

THE PRESS AND THE COLD WAR

A Book Review

By Nesar Ahmad

Reprinted From:

McGill Daily,
November 24, 1972.

The Press and the Cold War is a penetrating analysis of the capitalist press in the United States of America with particular attention to the role of the press as an instrument of American Cold War policy.

It is difficult to imagine anyone better qualified to discuss this subject. James Aronson began his journalist career and political education on the Boston Evening Transcript in 1937. From there he moved to the New York Herald Tribune, the New York Post and finally, after a stint in postwar Germany trying to set up a de-Nazified press for the U.S. Army's Information Control Division, he went to work for the New York Times. Two years later, in 1948, he left the Times to set up the National Guardian with Cedric Belfrage and John T. McManus. From then until his resignation as editor of the National Guardian in 1967, Aronson participated in the paper's many battles against U.S. policies, battles such as the one to save the Rosenbergs and the long campaigns against the Korean and Vietnam wars.

Aronson begins his book by showing the economic foundation of the press, its gradual concentration into the present chains and conglomerates by a process of mergers and its dependence on advertising. For example, he gives statistics showing that in 1900 there were 2,200 daily newspapers in the US; by 1969 there were only 1,753. The ratio of editorial matter to advertising was 60 percent to 40 percent before World War II. Today the reverse is true.

Aronson succeeds in showing that the American press does not reflect the American people's mind. It reflects the views of established power which in turn seeks to mould the American mind to suit its prejudices. The press seeks to shape its public opinion by fostering and presenting

a unanimity of view which it then offers as public opinion.

Aronson then proceeds to trace this process from the beginnings of the Cold War, which actually dates from world capitalism's terrified reaction to the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 and the round-up of thousands of suspected subversives in the US during the raids conducted by Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer in 1920. How many people know that some 400 political prisoners were marched through the streets of Boston in chains during that period? Aronson quotes from a New York Times editorial of January 5, 1920: "If some or any of us, impatient for the swift confusion of the Reds, have ever questioned the alacrity resolute will and fruitful, intelligent vigor of the Department of Justice in hunting down these enemies of the United States, the questioners have now cause to approve and applaud. ...This raid is only the beginning...The Department's further activities should be far-reaching and beneficial."

The press has continued with the anti-communist crusade ever since the 1920's. The history of this "crusade" is both sad and infuriating. It shows the corruption of the men and women who write, edit and thereby manage the news.

Aronson demonstrates how most of the journalists who covered the antics of Joseph McCarthy were perfectly aware of the fact that he was one of the outstanding liars of his time; and yet they turned him into a national figure. The press only began to turn against McCarthy when he started attacking the newspapers. But even then they defended themselves by invoking their anti-communist purity and never by challenging the basic assumption of anti-communism itself. A particularly disgusting example was set by James Weschlet, editor of the New York Post, who supplied McCarthy with a list of sixty persons whom he knew to be Communists during the time he was a member of the Young Communist League. Among the people he named were a number of his fellow workers at the Post.

At no time has the press acted in ignorance of its role as propaganda arm of the US Government. There is enough evidence, claims Aronson, to prove that the Korean War was initiated by Southern Korea with full knowledge of the US authorities. And yet to this day most Americans believe that the North invaded the South. In one of those rare moments of candour on the part of US newsmen, Robert C. Millar of the United Press said in a speech before the Nevada Editors Conference in 1952:

"There are certain facts and stories from Korea that editors and publishers have printed which were pure fabrication. You didn't know that when you printed them. Many of us who sent stories knew they were false, but had to write them because they were official releases from responsible military headquarters, and were released for publication even though the people responsible knew they were untrue."

The Cuban Revolution and open call for self-censorship by the press "in the national interest" was followed by the Vietnam War. Some correspondents dared to dissent from the official version of events in Vietnam. However, their dissent never went so far as to question the validity of US intervention in Vietnam, because that would mean questioning the basic postulates of the entire cold war - that is, of the global struggle between American imperialism and the peoples fighting for their liberation - and the press cannot do that without questioning its own existence. And finally, even though the press reacted with indignation to Vice-President Agnew's blast at the "liberal" media, it ultimately brought its editorial policies even closer in line with Administration policy. Agnew, perhaps, was aware that his adversaries were paper tigers.

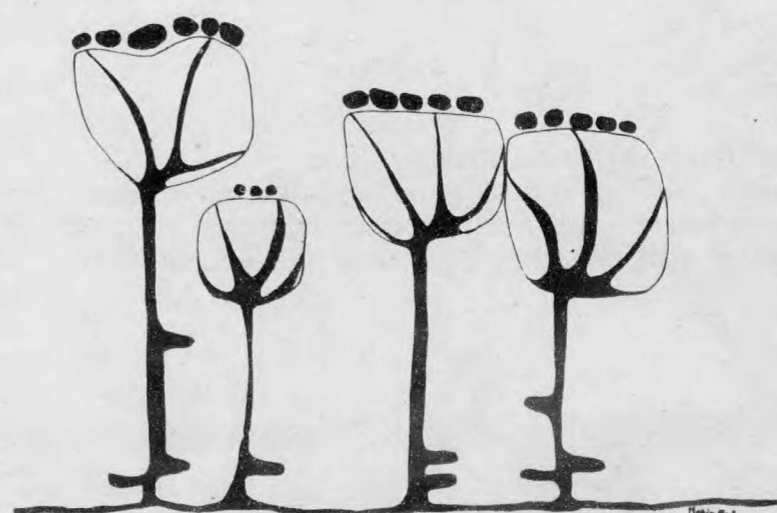
Aronson places little faith in the ability of the press to

reform itself, the only hope is the creation of an alternate news service.

Says Aronson: "But above all, it seems to me, a public determined to achieve the dissemination of honest and unhibited information, comment, and interpretation of the news must take radical alternative action... The purpose of such an alternative press would be, first, to expose and discredit the misinformation and false interpretation of the news, and to fill in omissions in the general press; second, to offer a credible substitute for the press as it exists today, prepared in a fashion that would win the confidence of an ever-widening audience."

The Press and the Cold War is a book that can be highly recommended both to those who are seeking an alternative channel of information and to those who still swallow the myth of freedom of press in the United States of America.

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Edifice du Centenaire Centennial Building
Frédéricton, N.-B. Fredericton, N.B.
'19 - 23 février '73 February 19 - 23, '73



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