldes, Never Tire of Protesting (New York: Lyle Stuart Inc., 1968), 11.

11. George Seldes, Interview with Helen Fordham. ibid

12. Pamela Brown, "George Seldes and the Winter Soldier Brigade: The Press Criticism of In Fact, 1940-1950," American Journalism 6 (1989): 101.

13. George Seldes, Interview with Helen Fordham.

14. Brown, 101.

15. Frederick Woltman, "The Camouflaged Communist Press," American Mercury 57, (November 1943): 587.

16. Helen Jean Williams, "An Evaluation of Criticisms of the Daily Press in George Seldes' In Fact." (M.A. Thesis, University of Minnesota, 1947), 135.

17. Dennis and Bertrand, 120.

18. Jenson, 18.

19. Seldes indicates in several of his books that the experiences listed in this study were among the most influential. For example, he wrote in Tell the Truth and Run that the shock of discovering the truth about the First World War made him vow to tell the truth about the war. 54. He also acknowledged the influence of the Spanish Civil War when he wrote in the same book, that everything that happened to him after 1936 was conditioned by his experience in Spain. 239 Seldes also wrote in Tell the Truth and Run that his meeting with Dr. Alfred Adler was a "catalytic" occasion.viii. In Mexico he learned that "I could write as I pleased only when it fitted in with the ... policy ... of this newspaper. Therefore I decided to resign." 223. Seldes wrote in Even the Gods Can't Change History that Mussolini had perverted history. 57 He also acknowledged in his 1938 article in The Nation that the failure of Ken magazine was a bitter disappointment.499.

CHAPTER TWO

BACKGROUND

If an individual is the sum total of his or her experiences then it would logically follow that the influences on George Seldes' life and criticisms are highly complex. Further, to examine his life through a detailed analysis of six experiences without first looking at who he was and where he came from is to do him an injustice.

Seldes' adult life was full of exciting events and noteworthy meetings with great people, but it is apparent when examining his life that many of his later criticisms and crusades can be traced to his childhood experiences. Seldes himself acknowledged the link between his childhood and the choices he made as an adult when he wrote, "With my non-conformist upbringing, my choice of an occupation now seems logical, natural, inevitable."[1]

SELDES' CHILDHOOD

Seldes was born in Alliance, New Jersey, on September 10, 1890, the eldest son of George Sergius Seldes and Anna Saphro Seldes. Alliance was a farming community that Seldes' father tried to turn into a Utopian colony.

However, the experiment failed shortly after his son's birth. To earn a living, Seldes' father left his family and went to work in a drug store in Philadelphia.

Seldes' mother died when he was six, and George and his brother Gilbert, who was born in 1893, were raised by an aunt and grandparents on the family farm. Seldes later wrote only briefly about his years on the farm and his childhood recollections were dominated by his largely absent father, who was perhaps the single most influential person in his life.

The elder Seldes was an idealist and a philosopher who spent his life pursuing noble causes. Seldes described him as:

> A libertarian, an idealist, a freethinker, a Deist, a Utopian, a single Taxer, and a worshipper of Thoreau and Emerson.[2]

Seldes' father was not always successful in achieving his ideals but Seldes, throughout his life, retained the greatest admiration for him. He wrote: "It was not until my brother and I grew up and began to think that we realized we had an extraordinary father."[3]

Seldes' father, though living in Pittsburgh, took responsibility for his sons' education and exposed them to the writings of the great theorists of the time. The elder Seldes took ideas from various political writers and formulated a belief system that provided the blueprint for his son's later life of protest. Seldes acknowledged the influence of his father when he wrote:

> Gilbert and I...remained throughout our lifetimes just what Father was, freethinkers. And, likewise, doubters and dissenters and perhaps Utopians.[4]

Seldes' memories of his father consist almost exclusively of his parent's political and philosophical leanings. He recalled that his father believed in the fundamental goodness of human nature and the eternal possibility of change. This faith fueled the elder Seldes' commitment to Utopian communities up until his death in 1931. Seldes inherited his father's belief in human nature and it provided the impetus for his own years of protest.

The elder Seldes was a committed liberal and debated the relative merits of liberalism in correspondence with Prince Peter Kropotkin and Count Leo Tolstoy. He insisted that liberals, because they believed in tolerance to all schools of thought, could never be part of an organized group.[5] He encouraged non-conformity in his children, and quoting Emerson, told them that "Who would be a man must be a non-conformist."[6] Seldes, following this advice, never joined a political party.

Seldes' father's non-conformist lessons taught his sons to be freethinkers and encouraged them to never accept unquestioningly the dictates of society. He insisted the boys keep an open mind to all religious and political philosophies.

While emphasizing tolerance, Seldes' father also told his sons never to compromise on important principles. He

demonstrated this in his own life when he insisted upon running an ethical pharmacy by refusing to bribe doctors to refer business his way or pay-off police to protect him. As a result, wrote Seldes, "we were continually persecuted."[7] The drug store suffered as the elder Seldes sacrificed business acumen for personal idealism. Seldes wrote that this uncompromising stance impressed him greatly, and he was later to adopt the same attitude in his battles with the press.

Although a theorist, Seldes' father did not confine his arguments to the abstract; instead he translated his philosophical commitment into action. He became secretary of the Friends of Russian Freedom - a group that raised money to support the overthrow of the Tsar - and it was indirectly through this connection that his son George had his first contact with the press.

Seldes was in Philadelphia with his father when the 1905 Russian Revolution occurred and the local reporters rushed to interview the elder Seldes. Seldes, who was 15, listened to the interview and was surprised to hear the reporters quoting his father verbatim over the phone as they relayed the story to their papers. He had, until then, thought that reporters created masterpieces in the local newspapers by improving on everything they heard. This meeting with the press was significant to Seldes who wrote eighty years later that it was this first meeting which

"determined me to be a newspaperman."[8]

It was to be another three years before Seldes became a reporter and in the meantime he continued to attend school. His father believed Seldes would have a greater chance at getting into college with a high school diploma from a larger school. So in 1907, Seldes left Alliance and went to live with his father in Pittsburgh where the elder Seldes had bought his own drug store. Seldes transferred to Pittsburgh High School, but dropped out soon after because "not being a very bright boy" he was asked to re-take his junior year.[9]

He went to work for a short while at his father's pharmacy, filling prescriptions before approaching the Pittsburgh Leader in 1909 to become a reporter. He wrote that he wanted to be "a writer, and preferably a dramatist" and had decided to become a journalist because "newspaper adventures still appealed to my farm-boy mind as the greatest of all callings."[10]

SELDES - THE REPORTER

Seldes was idealistic about journalism and the role it played in society. He wrote in 1929: "I ... cling to that very old fashioned belief that the press is the most powerful estate and that the journalist is the great molder of public opinion."[11] On a more personal level, Seldes felt that "newspaper work meant freedom of the individual." He

had read Thoreau's treatise that people live lives of quiet desperation and had resolved not to be a member of the silent majority.[12]

Seldes' idealism about the profession was severely shaken during his early years as a reporter. He often recounted the story of the Silver Top Brewing Company, which he considered his first encounter with corruption. He had been working as a reporter for two weeks when he wrote a story about the Brewing Company wagon being hit by a street car. Seldes discovered after the paper had gone to press that the name of the company had been deleted because Silver Top was a large advertiser with the paper. He wrote, "Immediately I recognized censorship and suppression."[13]

This was to be merely the first in a long line of experiences that were to shatter Seldes' illusions and show him that censorship and distortion were commonplace and that newspapers were a business, not the public service he had expected. Covering the police beat he discovered that the press was corrupt, business was corrupt, and reporters were contemptuous of the public whom they considered "suckers." Little by little Seldes discovered the newspaper business was not glamorous, as he had first thought.

> Every working day on the Leader brought new disillusions. On the occasions when my items were suppressed or censored or changed to suit the advertisers, politicians, and other sinister forces then unknown to me, I usually protested publicly, in this way adding unholy comic relief to the office routine.[14]

These early years were very disillusioning for Seldes. His colleagues taught him not to have faith in anything, yet he admitted that they never succeeded in completely destroying the ideals planted in his childhood. Instead, their actions succeeded in reconfirming the need for freethinking and non-conformity.[15]

Fighting to retain his values Seldes found an outlet for his idealism in the socialist press. He discovered that socialist papers were the only ones prepared to print stories that were honest and controversial. He gave a rape story that the Leader would not print to a newspaper called Justice and the story caused a sensation.

> My rape story was uniquely responsible for the start of a socialist labor weekly in our town. I learned then people wanted news that was generally suppressed. I remembered this all my life.[16]

Seldes also found satisfaction in the reform movement. He marched with the suffragists and tried unsuccessfully to unionize the editorial department of his newspaper. Eventually he gained a reputation as a radical among his colleagues, who saw him associating with "the notorious, the outcasts, the enemies of society."[17]

Considering Seldes' radical reputation it is not surprising that he was also drawn to the labor movement. His pro-labor bias was evident as early as 1910 when he went to work part-time for a labor paper: "I pointed out all that was noble in common day jobs and said that all that America was or hoped to be it owed to the workingman [sic]."[18] The

labor paper turned out to be a blackmail scam, with the publisher being paid off not to incite the workers, and when Seldes was offered a share of the business he declined.

> I was an idealist then. I believed all the world's ills could be cured by an honest press. I told him I didn't mind writing articles for him [the publisher] because what I wrote I believed in, but I would not become a partner in his business.[19]

Seldes continued to learn that the daily press was corrupt. He had many stories suppressed including an expose of the United States Steel Corporation. In 1910 the corporation stopped employing American workers and began hiring immigrants from Eastern Europe because they would work for lower wages.

Seldes expressed outrage and concern in his later books when reflecting on how the press functioned during these years, but at the time he was not yet the vocal critic that was to emerge later. This may be that despite all the disillusionment Seldes found the newspaper business fun. He wrote in Tell The Truth and Run (1953) that in the early days of his reporting he didn't really consider the causes and results of things. The years passed quickly and he was swept away in the adventure and excitement of his life as a reporter. He appears to have been a socially conscious reporter, but his encounters with people and places left very little time for thought or active protest.

> From the first day...all my newspaper days seemed to be great days, and there was fun, adventure, excitement, the satisfaction of being always at the focus of great events, a world in change; and

> these forces enslaved me just as circumstances enslaved other men to a lifetime of making a living.[20]

This recollection varies slightly to an admission Seldes' made later in the same book. He wrote that despite the fun of his job, he thought deeply about the battle between his profession and his ideals. In 1911 he read the last installment of "The American Newspaper" series by Will Irwin, which dealt with press corruption in Pittsburgh and Cincinnati. "His revelations shocked me more than anything that had happened to me or that I had heard about."[21]

> Something happened to me the day I read it. It is possible that I had been rationalizing the evils I had seen; perhaps I had even compromised a little, or closed my eyes conveniently, or made excuses, or found a way to get along like most men do.[22]

It is feasible that Seldes both enjoyed the fun of being a reporter while at the same time was concerned at how the press functioned. Seldes admitted that he found he had to compromise his ideals. He experienced constant conflict between his ideals of the press and the reality of the newsroom and he sought refuge in literature, spending hours at the library reading dramatists Shaw and Ibsen.

Although Seldes had mixed feelings about his profession he continued as a reporter, progressing from the Leader to copy editor on the Pittsburgh Post. In 1912, at the urging of his brother, Seldes took a year off to attend Harvard University and study literature. He was twenty-two years old when he entered the special non-graduating program,

which allowed students without high school diplomas to undertake a year of study with the understanding they would not be able to graduate from the university. Harvard was an enchanted period for Seldes, who as a frustrated writer and dramatist revelled in studying literature and drama full-time. His enthusiasm for the theatre was revealed in a February 18, 1913, letter to Judith Randorf, a close friend of the family, in which he wrote that he attended the opera every night for a week.[23]

At the completion of his year of study Seldes returned to the newspaper business and in 1916 moved to New York City to freelance for the New York World. The following year, he quit the World and sailed for England, hoping to find work reporting the European war. He got a job in the London office of the United Press, and after the United States entered the war in 1917, Seldes became a member of the press section of the American Expeditionary Forces. His colleagues in the press section included renowned journalists and writers Damon Runyon, Floyd Gibbons and Heywood Broun.

The war continued for seven months after Seldes joined the press corp and when the conflict ended on November 11, 1918, he remained in Europe. He became a foreign correspondent and later Berlin Bureau Chief for the Chicago Tribune. During his years in Europe he gained a reputation as a "fair and independent reporter" and "a born

newspaperman with a love for a front page story."[24] His more well-known exploits included being expelled from Russia in 1923 for his reporting of the Bolshevik purges; being the only witness to the French bombardment of Damascus in 1925; and being thrown out of Italy by Mussolini.

Seldes returned to the United States in 1927 and, still with the Chicago Tribune, was sent by Colonel McCormick to investigate rumors that war between Mexico and the United States was imminent. It was at the completion of this assignment that he resolved to leave the newspaper business for good. He had been disillusioned for several years with how the press functioned in Europe and had consoled himself with the thought that it was not the same in the United States. His experience in Mexico, however, showed him that United States publishers indulged in the same censorship and suppression he had witnessed in European countries.

Seldes decided to leave journalism after Mexico, but it was several months before he actually quit the Chicago Tribune. Soon after he tended his resignation he was offered a book contract by his brother's agent.

The contract was arranged by Seldes' younger brother Gilbert, who indirectly assisted Seldes several times in his writing career. The two brothers were very different in taste and temperament and spent most of their lives apart, but the relationship between the two of them provided an interesting insight into Seldes' character.

Seldes appears to have felt competitive with Gilbert, who was a successful writer and drama critic. Gilbert went to Harvard, where he was an editor of the Harvard Review. He later became an editor of the literary magazine Dial, authored several books and became a professor at the University of Pennsylvania. Gilbert had a polish and sophistication that was lacking in his elder brother. Seldes never quite fit into the more cosmopolitan world of his brother, as a letter he wrote to a family friend indicates. He wrote: "Gilbert still says sarcastic things about his degenerative socialist of a brother."[25]

The differences between the brothers were highlighted in an article Seldes wrote for The New York Observer in 1929.

> Gilbert was for literature; I was for life. Gilbert was for books; I was for bloodshed. He studied his humanity in cloistered aloofness, I preferred mine in man at his worst. Gilbert should have been the family newspaperman. Although ... our formative years were alike, we are entirely different. Gilbert always had push and go and an adequate journalistic ego, while I was, and am, shy.[26]

Both brothers used the name Seldes so it is hardly surprising that in literary circles their names were confused, something that both brothers disliked intensely.[27] Seldes felt his own work was obscured by his brother's achievements and he wrote: "For ten years I have heard myself introduced and talked about as Gilbert's brother. I shall never die happy until once I hear him called George's

brother. I may have to hire a man to do it."[28]

The sense of inferiority that Seldes felt toward his brother was noted by Elizabeth Mehren in her 1985 feature story on Seldes when she wrote: "Even today, Seldes hovers under a minor cloud of inferiority when then subject of Gilbert, author of "The Seven Lively Arts," is raised."[29]

Whether the competition between the brothers was mutual is unknown. What is certain, however, is that Gilbert got Seldes' his first book contract and later it was through contacts of Gilbert's that Seldes was offered work with the magazine Ken.

Seldes quit the Chicago Tribune in 1928 and devoted the following years to writing, travelling and painting. He was a prolific, if somewhat repetitive, writer and produced ten books in the following ten years.

It was also during his early years as a writer that Seldes met his future wife, Helen Larkin. From Seldes' account they did not hit it off when they were first introduced to each other at a party in Paris in 1929. Helen, who was 14 years Seldes junior, was studying physics at the Sorbonne in Paris and planned to go to Russia to work with Pavlov. Seldes, upon learning of Helen's plans took the opportunity to tell her all about the difficulties and terrors of the soviet regime. Helen appears to have been sympathetic to the ideal of communism and was so disgusted by Seldes' comments that she swore never see him again.

This was not to be. They met again in Paris in 1932 and were married three weeks later.

Helen appears to have been Seldes' loyal supporter during their 40 years of marriage. There is no indication that she continued her studies in physics and instead accompanied Seldes to Spain during the civil war and later co-edited In Fact.

Seldes continued to write and followed world news closely. In 1936 he, along with Ernest Hemingway and others from the League of American Writers, became concerned that news about the Spanish Civil War was being misrepresented in the daily papers. So great was Seldes' concern that he volunteered to became a war correspondent for the New York Post in 1937, and he and Helen spent the next three years writing about the war.

Seldes came to believe that the battle was not one of Communism against Democracy, as was commonly believed, but rather Fascism against freedom of the Spanish People. Further, he felt that the Spanish Civil War was a prelude to a greater, world-wide conflict.

Seldes became completely disillusioned with the performance of the mainstream press, which he felt suppressed and distorted the news about Spain in presenting only the pro-Fascist side. He looked around for alternative forums for his work and increasingly only wrote for the left wing magazines. He toyed with the idea of starting his own

newsletter that would expose the mainstream press, but he lacked the funds.

In 1940 Seldes was approached by a neighbor, Bruce Minton, who professed to be equally disgusted with the performance of the mainstream press, and offered to finance the publication of an independent newsletter that would uncover lies in the daily press. Seldes was enthusiastic and began work immediately. He declared that the newsletter would act as "an antidote for falsehoods in the daily press" and that it would be committed to "exposing fascism, the corrupt press, the labor baiter and all enemies of the American people."[30] In the original prospectus he wrote: "The viewpoint of In Fact is simple: it is in favor of every idea movement and organization that is for what we carelessly call liberalism, democracy, and progress."[31]

Using labor union circulation lists, Seldes and Minton began producing a weekly edition of In Fact. The two editors, however, increasingly quarrelled over the content of the paper and in 1941 Minton quit. Several years later it was revealed that Minton was a member of the Communist Party who had hoped to use In Fact as a party mouthpiece. In a signed confession Minton explained that the party wanted to reach a wider audience and thought it would be wise to use a non-Communist person as a front.[32] Unfortunately for the Communist party they found Seldes too difficult to control. He was jealous of his intellectual

freedom and his copy "was too often opposed to the official communist position."[33] Minton concluded that "his [Seldes'] integrity, his personal honesty and forthrightness, his convictions were such that the Party was helpless."[34]

After Minton's departure Seldes continued with In Fact, which increased in circulation. Subscribers from around the country submitted articles to the newsletter, and Seldes took up dozens of causes. He had the support of politicians such as Harold Ickes and Harry Truman, and his correspondence included letters from writers Theodore Dreiser and Upton Sinclair, and journalists Eric Sevareid, Bruce Blixan and Oswald Garrison Villard. Newsletter circulation peeked in 1946 at 176,000 but fell off rapidly.[35] Seldes began having difficulty attracting readers, and literary critic Robert Sobel suggested that people were no longer interested in the issues Seldes was raising. In the cold war climate of post-war America, Seldes and his newsletter were attacked from both ends of the political spectrum. On the one hand, he was increasingly labelled a Communist by the right for his support of labor and on the other hand, he claimed he was boycotted by American Communists, who objected to his outspoken views.[36] In Fact couldn't survive under the double assault and Seldes was forced to suspend the newsletter in 1950.

Three years later Seldes was asked to appear before Senator Joseph McCarthy to explain any Communist

affiliations of In Fact. Seldes produced Minton's confession and was exonerated, but the experience appears to have had a profound effect on him. This effect was apparent in letters Seldes wrote to someone named "Tim W." in November and December 1957. Seldes wrote that he and Helen had been "through such a cruel experience" and warned Tim, who wrote for an unnamed radical magazine, that he should be clear about his political allegiances. In the letters Seldes explained that he was a Socialist, not a Communist. He made the point forcibly, which is a departure from the tolerant attitude he displayed to the extreme left during his In Fact days.

The label of Communist was to dog Seldes' steps, and although he was cleared by McCarthy he continued to be persecuted for his views and his association with In Fact. In the 1950s and 1960s he had difficulty getting publishers for his books. He continued to travel but even had difficulty obtaining a passport. Correspondence between Seldes and the passport office indicate that it took him 12 months to get permission to travel abroad in 1956. A letter dated August 2, 1956, from Francis Knight, director of the Passport Office, denied Seldes' request for a passport because "In Fact was cited as a Communist front in the March 29, 1944, report of the special committee on UnAmerican activities in the House of Representatives."[37]

The Seldes retired to Vermont and continued to write,

paint and garden, surviving on the royalties from his books. They started vacationing in their beloved Spain after the death of Franco and continued until Helen's death in 1979. The following year Seldes appeared as a narrator in the movie Reds, which told the story of the radical journalist Jack Reid, whom Seldes had met at Harvard. After his movie debut, Seldes was re-discovered by the journalism community and received his first national award for professional excellence from the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC). In 1987 he published Witness to a Century, a book which detailed his earlier escapades in Europe without the bitter attacks at the press that characterized his earlier work. Seldes, who turned 101 in September 1991, still lives in his home in Vermont and is cared for by a host of neighbors.

SUMMARY

By providing this brief biography of Seldes' life the following six experiences can be placed in the context of Seldes' personal and philosophical background. It appears that in many ways Seldes' philosophies were modelled on that of his idealistic father. He absorbed his father's liberal utopian belief systems and it was on this foundation that Seldes' life of protest began.

> I see now that my more than forty journalistic years, with a few short and minor interludes, have been protest and defense, a sort of forced payment for the behavior pattern which was set for me by

> others and which probably made my first views and actions inevitable.[38]

The evolution of Seldes' career as a gadfly did not come automatically. It took two decades as a journalist and foreign correspondent to reinforce and redefine the patterns of his childhood. Several experiences contributed to his growth into a gadfly and the first of those experiences was the First World War.

NOTES -- CHAPTER 2

1. George Seldes, Tell the Truth and Run (New York: Greenburg Publisher, 1953), 1.

2. George Seldes, Witness to a Century (New York: Ballantine Books, 1987), 4.

3. Ibid., 7.

4. Ibid., 8.

5. Tell the Truth and Run, xxi.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., xx.

8. Witness to a Century, 13.

9. Ibid., 11.

10. Ibid., 13.

11. George Seldes, You Can't Print That (New York: Payson and Clarke Ltd., 1929), 11.

12. George Seldes, Never Tire of Protesting (New York:Lyle Stuart inc., 1968), 11.

13. Tell the Truth and Run, 3.

14. Ibid., 15.

15. Ibid., 14.

16. Ibid., 17.

17. Witness to a Century, 30.

18. You Can't Print That, 237.

19. Ibid., 238.

20. Tell the Truth and Run, 1.

21. Ibid., 18.

22. Ibid.

23. George Seldes, to Judith Randorf, 18 February 1913, Transcript in the hand of George Seldes, Special Collections, Van Pelt Library, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

24. Chicago Tribune, 28 July 1925 and New Republic, 8 May, 1929, 310.

25. George Seldes to Judith Randorf, 18 February 1913. Special Collections, Van Pelt Library, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

26. The New York Observer, 12 June 1929.

27. New York Evening Journal, 10 June 1933. Gilbert wrote in the preface to his review of World Panorama that he disliked intensely being muddled up with George.

28. Ibid.

29. Elizabeth Mehren, "George Seldes at 94: A Living Panorama of World History," Los Angeles Times, 12 June 1985. Part V, 1.

30. In Fact, 20 May 1940.

31. In Fact, 9 June 1941.

32. Copy of testimonial made by Richard Bransten alias Bruce Minton on 15 September 1953. Special Collections, Philadelphia.

33. Ibid., 3.

34. Ibid., 4.

35. George Seldes claimed that In Fact was supported by mass union subscription. Never Tire of Protesting, 26.

36. Never Tire of Protesting, 195.

37. Francis Knight, to George Seldes, 2 August 1956. Special Collections, Philadelphia.

38. Tell the Truth and Run, vii.

CHAPTER 3

FIRST WORLD WAR

The first in the series of significant experiences for Seldes on his path to becoming a gadfly and press critic was the First World War, which ravaged Europe from 1914 to 1918. To Seldes, who joined the American Expeditionary Forces Press Corp in 1918, the war was initially a great adventure and a chance to write with some of the most prestigious journalists of the era. Later, however, the experience was to provide a basis for Seldes' criticisms against press censorship and big business.

THE PRESS CORP

Seldes sailed for Europe in October 1916, and on his arrival secured a job with the United Press offices in London. In July 1917, the U.S. Embassy invited Americans to volunteer for war service, and Seldes and his brother, who was also in London, signed up. Seldes believed strongly in the Allies' fight and wrote, "I wanted somehow to be in Wilson's (and my) great war for democracy."[1] Neither brother was called and Floyd Gibbons, who had met Seldes in London, arranged for Seldes to work as the sole

representative of the Chicago Tribune in Paris.

While in Paris, Seldes met Edward Marshall, a Randolph Hearst war correspondent during the Spanish American War who had been with Theodore Roosevelt at San Juan Hill. Marshall ran his own syndicate and shared offices with the Chicago Tribune. Seldes wrote that Marshall was one of the most interesting men he had met. During their time together in Paris Marshall told Seldes stories about the Spanish American War and how lies in the press that had become accepted as historical fact. Marshall said the biggest lie of the Spanish American War was T.R. Roosevelt's charge up San Juan Hill, which Marshall claimed never took place. Roosevelt walked up the hill, according to Marshall, and was met at the top by a brigade of African-American soldiers.

Seldes had never heard these alternative versions of historic events and had never questioned the authenticity of historic facts. He wrote:

> Long before there was any muckraking in world journalism or even investigative reporting, Marshall had tried to do his best to set the historic record straight.[2]

Seldes was so impressed by what Marshall had to say that he emulated the old muckraker sixty years later by writing Even the Gods Can't Change History (1976). The book was an expose of the historic events that Seldes' had covered as a reporter and it was his attempt to "set the historic record straight."

Marshall seems to have been equally impressed with

Seldes and arranged for Seldes' appointment to the press corp of General Pershing, commander of the American Forces. On May 8, 1918, Seldes officially became a member of Pershing's G-2-D press section.

Being appointed to Pershing's press corp was a dream-come-true for Seldes, who had been seduced by the images of dashing foreign correspondents such as Richard Harding Davis. Seldes wrote: "Every newspaperman [sic] in the civilized world, I believe, would have given most of his fortune and several years of his life...to be a member of Pershing's Army Press Section."[3] Seldes saw the life of a war correspondent as glamorous and romantic and he wrote that he would have covered the war for only "my bread and a hall bedroom."

> When I joined General Pershing's G-2-D, the press corps of the American Army in France, the great, gorgeous, glamorous, roaring and romantic tradition of the war correspondent danced like a specter on our typewriter keys.[4]

Seldes became one of twenty-one reporters covering the war. Although the number of reporters remained constant, over one hundred journalists were members of the corp at various times. Seldes represented a syndicate that served, among others, the Atlantic Constitution, the Los Angeles Times and The Detroit Free Press.[5] Seldes' colleagues in the corp included Floyd Gibbons, Damon Runyun, Heywood Broun, William Allen White, Will Irwin and Edwin L. James. These were the elite of American journalists; they were the

brightest and most well-known stars of the era. It is curious that Seldes found himself among them. He was by no means a novice, having served an eight-year apprenticeship in the newsrooms of Pittsburgh and New York, but he was still an unknown. Seldes himself admitted that it was rather odd to find himself in such prestigious company. The original members of the corp were all famous, he wrote, and their replacements were all star reporters "with one exception, the present writer of these adventures."[6]

Six months prior to Seldes joining the unit the press corp had been reorganized to cope with discipline problems among the journalists who resisted military censorship. The new arrivals didn't question authority or military censorship and were known as "impatient, impulsive and inexperienced," according to historian Emmet Crozier.[7] Seldes, who was among this brash new generation of reporters, observed that the majority of his colleagues were untroubled by a social conscience.

> So far as I know, no one cared a damn about anything at all except getting the news, preferably getting it first, and not necessarily getting it too objectively or too truthfully.[8]

Seldes found that all the reporters were neutral: "No one took a stand. No one took sides. No one I can remember during those 18 months [Seldes was also a member of the corp several months after the war ended] ever spoke seriously about a serious issue or a great event."[9] Further, no one ever questioned the Allies "rightness" in the war and anyone

who doubted "Wilson's crusade to make the world safe for democracy" was considered socialist, pacifist and unAmerican.[10] Seldes, while making these observations, admitted in his 1943 book Freedom of the Press that he too believed totally in the Allied cause. It was not until December 1918 "when I came into Coblenz with the American Army that I realized how fooled I had been by all those years of propaganda."[11]

In his recollections of the corp Seldes implied that he was the only one with a social conscience. He also claimed that no one in the section had a reputation of being a radical or a liberal.[12] This is somewhat surprising particularly when he admitted that the press corp included the famous foreign correspondent Floyd Gibbons, the critical journalist Heywood Broun and the muckraker Will Irwin, who had written the expose on press censorship that had so profoundly affected Seldes in his Pittsburgh days. Seldes acknowledged the presence of these reporters when he wrote: "There were at least two famous writers of the muckraking era among us, but neither of them any longer wanted to expose anything, or right any wrong, or even to alarm anyone."[13] This may be true since many of the troublemakers were removed when the unit was reorganized in November 1917. However, it is difficult to believe that vocal Gibbons, Broun and Irwin, who must have been among the new intake of reporters if they wrote with Seldes, would keep quiet about

corrupt press coverage of the war.

Seldes didn't protest coverage of the war until many years later. He claimed that he didn't learn of the lies until after 1918, so his silence may have been the result of ignorance. And perhaps he was caught up in covering the war to question it too deeply. Furthermore, other reporters' neutrality may have influenced his attitude. After all, he was the youngest of the regulars and probably fairly impressionable when in the company of men whose names graced the front pages of the nation's newspapers. In addition, even if Seldes had been aware of the corruption of the war news, he had already demonstrated, as a cub reporter in Pittsburgh, an ability to rationalize away uncomfortable realities. This ability to evade the realities of certain events during these earlier years may be responsible for his later incongruent memories of those same events.

Although Seldes deplored the lack of social consciousness displayed by those in the corp, he found several journalists he admired and whose influence is reflected in his later work.

There was the dashing and brave Floyd Gibbons, who was in charge of the Chicago Tribune foreign correspondents. Nothing stopped him from a good story, and he scooped his rivals across the continent for more than 20 years, taking incredible risks to file stories.

> Floyd Gibbons, as I have said often, was the best reporter of this time, one of the best of all

> times... Floyd was tough physically and he had a tough mind. It was frequently brilliant in a hard way.[14]

To Seldes, Gibbons was all that was glamorous about the profession and romantic about war correspondents. "He was not a literary writer like Stephen Crane, but he could play the part of Richard Harding Davis brilliantly."[15]

Heywood Broun, who later started a newspaper guild in 1934, also made an impact on Seldes. The "iconoclast" and "individualist" Broun was "so obviously a non-conformist" that Seldes admired him tremendously.

> It was his general non-conformity in the most conforming of all worlds that made me admire him rather than any indication he was a liberal and not a cynic, a humanitarian and not a wise-cracker.[16]

Seldes was impressed by Broun because he appeared to be a man with a social conscience who did not compromise. Neither did Ruth Hale, Broun's wife, who was known as a militant feminist and believed, like Seldes, that newspaper offices should be unionized.

These early meetings with Marshall, Broun, Hale and Gibbons had an impact on Seldes and it is possible to see links between his work and theirs: Seldes went on to become an investigative reporter and revisionist historian like Marshall, a dashing journalist like Gibbons, a non-conformist press critic like Broun, and a unionist like Hale. It is likely that these people influenced his education as a press critic.

WARTIME CENSORSHIP

Seldes' war experiences were more than just meeting interesting people. He also learned a great deal about the press and censorship and now, instead of editors, it was the war censors who gutted his copy. Although Seldes confessed that he was unaware of the allied propaganda during the war, he wrote sixty years later that it was the first time that he had come up against mass-orchestrated propaganda. The war department dictated what reporters would write and Seldes, partially quoting Lord Ponsonby, wrote:

> We all lied about the war...'in all wars truth is the first casualty'...The villian is not the war correspondent in most cases - it is the War Department, the propaganda department which may style itself "office of information."[17]

In an earlier first draft of Tell the Truth and Run (undated) Seldes wrote:

> We all lied about the war. Or, rather we half lied. Every day every one of the twenty war correspondents...wrote a cable dispatch or a mail story reporting heroism and victory on land on sea and in the air. That there was cowardice, defeat, mutiny, suicide as well was known to all of us, but even if censorship did not exist none would have wanted to speak about such things.[18]

In the first version of this admission Seldes put more blame on the War Department than in the later draft when he seemed to apportion some responsibility to the journalists for not telling the whole story. Still, Seldes noted that the Office of War Information was so concerned the war be presented positively that it censored the journalists' copy for anything unpatriotic or pacifist, and the interpretation

of what fit these categories was fairly broad. Seldes discovered that even writing about soldiers singing on the way to battle was not acceptable. "I thought it the grandest thing I ever could write about the spirit of our men. Nothing during the war had so stirred me."[19] Yet his article was cut by the censors because they thought it was pacifist propaganda.

Nothing of the true nature of the war was to be revealed to the public back home. The war was protracted, dirty and slow, according to Seldes. There were no glorious occasions or spectacular events, no drama or color, just a slow grinding of the enemy into the mud. Somehow, reporters had to churn out stories of heroism and valor and dared not write one word of the horror and suffering and death. Seldes wrote:

> I now realize that we were told nothing but buncombe, that we were shown nothing of the realities of the war, that we were in short, merely part of the great allied propaganda machine whose purpose was to sustain morale at all costs and help drag unwilling America into the slaughter.[20]

The deceit practiced by the military concerned Seldes, but in hindsight he was more distressed by his profession's complicity: "By the time our American press corp went to the front everything was cut and dried and powdered for us. We saw little, heard little, and had to make mountains of news out of molehills of information for weeks and weeks."[21]

Seldes made news out of the molehills but in his

subsequent books he wrote about previously-censored events. For example, he disagreed with the official account of the battle of Saint Mihiel, which had been presented as a Allied victory in all the newspapers and history books. According to Seldes, there never was a battle because the German troops had heard plans about the attack and left the city several days earlier. It is important to note that Seldes' claim is substantiated by historian M.L. Stein, who wrote: "The first person to enter Saint-Mihiel after the Germans abandoned it was George Seldes, correspondent for the Marshall syndicate."[22]

By far the biggest suppressed story of the war for Seldes was his interview with German General Paul Von Hindenburg on Armistice day. Seldes described how he and three of his colleagues violated the Armistice and crossed enemy lines seeking an interview with the German Field Marshall. On the way they got caught up in the Soviet-backed German revolution that gripped the country immediately after the armistice was declared. With the assistance of some of these revolutionary sailors, who had mutinied and declared themselves the government of Frankfurt, Seldes and his colleagues were able to obtain an interview with Von Hindenburg at Kassel.

On their return to France with the world scoop, the French requested that those who violated the armistice should be court martialled and shot, claiming it was treason

to enter Germany while a state of war still technically existed. Pershing spared the reporters' lives but insisted that the story be suppressed.[23] This version of events is slightly different to those related in Witness to a Century (1987), when Seldes wrote that the story was suppressed as a result of pressure by the press corp and, in particular, by the representative of the New York Times, Edwin James, who objected to Seldes getting a scoop on the other syndicates.[24]

And a scoop it was. During the interview, Hindenburg confessed that Germany had lost the war not because of any conspiracy by the Jews or Communists, as was commonly rumored, but because of the military superiority of the U.S. forces. Seldes quoted Hindenburg as saying; "I must really say that the British food blockade of 1917 and the American attack decided the war for the Allies."[25]

> This was the biggest story of the war certainly the most important news story of my journalistic three-quarters of a century, an important paragraph in the history not only of the United States, but of the world, and so far as I know it has never been published by anyone but me and appears in no historical work.[26]

Seldes felt that the interview was wrongly suppressed and that if it had been published then perhaps the Nazi platform, which exploited the rumors about a Jewish conspiracy against Germany during the First World War, would have been undermined.

> If the Hindenburg confession had been passed by Pershing's censors at the time, it would have been

> headlined in every country...and undoubtedly would have made a lasting impression on millions of people...I believe it would have destroyed the main planks of the platform on which Hitler rose to power, it would have prevented World War II,...and it would have changed the future of all mankind.[27]

The war ended, and according to Seldes, "The armistice liberated our minds; suddenly we were able to question what we had seen. But up to then it had been living an adventure and writing it patriotically - the greatest adventure in our time."[28]

The reality of the great adventure struck home when they saw the devastation that war had brought to the people and property of Europe. On a battlefield in France, Seldes and three of his colleagues swore an oath that they would do all they could to prevent another war. They pledged

> to tell the world..."the true facts" about the war, so there would be no more wars...we made statements to each other which could be called a declaration of pacifism and I thought mine was for my lifetime.[29]

SELDES' CRITICISMS OF PRESS COVERAGE OF THE WAR

Seldes told the truth about the war ten years later. He devoted a chapter to the war and military censorship in his first book <u>You Can't Print That</u> (1929), but later addressed one of the key issues, that of the association of the munitions industry with the war, in 1934. In <u>Blood and Profits</u> he described how the international cartels had supplied munitions to all sides of the war and prolonged the

conflict for their own mercenary gain. Further, he claimed that they had paid the press to distort the truth about it. The book detailed in length the international cartels who, regardless of nationality, continued to supply the enemy during the war.

> The Krupps who gave their fuses to Vickers for a royalty, the Americans who sold their superior guns and armor to friend and enemy alike, the French who shipped poison gas to Germany during the war and the Germans who shipped steel to France, were big businessmen, doing business as usual, and good business is good patriotism and never lacking in rewards.[30]

Seldes accused international munitions companies of starting the war through their greed and claimed that big business influenced the U.S. government policy toward the European War.

> In 1914 the neutrality of the United States became a vital question for Europe. But Big Business won easily. The "sell to both sides" advocates had no difficulty in persuading government officials they were right.[31]

Seldes saw the same business influence over war policy in France when the French government refused to allow its military to bomb the Briery iron and steel basin, from which the Germans were extracting material to continue the war. A French investigation revealed in 1919:

> Either owing to international solidarity of the metal industrialists, or for the purpose of safeguarding private interests, the order was given by our military heads not to bombard the Briey Basin works exploited by the enemy during the war.[32]

Seldes produced further evidence of the complicity of

big business in manipulating the war in his book Freedom of the Press (1937). He wrote that Woodrow Wilson confessed on September 5, 1919, that "commercialism, money, big business, was [sic] responsible for the war."[33] Seldes further claimed that the American Ambassador to England cabled Woodrow Wilson to enter the war to save Morgan Company investments. Seldes cited part of the text of Ambassador Page's Cable.

> The pressure of this approaching crisis has gone beyond the ability of the Morgan financial agency for the British and French Governments...It is not improbable that the only way of maintaining our present pre-eminent trade position and averting a panic is by declaring war on Germany.[34]

The public release of this cable disillusioned Seldes about the First World War, a war he had thought was for democracy.[35]

As Seldes began to realize the extent of big business involvement in the war, he condemned the hypocritical nature of the big companies who claimed to be patriotic. He concluded in Iron, Blood and Profits (1934):

> The World War has proven...that war is bad business for all countries, all men;...it has shown that armaments are an incentive, one of the main causes of war and no guarantee for peace; that preparedness is the best way to get war; that profits, not patriotism is the motive of the armament-makers and their subsidized patriotic societies.[36]

Yet, big businesses didn't create war all by themselves. Seldes also blamed the press, claiming that the munitions industry was able to control world opinion through

their ownership of a large part of the world's press.

> The corruption of public opinion by the armament-makers has been one of the great secrets of the past fifty years. When newspapers in the name of patriotism attacked pacifists as traitors, when they sabotaged international conferences and ridiculed world peace movements, no one suspected them of being owned by the munitions manufacturers.[37]

Industries' attempt to sabotage peace and control world opinion through ownership of the press during the First World War was to comprise a major plank in Seldes' criticisms of the establishment. Yet, he still wrote optimistically about the legacy of the First World War.

> All the...peoples...feel that the last great war has been fought and not in vain, because the great peace which is to last forever and was worth the sacrifice of all the youth and all the treasure of the generation...Today we live in the golden age when men need no longer kill and die, and hate and death need never return.[38]

Unfortunately death and war were to return to devastate the continent just four years after he had written this, and Seldes blamed the war on the greedy and reactionary nature of big business. As America prepared to go to war in 1940 Seldes fought conscription, claiming that it was against the best interests of the American public. He became an advocate of peace insisting that the war was simply big business moving to quell the growing voice of labor and liberalism. In his newsletter, In Fact, he named American industrial companies that shared technology with the Germans. He also accused the Standard Oil Company of treason because it provided gasoline to the Axis countries

and withheld a synthetic rubber patent from the U.S. government because of its ties with the German rubber company I.F. Farben.[39]

By the time the Second World War arrived, Seldes had come a long way from the young man who had viewed war as a great adventure. In the First World War, he had supported the Allies and believed in their fight for democracy. He even became a part of the military propaganda machine that churned out heroic reports of the war.

In the Second World War, he questioned the Allies' involvement and he sought to reveal the truth about the war with all its big business and political subterfuge.

SUMMARY

Seldes' experiences in the First World War were significant in his evolution as a gadfly on two levels: Professionally, he made his mark as a war correspondent, progressing from small town reporter to foreign correspondent - one of the most glamorous jobs imaginable to Seldes. He had changed from the parochial Pittsburgh reporter, who had in 1915 accepted all reports of the First World War as true, to a seasoned journalist who came to recognize that much of the news about the war was censored. Personally, he met Marshall, Broun, Hale and Gibbons whose own idealogies paralleled his own. Perhaps these older, more experienced, journalists served as role models for the

young idealistic reporter.

The war provided a foundation for Seldes upon which other experiences were built. During the following years Seldes was alerted to big business involvement in politics and war and also to the connection between big business and the press. That he wrote about his war experience many years after the event suggests that the experience had a major impact on his writing.

The war appeared to have been a threshold for Seldes, who stepped through it into, not only a new stage of his career, but also into a new era in Europe. As he covered the Versaille Treaty he saw a new Europe evolving, one in which he felt there was a world-wide conspiracy by the anti-labor reactionary press intent upon destroying Woodrow Wilson and his vision for the liberation of humankind. "It was a conspiracy against all idealism, against democracy, against the welfare of all the common people of all nations."[40] Seldes saw reactionism sweeping Europe in the 1920s and in no place was it more apparent than in Italy under the dictator Benito Mussolini.

NOTES -- CHAPTER 3

1. George Seldes, Tell the Truth and Run (New York: Greenburg Publisher, 195), 28.

2. George Seldes, Witness to a Century (New York: Ballantine Books, 1987), 63.

3. Ibid., 69.

4. George Seldes, "No More Glory,"

5. Witness to a Century, 65.

6. Ibid., 69.

7. Emmet Crozier, 1914-1918 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 174.

8. Tell the Truth and Run, 41.

9. 1914-1918, 174.

10. Tell the Truth and Run, 42.

11. George Seldes, Freedom of the Press (New York: Garden City Publishing Co., Inc., 1937), 33.

12. Tell the Truth and Run, 35.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid., 124.

15. Ibid., 125.

16. Ibid., 31.

17. Witness to a Century, 75.

18. George Seldes, Tell the Truth and Run first draft. Special Collections, Van Pelt Library, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

19. George Seldes, You Can't Print That (New York: Payson and Clarke, 1929), 23.

20. Colman McCarthy, "Seeking a Free Press," The Washington Post, 3 May 1973, A26. McCarthy cited this passage from Freedom of the Press.

21. George Seldes, Tell the Truth and Run, first draft, (p10) Special Collections, Philadelphia.

22. M.L. Stein, Under Fire - The Story of American War Correspondent (New York: Julian Messner, 1968), 73.

23. Tell the Truth and Run, 53.

24. Witness to a Century, 100.

25. Ibid., 99.

26. Ibid., 96.

27. Ibid., 100.

28. Tell the Truth and Run, 42.

29. Ibid., 54.

30. George Seldes, Iron, Blood and Profits (New York: Harper Brothers Publishers, 1934), 2.

31. Ibid., 160.

32. Ibid., 84-85.

33. Freedom of the Press, 116.

34. Ibid., 117. Cited from the Nye Committee investigating the munitions industry in 1934.

35. Tell the Truth and Run, 228.

36. Iron, Blood and Profits, 325-326.

37. Ibid., 131.

38. George Seldes, World Panorama (New York: Blue Ribbon Books, 1935), 10.

39. In Fact, 21 December 1942.

40. Tell the Truth and Run, 60.

CHAPTER 4

ITALIAN FASCISM

After the end of the First World War Seldes stayed in Europe. He became an assistant to the London correspondent for the Chicago Tribune and then later was appointed European correspondent for the Chicago Tribune. During the following ten years he recorded the rise of modern post-war Europe with its new political orders powered by radical new ideologies. The void left by the destruction of centuries-old-monarchies gave place to a struggle between revolutionary Socialism and reactionary Fascism. It was in Italy that Seldes documented the reality of Fascism - the violence, the undermining of liberal and democratic values and the increased censorship of the press. He saw beyond the carefully constructed image of a successful Fascist Italy to realize that Fascism posed a threat to, not only his humanitarian and liberal values, but to democracies throughout the world.

SELDES' EXPULSION

Seldes, as a roving European correspondent, visited Italy four times before asking to be appointed there

permanently in 1924.[1] He went to Rome a year after he had been expelled from Russia for not submitting to Bolshevik censorship, and he wrote:

> I came to Italy with the same open mind I took to Russia...I was probably more friendly to the idea of fascism.[2]

There is some doubt as to whether Seldes really did go to Rome with an open mind. In his book Witness to a Century (1987) he wrote that on his way to his permanent position in Italy he met up with William Bolitho, a fellow journalist from Germany. Bolitho, who had been a correspondent in Italy, convinced Seldes that Fascism was an empty ideology based upon greed and violence and that Mussolini and his Blackshirts were merely the army for big business interests. He suggested that Seldes try to get the facts on the assassination of Socialist leader, Giacomo Matteotti, who was killed just before he revealed a connection between the American Sinclair Oil Company and Fascists. "Go after this story," Bolitho advised. "It will rock the world."[3]

Bolitho encouraged Seldes to pursue this story because Bolitho felt that it was important to let the world know that big business, both in Italy and abroad, subsidized Fascism and controlled the press. Bolitho believed that newspapers in America, particularly the Hearst papers with their connections to big business, "were more likely to print tourists reports of trains running on time than stories about corporate interests bribing Mussolini."[4]

Seldes was profoundly impressed with Bolitho's argument.

> Bolitho's revelations convinced me that there were no longer two valid sides to the fascist question, as there still were to the communist question ... Fascism was nothing but the special interests, the big business, reaction marching with bayonets. It has no philosophy, good or bad. It had nothing for the people of Italy.[5]

The discussion with Bolitho was an important turning point for Seldes, and he began to realize the implications of Fascism.

> My understanding [of Fascism] did not begin with my own eyewitness experiences with Blackshirt street fights, stabbings, shootings...the endless bloodshed...and occasional murders;...I saw these things but did not jump to conclusions. Their meaning was made clear to me in conversations with William Bolitho in Paris.[6]

If these recollections are correct, then it is doubtful that Seldes went to Italy in 1924 with quite the open mind that he claimed in his first book <u>You Can't Print That</u> (1929).

Yet, it would have been understandable if Seldes had gone to Italy initially receptive to Fascism. He wouldn't have been the only one. The governments of the world during the 1920s had a largely positive view of Fascism. They saw that it had organized a chaotic Italy, helped to balance the national budget and encouraged foreign investment. Fascism was given further credibility because of the existence of Fascist parties in England and the United States, and the ideology was seen as an alternative to the Russian menace of Communism.

Whether Seldes initially viewed Fascism positively is debatable. What is known is that he went to Rome expecting to find journalistic freedom. He was soon disappointed.[7] Seldes discovered on his arrival that his predecessor had received, along with all other correspondents, a "monthly bribe from Mussolini in the form of 5,000 free words via telegraph or cable" to write positive reports of the Fascist regime.[8]

Seldes sent a letter to the Paris office of the Chicago Tribune stating that he would not be a party to corruption. He was urged by the Tribune representative in Paris, however, to make some sort of compromise by which he could accept the bribe. Seldes was puzzled that the Tribune was prepared to prostitute itself to the Italian government for only 5,000 free cable words, which was worth only $200. Later Seldes discovered that the owner of the Tribune, Colonial McCormick, resented having to pay for anything in which he was not particularly interested and this included European news. The Tribune correspondents therefore were encouraged to accept the Italian "bonus."[9]

Bribery was not all that Seldes had to contend with. He discovered that, like Russia, there was censorship in Italy. Cables were intercepted, altered or delayed, and he was cautioned by his colleagues not to write anything uncomplimentary about Fascism or he would face expulsion.

Despite the warning Seldes fell foul of the Italian

government only weeks after his arrival when he reported on street riots and Blackshirt beatings. He was told by the American Ambassador that Mussolini didn't like his work. Seldes responded with a letter to the foreign office explaining why it was incumbent upon him to give more than the official line.

> We are required to give the facts, to relate happenings; not viewpoints of foreign governments, but facts of interest to the American viewpoint.[10]

Seldes would not be intimidated into modifying his cables:

> Despite the threat of deportation my dispatches never toned down the news, never aimed to apologize for violence or veneer with propaganda favorable to the Fascisti [sic] certain acts of which they were proud at home but which made a bad impression abroad.[11]

Seldes continued his reports but the situation came to a climax two months later when he discovered information that directly implicated Mussolini in the assassination of Giacomo Matteotti. Seldes claimed to have documentary evidence that Mussolini had ordered the execution. The story behind the assassination was common knowledge in Italy, but it had not been published abroad because of censorship.

The Matteotti case was the "biggest news item in Italy," according to Seldes, because it showed Mussolini for the assassin he was. Seldes smuggled the story out of Italy to America via Paris. He warned the Paris paper not to publish the story in Europe because of the danger to himself. The Paris Tribune published it, however, and as a

direct result Seldes was expelled from Italy.

An Associated Press dispatch reported the Italian government's explanation for the expulsion: It claimed Seldes was asked to leave Italy because he was depicting the Mussolini government "in the worst possible light and that he presented in his dispatches the views of the political antagonists of Premier Mussolini."[12] Seldes denied having met with any members of Mussolini's opposition. He claimed in a press release that "most of my information came from the most reliable American and British sources...untainted by party prejudice."[13] Seldes also dismissed the Italian accusations of his dispatches being unfair, biased and a tool of the minorities as lies. He stated that his only crime was to have written the truth for the American public.[14]

Seldes, having publicly criticized Italian Fascism, began to realize that the reactionary ideology had strong political and business allies. He discovered this when he wrote to the American Embassy in Italy seeking assistance in getting his Italian aide, Camillo Cianfarra, out of Rome. The embassy failed to help and Cianfarra was so badly beaten up by Fascists that he died of his injuries. Seldes, angry at the diplomats, declared they were in the pay of big businesses in America who supported Fascism. He wrote that the American embassy was nothing more than the political arm of international big business who rationalized their non-

action by claiming that all non-Fascists were Communists.

> Unfortunately the U.S. Embassy in Rome was at this time...in the hands of self-styled diplomats...who were in reality an American brand of Fascisti. Ambassadors and ministers representing the United States were the worst offenders in labeling, branding, name calling: liberals and especially Socialists were all called "Reds" and "Communists" and therefore everything done against them was justified.[15]

Seldes' expulsion caused an explosion of protest from several of his fellow correspondents, who lodged an official complaint with the Italian government and publicized their displeasure in their newspapers. The only representatives who did not protest were from the New York Times and the Associated Press, and Seldes condemned them for suppressing the news and supporting Fascism.[16] He claimed that the two representatives from the Times and the AP lied about all the news from Italy, including his expulsion.

There is some dispute over whether the Chicago Tribune supported Seldes' attempt to write the truth about Fascism. Seldes claimed it did not. The paper did, however, report the complaint from the other correspondents on July 28, 1925:

> On Wednesday last a group of other American correspondents in Rome, including representatives of the New York World, Christian Science Monitor, Chicago Daily News, Philadelphia Public Ledger, and the United Press signed a letter asking,... for a conference...to protest against the treatment of Mr. Seldes as unfair and high handed. They said they purposed [sic] to request their respective newspapers to withdraw them from Rome if the Mussolini government persisted in its action against The Tribune representative...The only correspondents of American newspapers in Rome

> who did not join in this protest were the representatives of the Associated Press and the New York Times, who are Italian subjects and not American citizens.

The article acknowledged the censorship under which Seldes and other correspondents were forced to operate and indicated support for his protest at Italian censorship. The article added:

> He [Seldes] was sent to the Rome Bureau about six months ago at his own request for a change. Instead of sending out only the glowing reports of conditions which are common from Rome since the Mussolini dictatorship began, he sought to give some publicity to the large minority of the country, which continues boldly to persist and to publish its opinions despite the energetic censorship which prevails under the Mussolini dictatorship.

The issue of Italian censorship was mentioned in several articles including a satirical editorial in the July 29, 1925, New York World:

> Signor Grandi, Undersecretary of State for Foreign Affairs, said there is no form of censorship; that no newspaperman need fear to cable any facts, or express any honestly professed opinion. This is to say then, that Mr. Seldes is a liar and a hypocrite. What the Italian Government wants, it says in effect, is fair play; and its notion of fair play is that if a correspondent cables that Italy is full of sweetness and light, with a side order of milk and honey, the correspondent is permitted to dwell in Rome. Otherwise, alien skies must smile upon him.

The New York World also made it quite clear whose side of the issue they supported and suggested that the Italian government could damage its carefully cultivated public image as a result of its actions:

> The action of the Italian Government in asking the

> withdrawal of George Seldes...is a brilliant piece of stupidity. If, in view of the situation it creates for the other correspondents, they do as has been suggested and withdraw from Rome, the government will be in worse plight [sic] than ever so far as news sent to America is concerned. It will be very simple for all of these correspondents to "cover" Rome from some other place, say Paris. There will be no dearth of persons glad to furnish them with information. But in such cases the Government will be unable to present its side, as it can at present, which is a valuable privilege when controversy is raging ... When Seldes is accused of sending 'misleading, alarmist and exaggerated' dispatches, this means he sent facts which reflected not on Italy but on an Administration, a group of men in control - i.e., the Fascisti [sic]. That they may have been true reports boots little to the Fascist mind. That mind is addicted to strong arm methods, even as regards foreign correspondents.

The most supportive of the dispatches was from the Nation:

> We do not believe the charge - having followed the work of Mr. Seldes (a brother of Gilbert Seldes) for many years. But even if it were true it would be no reason to expel him. Such high-handed action can only lead outsiders to believe that Italy is attempting to conceal something shameful.[12]

The New York Daily News reported that what Seldes had written about Italian censorship was not vastly different to what others were saying about the Fascist Government, adding:

> The Tribune has no prejudice against fascism. It knows the social and economic disorders and the governmental weaknesses from which Premier Mussolini rescued the land. In turn he established a personal despotism and The Tribune does not care for a news service which ignores the real news, and furnishes government bulletins about what is actually happening. Seldes himself would not remain, nor have been permitted to remain, as the agent of Premier Mussolini. The purpose of corrupted and censored news from Italy is to influence public opinion and to obtain in

> international affairs benefits which would not be had if public sentiment was based on truthful information.[17]

This sample of newspaper articles, found among Seldes' papers, indicate that there was support for Seldes' actions among the journalism community. The reports also indicate that the international news services reported that press censorship existed in Italy. Whether this was the only occasion that Italian censorship was reported internationally is not known.

Returning to Germany Seldes later wrote that he held no grudge against Mussolini or Fascism for his expulsion. He felt that, like his expulsion from Russia, it was inevitable. It was a lesson, he wrote, that "all writers who do not compromise and trim their sails soon learn if they defy the dictators."[18]

SELDES' CRITICISMS OF FASCISM

In Italy Seldes learned some important lessons about Fascism that were to influence his criticisms of the press. He saw Fascism as a reactionary ideology and he interpreted it to mean anti-liberal, anti-freedom, anti-change and intolerant of other political theories. He felt that it posed a real threat to Democracy and, immediately after his expulsion, he began to warn the world of its dangers.

Using the terms "Fascism" and "Reaction" interchangeably, Seldes felt Fascism was as dangerous as

Communism, and in an article he wrote for Liberty magazine in September 1925 he drew parallels between the two ideologies. Both use violence and both claim to be a panacea for all the world ills, he wrote. "Fascism is Bolshevism working for another minority and wearing the black instead of the red shirt." And instead of workers in control it was big business.

> The original Fascist party of Italy,... was subsidized by a handful of the richest industrialists and landowners who wanted to preserve their wealth and power and prevent the majority of people from living better lives.[19]

Seldes felt that there was no program or policy behind Fascism; it was simply a 'spoils system' whose purpose was to generate money for the rich by exploiting the poor.

Seldes found that Italian Fascism also meant profit for overseas investors, as Mussolini mortgaged Italy to raise funds for his new empire. By financing Mussolini, American big business helped prop up a government that was destroying democratic values. Further, big business also encouraged the business-owned press to present positive images of Fascism in order to promote further tourism and investment. Both the national and international press was so successful at promoting Italy that American companies owned half a billion dollars worth of the country by 1931.[20]

According to Seldes, big businesses rationalized their involvement with Italian Fascism by claiming that Mussolini had saved Italy from Bolshevism. Since Communism was seen

as the greatest threat to world stability by many during the 1930s and 1940s this gave the association a cloak of acceptable respectability. However, Seldes disputed that Mussolini had saved Italy from Bolshevism. He claimed that he had witnessed the rise of Democracy in post-war Italy before it was destroyed by Fascism.[21]

Seldes, who was strongly anti-Communist, did not believe that the existence of Fascism could be validated by the fear of Communism. He increasingly began to believe that it was Fascism, rather than Communism, that posed the most immediate threat to Democratic society and liberal values. He wrote: "The ultimate and complete destruction of civil liberties is in the program of every reactionary and Fascist group and movement. Liberty and Fascism cannot coexist."[22]

The Italian propaganda, about the success of Fascism, deceived the world, according to Seldes. The illusion that Fascism was a viable system of government was created by Mussolini and the Fascists, who through censorship and the threat of violence, controlled the news and deliberately created the image of a Communist-free and prosperous Italy.

The only ones that could see the truth about Fascism - the violence, the assault on freedom - were the foreign correspondents, but there was nothing they could do against such institutionalized government control. In fact, the journalists in Italy were forced to become collaborators of

the Fascists because they had to assess each news item to see if it was worth the risk of deportation. "Thus, we voluntarily suppressed the truth about blackshirt terrorism waiting for a big day."[23]

Even if the correspondent did get the story out of Italy, Seldes claimed, he or she had to face a system of international censorship, able to control and hide the truth about Italy.[24] Seldes learned that the international news services and newspaper chains suppressed any news that reflected badly on Italy. He maintained that big-business-run-newspapers were lying about Fascism for profit and that "hundreds of press bureaus that supply the world's news are merely servants of the state and thus tools of propaganda."[25] He claimed that few papers were brave enough to disregard the wishes of the foreign office or the international business houses for fear of losing advertising revenue. He insisted that: "Billions of dollars, at home and abroad, are able to control or hide the international truth."[26]

Seldes' theory of international press control, however, is not easily reconciled with the reports of his expulsion, which also mentioned that censorship existed in Italy.

The American press hid the truth, according to Seldes, by writing favorably about Fascism, Naziism and Reaction, and by calling everyone that was anti-Fascist and anti-Reactionary a Communist.[27] Seldes wrote that the newspapers

printed mostly the pro-Mussolini views of the business people and politicians. Academics and labor leaders who vowed "to drive Fascism from the face of the earth" did not receive the same coverage.[28]

During his years in Europe Seldes grew concerned at the spread of Fascism. He watched the increase in violence, the reduction of personal liberties and the discrediting of Democracy as a workable political ideology. He felt that the 1929 economic collapse saw great gains for Fascism, which "can arise only in time of national distress."[29]

> In one country the bankers' and manufacturers' associations have assumed arbitrary power, in another a perverted philosophy is in control of human fate; in a third an ego maniac rules and in a fourth medieval corruption has temporarily crushed all liberal resistance; therefore the word is spread throughout the dominant nations, America and Britain, that democracy is unsuitable for most of continental Europe, that it has proven a fraud and a failure, that parliaments are a drag on the efficient expression of the will of a people, freedom is a modern delusion, truth is a false god and liberty nothing but a chimaera [sic]. The new propaganda reigns.[30]

After watching the growth of Fascism in Europe, Seldes was acutely conscious of any similar patterns in the United States. In the 1930s and 1940s he wrote four books documenting the threat of Fascism to America: Freedom of the Press (1937), You Can't Do That (1938), Facts and Fascism (1943) and One Thousand Americans (1947). He warned of the danger of reaction which he believed would come from the right wing and big business.

Seldes saw evidence of the growth in Reaction in

America's social problems. He attributed the growing gap between the rich and the poor, the vetoing of welfare bills by Congress and anti-labor tone of the big-business-run-newspapers to reactionary forces. He felt that groups like the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM), the American League and other "pseudo-patriotic" organizations were behind the growth of American Fascism. He claimed that these groups organized big business in a movement against labor, encouraged the Liberty League to curtail civil liberties and stopped the passage of food, drug and other laws aimed to safeguard consumers. It was these powerful business groups that sought to "end ... civil liberties, destroy the labor unions, end the free press, and make money at the expense of a slave nation."[31]

Seldes warned that big businesses was Fascist, but it wasn't until the Second World War, when businesses refused to convert auto-plants to war production for fear of losing profits, that the reactionary nature of business became apparent.[32] Seldes claimed that these manufacturers, through their greed, sabotaged the American war effort and others agreed with him. An editorial in The Nation related how the Standard Oil company continued to sell gasoline to the Germans and their subsidiaries throughout 1941 and only ceased when black-listed by the state department.[33] Michael Straight of The New Republic also attacked big business in April 1942 when he described how Standard Oil withheld

synthetic rubber production methods from the navy "to make good on an agreement with I.G. Farben, the German chemical trust."[34]

It wasn't just Seldes' observations about the unpatriotic and greedy nature of big business that drew support. His accusation that big business and newspapers were actively anti-labor and working against public welfare were also supported by articles in The Nation. Freda Kirchwey argued that "war hysteria" would bring about legislation undermining labor's rights and in the end "produce home grown Fascism."[35] I. F. Stone also concluded in an article entitled "All-Out Against Labor" that attacks against labor were only an attempt to "distract attention from the conduct of many big business men."[36] Another exponent of the anti-labor tone of the press, Heywood Broun, wrote in the Guild Reporter on April 1, 1936: "the making of a modern newspaper is Big Business. Big business does not want to see the growth of trade unionism." Virginius Dabney, editor of the Richmond Times Dispatch, was yet another who agreed with Seldes that big-business-run newspapers were not interested in the public's welfare. Dabney wrote to the Princeton Public Opinion Quarterly on January 10, 1938: "What this country needs is a press which puts the general good first. With notable exceptions, American publishers are chiefly concerned with profit."

These are but a few who indicated support for Seldes'

accusations about big business and the press. It suggests that, for all Seldes' dramatic and aggressive talk about international plots and censored press, there were others who felt the same way.

For Seldes, America became divided into three political groups. The Communists, the Fascists and the Liberals, and he felt the struggle among these three ideologies was behind many of the programs and reforms during the 1930s and 1940s. For example, Seldes believed that President F. D. Roosevelt's 1932 New Deal welfare programs were an attempt to steer a path between Fascism and Communism.[37] Seldes also claimed that fear of Communism was used as an excuse by a group of Wall Street bankers, who objected to Roosevelt's reform packages and planned to take control of the White House and install a Fascist leader to control the president.[38]

Whether such a plot did exist is difficult to prove; however, Seldes' biggest concern about reaction in America was that it would unite under a leader like Mussolini and Hitler.

> America's danger from Fascism lies in the success of a number of demogues [sic] who are arising in all parts of the country. Like Hitler and Mussolini and others, they make promises capitalizing the misery of the unemployed, and disclaim anything but patriotic and democratic motives.[39]

Acknowledging that there was disillusionment with the parliamentary process, Seldes continued to insist that

America had not gone to the left, Communism was not sweeping the county, "its enemy is the black-shirted right, not the red-shirted left."[40]

SUMMARY

Seldes' experience in Italy had a fundamental impact on his criticisms of the press. He believed that the world's news sources were corrupt. He also saw the growth of Reaction in Europe after the First World War, but it was in Italy that he saw the real threat that Fascism posed to press freedom and liberal democratic values. He watched as Fascism destroyed the free press, annihilated liberal values and undermined personal freedoms. He watched as the idealogy spread to Germany, Rumania, Spain and Japan dragging the world toward another war with little protest from democratic governments.

Seldes was against everything that Fascism stood for. He objected to an idealogy based upon greed and violence, he objected to the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few as big businesses manipulated governments for profit, and he objected to the corruption of the world's news sources. Adopting these objections as the basis of his criticisms, he continued to protest against Fascism and big business.

Seldes' experience in Italy took him another step along the path toward becoming a press critic. In the seven

years since the First World War he had gone from adventurous reporter to a protester of Italian Fascism. But it was not until his meeting with psychoanalyst Dr. Alfred Adler that he began to closely examine the direction in which he was heading.

NOTES -- CHAPTER 4

1. George Seldes, You Can't Print That (New York: Payson and Clarke, 1929), 70.

2. Ibid., 69-70.

3. George Seldes, Witness to a Century (New York: Ballantine Books, 1987), 217.

4. Ibid.

5. George Seldes, Tell the Truth and Run (New York: Greenberg Publishers, 1953), 180.

6. Ibid., 179.

7. You Can't Print That, 70.

8. Witness to a Century, 218.

9. Tell the Truth and Run, 189.

10. You Can't Print That, 72.

11. Ibid., 78.

12. Associated Press Release, 28 July 1925. Special Collections, Van Pelt Library, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

13. Chicago Tribune, 29 July 1925.

14. Manchester Guardian, 1 August, 1925.

15. Witness to a Century, 222-223.

16. Tell the Truth and Run, 194.

17. The Nation, vol. 121, 1925.

18. New York Daily News, month unknown, 1925.

19. George Seldes, Sawdust Caesar (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1935), xiv.

20. George Seldes, Facts and Fascism (New York: In Fact, 1943), 34.

21. You Can't Print That, 312.

22. Ibid., 87.

23. George Seldes, You Can't Do That (New York: Modern Age Books, 1938), 173.

24. You Can't Print That, 80.

25. Ibid., 16.

26. George Seldes, Freedom of the Press (New York: Bobbs Merrill, 1935),242.

27. Ibid.

28. Facts and Fascism, 69.

29. You Can't Print That, 96.

30. You Can't Do That, 186.

31. You Can't Print That, 10.

32. Facts and Fascism, 14.

33. Ibid., 12.

34. The Nation, 9 May 1942, 530.

35. I.F. Stone, "ESSO Family Reunion," The Nation, 12 June 1943, 826. and Michael Straight, "Standard Oil:Axis Ally," The New Republic, 6 April 1942, 450.

36. Freda Kirchwey, "Keep Cool on Labor," The Nation, 21 June 1941, 713.

37. I.F. Stone, "All-Out Against Labor," The Nation, 28 March 1942, 360.

38. George Seldes, World Panorama (New York: Blue Ribbon Books, 1935), 382.

39. You Can't Do That, 174.

40. World Panorama, 390.

41. Ibid., 396.

CHAPTER 5

DR. ALFRED ADLER

Not all the events that influenced Seldes' writings were as historically significant as his interview with German General Paul Von Hindenburg or his expulsion from Italy. Seldes' meeting with psychoanalyst Dr. Alfred Adler in Vienna in 1928 was not a particularly important news event but it was a "catalytic" occasion for Seldes. He wrote it was "much more significant for me at least than the experiences of a certain Biblical character on the road to Damascus."[1] It was Seldes' meeting with Adler that was to precipitate a major change in Seldes' career as he went from journalist to press critic.

SELF ANALYSIS

After Seldes' expulsion from Italy, he returned to Berlin where he was head of the Tribune bureau. He made several trips to Vienna in 1927 and during one of them he met Dr. Alfred Adler, founder of the school of individual psychology and the inferiority complex theory. Seldes initially asked Adler for a personality analysis of Mussolini for a feature story he was writing for the New

New York World Sunday Magazine.

Following this meeting, when ever Seldes was in Vienna, he would attend weekly receptions at Adler's house. Through these informal sessions Seldes, at 37, began to examine his own life, his relationship with his family and his decision to become a journalist. Until this point Seldes' life had been so full of exciting events and historic encounters that he never stopped to fully consider the implications of how he was living.

Seldes acknowledged the importance of his meeting with Adler when he wrote that it shaped the pattern of his life as much as "my libertarian, nonconformist freethinking father did in my childhood."[2]

> Dr. Adler changed my attitude and my career just as surely as certain forces shape the lives, the behavior patterns, of all the people in the world in their childhood.[3]

Adler, with his theories about human behavior, helped Seldes to analyze his life.

> When he [Adler] first spoke of "the feeling of inferiority," which he insisted every man and woman living and dead had experienced, and the lifelong struggle everyone makes to overcome it, how this feeling expresses itself, the compensations for it...he gave me a true revelation and set me to reconsidering, meditating, judging and deciding upon the future.[4]

Seldes superficially acknowledged in his books that Adler made him think about his life, but Seldes does not reveal what motivated him initially to undertake this reassessment. It is possible to speculate that Seldes was

open to self examination partially to resolve the personal conflict he experienced trying to reconcile his beliefs about how the press should function with the lies he saw in the international news. He had been a journalist for twenty years when he met Adler, and his self-examination may also have been part of a general disillusionment with the profession. Whatever the reason it is clear that Dr. Adler provided Seldes with some powerful insights into what had influenced his choices in life.

Adler emphasized that the pattern of human behavior was set in the earliest years of life. Seldes acknowledged the significant influences on his own life.

> My mother whom I do not remember, my aunt who guided my life for ten years, and my father who came and went - these are the three who according to my mentor Alfred Adler are so greatly responsible for much that I have done and said and the way I have gone through my four decades of American and European journalism.[5]

Seldes examined his motives for becoming a journalist. He considered himself shy and fearful, reticent and retiring. "No aspen leaf ever had a shakier time than I during my hour with Mussolini and every big event to which I have been assigned in the past 10 years in Europe filled me with dread and horror."[6] Seldes also claimed that he hated to push himself forward and was self-deprecating about his achievements.

> I hated the first person singular and avoided it always in my newspaper work...Despite Hemingway writing that 'I knew George and he was a damn fine newspaper man,' that wasn't so. There were amazing

> coincidences and the "great scoops" were accidents.[7]

At a time when journalists were essentially roaring, brawling adventurers Seldes wondered why he had chosen this profession, and Adler provided him with an explanation.

> I had been a timid child, fearful of adventures. Adler told us that youth meets the feeling of inferiority in many ways -one person might become a bully, seeking compensation in fighting; and another would become a humanitarian.[8]

It is possible that Seldes chose to become a journalist because he saw it as a profession that was both glamorous and fun, as well as a social service.

The underlying impetus for Seldes to become a journalist and later a press critic may have come from his struggle to live up to his father's liberal, utopian idealized views of life. Seldes never admits this but through his oblique intellectualized references it is possible to speculate that he felt simply being George Seldes was not enough to satisfy his father. Seldes believed he had to achieve great things in order to be loved. He wrote: "I was especially interested in the Adlerian view of compensating for the universal feeling of inferiority. I realized that my choice of trade had been explained by Dr. Adler." He added

> Was there also compulsion those past decades for speaking and writing, not out of partisanship, but out of a feeling of simple justice for the small, the weak, the minority, the voiceless, the disinherited? Were these compulsions developing out of the old behavior pattern inflexibly set during the years of childhood, shaped by my

parents?[9]

SUMMARY

The Wednesday afternoons at Adler's apartment were important to Seldes' evolution as a critic. He began to think about his career and to focus on why he became a reporter. In the process of self discovery he changed from a foreign news reporter to a press critic. Seldes acknowledged openly that Adler helped him to look closely at why he became a journalist and what "made me want to quit newspaper work and attempt writing of more lasting value than headline news."[10]

> I decided that I too would overcome my feeling of inferiority, give up security, give up the life of travel and adventures and dramatic experiences, leave an interesting and exciting world, and follow my second, but never exercised ambition, playwriting.[11]

It was not the first time Seldes had thought of leaving journalism. He mentioned it in a letter he wrote to Judith Radorf on September 22, 1926. He described his time in Syria and Damascus and wrote of his plans for the future. "Now going to Berlin - bloody Berlin - my fatality - always to be sent back there, I count on it as cash, I cannot quit."

Seldes' brother Gilbert also mentioned Seldes' desire to leave the business in an article he wrote for the New York Evening Post on February 13, 1929. "He is a great newspaperman...but like the star reporter on the front page,

George has been giving up newspaper work for years and getting pulled back into it."

Meeting Adler was unlike any of Seldes other experiences, because it did not directly provide him with material for criticisms of the press. However, it was important in a more personal way. It enabled him to look at his other experiences in a different perspective and gave him the insight to translate them into criticisms of how the press functioned.

Seldes didn't leave journalism until almost two years after meeting Adler. It took one more experience before he made the final decision to leave newspaper journalism for good.

NOTES -- CHAPTER 5

1. George Seldes, Tell the Truth and Run (New York: Greenburg Publishers, 1953), ix.

2. George Seldes, Witness to a Century (New York: Ballantine Books, 1987), 227.

3. Tell the Truth and Run, viii.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., xxiii - xxiv

6. The New York Observer, 12 June, 1929.

7. Tell the Truth and Run, x.

8. Witness to a Century, 228.

9. Tell the Truth and Run, xi.

10. Witness to a Century, 228.

11. Tell the Truth and Run, 225.

CHAPTER 6

MEXICO

If Seldes' meeting with Dr. Adler caused him to think about his future, then it was his experience in Mexico that led him to act upon those reflections and make the decision to leave the newspaper business. It was in Mexico that Seldes' illusions about the American press were shattered when he discovered that the United States' press was just as corrupt as the press in Europe.

SABOTAGE BY THE UNITED STATES PRESS

Seldes returned to the United States early in 1927 to recuperate from malaria, which he contracted while on assignment in Baghdad. In March Colonel McCormick called him about rumors that the United States was about to declare war on Mexico and said the Tribune needed a trained foreign correspondent to cover the situation. Seldes, who was almost recovered, accepted the assignment.

Going to Mexico as "open minded a journalist that ever visited a strange land," Seldes found the border deluged with propaganda, rumors of a Bolshevik takeover, and Mexicans in the pay of Americans.[1] He learned that war was

not imminent but rather that there was tremendous intrigue by Americans and the Mexican aristocracy to discredit the Mexican Socialist government. Several American oil and mining companies, through the press, promoted a picture of internal disharmony in Mexico in order to encourage the U.S. government to intervene on the pretext of stabilizing the region. The businesses hoped that intervention would lead to the negotiation of further mining concessions.[2]

The center of the anti-Mexican intrigue was the American Embassy in Mexico City. Seldes again saw the U.S. embassy acting as the political agents of big business interests and he claimed that it had deliberately fostered fears of Bolshevism. Seldes found that much of the anti-Mexican sentiment focused upon Mexican President Pluarco Elias Calles, who had threatened to withdraw American mining concessions. Calles claimed to have documents that proved the original concessions had been extracted through threats of violence.[3]

In an effort to understand the situation, Seldes carried out his own investigations. He began first by examining the accusations against Calles.

Seldes discovered that the Mexican president, although profoundly impressed by Communist ideas, was more Socialist than Bolshevik. Calles was attempting to restore land and mining rights to the Mexican people and establish a dictatorship of the workers. The nucleus of the

dictatorship was the Mexican Federation of Labor (CROM), whose program was the socialization of all means of production and distribution. Seldes learned that CROM, despite its professed Communist goal, had agreed to fight Bolshevism in cooperation with the American Federation of Labor.

Seldes conceded that Calles was fanatical in some areas, particularly in his attacks of the Catholic Church, which he blamed for dividing the Mexican people. Seldes found that the Catholic church in Mexico was politically active and was able to incite sections of the population into revolt against the government. Yet the American press downplayed the political nature of the church and focused upon only the government attacks on the Catholic Church. Seldes found this bias played upon Catholic sentiment in the United States and further discredited the Mexican government.

Seldes found many reporters in Mexico ready to work against the Calles regime by fabricating lies about Bolshevik plots. It was a shocking discovery for Seldes because, although he knew publishers censored the news, he had believed that journalists in the field tried to write the truth.

> Mexico was an experience which hit me hard. It was the first time, I might add the only time, I found a large percentage of the American press corps engage in the same unethical or venal practices which were common to newspaper owners, but rare among reporters. No one could ever

> accuse any one of a score of us who had been in Moscow of attacking or favoring the Bolshevik regime because of a promised oil concession or the failure to get it ... In Mexico there was corruption among the correspondents.[4]

Seldes felt that the anti-Mexican attitude of the reporters only reflected the views of their big business newspapers in America.

> To begin with there are powerful newspapers in America, which want war with an annexation or occupation of Mexico, and these papers pick men [reporters] who believe in this policy or who sell themselves to it.[5]

The newspapers of America were content to have events in Mexico interpreted by incompetent and prejudiced reporters, according to Seldes. He claimed that ninety percent of the reports from Mexico were biased and depicted only the darker side of the Calles regime.[6] Seldes concluded that "Between the American editors and the American reporters Mexico has not had a square deal."[7]

Despite the lies in the American press Seldes was not blind to the inadequacies of the Mexican president. He criticized Calles' efforts to control his opponents by censoring the Mexican press. Yet Seldes, who objected to censorship in any form, found that Mexican censorship was virtually insignificant compared to America's manipulation of the news about Mexico. He wrote:

> ... censorship exists [in Mexico] from time to time, but ... it is not a tenth as stupid or vicious as that practiced in American newspaper offices where owners and editors have policies of war and interventions which force their editorial writers and reporters to prostitute themselves.[8]

From his own investigations in Mexico Seldes concluded that there were Bolsheviks in Mexico trying to incite the country against the Americans. However, he felt that there was no real Communist threat because Mexico simply preferred America to Russia. He wrote about his findings in several articles for the Tribune but found that for the first time in ten years his copy was censored.

Seldes' findings were a drop in the ocean of disinformation that was being fed to the press by the embassy, which kept the fear of Bolshevism at a fever pitch. The American ambassador (unnamed) was opposed to any change in the status quo and labelled anything that deviated from previously accepted methods as being Bolshevism. When Calles spoke of ideals in government the ambassador could only see violations in property rights, and when Calles explained his reforms it was considered Communist.[9] The intense anti-Mexican sentiment among Americans in Mexico led to collusion between the press and the embassy, who both, because of their desire to promote commercial investment, had a vested interest in discrediting the Calles' government. Seldes was offered stolen documents by one of his pro-American Mexican sources that alleged that the Calles' government would financially renumerate any U.S. senator for expressing sympathy for Mexico. The documents were being sold to reporters, according to Seldes, with the tacit approval of the diplomatic corp. Seldes felt the

documents were false and didn't buy them, but this didn't stop the Hearst syndicate from purchasing and publishing them. Subsequent Congressional records later declared the papers forgeries.

Instead of finding that Mexico was corrupt, Seldes uncovered incriminating evidence that the U.S. government had been intervening in Mexican affairs for several years. He discovered several authentic documents that proved the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City was implicated in the 1913 assassination of the Mexican president, Francisco Madero. Seldes believed that the Madero affair was important to the strained relations between the two countries. He reported that Calles had said, fourteen years after the assassination, that "complete confidence between Mexico and the United States can never be re-established until [the]...affair is explained and atoned for to the satisfaction of our people."[10] Seldes sent the Madero documents to the Chicago Tribune, but the story was never published.

Seldes found it especially intolerable that a number of his Mexico stories were censored after having spent nine years in Europe where, because of Colonel McCormick's lack of interest in European affairs, no office policy had influenced his stories.

> In Europe, thanks no doubt to the fact that America is still uninvolved in Transatlantic politics, the newspaperman is almost entirely free from editorial political instructions. In my nine

> years [sic] with the Chicago Tribune, for example, I never received an order from Colonel McCormick to support or attack any party, system or cause.[11]

It was the complete reverse in Mexico. Seldes discovered that the Chicago Tribune supported intervention in Mexico and his copy was changed accordingly.[12] He described Mexico as one of his most "upsetting experiences" in which he discovered the truth about the press. His education began with:

> ... my first American assignment (in 1927) after eleven years [sic] of foreign service during which I had been free to write as I pleased. Now, censored and suppressed by the rich and powerful Chicago Tribune,...I wanted to leave the profession, or trade, of daily journalism, anger and disillusion now forcing a decision.[13]

After being in Mexico only three months Seldes returned to the States and reported to the secretary of state: "I believe both the press and political agencies of America unfair in their general attitude to Calles and Mexico."[14] He noted that America was misinformed on the situation in Mexico, and he detailed both the anti-Mexican sentiment that existed among the Americans, the plans for a labor dictatorship and the trouble with the Catholic Church. He concluded his report by saying:

> My personal opinion is this: I believe that the United States government should support the present regime in Mexico. Calles is a fanatic, but there are other men...who want to save Mexico from continuation in the 400 years of ignorance, slavery and terrorism. If we change our attitude to friendship, instead of ambassadorial hatred, we can do more than by intervention...They would repeal the confiscation oil laws, compromise with the church and live at peace with us of we showed

> the least indication of wanting friendship instead of military intervention.[15]

Immediately after Seldes left Mexico he wrote 20 articles on the situation for his paper presenting both sides of the issue. He submitted the columns to the Tribune before being transferred back to Europe. A few months later he discovered that only five columns, presenting the United States side, were published. He was informed that the rest of the articles were not of interest to the public.

> This was total censorship and suppression. It had never happened to me in the more than eight [sic] Tribune years. The reason was obvious: the xenophobic Colonel hated Europe so much that he did not care what our corps sent as news every day. With Mexico it was different. I then and there decided to quit the Tribune as soon as financially possible.[16]

Idealistically, Seldes chose to leave the Chicago Tribune because he felt it did not honestly report the news. He resigned on December 31, 1928.

> One could perhaps understand all and forgive all - except the corruption of the news. On a newspaper this was the cardinal sin, the sin that nullified the reason for its existence, which made its existence not only an evil but a growing and spreading evil whose field was unbounded. It had not yet spread to Europe. But could I continue there to do my work in the sure knowledge that sooner or later, and probably quite soon, the daily orders on what to write, would be coming to Europe from the Duke of Chicago.[17]

After years of observing press censorship in Europe, the experience in Mexico changed Seldes from a reporter, seduced by the fun and glamor of the profession, to a journalist prepared to resign because the press lied. Was

this decision to resign prompted solely by the discovery that the American press had lied to the public? It was probably a combination of reasons, but lying in the press was undoubtedly a key issue and indicates the seriousness which Seldes had come to view the issue of press censorship. However, the decision may have been part of a mid-life crisis, which was also characterized by his three week courtship and marriage to Helen Larkin and the purchase of his first home. In addition, the financial considerations that he listed in earlier letters as reasons for not leaving the profession were taken care of by a book offer from his brother's publisher.

SUMMARY

Seldes' experience in Mexico appears to have been the deciding factor in his decision to leave the newspaper business. In many respects Mexico was the culmination of nine years of censorship for Seldes, and the final disillusionment. Throughout his years in Europe, Seldes had witnessed press corruption by the Communist and Fascist governments, but he had always believed that the American press, as a whole, was above such corruption. He recognized that some foreign news had not been reported in the U.S., but he felt that was largely the fault of the European governments, rather than a deliberate plan by the American

press. His time in Mexico taught him otherwise. He learned that American businesses were manipulating international politics in Mexico for profit and that the press of America was facilitating this corruption by printing anti-Mexican lies in the daily papers. He discovered that the press in America was just as corrupt as the press in Europe. Seldes did not see Mexico the same way as many of his colleagues did, and he did not join in with the lying about the true state of affairs. This is possibly because first he had been abroad for several years and had developed an impartial eye, and second he was still committed to the concept that the press should be free from business interests.

In 1928 Seldes was offered a contract by the publishers Payson and Clarke to write a book about foreign correspondents. He accepted the offer and left daily newspaper journalism for ever. He began to write about his experiences as a correspondent, and about the censorship of the news that he had witnessed in Europe, Mexico and America. He books repeated the same accusations and related the same events until the Spanish Civil War, which forced him re-examine his view of the press once again.

NOTES -- CHAPTER 6

1. George Seldes, You Can't Print That (New York: Payson and Clarke Ltd., 1929), 315.

2. George Seldes, Witness to a Century (New York: Ballantine Books, 1987), 283.

3. George Seldes, Tell the Truth and Run (New York: Greenburg Publisher, 1953), 213.

4. Ibid., 218.

5. You Can't Print That, 349.

6. Tell the Truth and Run, 218.

7. You Can't Print That, 349.

8. Ibid., 18

9. Ibid., 350.

10. Ibid., 352.

11. Ibid., 348.

12. Ibid., 323.

14. You Can't Do That, 387.

15. You Can't Print That,391.

16. Witness to a Century, 242.

17. Tell the Truth and Run, 221-222.

CHAPTER 7

SPANISH CIVIL WAR

Seldes spent the years following his retirement from the newspaper profession writing books. He wrote ten books in ten years and all were based on his experiences as a foreign correspondent. Through his writings he cemented the foundations of his criticisms. His primary attacks were focused on the mainstream press and its failure to inform the public. He criticized the press for lying to the public and for censoring the news in accordance with political or business office policies. He also attacked big businesses' control over newspaper content.

Seldes saw many examples of press corruption during the 1930s. Probably the most influential event, which reaffirmed his views of inadequate coverage, was the reporting of the Spanish Civil war.

SELDES' COVERAGE OF SPAIN

Spain was declared a democratic republic in 1931. Wealth and power were taken away from the controlling class through land reforms and given to the people. The situation

the government. However, victory of the Popular Front Party in 1936 saw another reversal, with ten times the amount of land redistributed to the people. Later that same year military leader Francisco Franco sought the assistance of Fascist governments in Germany and Italy to help restore land to the wealthy in Spain. Thus began the Spanish Civil War.

Technically it was a battle between the Nationalists - the military and the aristocracy - and the Republicans - the middle classes and the workers - of Spain, but to many it was so much more. The war became a metaphor for the world's struggle over Fascist, Communist and Democratic ideologies and it stirred romantics, idealists and liberals across the world. It also touched Seldes deeply. He wrote that he had a strong compulsion to go to Spain.

> Helen and I read the news and talked and thought about it. We both felt now that this was more than a war; we felt that it was a conflict of ideas involving the world, and that we too, like all other people, were involved in it, although our country was neutral. At the beginning, remembering the lessons of the (First) World War, my devotion to the cause of the Allies, my disillusion at the time the Page cable was made public ... I acted cautiously. But by the end of the year the Spanish war had become, I thought, an attack not only on people but on culture and on civilization, and it was made by all the forces of reaction in the world, a reaction which aimed to go back to feudal times, if not to barbarism.[1]

The civil war divided world opinion. Seldes, along with many other writers and intellectuals, claimed the Republic stood for Democracy, freedom and the rights of

workers. And that it was battling against Fascist-backed aristocrats.

> Fascism was attacking in Spain - it was fighting not Communism as the Fascists of all lands, and notably the pro-fascists in the U.S. and the great Vatican propaganda machine was claiming, but it was fighting democracy.[sic][2]

The mainstream press in America, however, portrayed the Nationalists as the rightful government, while playing up rumors that the Republicans were Communist-backed insurgents.

Seldes, who covered the war for the New York Post - one of the few papers he felt was liberal - denied that there was any military Communist presence in Spain. He wrote in a mail dispatch:

> So far as the Russians are concerned, it is true, as I have previously reported, that they sent over a few men in the early days of the war, these men being mostly aviators and all volunteers...Russia has not sent units or divisions nor has it deliberately sent units for war experience, as Germany has done.[3]

Communist involvement in the Spanish Civil War was minimal, according to Seldes, who wrote, "All of us knew that the Communists had little say or power in 1936-37."[4] It was this belief that led Seldes to maintain in his dispatches and in his later books that the Communist myth was created by the Fascists to prevent aid to the Republic.[5]

Myth or not, fear of Bolshevism kept international support from the Republic. Fascism was still seen as preferable to Communism and with the outbreak of the Spanish

Civil War Britain attempted to maintain a balance of power in Europe and proposed a neutrality pact toward Spain. It was accepted by all western nations, including the United States. Seldes wrote that all the democracies knew that Hitler and Mussolini were supplying Franco with military weapons, but the neutrality pact prevented the allies from sending, food, medicine or military aid to Spain to help the Republic.

Seldes couldn't understand how the Democratic nations of the world could stand by while the Spanish Republic was destroyed by Fascism. Many years later he wrote:

> How was it possible, given a free press in the free nations such as the United States, Britain and France, and a pro-democratic people in at least half the world, that one small free and democratic country, the Spanish Republic, could be abandoned by its alleged friends and destroyed by its fascist enemies?[6]

Seldes and his wife went to Spain in 1936 and spent six months talking to people of all political persuasions trying to understand what was really happening. "I had never before spoken to so many people, and everyday, as I did in Spain, asking every peasant, every soldier...what it was all about."[7]

Seldes wrote a series of 24 articles on the war and concluded that the conflict was essentially a class war.

> On the government side [the Republic] there is the objective of the redistribution of land and wealth. There is no desire to take life or to eliminate its enemies. On the Fascist side in this class war there is not only a frank desire to conserve land and wealth for the so-called "200

> families" which own most of Spain, but a plan to eliminate what it terms Marxism, forever. Hitler and Goering are the spiritual fathers of this plan of elimination.[8]

Spain showed Seldes that labor was on the march. He saw the masses rising up take control of their own destiny, demanding not just improved working conditions but also wanting a say in governing themselves. "After a hundred years of the industrial revolution and decades of banners saying 'Labor is on the march,' labor was on the march, and at last it was intelligent."[9]

Seldes' visit to Spain confirmed that the mainstream press in America was lying about the war. He disputed reports in the U.S. daily papers that the Republic committed atrocities against prisoners. He claimed that the atrocities were committed by the Fascists and wrote in another dispatch: "It is not true that the government [Republic] kills prisoners. My wife and I have visited the prisons full of them." He added that it was Franco and the Fascists that took no prisoners.

Hypothesizing about the connection between the Fascists and Franco, Seldes speculated about the cost of Hitler and Mussolini's assistance to Franco for fighting the civil war. Germany and Italy sent in their bills to Franco for the use of men and equipment, demanding payment in iron ore, copper and oil. "It is the boldest attempt in the history of nations, which have no money, to get, without cash payment, the materials of which their hypertrophied war machines are

built and must be maintained until the day of action." Seldes concluded, "The mineral wealth of rich Spain is filling the ships of the impoverished dictatorships."

Germany and Italy used the Spanish Civil War as a dress-rehearsal for the Second World War, according to Seldes. He wrote in an April 21, 1937, mail dispatch:

> The one outstanding conclusion, which military and diplomatic observers draw, is that the great Second World War must be postponed by Mussolini and Hitler. The lessons they have already learned requires [sic] more than a year to translate into new guns and airplanes, tanks and bombs. Two year postponement of the world war is the usual estimate.

Seldes believed Hitler and Mussolini's involvement in the Spanish War showed that Fascism was spreading.

> It was now obviously fascism moving to conquer...with tanks and guns and airplanes camouflaged behind a cast confusing international curtain of propaganda, accusing a democracy of being a communist regime.[10]

Seldes left Spain in 1937 totally committed to the Spanish Republic. He declared openly, "I am not neutral. I am for the Popular Front, the democratic Republic. I feel that no decent, intelligent, honest American can remain neutral."[11] Seldes believed that the struggling democratic Republic of Spain was being sacrificed to international big business Fascists who promised profits and political advantage to those who supported them. Seldes cited the Catholic Church's official support of Fascism as an example of this bargain.

The Catholic Church, who was an ally of the Fascists,

played a critical role in discouraging the U.S. government from sending assistance to the Republicans. Seldes maintained that the Catholic Church brought pressure to bear on Italians in America, who in turn had pressured the press and the government to withhold support for the Republic. According to Seldes the Catholic Church supported the Nationalists in Spain because Mussolini had reached an agreement with the Pope in Rome, which exchanged Fascist support for protection of papal lands and property. Further, in Spain many of the most powerful clergy in the Catholic Church came from the aristocracy, that ensured their support for the Nationalists. Yet, Seldes found this support largely "official" and representative of only the Roman clergy. Seldes cited Gallup Poll figures that indicated that only 38 percent of America's 22 million Catholics favored Franco.[12] Seldes returned from Spain and vowed to continue the battle "I returned home determined to give our time...to helping the Loyalists."[13] He discovered America overflowing with sensational and false news about the war. He wrote that Helen and he "both felt that we had to tell the people of America this was our war. We were compelled, we felt driven, into some decision. We had to quit the peaceful hill and valley, and do what we could."[14] The Seldeses sold everything and moved from Vermont to New York to fight the battle for a Spanish democracy. They joined dozens of pro-Republican anti-

Fascist organizations, including the League of American Writers, which actively fought Fascism and Reaction.

While in Spain Seldes had seen how badly equipped the Republicans were and how few men they had, and he wrote that he knew that Spain would lose the war "within my first five minutes in trenches near Madrid."[15] Yet Seldes continued to write hopefully about the Loyalists for the next three years. He felt compelled to fight for the Republican cause. All the forces against Fascism were united in the Spanish Republic and Seldes wrote: "Spain had restored our faith in human beings, We could again say, and with passion: The People, Yes."[16]

SELDES' CRITICISMS OF THE CIVIL WAR PRESS COVERAGE

Seldes' major criticism of the press coverage of the civil war was that the mainstream press lied about the conflict. He maintained that the free press published the greatest series of falsehoods in modern history about Spain. He wrote that the mainstream press distorted the truth about Spain and incited public feeling against the Republic. "Spain proved...the world press is allied to all other commercial and political commercial interests on the conservative, if not the reactionary side."[17]

The press lords, according to Seldes, had decided it was preferable to have a Fascist government in Spain than a Communist and so lied about what was going on in Spain.

> Hearst Sr.,... gave orders that the Spanish Republic was to be denounced editorially and always referred to as "reds" whereas the traitor generals and their forces, supplied by Mussolini and Hitler, were to be called "Nationalists."[18]

Through semantics like these the business-run-press was able to play upon the public's fear of Communism, and newspapers were able to incite support for the Nationalists. No one would believe the war correspondents who reported that there were only a few hundred Russians and not one of them was a soldier. "Without one exception every correspondent in Madrid informed the world that Hitler and Mussolini were trying out infantry, tanks...and other weapons for the imminent world war, but no one listened."[19]

Seldes found that the only ones prepared to print the truth were the liberal papers because they were not as controlled by advertising dollars and big business as the daily papers. Yet, many of these, Seldes claimed, were eventually intimidated or blackmailed by their advertisers into modifying their reports. Seldes wrote that even the New York Post was forced to change its pro-Republican stance after a boycott of the paper was called for by Cardinal Daugherty of Philadelphia.

According to Seldes, deliberate misinformation about Spain poured in from everywhere, including the U.S. Foreign Office. Seldes claimed that America's foreign policy toward Spain was dictated by U.S. business interests. Businesses which dealt with Italy and Germany did not want to adversely

affect their interests by interfering in Spain.

Seldes saw evidence of Foreign Office misinformation when he reported on the Spanish War to American Ambassador Bill Bullitt. Bullitt had gained a reputation as a Fascist sympathizer, and Seldes withheld information that would hurt the Republic:

> I did not...tell Bullitt that the Republic had almost no machine guns, rifles or cannons behind the trenches, little ammunition, almost no medicine, almost no food. I did mention the foreigners, the whole Italian armies in Spain, and Hitler's tanks and his Condor Legion of thousands of aviators, and I added that despite what the papers in foreign countries said, there were no Russian troops in Spain.[20]

Bullitt disagreed with Seldes' report. The Ambassador insisted that his sources had indicated that there were Russians in Spain and continued to inform the government accordingly.

In spite of the international misinformation and falsification of the news from Spain, the Republic gained support from all over the world. Press opinion against Spain was not a true expression of the public's sympathy, wrote Seldes. "Every intelligent person in the world who knew what was happening ... favored the Spanish Republic."[21] Volunteers from throughout Europe flooded Spain eager to fight against Fascism, and writers and intellectuals from around the world wrote about the injustices of the civil war. Writer Malcolm Muggeridge observed that the Spanish War provoked such support because it was the last occasion

when people were confronted with a clear choice between good and evil.[22]

The war taught Seldes about the greatness of common people and gave him faith that humankind could be actively involved in their own government. In Thoreau-ian overtones he wrote of the nobility of the futile fight against fascism;

> Not a few great common men, not a few heroes, but mass greatness, a nobility of the human spirit among the many which in history is usually accredited to individuals, a few heroic ones, a national hero; and sometimes to a little group, but never to multitudes. Here, once in my lifetime, in a time of greatness I saw the thousands, tens of thousands of illiterate peasants and factory workers, American trade union organizers from Detroit, British poets, and Jews from Dachau who had been little merchants, doctors, professors and students but mostly the common ordinary run of working men with rifles in their hands...many men who might have gone to their graves without thinking, without ever feeling deeply, many lifted out of the useless ruts of their lives, up to the level of the time, the time of greatness. This was mass heroism. It was a rare if not unique experience.[23]

While giving Seldes hope for humanity, Spain also broke his heart. Writer Albert Camus explained it best when he said: "It was in Spain that man learned that one can be right and yet be beaten, that force can vanquish spirit, that there are times when courage is not its own recompense."[24]

Seldes' experience in Spain was important for several reasons: First, it turned him from a pacifist into a fighter. "I was a pacifist until 1936; from Spain in 1937 I

wrote: there is only one war worth fighting, one cause worth sacrificing one's life for, and that is the war against Fascism."[25] Second, Spain changed Seldes' view on Communism. After his expulsion from Russia in 1923 he became a ferocious opponent of Communism. However, during the 1930s and 1940s he came to believe that Fascism was a greater threat than Communism. After seeing the Communist support for the Republic Seldes became more tolerant of the Marxist idealogy. He never became a Communist because he was ideologically opposed to a one-party system, but he did join a number of anti-Fascist, pro-Spanish Republican organizations that tolerated or encouraged Communist membership. Helen, however, was a member of the Communist party from 1940 through to 1944.[26]

Seldes collaborated with the Communists because they were the only group prepared to stand against Fascism. Yet, both Seldes and the Spanish Republic suffered as a result of their affiliation with the left. Seldes claimed that Fascist American newspapers used the Republic's link with Communism to harass the Spanish Republic to death. He wrote: To hear American tourists in France saying, "Franco will make short work of those dirty Reds...and repeating every lie of the reactionary press...is indeed a sickening experience."[27] Seldes learned in Spain "that anything, a nation as well as a person, can be maimed if not destroyed by false red-baiting. This was the greatest lesson from

Spain."[28]

Seldes learned this lesson well. He was, himself, the target of red-baiting throughout the 1940s and 1950s. J. Edgar Hoover, head of the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI), kept a file on Seldes and kept him and Helen under surveillance, monitoring their movements and interfering with their mail.[29] Seldes' persecution climaxed with his appearance before Senator Joseph McCarthy and the Committee on Un-American Activity in 1953. He was anti-establishment and during these reactionary years that was sufficient reason to be labeled "red."

Seldes was cleared by McCarthy but the harassment he experienced may have caused him to re-examine his position on Communist support for the Republic. He never stopped believing in the Republican cause and what he believed was a fight for freedom and Democracy, but seems to have come to a realization that the Communists played a larger role in the war than he had previously suspected. He wrote a letter to a friend called "Tim W," in December 1957:

> In 1936 and 1937 I was in Spain...and I was completely taken in by the Moscow program of complete disinterested, united front help for the Republic. The only group that appeared completely committed to the Spanish Republic were the communists...At least that's how it looked to us. Perhaps we were blinded by the light - others, notably those who had no political perceptions, and most notably Ernest Hemingway, saw and heard disquieting and disillusioning things...but we refused to believe them.[30]

Seldes wrote that the Communists admitted that they plotted

to take over Spain from the beginning of the civil war and at no time was their declaration of support real.

> I believe that in modern times there was never more enthusiasm, even fanaticism, aroused for a noble cause among so many common people in the whole world as in the case of the Spanish Loyalist Republic, and this cause was betrayed by the Moscow Regime.[31]

Seldes came to believe that it was impossible to compromise with Communists, regardless of the cause and he wrote:

> It is impossible to go along any distance at all with either Communists or Fascists today - it was impossible years ago, only the majority of left-liberals did not realize it.

From these letters it is possible to see a change in Seldes. He was no longer the same man who, in 1936, had his faith in human nature reaffirmed by the battle against Fascism in Spain. In the intervening years he discovered that the glorious battle for freedom and democracy had been tarnished by the presence of Soviet Communists. In these later letters it also seemed that Seldes' faith in people had also been tarnished.

> There is no hope for any radical or even a deeply rooted liberal movement in America so long as the vast majority, the working people...remain abysmally illiterate - economically and politically speaking.

Seldes continued to believe in the Loyalist cause, which he interpreted as a battle for freedom and liberty, but he no longer thought that the Communists were altruistic helpers as he had initially believed.

SUMMARY

The Spanish Civil War was important for Seldes for two reasons. First of all it gave him hope, hope in people and their ability to be actively involved in their own government. He came to believe that the Spanish Republic, which he felt stood for the "general welfare of the all the people of the nation," should be extended to the United States. He suggested that the American United Front could be built on the new labor movement.[32] It was this hope in people that was to inspire him to produce his newsletter In Fact. Second, Spain reaffirmed for Seldes that the American press deliberately lied to the public when it was politically or financially expedient. Seldes believed that the business-owned mainstream press in America, indeed the world, distorted the news about Spain to protect its established commercial interests with the Nationalists. As one example of this relationship, Seldes claimed that the Spanish-owned Telefonica company was owned by America I.T.& T. [AT&T], which had several prominent Nationalists and Catholic clergy on the list of shareholders who guaranteed business support for the Nationalists.[33] Seldes believed the civil war was a class struggle between labor and big business and therefore the newspaper businesses in America were solidly opposed to labor and the Republic.

World opinion about Spain changed in the 1940s when the

Second World War brought home the threat of Fascism. President Roosevelt even admitted that he had erred in not supporting the Spanish Republic.[34] But by then it was too late. According to Seldes, the Spanish Republic died because the press of democratic countries promoted neutrality toward Spain, supported Fascism and misrepresented the news.

Seldes' experience in the Spanish Civil War was to affect him deeply for many years. It triggered a renewed burst of vigorous protesting and he wrote in 1953, "Everything that happened to me from 1936 to now had been conditioned by my experience in Spain. Spain permeated minds, penetrated hearts."[35]

Seldes returned from Spain in 1937 seeking a forum for the news he had discovered about the gradual move toward war, and he thought he had found it in the radical new magazine Ken.

NOTES -- CHAPTER 7

1. George Seldes, Tell the Truth and Run (New York: Greenberg, 1953), 228.

2. George Seldes, unidentified manuscript of a chapter, Special Collections, Van Pelt Library, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

3. George Seldes, "World War Postponed Two Years," Mail Dispatch dated 21 April, 1937, 4. Special Collections, Philadelphia.

4. George Seldes, to Carlos Baker, Princeton University, 28 November 1961. Special Collections, Philadelphia.

5. George Seldes, Even the Gods Can't Change History (N.J.: Lyle Stuart, Inc.,1976), 11.

6. George Seldes, Witness to a Century (New York: Ballantine Books, 1987), 306.

7. George Seldes, Manuscript of unidentified chapter, Special Collections, Philadelphia.

8. George Seldes, "Kill Men in Overalls, Spare Men With Collars, Fascist Plan in Madrid," Postal Dispatch, Special Collections, Philadelphia.

9. George Seldes, Manuscript of unidentified chapter, Special Collections, Philadelphia.

10. Tell the Truth and Run, 228.

11. George Seldes, "A Time of Decision," chapter from unidentified book, Special Collections, Philadelphia.

12. Witness to a Century, 309.

13. Tell the Truth and Run, 239.

14. Ibid., 241.

15. George Seldes, Manuscript of unidentified chapter, Special Collections, Philadelphia.

16. Tell the Truth and Run, 241.

17. George Seldes, Manuscript of unidentified chapter, Special Collections, Philadelphia.

18. Witness to a Century, 307.

19. Ibid., 306.

20. Ibid., 321.

21. Ibid., 305.

22. Ibid., 306.

23. Tell the Truth and Run, 234.

24. Witness to a Century, 306.

25. Tell the Truth and Run, 54.

26. George Seldes, to Francis Knight of the Passport Office (undated). Part of the letter read, "Helen L. Seldes appeared before the Jenner Committee and swore that she had been a member of the party for a short time in the early 1940s, and had definitely quit by 1944, and was definitely anti-communist." Special Collections, Philadelphia.

27. George Seldes, Manuscript of unidentified chapter, Special Collections, Philadelphia.

28. Ibid.

29. George Seldes, FBI File. Special Collections. On July 29, 1944, Seldes wrote to Hoover asking about confiscated copies of In Fact, and surveillance of Helen Seldes. Hoover wrote over a year later on September 10, 1945, denying that Helen was under surveillance and suggested that if mail was being withheld by the FBI it would be discontinued. Attached to the correspondence was a letter from Assist. Postmaster James Slattery to Hoover, dated January 10, 1945, detailing the mail that was received by Helen Seldes. Special Collections.

30. George Seldes, to Tim W., 20 December 1957, Special Collections, Philadelphia.

31. Ibid.

32. George Seldes, Manuscript of unidentified chapter, Special Collections, Philadelphia.

33. George Seldes, Facts and Fascism (New York: In Fact, 1943), 63.

34. Even the Gods Can't Change History, 88.

35. Tell the Truth and Run, 239.

CHAPTER 8

KEN MAGAZINE

Seldes returned from Spain full of news about the civil war. He, along with the hundreds of writers who visited Spain during the civil war, sought a means of communicating the alarming news that the Spanish Civil War was merely a prologue to a greater and more devastating conflict, the Second World War. Totally disillusioned with the daily papers, Seldes submitted his work almost exclusively to liberal left wing magazines and labor papers, such as the Daily Worker. In 1937, however, a dream-come-true opportunity occurred for him when he was approached to edit a revolutionary new magazine that was to be called Ken.

THE CONCEPT

Ken, named after the Scottish word "Ken," which means to know or understand, was the brain child of Esquire's owner David Smart, who had decided to produce a magazine that would rival Look, Life and Colliers. Smart publicized Ken as "the first mass-circulation, public-opinion-forming magazine in history on the liberal side - one step left of

center."[1] He recruited writers Ernest Hemingway, Paul DeKruif, Raymond Gram Swing and George Seldes as editors.

The magazine was to be devoted to investigative reporting and exposing lies and misrepresentations in the daily press. Smart and Arnold Gringrich, editor of Esquire, asked Seldes to oversee the project, and he accepted with pleasure. It was a something Seldes had always dreamed, a magazine that was devoted to press criticism. "What had I wanted most; what was my American dream all those years since Pittsburgh? I had wanted the impossible. To edit and publish a free newspaper...to undo the harm of the big popular newspapers and magazines."[2]

Seldes was full of ideas and he began to rough out concepts of the content of the magazine. He wrote that Smart and Gringrich were enthusiastic over his ideas including his proposal to write a press department revealing lies in the daily press.

Gringich's recollections of Seldes' ideas for the magazine are not nearly as positive as Seldes' memories. Gringrich wrote:

> When I saw George Seldes's dummy of what purported to be the entire issue, I thought he was joking. It was all done with scissors and a pastepot. There would be a pasted-down block of copy...and beneath it, written with grease pencil in a bold hand, the words "This is a lie!" Then another pasted-down block of copy, and again the interstitial interjection, though varying slightly..."This is a damnable lie" or "This is a foul lie" or "This is an outrageous lie." I couldn't believe it, but, yes, that was the magazine...as George told it far and wide

> afterward, Dave and I were afraid to print, that we chickened out...that we...suppressed.[3]

There is no way of telling whether Seldes' work was approved initially by Ken's publishers. What is undeniable is they decided to proceed with the project with Seldes as editor.

Seldes maintained that Smart and Gringrich were so enthusiastic over his ideas that they seemed to be completely unaware, that by writing such exposes about organizations linked to big business, they made themselves vunerable to an advertising boycott. Seldes wrote that Smart reassured him that because advertisers would be confined to mostly men's clothing and liquor the magazine couldn't be touched by any advertising action.

Seldes began work enthusiastically on the magazine. He quickly discovered, however, that all was not perfect. The editors were mainly contributors and the real editor was Gringrich.[4] This bothered Seldes because he thought he would have more autonomy in producing the magazine. Seldes ran the New York office but he felt that he was never allowed to make real decisions about the content of the magazine. Yet, these were minor problems. It soon became apparent that the real obstacle to the success of Ken was the lack of advertisers.

It was disclosed to Seldes by advertiser Perley O'Gorman that the major advertisers of Madison Avenue had decided that if Ken published one item "one step left of

center" they would never see one dollar in advertising money."[5] Furthermore, the advertisers were going to pull $64,000 of advertising an issue from Esquire if Ken was in any way a leftist magazine. Seldes explained, "To these people "one step left of center" meant leftist and leftist meant red and red of course meant Communist."[6]

A series of letters between Smart, Seldes and Gringrich recorded the rapidly deteriorating relations among the three men over the concept of Ken. A letter from Gringrich to Seldes dated December 19, 1937, was the first indication that something was wrong: "Financial winds seem to be blowing the daylights out of the apparently fair-weather forum of liberalism that was one of the major tenets of Ken as you and I first planned."

Seldes wrote to Gringrich on January 18, 1938, asking what was going on. Seldes had been working on articles previously approved by Smart who increasingly acted as though Seldes' work was unsatisfactory. Seldes wrote: "I did not propose the (American) Legion series to begin with: it was one of the things I wanted to do after the magazine got going, but I was encouraged to write the series, and did so. Now Mr. Smart things [sic] I wasted two weeks of my time."

Suppressed and faked news was to be featured in each edition of Ken, but Smart told Seldes not to belabor the point. "Mr. Smart says once I have made the statement that

the press fakes the news, there is nothing more to say."

If this was how Smart felt, Seldes wondered whether he should continue with the press department. "I was sure that a department showing how news is faked or suppressed or colored or distorted by newspapers and the reasons for them would be useful. I also notice that in all the prospectuses of Ken this is one of the main points, if not THE main point."

In the same letter to Gringrich, Seldes also took exception to Smart's suggestion that he should modify his writing for the public reading age of twelve. Seldes wrote:

> I am rather shocked by the idea of a magazine for a mentality of 12. The government I.Q. tests in 1917 showed the average mentality at 13, and the adults with anything lower are morons. I do not think we intend to publish a slick 25 cent magazine for morons. I can't for the life of me see how Hemingway, De Kruif and other can possibly write for a moron circulation. I stress this point because Mr. Smart thinks that my stuff is not aimed at a low enough mentality.[7]

The letter ended with Seldes going over some ideas for stories and a repeated request for an indication of where things stand.

The next letter, dated March 24, signalled the break between Seldes and Smart. Smart wrote to Seldes informing him that he was no longer to be paid as a regular staff member of Ken.

> The batting average just isn't high enough, that's all. The only way that a weekly payment can be justified is by the weekly receipt of useable material...But out of all the many things you have sent in only a couple have hit the Ken average.

Smart wrote that after April he would only buy Seldes' work if it were up to standard.

> I see no point in making a mystery about this or hunting around for hidden reasons. A guy can be a Mohammedan or a Mormon or a Communist...and it's all the same to us, the only criterion being does he or doesn't he turn in consistently the kind of stuff that we consider publishable, not on any basis of "freedom of the press," but on the less glamorous basis of whether or not it is good of its kind.

Seldes responded immediately and on March 26 he wrote to Smart resigning and stating that it is most definitely a case of freedom of the press. Seldes pointed out that it was Smart who ordered the press department to deal with crooked news and now Smart, himself, was trying to suppress the news.

Seldes' accusations of news suppression by the publishers of Ken appeared in Gringrich's book Nothing But the People. Gringrich made light of Seldes' claims of suppression and wrote that "while other writers got rejection slips, Seldes got suppressed." It does appear that Seldes did indeed feel that if his work was not reported then he was being suppressed.[8] But he genuinely believed that Smart, by failing to expose suppressed news, had become a party to suppression. Seldes' disillusionment over Smart's response manifested itself in a personal attack against Ken's publisher. Seldes wrote in his last letter to Smart:

> Being a liberal and decent man nowadays requires more than publishing anti-Hitler articles. It

> requires integrity. When you told me you were suppressing the whole series in the American Legion because you were anxious to get the ad of the Prudential Life Insurance Company whose vice president was one of the big men in the Legion I should have known that you never had any intention to publish the left-wing, liberal and pro-labor magazine you have been telling you would publish. Your people here also inform me that you sell a feature service to 100 newspapers and never had any intention of publishing a press department exposing the press. Your employees in Chicago and New York tell me that you have been exploiting Hemingway and De Kruif and my name to sell the magazine.[9]

Before Seldes left Ken he informed DeKruif, Swing and Hemingway of the policy changes and all resigned. This account differs from Gringrich's, who claimed that only Hemingway defected from the board of editors, although he continued to submit pro-Spanish Republican articles to the magazine. According to Gringrich, Ray Swing "remained a regular and valuable contributor."[10] Further, Gringrich never mentioned that Seldes was ever on the board of editors of the magazine.

Seldes wrote a final letter to Gringrich on May 5, 1938, explaining that he felt disappointed over what had happened.

> I realize now that it is impossible to run a magazine that will tell the truth and make money. I am not sore about what has happened except that I resent having been fooled, but I do not blame you for it. Business in America is crooked and Fascist, and the advertisers are the spearhead of the Fascist movement. It is too bad that Mr. Smart cannot realize that he is playing the Fascist game, and that time will come when the reactionary-fascists will begin their anti-semitic work and he will not escape. [Apparently Smart was Jewish]...But I have now given up hope

> of persuading rich Jews who are linked with the reactionary-Fascist element in America of come out on the liberal, labor side, which is the only road open to them today for saving themselves and their people...The salvation for the Jews in America is the liberal-pro-labor side.

SELDES' CRITICISMS OF KEN

Seldes' hopes for a free press were shattered when Smart and Gringrich gave in to advertising pressure and changed the goal of Ken from "one step left of center" to fighting both Communism and Fascism.

The masthead of the magazine read on its first publication the first week in April 1938:

> A magazine of unfamiliar fact and informed opinion, filling in the shadows cast by coming events all over the world; equally opposed to the development of dictatorship from either Left or Right, whose one fixed editorial aim is to give unhampered and unbiased demonstration of whatever dangers threaten this our democracy from without and within, in accord with Lincolnian dictum of "Let the people know the truth and this country is safe." Signed Arnold Gringrich, editor.

Gringrich defended the change in Ken's policy saying that everyone was puzzled how Ken could be both anti-Fascist and anti-Communist. "This seemed, in those days of the "united front," a contradiction in terms; if you were anti one, people assumed that you had to be pro the other. To us, it was very simple. We were simply against dictatorship, and couldn't see how, just because the black kind was bad, that made the red kind any better."[11]

Seldes didn't agree with Gringrich. He felt that the

publishers had sold out the liberal and labor elements for fascist advertising. And Seldes repeated this statement in an article for the Nation on April 30, 1938. He began with a sweeping indictment of the press:

> The repudiation of the press by the American people was clearly demonstrated by the 1936 Presidential election. It may not have been complete, but it showed a vast popular disillusion. That someone would capitalize on the situation followed logically. In March 1937, the idea of publishing a magazine for the masses who had lost faith in the newspapers was discussed by three persons in Chicago.

Seldes felt the change in Ken particularly poignantly because it was to have been the receptacle of all his dreams of a free and uncensored press. He wrote that he had wanted to produce a magazine, "the kind Lincoln Steffens would have been proud to edit."

Seldes learned several important lessons from his experience with Ken:

> The history of Ken teaches many important lessons. It proves for our time and generation the sad truth learned by a dozen weeklies and monthlies in the great muckraking era of 1905 to 1917 - that big business and advertising will either change a magazine's policy from liberal to reactionary or try to ruin the magazine. Having spent $100,000 or more to promote Ken, its publishers perceived that a liberal policy might seriously affect advertising revenue. The impossibility of combining progress with profit, demonstrated before the war, is even clearer today, with the advertising agencies becoming leaders in a class conscious attack on progressive liberalism. On the other hand we have proof that a large audience exists which would support a popular magazine really free from advertising control.[12]

Sadly, Ken, launched in March 1938, was not to be that

magazine. An advertising newsletter entitled Space and Time (April 4, 1938) was one of the magazine's first critics. The newsletter suggested that the publishers, in trying to appease advertisers, destroyed not only Ken's potential as an intellectual, socially conscious magazine, but also compromised it as an advertising medium.

> It is a pretty package...but headlines are bad, subheads too long. Also, though it has the lack of lightness of a teller of horrid truths, the truths are not horrid enough or near enough to home to make you give a damn. The home stories run to doctrinaire socialism, like The Nation. The foreign pieces are either fulminations against Fascism - - and Hemingway goes the limit here, advising Americans to get into the Spanish War and lick Mussolini now - - or really good inside stuff, about the British Intelligence Service, Japanese in Panama, Mexico in a state of siege... Ken may present enough of the real alarming truths of facts behind the news to make 500,000 people pay a quarter for it every fortnight, but they will have thus achieved only a dubious advertising medium. Readers struck dumb by the horrible mess we're in are not in any happy frame of mind to consider the merits of any product -- except, say, liquor, as a means of getting away from it all. But Ken, as evidence of the new magazine conviction that the newspapers tell only half the truth, is a significant leader. It by no means justifies the happy Gringrich prospectus, outlining the new and unexplored fields of journalism which would be opened by Ken. But its very failure may give the cue.

Ken does not appear to have explored new fields of journalism. The magazine focused on international events instead of Fascism in America, which had been Seldes' original goal.

Ken continued for about two years. It changed from a bi-weekly to a weekly after a year, and according to

Gringrich this over-extended the magazine's resources. Circulation steadily declined and advertisers dropped off. Gringrich also blamed the recession, and a Catholic Church boycott of the magazine because of Hemingway's pro-loyalist articles. The magazine was increasingly subsidized by money from Esquire. Ken was finally forced to close down through lack of support in September 1939.

SUMMARY

The experience with Ken was important to Seldes because he realized that it was not possible to produce a truly free newspaper or magazine if it relied upon advertising dollars for support. He broke with daily journalism and the mainstream press forever, realizing that the only way he could really write what he believed was to start his own newspaper. In 1940 he began producing In Fact, a newsletter that was one of the first of its kind, devoted solely to press criticism.

NOTES -- CHAPTER 8

1. George Seldes, Witness to a Century (New York: Ballantine Books, 1987), 328.

2. George Seldes, unidentified notes, Private Collection, Van Pelt Library, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

3. Arnold Gringrich, Nothing But the People (New York: Crown Publishers, 1971), 138.

4. George Seldes, to Carlos Baker, 28 November 1961. Seldes wrote, "The Hemingway, DeKruif and Spivak announcement is [sic] pure fraud. Not one of them ever showed up, or ever edited anything."

5. Witness to a Century, 331.

6. Ibid.

7. George Seldes, to Arnold Gringrich, 1 January 1938.

8. Seldes wrote an article entitled "Non-Conspiracy of Silence in the Press," in Expose, February 1954, 3-4. He berated the press for suppressing his work, which he claimed had been deliberately ignored since he wrote Lords of the Press in 1941.

9. George Seldes, to David Smart, 26 March 1938, Special Collections, Philadelphia.

10. Arnold Gringrich, Nothing But People (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1971), 146.

11. Ibid., 138.

12. George Seldes, "Ken" - The Inside Story," The Nation, 30 April, 1938, 499.

CHAPTER 9

CRITICS' REVIEWS OF SELDES' WORK

By 1940 Seldes reached a new intensity in his attacks of the mainstream press. Transforming his thirty years of journalism experience into criticisms of the daily press, he used his books and newsletter to attack the influence big business and Fascism exerted over newspaper content. Seldes' claimed that his criticisms were first met with ridicule and then later he was simply ignored.

Seldes called this treatment by the mainstream press a "conspiracy of silence," and he claimed that it made it difficult for him to get his books published and reviewed.[1] Seldes further maintained that the conspiracy began after he had written Lords of the Press (1938), a stinging indictment of the press, and the newspapers had:

> published unfair, at times lying statements, in book reviews...At no time in the history of journalism, so far as I can remember in my 45 years, has there been such a general and universal non-conspiracy of silence.

Seldes argued that the press effectively neutralized his criticisms through this silence. "Today instead of attacking the press resorts to silence. It learned that this was the best way to kill a book or a man professionally

and politically."[2]

It is difficult to authenticate Seldes' claim that his criticisms were overlooked by the mainstream press, or that he was the target of a conspiracy. However, it is possible to examine reviews of Seldes' work to first, place him within the context of his times and second, know how others responded to his criticisms. By assessing whether there was some consensus by other writers on Seldes' criticisms of the press it may be possible to assess the validity of his criticisms and thus determine whether he created an accurate picture of how the press functioned during the first four decades of the century.

Several reviews of Seldes' book were found in alternative publications, and this list of reviews, which is by no means exhaustive, has dictated which Seldes' books will be examined in this chapter. (See Appendix 1 for a complete list of Seldes' books.)

The reviews were located in the academic journalism journal, Journalism Quarterly, the socialist newspaper, The Daily Worker, and the left wing magazine, The New Republic. The reviews examined ten out of the sixteen books Seldes' wrote between 1929 and 1953, and include reviews of several books that Seldes' claimed were met with silence.

You Can't Print That

Seldes' first book, You Can't Print That (1929), described censorship in several European countries. The book sold well and New Republic reviewer Harold Norman Denny wrote that the book was valuable because of the light it cast upon the "stupidity, futility and self-defeat of peacetime, and even to some extent war-time, censorship, and on the purity of the stream of information, which flows into the American public mind through the channels of the newspapers."[3]

Seldes had written that censorship was strongest in Russia, Italy and Rumania, and Denny responded to that accordingly:

> There are no three countries in the world that are regarded with more distrust by the American public. The very presence of a censorship in peacetime suggests to intelligent persons that there is something to hide, and therefore such a censorship itself creates the bad impression which it is supposed to forestall.

Denny, however, disagreed with Seldes' fundamental contention that international bankers control the news. "News must be suppressed, when unfavorable," Seldes had written, "otherwise the market will crash; news must be perverted at all times, otherwise new loans will be more difficult and rates will be too high." Denny responded, "To this reviewer, this seems a little improbable. Certainly

Mr. Seldes neglects to prove it."

World Panorama

World Panorama was published in 1933 and described the new philosophies and political trends changing Europe. Seldes considered it his finest work. Seldes' brother, Gilbert, reviewed the book for the New York Evening Journal and described it as "exceptionally fine work." Seldes "has written a book in which everything that has happened since the armistice is reported, put in relation to everything else, and made intensely entertaining."[4]

Freedom of the Press

Seldes' first attempt at applying his criticisms of the European press to the American press found voice in the book Freedom of the Press. The book was not well received, and Seldes wrote that as long as he focused his attacks on the overseas press his books were best sellers, but as soon as he started criticizing the American press he was ignored.[5]

Reviewer of Freedom of the Press, researcher Kenneth Olson of Rutgers University wrote in Journalism Quarterly: "Mr. Seldes' new book is perhaps the most stinging indictment of the American press since Silas Bent's Ballyhoo. Many newspapermen [sic] will damn it as scurrilous slander but the author marshals fact after fact, case after case to prove his contention that advertisers,

patent medicine manufacturers, public utilities, oil companies ... color and suppress the news and corrupt both press and public."[6]

Despite Olson's obvious approval of Seldes' message he concluded that Seldes' accusations were based upon too many generalizations:

> Interesting and thought-provoking as is Seldes' book one cannot escape the feeling that he has generalized from too few cases to indict the whole American press. No one disputes the fact that some papers are edited by the business office, but no one who knows the newspapers and publishers of his territory will agree that the entire press is as black as he has painted it.

Seldes' sweeping generalizations about the whole press also drew criticism from his liberal supporters. New York Post publisher David Stern wrote to Seldes telling him that he was considering not running a review of the book because, "although I get off easy (Stern ran a liberal weekly, which Seldes felt was one of the most honest papers in America), I owe a duty to my colleagues to whom you are unfair in your severe criticism."[7]

You Can't Do That

Another who thought Seldes was severe in his criticism was O.W. Riegel, who reviewed Seldes' next book, You Can't Do That (1938). The book focused upon the growth of international Fascism and Reaction, and Riegel felt Seldes overstated his cause:

Mr. Seldes is a good hater, and he writes with

> passion. Perhaps the facts warrant the alarm, which Mr. Seldes seems to feel, and call for passionate denunciation in books which are low priced for mass sale. Many readers may feel, however, that Mr. Seldes has overstated his case, and that the prospect of an evolution toward justice and security will not be helped by a book which is of the nature to a call to arms.8.

Riegel conceded that although Seldes offered a constructive program to implement changes that would safeguard civil liberties he also pointed out that the proposed program would increase the chances of a reactionary backlash. Riegal wrote, "This comment is not intended as a criticism of Mr. Seldes for writing polemics; it is merely a gloomy observation." According to Riegel, "Mr. Seldes is perhaps the most vigorously articulate spokesman of the group which is ceaselessly vigilant for evidence of collusion between the American press and reaction."

Lords of the Press

Seldes found more evidence of this collusion in his eighth book, Lords of the Press (1941). Seldes refocused his attack on the big business owners of the mainstream press, calling press lords Robert McCormick, Randolph Hearst and Howard Scripps perverters of news. The book was met with hostility, and Seldes wrote that "there were a few reviews, almost all short, angry and defensive."[9]

Yet, a favorable review of the book appeared in the magazine The New Republic.[10] Journalist W.L. White described Lords of the Press as the "most important book of

the year for men who work on daily newspapers, as well as for those who read them with any discrimination. Most of them will agree that it is a fair estimate." White pointed out that Seldes, in the course of producing this deeply significant book, "caressed the boss with a red-hot poker, with the result that many reviewers, after wrestling with their consciences, may feel it expedient to dismiss it with a disparaging paragraph."

White certainly didn't. He defended Seldes and rationalized Seldes' attacks at the mainstream press:

> If he takes the New York Times to task somewhat severely for coloring its news it is not because it is a frequent offender, but rather because its reputation for impartiality has been so high.

White agreed with many of the points Seldes made, including his assertion that the news is slanted against the working class in favor of those with money:

> Few newspapermen will take issue with his vigorous chapters on Hearst, McCormick, Chandler and other big names in the American Publishers Association...If these Press Lords are with few exceptions reactionary, the answer, as Mr. Seldes frequently implies, lies in the economic structure of the present-day newspaper. For in order to print the truth you must have not only the will to do so, but the money as well.

Concluding the review, White applauded Seldes' efforts to point out the short-comings of the system:

> But even though American democracy has developed a healthy tolerance to poisoned news, George Seldes has rendered a distinguished public service in deflating the windy pretensions of the American publishers. As watchdogs of freedom, few of them can be taken seriously, even though they snarl viciously when anyone approaches their cash

registers.

Lords of the Press was also reviewed by researcher Eric Allen, who observed, non-committally, that the book deserved consideration.[11] "While the book is a polemic, a hard-hitting and unsympathetic attack, still a distinct attempt is made at objectivity." He added, "Seldes has made a pretty good analysis of the grounds of much of the current dissatisfaction with the press that is felt in wide circles outside the conservative business element."

Seldes compared the press to an ideal model of how the press should theoretically work. Allen saw this as a weakness in Seldes' argument: "The book has both the advantages and disadvantages of this Utopian method."

The reviewer compared Seldes to the liberal press critic, William Allen White, who has "treated with equal vigor the same cerebral propositions that Mr. Seldes makes. Mr. Seldes rather lacks - a serener faith in human social evolution, a greater willingness to see, without illusion, yet without utter despair, the publishing problem, and a more gracious literary style."[12] Allen concluded: "Nevertheless, Lords of the Press is a substantial and serious contribution to journalistic controversy...and an immediate advance on some of the Brass Checks of the past."

The Brass Check, written by author Upton Sinclair in 1920, was one of the first books to expose corruption within the press. Seldes admitted that Sinclair and The Brass Check

influenced him and the books he wrote about the press.

The New York City Herald Tribune also perceived a relationship between Lords of the Press and the Brass Check. In its review of Lords of the Press on November 14, 1938, the Herald Tribune wrote the book " brings up to date the attack made twenty years ago by Upton Sinclair in The Brass Check."

Like the Brass Check, Lords of the Press upset many in the newspaper business. A review of the book in the liberal New York Post revealed Seldes had even alienated left wing publishers, upon whom Seldes usually counted for support. The New York Post editorial on November 22, 1938, described Seldes as the "hairshirt of the newspaper business." Despite calling the book a "heavy handed" critique, the editorial acknowledged the "part of his book which deals factually with newspaper practice" while thoroughly disagreeing with Mr. Seldes' proposed solutions. The editorial read in part:

> We used to think George Seldes was a liberal, and we believe he was. But his insistence that a labor union ought to move in and take over a business is proof that some time during the night Seldes got up from his chair on the liberal platform, walked to the extreme left and went over the side with a thud, which sounded like the end of an overripe tomato. We don't know what to call the particular brand of extremism which our former liberal friend now suddenly reveals. It isn't trade unionism because the Guild - his own union and a progressive one - won't even consider it. It isn't socialism if we read the Socialist Party platform aright. It isn't communism, for Stalin just the other day informed the Russian labor unions that he was running industry and that all

> he wanted from them was 100 percent support. So it must be something George just thought up. Whatever its name, he is far ahead of most extremists of his day. We can understand how Seldes, the former newspaperman, resents the pressure groups that sometimes try to bludgeon publishers into changing their editorial policy. But we can't understand how he hopes to cure the situation by setting up his own 'pressure group' to perform the same tyrannical acts demanding his kind of editorials instead of the other fellow's.

The editorial concluded by defending the American press and suggesting that not only are there just as many good deeds done by the press but that it is also far ahead of the press in any other country. The reviewer pointed out that some of the press lords listed by Seldes as reactionary have done splendid jobs at rooting out venal political corruption, such as McCormick's Chicago Tribune, cited the reviewer. Seldes' claimed it was one of the most reactionary papers in the country, "yet if the whole truth be told it has been a powerful force in attacking many forms of municipal and state corruption."

One of Seldes few supporters was The Daily Worker but even its reviewer, Seymour Waldman, had difficulty with Seldes' proposed solution to the problem of press corruption.[13] Waldman, while indicating that the book was "one of the most important contributions to progressive journalism since Upton Sinclair's Brass Check," suggested that Seldes' proposal that newspapermen should run the newspapers is "utopian and anti-climatic." "It is difficult to understand why Seldes, who refers a score of times to

publishers as big business, as capitalists, expects them to even consider such hari-kari." The article concluded, "A Seldes' book nowadays is distinctly news. [This belies Seldes' claim that there was complete silence about his books.] All the more reason for him to be wary of romanticism and utopianism both of which serve merely to provide a demagogic out ...for anti-labor redbaiters and anti-soviet distorters."

Lords of the Press was by far Seldes' most controversial book. His claims that it was not adequately reviewed were partly substantiated by a letter on May 9, 1938, from Laetitia Bolton of Modern Age Books who wrote the book had been ignored by the mainstream press:

> Why then should this book be greeted by a silence distinguished by unanimity as well as eloquence. To date it has been ignored not only by all the New York Dailies but by the weekly reviews as well, with the exception of the Saturday Review of Literature, The New Republic and The New Yorker.[14]

Further evidence of a conspiracy of silence against Lords of the Press was found in a Federated Press Bulletin on March 3, 1939. The release reported that the American League of Writers, who were committed to promoting suppressed liberal books like Lords, had surveyed newspapers and found the majority of U.S. newspapers had ignored the book.[15] The release also cited the responses of several reviewers which indicated how unpopular Seldes' book was. Harry Hansen of The World Telegram wrote; "Seldes' book is not in any way liberal but radical and iconoclastic."

Stanley Walker of the Herald Tribune accused Seldes of "hysteria, malice, innuendo, invective" and Professor Allen Nevins in the Sunday Times called him "biased and unfair."

The Facts Are

Many of the reviewers took exception to Seldes' style of criticism, including journalism history researcher Frank Mott, who in his Journalism Quarterly review of Seldes' twelfth book, The Facts Are, disputed Seldes' understanding of the word "fact." "Fact does not mean to George Seldes as it does to most people, the stalemate of an actuality; to him the word is a symbol for a conclusion often far-fetched and illogical, which is tied up with his peculiar philosophy regarding the press and radio."[16]

Mott wrote that he tried to understand Seldes' criticisms by reading In Fact.

> It has been an amusing, but, on the whole, not a very profitable experience. The trouble with George Seldes is that he thinks he is being factual, and even documentary (another favorite word), when he is only chasing his own ideas and emotions around in circles.

Yet, it appears that Mott did not receive the newsletter willingly.

> I followed his little sheet In Fact for a year or so - though, like many of the 100,000 he [Seldes] claims for his mailing list, I was a dragooned subscriber.

In Fact was supported by mass subscriptions from the unions, and this may have been what Mott was referring to.

Seldes' generalized attacks irritated Mott, who concluded, "The way to read our author is to forget about facts and concentrate on the gyrations of a flashing mind and a violent set of emotions." He suggested a more appropriate title for the book would be My Notions Are.

Seldes had difficulty in getting The Facts Are published. He received a letter from his agent, Nannine Joseph, on July 29, 1942, which said that Simon and Schuster wouldn't accept the book for publication because

> They feel that in some places you go to such extremes that you arouse antagonism and distrust...You sometimes carry the idea out to lengths that seem too great, as for instance when you say that all our difficulties are traceable to advertising, which is the impression part of the book gives... after all the press could not prosper as it has if it lied about everything.

Facts and Fascism

But Seldes insisted that the press did lie about everything of importance and further, that there was an increase in Fascist influence over news content. His book Facts and Fascism (1943) identified Fascist forces in the American government and press and was reviewed by Charles E. Rogers in the March 1944 Journalism Quarterly. Rogers described the book as a "highly spiced potpourri of opinion, fact, invective and generalizations based upon selected data." He wrote that Seldes' documentation of his accusations was not very substantial and concluded:

Students of journalism will go along with Mr.

> Seldes in agreeing that, judged by American democratic standards, some newspapers deserve a bad name. But random sample of fascist newspapers don't prove the whole pack fascist.

Facts and Fascism did not sell well and it couldn't escape being labelled Communist. This was confirmed by a letter Seldes received from one of his subscribers who had inquired of her local library for a copy of Facts and Fascism. The reader enclosed a June 16, 1944, letter she received from the Public Library of Cincinnati. In it the librarian had written the library did not carry the book Facts and Fascism because the publisher, New Union Press, was not reputable. (Seldes' own company, In Fact Inc., published the book and New Union Press was simply the printer.) Further, the librarian quoted in the letter a review of the book by the Christian Century, which damned Seldes' book. It read in part:

> The slant of the present volume, as of the publication which sponsors it, is so violently pro-labor (and in a less degree pro-soviet) that the wary reader will read it with the same reservations that the author suggests for the application to the press and radio.

One Thousand Americans

Undetered Seldes continued to attack the press and he published his book One Thousand Americans, in 1947, naming the 13 most powerful families in America and showing how they owned America and controlled the press. The book was reviewed by George Bird of Syracuse University, who

condemned Seldes' work as "distorted," stating that Seldes' attempt to show that a group of 1,000 men control the United States is unfair to the 10 million capitalists.[17]

Seldes made no attempt to be objective in his judgment, wrote Bird. "Instances of unbalanced evidence number in the scores, making it difficult to take Mr. Seldes' work seriously. His method of presentation is much like that of Upton Sinclair in his almost forgotten Brass Check."

Bird found Seldes' accusations repetitive:

> Mr. Seldes adds nothing new to his twisted theses expressed in earlier works; that any item omitted from print was necessarily suppressed; that this suppression was ordered by the advertisers...and that the American people are uniformly betrayed by the press and by the nature of "big business."

Bird wrote that Seldes did not present a balanced picture of the press and that, while numbering Fascists among the enemies of America, he completely ignored the threat of Communism. Bird also questioned the accuracy of Seldes' assertions: "The book's claim to accuracy rests upon a "documentation" that often is spurious, inasmuch as a very large part if it is mere opinion given before this or that congressional committee." The reviewer suggested that a more accurate appraisal of the press would come from editors and publishers and such a work would be of more benefit to journalism than "this jaundiced appraisal."

One Thousand Americans was also reviewed by journalist Lewis Gannet of the New York Herald Tribune, who agreed with

Bird that Seldes was too biased to comment with any credibility on the press. Gannet wrote on January 15, 1948:

> The concentration of economic power in this country is appalling and a careful study of the relations of economic power to press attitude and political power could be of the utmost value. But to be useful it will have to be performed by a student with a less flagrant bias, a greater understanding of economic and psychological realities, than Mr. Seldes evidences in his book...The American press is far from perfect, and big business still speaks with the loudest voice in America, but the American public has a curious way of making up its own mind, and the widely irresponsible mixture of fact and fancy in 1,000 Americans reminds me of nothing more than of the editorial misdemeanors of our yellowest and most reactionary press.

Frank Mott, who reviewed The Facts Are, also had a problem with the factual basis of One Thousand Americans. In the New York Herald Tribune Weekly Book Review on March 7, 1948, Mott made the same point as Bird, that by quoting someone's opinion in the congressional records does not make it fact. Mott added, if this was the case, Seldes would be the target of some "documentation" himself. Seldes had been denounced by congress member Thomas on March 6, 1946, as "the ace smear-artist of the American communists" and on January 13, 1948, congress member Hoffman called him "a mass producer of falsehood and vilification."

Mott disagreed with Seldes' basic contention that the press was corrupt. He wrote that an assumption repeated often enough does not make it true. "Take the matter of suppression of news. Is it always a sinister suppression when a paper does not print what Seldes is most interested

in?" Mott cited comments from A.J. Leibling, a fellow press critic, who said of Seldes, "He makes too much of the failure of newspapers." Quoting Leibling, Mott added that Seldes "too often treats errors as lies, when they appear in the press and lies as the effect of a deliberate and universal conspiracy of publishers." Yet, Mott writes that Leibling conceded, "it is nice to have George around to tell us the press is not perfect."

The press has many sins, Mott concluded,"but some readers will prefer the intellectual integrity of Oswald Garrison Villard or the gay acidity of Leibling himself, to the blind guidance of George Seldes."

Seldes wrote to the editor in response to this last review stating that he had complained to Mott's college for several years because of the professor's "maliciously libelous statements about my books. I mention this to show the malicious revenge he has written into his review."[18]

The People Don't Know

In 1949 Seldes wrote The People Don't Know, which examined lying in the press during the post war years. Seldes was outraged by a review of the book written by Keith Wilson of the Omaha World-Herald Magazine, who had titled his article, "George Seldes Froths Again." Wilson dismissed the book and Seldes' message that the U.S. press was in a conspiracy with big business to mislead the public:

> It's the same argument he has printed in You Cant Print That and Lords of the Press and his leftist magazine In Fact. It is one thing to make so serious a charge and another to prove it. Mr. Seldes makes it loudly and sensationally but his evidence is flimsy, trivial and often irrevelant. For the most part Mr. Seldes prefers you to believe him because he says it's so.

Seldes scrawled in the margin of the review: "he is knave and a fool" and wrote to him challenging him to document his charge that the book was not based upon fact.

Overall, Seldes had difficulty getting the book reviewed and he wrote to Editor and Publisher on December 22, 1949, "I have not only received unfavorable reviews - and some outright lying reviews - but in most instances there has been if I may use a very old cliche - a conspiracy of silence."[19]

Tell the Truth and Run

Seldes' genuinely felt that the mainstream press was conspiring to destroy his career through its silence. His books were not being reviewed and his literary agent, Nannine Joseph, suggested he use a pseudonym.[20] He refused, and began work on the autobiographical Tell The Truth and Run. It was published in 1953 and Seldes again claimed that it received no attention from reviewers. One person who did review the book, however, was author Leon Uris, who wrote in a letter to Greenberg Publishers on November 16, 1953: "For many years I have followed Mr. Seldes' amazing career and read his books. He had remained

in my mind as one of the most courageous men of our age. As with all his books Tell The Truth and Run should be a text for all journalists." Uris also wrote to Seldes on November 10, 1953, complimenting him on his book: "I would like to see for myself what type of case iron constitution you must have to withstood so much abuse all these years."

Uris was not the only one who admired Tell the Truth and Run. Columnist Mildred Gilman wrote to Seldes indicating her appreciation of the book. "I was happy to have you give Ruth Hale [writer and feminist] her due...also you are the first to write seriously and lovingly of [journalist] Floyd Gibbons."[21] Journalist Milton Resier also thought Tell the Truth and Run was such an important book that he wrote in a March 10, 1954, letter to Seldes: "If the Pulitzer Prize Committee were on the level you would have the 1953 award for the best biography."

Criticisms of In Fact

Books were not Seldes only avenue for criticism. He found then too slow in identifying immediately all the lies in the mainstream press. In 1940 he started In Fact, a newsletter devoted to up-to-date press criticism. Researchers Dennis and Bertrand wrote, "In Fact was a personal vehicle and every word represented George Seldes' personal passions."[22]

In Fact endured for ten years, dogged by controversy.

It reached a maximum circulation in 1946 of 176,000 before subscriptions began to decline after being branded communist and fascist. The newsletter was eventually forced out of business in 1950. Seldes received many letters of support from subscribers during the final days of In Fact, and in his response to a letter, from subscriber Meyer Field, Seldes reiterated the goal of In Fact:

> My hope has always been to find a quarter million, even a million persons willing to support a liberal, non-party, independent publication devoted to telling the facts suppressed or distorted by 99 percent of the press. The 60,000 who stuck with me to the end are not enough to pay the costs, which were over $2,500 a week.[23]

Although In Fact was forced out of business because of lack of financial support it did have its fans and among them was Senator Harry Truman, who wrote to Seldes: "I believe you are on the right track...and I hope that you are successful."[24] Columnist Drew Pearson also applauded Seldes: "The job you have been doing is one of the best in the nation when it comes to awakening the American public."[25] Harold L. Ickes, secretary of the Interior for the Roosevelt Administration, was also a friend of In Fact. He wrote "In Fact serves again to emphasize that the American people desire the facts and admire good hardhitting reporting."[26]

Seldes always maintained that he was not alone in his battle for a free press. He claimed that not only was In Fact a platform for the vast silent majority of people who

regularly asked Seldes to investigate issues, but also that hundreds of members of the Newspaper Guild besieged him with articles and ideas.[27] He said in an interview with the author:

> Everybody was in my favor, you understand, I wasn't a kicked around dog of journalism. I had the support of everyone in the profession. All sorts of men high in the profession would send me stuff, they'd tip me off on some general trend that I should watch for.[28]

A letter from Eric Sevareid, CBS network's director of news, seemed to substantiate Seldes' claim. Sevareid wrote to Seldes on August 5, 1947: "I noticed the item in your paper the other day and I felt much pleased. I would be happy to think that I was even the indirect cause of that minor furor."

The newsletter also received praise from press critic Upton Sinclair. Sinclair initially had some reservations about In Fact and he wrote on May 2, 1945: "I wish that I could give you a complete and unreserved endorsement of In Fact." Sinclair felt that he coudn't fully support the newsletter because of Seldes' denunciations of the preparations for the Second World War in 1939 and 1940. Seldes responded to Sinclair's letter, May 26, 1945, disappointed at the older critic's reticence.

> I know that In Fact has its limitations but I also know that it is the most important anti-Fascist publication in America...it has a tremendous effect because it not only reaches 700,000 persons, but its anti-fascist items are taken up by the entire labor press...I have some 20,000 letter of approval received in the past five years. The two men I honor most in American

> letters, Dreiser and you, sent letters for the first issue... that is why I regret all the more your meager and cautious four lines.

Yet, on August 7, 1947, in a complete turnabout Sinclair wrote, "There appears to be each week a number of important news items which our capitalist press refuses to publish; or at any rate to feature. I find these items in In Fact and I do not see any contradictions of them. It is like a weekly Brass Check to me."

Despite these endorsements In Fact had its share of enemies. Frederick Woltman, reporter for New York World Telegram, wrote in an article for the American Mercury that "Seldes dopesheet ... provides such a perfect object lesson in camouflaged communist assaults on public opinion."[29]

Harry T. Saylor of the Philadelphia Record had the same concerns about In Fact's perceived Communist affiliations. He wrote to Seldes April 2, 1946: "You used to stand out, in my opinion as one of America ablest writing men and one of the most courageous. But in the last few years you seem to lose your fine sense of discrimination."

The American Newspaper Guild also attacked Seldes. Seldes accused the Guild's editor, Wilbur H. Baldinger, of lying about the unions. Newspaper Guild president Milton Murray wrote to Seldes on May 24, 1944, saying "the American Newspaper Guild representing 22,000 working newspaper people, having considered your scurrilous assaults on the Guild Reporter and its editor Wilbur H. Baldinger, directed

me to write to you expressing contempt for your scabrous journalism."

Summary

From the reviews and personal letters examined in this chapter it is apparent that, although Seldes had his supporters, his work drew a lot of criticism from his peers. Many of Seldes' critics acknowledged that he was raising important issues, but he seems to have alienated support through his aggressive manner and uncompromising approach. This led him to be labelled radical but he remained steadfast in the belief that the press had to be free because it was the most important force working for freedom of the human spirit. Seldes invested the press with such importance that he insisted that it was not possible to compromise with those who wished to subvert the press and prevent it from being free.

Seldes was attacked for offering solutions that his critics considered idealistic and extremist, but were they really? He proposed that not only should reporters have greater involvement in the business side of newspapers but that they should be unionized to provide economic security and independence, and thus withstand publishers' threats to change copy to protect profits. He further insisted that readers of newspapers should question everything they read, that a labor newspaper be established to challenge the papers of the establishment and that congress should

investigate the press magnates and their connections to big business. To some critics these seemed an impractical solutions to lying and distortion in the press. Yet, in 1947, five years after Seldes had articulated these proposals in Lords of the Press, the Hutchinson's Commission, which investigated the functioning of the press, proposed that the press should be regulated by a code of ethics. In addition, the Newspaper Guild insisted that the unionization of journalists was a way to afford them economic security and thus avoid corruption.[30]

That these other organizations were echoing the same sentiments about the press as Seldes, indicates that his criticisms had a degree of validity.

Yet, Seldes' solutions, although ahead of their time, were undeniably attacks on the very foundations of the press, which made it difficult to redress his criticisms. For example he wanted to see advertising, newspapers' main source of revenue, regulated. He wanted the press to print Federal Trade Commission Reports and their findings about the harmful effects of various products. Yet, Seldes was not totally unaware of the impracticality of his suggestions. In a debate with liberal magazine publisher David Stern, Seldes' acknowledged Stern's need to compromise with business. He wrote:

> As in all my precious battles with Stern over the ... hope of a free press in the United States, Stern won the battle with ...me as he won all others, with just this simple statement: "What do

> you want me to do, take a quixotic stand, print the truth about everything including bad medicine, impure food and crooked stock market offerings, and lose all my advertising contracts and go out of business -- or make compromises with all the evil elements and continue to publish the best liberal newspaper possible under this compromising circumstances?[31]

The thrust of Seldes' argument was that business interests should remain separate from the press. He believed that the press should be a public service and that as long as big business owned the press they would never be free. In hindsight his goal, albeitly idealistic, is hardly radical, but at a time when the press were closely associated with big business some obviously considered it so. Seldes didn't think of himself as an extremist, and he wrote that if the Newspaper Guild failed as a practical road to freedom of the press, "those of us who are interested in getting there will have to turn again to roads which realists call ... idealistic."[32]

It wasn't just the content of Seldes' criticisms that alienated people, it was the way he said it that drew attacks from his critics. He was repetitive in his comments and he was impassioned in his method of protest, and the vehemence with which he espoused his views hurt his own cause. It is evident that Seldes could not accept abuses of the press calmly, even though he was cautioned by his friend John Steele, the Tribune correspondent for London, back in 1925 to modify his responses. Steele wrote to Seldes on August 12, 1925: "I know that it is hard to write calmly

about this kind of thing, but I do think that you sometimes hurt your own case by the heat with which you press it."

Seldes impassioned method of protest may have discouraged some supporters but he admitted that he adopted this style in order to reach the widest possible audience. He was a true democratic socialist and he wanted to reach the widest possible audience, not just the liberal intellectuals. His believed that, if the public was fully informed, it was possible to motivate them into a grassroots reaction against press corruption.

Seldes' criticisms, however, were also weakened by his generalizations. He claimed that the main object of the American Fascists was to "end civil liberties, destroy labor unions and end free press." He insisted that big business was organized against labor and that the National Association of Manufacturers were corrupters of America Congress.[33] He also maintained that ninety-eight percent of the press was not free and that fifty-nine men ruled America.[34] These figures were difficult to prove, and supposing that they were true, even harder to act upon.

From the reviews examined in this chapter it appears Seldes' criticisms were considered controversial by some of his peers. Yet, in these same reviews, there was some consensus of his criticisms of the press, which would suggest that Seldes' portrait of the press during this period had a degree of accuracy.

NOTES -- CHAPTER 9

1. George Seldes, "Non-Conspiracy of Silence in the Press," Expose, February 1954, 3.

2. Ibid.

3. Harold Norman Denny, review of You Can't Print That, by George Seldes, In The New Republic (May 8 1929): 310.

4. Gilbert Seldes, review of World Panorama, by George Seldes, In New York Evening Journal Saturday 10, 1933.

5. Expose, 3.

6. Kenneth Olson, review of Freedom of the Press, by George Seldes, In Journalism Quarterly (September 1935): 320.

7. According to a typed note in the column of the editorial run by the New York Post, publisher, David Stern, held up the review because it was so harsh on the daily press. The review, which was cut to one-third its original size, was run on the 15 November and the editorial followed on the 22 November.

8. O.W. Riegel, review of You Can't Do That, by George Seldes, In Journalism Quarterly 15 (September 1938): 298.

9. The Pilot, February 3, 1939

10. W. L. White, review of Lords of the Press, by George Seldes, In The New Republic (November 30 1938): 107

11. Eric W. Allen, review of Lords of the Press, by George Seldes, In Journalism Quarterly 16 (June 1939): 178.

12. Allen, 179.

13. Seymour Waldman, review of Lords of the Press, by George Seldes, In Daily Worker (November 25 1938):

14. Laetitia Bolton of Modern Age Books, to George Seldes, 9 May 1938. Special Collections, Van Pelt Library, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

15. The Pilot, February 3, 1939.

16. Frank Mott, review of The Facts Are, by George Seldes, In Journalism Quarterly (December 1943): 335.

17. George Bird, review of One Thousand Americans, by George Seldes, In Journalism Quarterly 25 (June 1948): 177.

18. George Seldes, to editor of Journalism Quarterly, 3 March 1948. Special Collections, Philadelphia.

19. George Seldes, to Mr. Brown, editor of Editor and Publisher thanking him for reviewing Tell the Truth and Run, 22 December 1949. Special Collections, Philadelphia.

20. Nannine Joseph, to George Seldes, 14 January 1954. Special Collections, Philadelphia.

21. Mildred Gilman, to George Seldes, 23 October 1953. Special Collections, Philadelphia.

22. Dennis and Bertrand, 120.

23. George Seldes, to Meyer Field, 17 October 1950. Special Collections, Philadelphia.

24. Harry Truman, to George Seldes, 27 April 1940. Special Collections, Philadelphia.

25. George Seldes, News They Won't Print. (Brochure)

26. Harold Ickes, to George Seldes, 26 April 1945. Special Collections.

27. George Seldes, Never Tire of Protesting, 23.
There were dozens of letters, among Seldes' papers, from people asking Seldes to investigate issues. For example a letter from Shaemas O'Sheel to Seldes, 31 August 1943 asked Seldes to expose W. Philip Simms "whose stuff in Scripps Howard Chain is as poisonous as Peglers'...Please tackle him George, lets know who he is, whose work he's doing." Seldes also supplied information to Senator Paul Badger who wrote thanking Seldes for the information on National Association of Manufacturers; and to Harold Ickes on the tobacco industry and on freedom of the press for a debate Ickes participated in 1939.

28. George Seldes, Interview by Helen Fordham, tape recording, 10 December 1990.

29. Woltman, 587.
In light of Woltman's comments about Seldes and In Fact a letter from Freda Kircheway, editor of The Nation, to Seldes, December 4, 1944, is very illuminating. She wrote: "I don't like the Mercury point of view. They ride their anti-Communist hobby too hard and besides are too ready to print any old article just for its sensation value."

30. George Seldes, Freedom of the Press (New York: Garden City Publishing Company, 1937), 360.
31. George Seldes, Witness to a Century (New York: Ballantine Books, 1987), 308.

32. Freedom of the Press, 363.

33. George Seldes, The Facts Are (New York: In Fact Inc., 1942), 85.

34. Freedom of the Press, 215.

CHAPTER 10

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

To understand how the experiences related in the previous chapters motivated George Seldes' life of protest, it is important to first appreciate his paradigm of society. He grew up in a socially responsible environment in which his father encouraged him to think deeply about the philosophical and political issues confronting society. He evolved into a freethinker and came to believe in democracy, freedom and liberty, not as abstract concepts but as fundamental rights. Inherent in this liberal perception of society was a belief that the press played a critical role in the effective functioning of a democracy. Seldes believed that political democracy relied upon a well-informed public, and he felt the press had a social responsibility to act as a conduit for the information required by the public to make informed decisions. Seldes best summarized his view of the press when he cited President Lincoln, who wrote:

> I am a firm believer in the people, if given the truth, they can be depended upon to meet any national crisis. The great point is to bring them the real facts.[1]

Seldes believed the press created public opinion and

therefore had to be free of vested interests, like big business. It was his belief in democracy and the power of the press that was fundamental to all of his criticisms.

Seldes' criticisms were characterized by his idealism. He remained an idealist throughout his life and he measured the performance of the press against utopian concepts, focusing on what should be, rather than what was. This is how he assessed the performance of the press in its coverage of the First World War, Italian Fascism, Mexico and Spain. The press, in each of these experiences, were found inadequate by Seldes, and each separate incident contributed to his understanding of the nature and extent of press corruption.

In 1929, Seldes put his idealism about the press into action and began to write, using his experiences as a foreign correspondent to illustrate the inadequacies of the press. He challenged the accepted reports about his experiences and shared the knowledge that the First World War was fought for profits; that Italian Fascism was a threat to world-wide democracy; and that big business controlled American diplomacy in Mexico and Spain. Like the pieces of a puzzle, each of these experiences fit together, to create a picture of press corruption and business control of the news. Seldes could do little about the powerful and wealthy groups that manipulated these events, but he could attack the press, which he believed not only failed to

report the truth but deliberately lied and distorted the news. Seldes, who also believed the press had the power to make the world into an "industrial democracy in which poverty would be unknown," felt that the press had betrayed its role as public informers to became "the most powerful force against the general welfare of the majority of the people."[2]

> I have seen the powerful press of the world, not only our American press lords, Hearst, Howard Patterson McCormick, Gannett, Knight and others ... the press of most major countries - line up with reaction to fight the common man. I saw how these press lords operated, the evil they wrought. Never in history were so many people misled by so few.[3]

Seldes' books became warnings that events were occurring in the world that threatened freedom and democracy. Further, these events were not being reported because the press had become a tool of wealthy and powerful businesses, who undermined liberal values in an effort to retain control in a rapidly changing world. New idealogies challenged established patterns of power during the first four decades of the twentieth century. Fascism - associated with the established rich, and Socialism - the banner of the workers, battled it out. In some respects Seldes' fight for a free press became a class war. He became the self-appointed spokesperson for the vast silent majority who, after centuries of repression by the wealthy, were beginning to demand a voice in their own government.

Seldes initially focused his criticisms on overseas

news, writing about Mussolini and Fascist terrorism and Russian censorship. In the mid-1930s, however, he began to see the same patterns of censorship, control and Reaction emerging in America and began his criticisms of the American press. Although his views were met first with opposition and ridicule, and then later with silence - a claim that was substantiated in studies by Jenson and Bertrand - he continued to protest because he could see the forces of Reaction defeating Democracy. Seldes could see this battle against Reaction in the millions who worked for starvation wages while the Hearsts and DuPonts made billions. He saw it in the growing fight against civil liberties and the increase in racism and anti-semitism. And he recognized it in the propaganda against the qualities of tolerance, freedom and understanding.

Seldes continued to protest because he believed that people were capable of change provided they were given the correct information. This belief was fundamental to his years of protest, and it was the Spanish Civil War, more than any other single event, that reaffirmed his faith in humankind. Spain showed him that people, although fed lies by the mainstream press, resonated with the truth when they heard it. Spain also became a metaphor for Seldes' own battle with the establishment. He identified with the Republic which he felt, like himself, struggled for freedom in the face of a disinterested and reactionary world.

Even with his experiences in Spain, Seldes believed that it was possible to criticize the press from within the system, using established magazines and newspapers to inform the public that freedom and democracy were under threat. However, his experience with the magazine Ken made him realize that it was not possible to remain within the mainstream press and protest. There were too many controls on newspaper and magazine content, through politics and advertising -- even the most liberal was not immune -- and he came to understand that if he was to freely criticize the press he had to run his own paper.

In 1940 Seldes produced his newsletter, In Fact, which became a vehicle for his criticisms of the mainstream press. Using congressional records and federal trade commission reports he attempted to relay news that he felt was critical to the public's welfare but was suppressed in the daily papers. Seldes wanted the public to be aware that these forces were polluting the news and he wrote in his original prospectus of the newsletter:

> The viewpoint of In Fact is simple: it is in favor of every idea, movement and organization that is for what we carelessly call liberalism, democracy and progress.

Yet, in wartime America, liberalism became associated with radicalism, and In Fact, the vehicle of all Seldes' dreams of reforming the press, was considered anti-establishment. The newsletter died in the post-war years and Seldes was silenced by the mainstream press.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has sought to answer why George Henry Seldes wrote about the events that he did and how those events influenced his criticisms. Seldes wrote about his experiences as a reporter and foreign correspondent because they illustrated his belief that the press was corrupt. His criticisms of the press were a direct response to his experiences, which had repeatedly shown him that the press was negligent in its role as democratic watchdog.

After Seldes left newspaper journalism and began to document his experiences he began to see reoccurring patterns of economic and political factors that governed the press and controlled society. In his criticisms he tried to expose those powerful, faceless people and organizations who owned the press and consequently controlled public opinion. Seldes labelled them "Big Business" and used words like "Reaction" and "Fascism" to identify his opponents, terms so nebulous that it is not surprising that he was criticized for being too general and too unspecific. Essentially, Seldes tried to convince the public that the press - those watchdogs of Democracy - were undermining the very values they professed to uphold.

The mainstream press succeeded in silencing Seldes' accusations first, by not reviewing his books and second, by dismissing him as an hysterical extremist. It must be conceded that Seldes' aggressive and uncompromising style of

criticism and idealistic solutions made it easy for them to portray him as a radical. Further, what he was saying about press ethics and social responsibility was unpalatable to a press that used the First Amendment as an excuse to function without restraint or interference.[4] Even those that agreed that the press needed reforms felt that Seldes' proposed solutions smacked of control of freedom of speech.

It is undeniable that Seldes' criticisms of big business involvement in the press attacked the foundations of democratic society. Seldes raised questions about freedom of speech and standards of the press, issues that were still open to First Amendment interpretation by the Supreme Court.[5] He wanted business regulated in a society that considered the right to make a profit an integral part of the constitution. Seldes, by himself, couldn't destroy his opponents - big business and reaction - because they were woven into the very fabric of society and human nature. The task was made harder because there was no single identifiable enemy or easy solution, it was the whole institution that was corrupt.[6]

When assessing Seldes' contribution to press criticism one must speculate on what he hoped to achieve by attacking those who controlled the press. Realistically he couldn't possibly destroy the Hearsts and McCormicks and their huge press empires. He could not even prosecute these press lords for starting the First World War or manipulating

politics. What he could do, however, was make the public aware and he believed, in true democratic fashion, that if enough spoke out then changes would follow. His message was simple - the press was corrupt and the public should question everything that they read. He encouraged them to be eternally vigilant against the forces of reaction.

Others, like Upton Sinclair and I.F. Stone, also criticized the control of business over newspaper content and the lack of press freedom, but they voiced it in a much less vehement manner and focused more upon their newspaper colleagues than the general public.[7] What made Seldes unique was that he spoke out in spite of the public attacks and ridicule. He sacrificed his reputation as an objective journalist to the cause he believed in. Arguably, this was not a very practical course of action, and one that diluted the effectiveness of his message. However, by looking at Seldes' profile, it would be difficult to imagine that he would act in any other way. As an idealist, a humanitarian, and a passionate crusader there could be no half measures for him. There is Don Quixote quality about him as he tilted at all the issues he could find.

In discussing Seldes' contribution to press criticism it is possible to argue that he contributed nothing of significance and this is why he had not been acknowledged by history. Lee Brown thought Seldes was so insignificant that he barely mentioned him in his book, The Reluctant

Reformation, a history of press criticism. Brown, in establishing the significance of a press critic, used a model of criticism that determined that effective press criticisms must be "realistic" and "critically positive." Seldes, with his ideal solutions to the problems of the press, fulfilled neither of these criteria and could thus be considered an ineffective critic. Brown further concluded that press criticism is ineffective if it is motivated "by a desire to prove something good or bad."[8] Since most of Seldes' criticisms were designed to show how inadequate the press was and how much it needed reform, it would suggest that he failed on this account also.

Seldes may not have been an effective critic according to the definition supplied by Brown, but he was an outstanding muckraker. Researcher Harry Stein provided an operational definition of the term muckraking, which he described as having six aspects: they work to expose a hidden situation, they depict the situation prescriptively, locate the agent of control, suggests a course of action, incite audience response and maintain authorial autonomy. All these factors characterized Seldes' work.[9] Stein also believed that "most muckrakers sought to increase the power of individuals and to make business and government more responsive, believing that commercial interests deflected democratic interests." Stein concluded that the basis of the muckraking tradition was that it expounded a faith that

once the people were presented with the facts this would lead to action. Stein suggested that muckraking did not end in 1914 but continued past the progressive era with people like "George Seldes, Drew Pearson and Ralph Nader." Researcher Margaret Blanchard agreed, claiming that virulent press criticism assaulting the "economic structure of newspaper operations" experienced during the 1930s, dated back to the turn of the century.[10]

Whether press critic or muckraker, Seldes did raise issues about the press that were echoed by others. The press faced a crisis in public credibility during this period and historian Edwin Emery described this widespread public disillusionment with the press in his book, The Press in America.[11] Critics of the press ranged from President Franklin Roosevelt to Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes to author Sir Norman Angell, who all agreed that there were major flaws in the press and that there was an amazing amount of disinformation in the press during the 1940s.[12]

That others agreed with Seldes affords his work a degree of validity and suggests he was not perhaps as radical as his critics would have us believe. His criticisms were further validated when they were duplicated in the Hutchins Commission 1947 summary report, A Free and Responsible Press, which is the definitive work on press criticisms whose recommendations are still being implemented forty-five years later.[13] The commission promoted the

concept of press responsibility and devised ethical standards to which the press should aspire.[14] Both of these tenants were fundamental to Seldes' vision of the press. The existence of the commission indicates that the press were in a state of crisis and that Seldes' criticisms were merely part of a wider societal movement that demanded reforms in how the press functioned.

While conceding the value of Seldes' criticisms it should not be ignored that he was in many ways a flawed critic. Flaws that were to work against the effectiveness of his message. He believed passionately in freedom of the press and, like his father, was not prepared to compromise, not even moderate critics like Bruce Blixan and Oswald Garrison Villard, who believed in his principles but abhorred his methods.

An extension of Seldes' uncompromising attitude was his strict requirements for what constituted suppression. He saw lying and distortion everywhere and he worked out a test to gauge the accuracy of the news:

> If, for example, the newspapers reported that Lenin had been assassinated in 1917, and again in 1918 and once more in 1919, and 1920 showed the Bolshevik leaders alive, then obviously the press of the world had lied, again and again, year after year.[15]

This is harsh criteria by any standard. Seldes made no allowance for the errors made in the accumulation of information, methods of communication or the restrictions of space in newspapers. He was also uncompromising in his

language and Pamela Brown wrote: "Nor did he pull any punches. Newspapers were not inaccurate; they lied. The press did not miss stories; it suppressed them."[16]

While always ready to accuse the daily papers of suppression and distortion Seldes, himself, was not above making errors that could have easily been considered suppression. For example, he wrote an article in In Fact on April 27 1942, about labor trouble in the office of the magazine The New Republic. Editor of The New Republic, Bruce Blixan, wrote to Seldes saying:

> You accepted as true a statement regarding a controversy from one of the parties without making any attempt... to investigate or to hear the case of either of the two other parties. Such conduct seems to me a departure from the high standards of journalism about which you so often talk publicly.[17]

Seldes responded that "from my point of view the statement of a majority of editors ... warranted my publication of the barest fact mentioned in the editors appeal to me."[18] This was hardly sufficient explanation for failing to get all sides of the issue, particularly when Blixan had championed Seldes in an article on the effective functioning of the press.[19] Seldes wrote a retraction but his bias was evident. He claimed to be completely impartial in his presentation of the facts but he did favor stories that reinforced the view that the daily press lied to the public.

In Seldes' efforts to reveal how corrupt the press was he employed several methods, some of which were not always

completely ethical. He devised a plan to find out whether daily newspapers were indulging in suppression. He sent a letter to the editor of the New York Times, Edwin James, on the letterhead of another organization and signed a fictitious name. When the NYT failed to publish the letter, Seldes wrote to James telling him what he was doing and accusing the NYT of distortion and suppression. James wrote back, "I trust in the future we will be able to avoid giving space to the fabrications you intimate you intend to keep coming."[20] Through actions like this Seldes may well have destroyed his own credibility with other journalists. The likelihood that Seldes was treated as a joke by some of his peers is reinforced by another letter from James to Seldes, which read: "Did you read what the head of the union said about the Gimbel strike when it was all over? I did not notice anything about it in In Fact. What suppression!"[21]

Although treated lightly by some of his peers, Seldes appears to have been taken seriously by some of his subscribers who would ask him to investigate people or organizations. Seldes claimed that he had a circulation of 176,000, a figure that is unsubstantiated because In Fact is not listed in either Ulrich's Guide to Periodicals or Ayer's Directory of Newspapers. The circulation figure of In Fact implies a great deal of support, since it was twice the circulation of The Nation or The New Republic, but as Frank Mott insinuated, many of the subscribers may have been

"dragooned" because they received the newsletter along other labor periodicals. Despite this, Seldes continued to insist that he had support.

Seldes, although reliant upon this support, wasn't above exploiting it to further his own cause. For example, he wrote an article in In Fact about his colleague, Lawrence Fernsworth, who was a New York Times correspondent unhappy with the Times because he felt his work was suppressed. Apparently after the article appeared Fernsworth wrote to Seldes saying that he resented references to a quarrel between himself and the NYT in the pages of In Fact.[22] Fernsworth objected to being portrayed as a disgruntled worker and he claimed that the NYT printed almost all his pieces on the Spanish Civil War. "I can't see what end is severed by mixing my name up in any further discussions about the NYT and hope it will not be done."

The criticisms of Seldes' method of protest are valid. He was frequently shrill, repetitive and aggressive. He was sensitive to criticism of his own work, and among his private papers were copies of letters responding individually to his critics. Seldes also damned his critics publicly in a 1954 article in which he insisted that newspapers across the country were refusing to review his books.[23] This anxiousness to defend his position made his criticisms sometimes seem belligerent, defensive and they raise questions about whether he was really suppressed or

just felt that he didn't receive the coverage that he felt he deserved.

Seldes also lacked balance in his criticisms, concentrating on only the negative aspects of the press. He made sweeping generalizations, and stylistically his work was blunt, sensational and often badly written, an observation reinforced by researcher Pamela Brown who found Seldes' language "simple and colorful" and concluded that he did not "produce copy of literary merit."[24]

Seldes alienated support through this manner of protest, yet he never attempted to change or modify his method of criticism. He chose to wage his battle against the press in an extreme, almost anti-intellectual manner because not only did he believe that there never could be any compromise with press corruption of Fascism, but he also wanted to reach as wide an audience as possible. He wanted to reach the workers, not just other journalists or the intellectuals who read liberal magazines, because he believed that change would come from the people. In this respect he was perhaps a radical. He didn't mind if he alienated others. All that mattered was that he draw attention to issues and through his sacrifice, heighten public awareness and force action.

This method of protest may have been short-sighted in terms of the effective dissemination of his message to his peers, and those within the press system. Yet, who is to

say that Seldes tireless, aggressive approach to criticism did not directly influence members of the Hutchins Commission. Seldes uncompromising attitude to protest indicates an extraordinary level of commitment to his belief that the daily press was misinforming the public and that the public armed with the knowledge of press corruption was capable of making changes.

This study, by examining Seldes' experiences and criticisms, has sought to understand the roots of his criticisms and why he protested in the manner in which he did. It has attempted to integrate his experiences and his criticisms and show that Seldes' life of protest was the culmination of both his childhood values and his experiences as a journalist. Elements combined from both, to produce an uncompromising and committed critic who never stopped believing in a free and responsible press. Driven by his idealism, his humanitarianism, and perhaps his need to prove himself, he remained steadfast in his criticisms even though his work was ridiculed. He continued because he really felt that he was echoing the sentiments of a significant portion of the public.

Seldes did not receive official recognition of his contribution to press criticism until 1980.[25] Other outcast critics like Will Irwin and Upton Sinclair were restored to grace earlier, but not Seldes. Why Seldes was treated in this manner deserves further consideration as does the issue

of whether Seldes was a truly effective critic. Perhaps a key to understanding Seldes' treatment by the mainstream press is found in Altschull's theory of press criticism, which concluded that "Dissent is permitted ... just as long as it does not go beyond the parameters of acceptable idealogy."[26] Seldes' criticisms did go beyond what was deemed acceptable in the 1930s and 1940s, and he spoke out when few others would, sacrificing career and credibility. But it was these traits that made him into a persistent, annoying gadfly whose bites at the established press helped raise public consciousness of press practices and thus assisted in creating a climate conducive to press reform.

NOTES -- CHAPTER 10

1. George Seldes, Witness to a Century (New York: Ballantine Books, 1987), xxi.

2. George Seldes, The Facts Are (New York: In Fact Inc., 1942), 25.

3. Prospectus of In Fact.

4. Margaret Blanchard, "Press Criticism and National Reform Movements: The Progressive Era and the New Deal," Journalism History (Summer 197): 3.

5. Ibid.

6. Herbert Altschull, Agents of Power (New York: Longman Inc., 1984), 12. Seldes criticized during a time when the press were in the pay of big business, a historical phenomena examined by historian Herbert Altshcull who wrote that the press during the 1930s and 1940s were powerful, profitable and reactionary. He observed that business-like media monopolies had begun to dominate the ties between business and the press. Roosevelt's New Deal and the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) had sought to regulate industry, including newspapers. Publishers protested at what they considered government control of a free press and aligned themselves with big business interests to oppose reforms and increasingly pushed an anti-labor, pro-big business line in their newspapers.

7. A study by the author indicates that both The Nation and The New Republic covered many of the same topics during the Second World War. also;
Bruce Bliven, "Balance Sheet of Journalism," The New Republic 10 March 1941, 331-334. Bliven listed several complaints against the press that were similar to Seldes criticisms; one, censorship by the publisher is worse than that by advertisers, newspapers are edited by Business men 3 Monopoly is a grave danger to the press, 4 There is a dangerous tendency toward standardization and syndicated material. 5 the middle class is overrepresented in the press. 6. Journalists and papers get old fat and timid. Seldes was not alone in warning the American people about the threat of fascism during the 1930s. Heywood Broun wrote an article for the New Republic (Sept 28, 1938 p.211)

attacking a young writer named Vrest Orton who wrote in his column "The Return of the Native" that while fascism is a current menace to America "communism was not in the national picture at the moment and constituted " no danger whatsoever."

8. Lee Brown, The Reluctant Reformation (New York: David McKay Company, Inc.,), 19.

9. Harry Stein, "American Muckraking of Technology Since 1900," Journalism Quarterly (Summer 1990): 401-402.

10. Blanchard, 2.

11. Edwin Emery, The Press in America, 3rd, ed., (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1972), 571.

12. George Seldes, The People Don't Know (New York: Gaer Associates, 1949), 2-3. According to Seldes author Sir Norman Angell wrote in an article in The New Republic, 21 June 1941 "with out vast and complicated paraphanalia of making things known ... the world somehow manages to miss just the news that is often of the most vital significance." Seldes also quoted Franklin Roosevelt as saying at one of his press conferences "An amazing state of public misinformation exists in the United States."

13. Blanchard, 1.

14. Ibid., 11.

15. George Seldes, Tell the Truth and Run (New York: Greenburg Publisher, 1953), 242.

16. Pamela Brown, "George Seldes and the Winter Soldier Brigade: Press Criticism of In Fact, 1940-1950," American Journalism vol vi (1989): 86.

17. Bruce Blixan, editor of The New Republic to George Seldes 1 May 1942.

18. George Seldes to Bruce Blixan 6 May 1942. Special Collection, Van Pelt Library, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

19. Bruce Blixan, "Balance Sheet of American Journalism," The New Republic, 10 March 1941, 331-334. One of the few articles that alluded to Seldes' importance as a press critic was in The New Republic, which suggested that although the sharp criticism of men like Upton Sinclair and George Seldes had been repudiated by American Journalism "it had then proceeded to remedy at least some of the faults

charged, whose existence is denied."

20. George Seldes to Edwin James, 1 February 1944.

21. Edwin James 26 September 1941.

22. Lawrence Fernsworth to George Seldes, 16 September 1941, Special Collections, Philadelphia.
23. George Seldes, "Non-Conspiracy of Silence in the Press," Expose February 1954, 3.

24. Brown, 86.

25. George Seldes was selected by the Qualitative Studies Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication to received its second annual award for professional excellence. The honor was presented to Seldes at the AEJMC convention in Boston August 1980. Several magazine articles throughout the 1970s and 1980s also applauded Seldes' role in the development of consumer advocacy and investigative journalism. Communication Researcher Carl Jensen wrote: "Lincoln Steffens, the golden muckraker, inspired George Seldes, who, in turn, inspired I.F. Stone, in turn inspired Carl Bernstein, who, along with Bob Woodward, inspired a generation of investigative journalists." Columnist, Colman McCarthy, also acknowledged Seldes' contribution to press criticisms in his "Thinkers and Their Thoughts" column in the Washington Post May 3, 1973. He wrote that Seldes "produced a large body of literature that is among our most insightful press criticism." Journalist, Nat Hentoff concluded in the Village Voice March 29 1973 that Seldes had been "grossly neglected" by history. He wrote: "Leibling was the better stylist, to be sure, but Seldes, like I.F. Stone got into much more controversial areas than Leibling and was more involved in the muckraking tradition of journalism." Derek Norcross wrote in his article in Parade Magazine on the 18 November 1973 pioneered the field of consumer news.

26. Herbert Altschull, Agents of Power (New York: Longman Inc., 1984), 272.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX 1

List of George Seldes' Books in Chronological Order

You Can't Print That	Payson and Clark	1929
Can These Things Be	Brewer and Warren	1931
World Panorama	Little, Brown & Co	1933
The Vatican: Yesterday Today - Tomorrow	Harper & Bros	1934
Iron, Blood & Profits	Harper & Bros	1934
Sawdust Caesar	Harper & Bros	1935
Freedom of the Press	Bobbs Merrill	1935
Lords of the Press	Messner	1938
You Can't Do That	Modern Age	1938
The Catholic Crisis	Messner	1940
Witch Hunt	Modern Age	1940
The Facts Are	In Fact	1942
Facts and Facism	In Fact	1943
One Thousand Americans	Boni & Gaer	1947
The People Don't Know	Gaer Associates	1949
Tell the Truth and Run	Greenberg	1953
The Great Quotations		1965
Never Tire of Protesting	Lyle Stuart	1968
Even the Gods Can't Change History	Lyle Stuart	1976

The Great Thoughts.....

Witness to A Century.....**Ballantine** 1987

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