

## MR. AGNEW AND THE COMMENTATORS

(Originally published February 1970)

On November 13, 1969, Vice President Agnew's speech criticizing the eastern, liberal bias of television news caused much controversy and anguished breast-beating among the network commentators. Walter Cronkite, the armchair astronaut, in pain that some should recognize him as liberal instead of moderate, fled to his home state of Missouri and, before a stony-faced audience of natives, convinced himself that he, Eric, Chet, David and Howard—all small town boys from America's heartlands—could therefore not possibly be Easterners. We sent a letter and several editorials of conservative tone from our local papers to Howard K. Smith of ABC, a former classmate at Tulane University. The letter and his reply are reprinted below.

November 20, 1969  
Howard K. Smith  
American Broadcasting Company Washington, D.C.

Dear H. K.:

It was comforting to find you catalogued by *TIME* under the headings of general conservatism and hawkishness, but my antipathy toward the character of their news writing made me resent their presumption.

I think there was considerable justification for Agnew's blast beyond his own personal and understandable vexation. The Spiro Who? Tab set the tone initially and his derisive handling by the media since has been rivaled only by the knife job done on Goldwater. For many years, outside the Washington-New York news axis, there has been a chronic annoyance with the unvarying, left-leaning attitude of those in control of major communication, and particularly with the condescending manner in which they ignore or slap down the peasants who dare to challenge or disagree. It seems amazing that, with all the combined ability and brilliance represented by the "no more than a dozen anchormen, commentators, and executive producers," so few in the group possess humility enough to tolerate criticism or admit to the possibility of fault. A steady fare of unleavened liberalism can be just as stultifying as a steady diet of Georgia grits and gravy. Any "polarization" being brought about is less the fault of Agnew and the Administration than the direct result of a prolonged slow burn provoked entirely by the established media.

I was sorry that Agnew singled out ABC and Harriman as one target, chiefly because I've felt that since your return to network news casting, you and ABC have presented by far the best balanced and least biased coverage. I will admit, though, that I did squirm a little through the Harriman interview, and have shared the VP's irritation of Harriman is being brought forth in rebuttal. A.H. may be personable and charming, but his own vague and ineffective handling of the Vietnam tangle when it was partially in his lap hardly qualifies him as a reasonable authority. It was a poor choice on Reynolds' (?) part.

Not too long ago, I recall you expressed publicly a somewhat similar disenchantment with the communications media. I would guess that on occasion you and Reynolds might hold differing viewpoints about some happening. Why not, then, air conflicting analyses more often on the same program's final commentary? It would at least convey that not all pundits are jelled in the same

mold.

My continued best wishes,

Sincerely, Graff

P.S. The enclosed samples were clipped from yesterday's and today's local editorial pages. Though I am not in full agreement, I find it hard to accept that such opinions come from minds less capable than those of Cronkite and Rather.

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December 30, 1969  
Dr. Peter Graffagnino  
Medical Arts Building  
Columbus, Georgia 31901

Dear Graff,

Thank you for your letter. I, a liberal as Time called me last year, not a conservative as Time called me this year, agree that my profession has gone off in one direction and should recapture balance. I hope the present debate helps.

Our greater fault is however the negative tradition of all American journalism. We are geared to find out what went wrong in a country where I believe most things go right. The Pulitzer Prize and our other rewards are given for exposing wrongs. I think that an endless flow of negative news is offending the American people, and it should be corrected. I have, for example, seen many vivid reports of demonstrations against ROTC. I have seen nowhere that on 97 percent of campuses ROTC is accepted, not protested against. This bothers me more than the commentaries I read.

Anyhow, argument will lead us towards perfection, though it will never get us there. I am glad Mr. Agnew started an argument.

Sincerely,

Howard K. Smith