

June 29, 2009

## **MEDIA NEED TO REMEMBER THAT FIRST AMENDMENT BELONGS TO US ALL**

Looking around for something appropriate to say as our nation celebrates its 223rd birthday, I happened to run across an old clipping in my files from Eugene Methvin, one of the finest journalists ever from the state of Georgia.

Methvin is a local boy made good. His distinguished family were the longtime publishers of the Vienna News in Dooly County. Gene graduated cum laude from my beloved Grady College of Journalism at the University of Georgia and lettered in football, proving that not all journalists are milquetoasts. After graduation he spent three years in the U.S. Air Force as a fighter pilot. Then he joined the Reader's Digest Washington bureau and remained there for 42 years as reporter-editor.

I mention all of this not to give him the big head (in fact, I haven't seen him in years), but to tell you that Gene Methvin can stand with any journalist in the country in terms of his stellar credentials in the business.

The article I had saved was from 2005. Methvin had excoriated the New York Times for revealing a top-secret government program right after the attacks of Sept. 11. Methvin said, "The terrorist agents who read the newspapers will now change their ways and blind our intelligence agents." He went on to mention other egregious examples of how the press has compromised our national security. During the height of the Cold War, the late syndicated columnist Jack Anderson announced that the National Security Agency was eavesdropping on Soviet agents in Moscow. Anderson's gratuitous comments cost our side the opportunity to discover potential mischief by the Kremlin.

In 1942, the Chicago Tribune published information that the U.S. Navy's victory at Midway, which was a turning point in World War II in the Pacific, had been made possible because Americans broke the Japanese naval code, allowing our forces to have a great advantage in that battle. The Japanese promptly changed their codes, perhaps even prolonging the war as a result.

Methvin's column reminded me of the comments of my least-favorite journalist, Mike Wallace of "60 Minutes," who once proclaimed to a group at Harvard that if he were traveling with enemy soldiers he would not warn U.S. soldiers of an impending ambush. "Don't you have a higher duty as an American citizen to do all you can to save the lives of soldiers rather than this journalistic ethic of reporting fact?" the moderator asked. Wallace responded blithely, "No, you don't have a higher duty. You're a reporter." Oh, please.

Brent Scowcroft, later National Security Adviser, said it correctly, "You're Americans first, and you're journalists second." I believe most Americans agree with George Connell, a Marine Corps colonel: "I feel utter contempt. [If reporters] get ambushed, they're going to expect that I'm going to send Marines up there to get them. They're just journalists, they're not Americans. But I'll do it. And that's what makes me so contemptuous of them. Marines will die going to get a couple of journalists." Sadly, he is correct. I doubt seriously that if Mike Wallace got a bullet in his pompous posterior, he would say, "Please don't rescue me! I am not an American. I am a reporter!"

Methvin's column reminds us that freedom of the press as guaranteed by the First Amendment is not the private province of the media. It belongs to the American people, and it is the media's responsibility to take good care of it. Endangering our security simply because you can is a despicable misuse of that freedom. Like yelling "fire" in a crowded theater, it goes far beyond what our founders had in mind when they created this nation.

A lot of Americans have died in a lot of wars over the past two centuries to ensure that we remain free. Part of that freedom includes a free press. But we need to be able to trust our media to act responsibly and not provide aid and comfort to our enemies. Maybe it is too much to ask, but I think we would all feel better if our media had more Gene Methvins — reporters who are Americans first and journalists second.