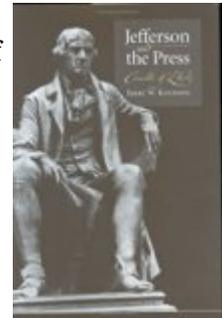




Jerry W. Knudson. *Jefferson and the Press: Crucible of Liberty.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006. xvii + 221 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-57003-607-1.



Reviewed by William E. Huntzicker

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Thomas Jefferson often wrote about newspapers and press freedom, but he was far from consistent.

Most of us are familiar with the classic statement from correspondence in 1787: "The basis of our governments being the opinion of the people, the very first object should be to keep that right; and were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter. But I should mean that every man should receive those papers and be capable of reading them." [1]

Like his contemporaries, Jefferson believed that truth would win in a free marketplace of ideas. "Where the press is free, and every man able to read, all is safe," he said in 1816.

Leaders should follow public opinion as reflected in the press. "The only security of all is in a free press," he wrote to the Marquis de Lafayette in 1823. "The force of public opinion cannot be resisted when permitted freely to be expressed. The agitation it produces must be submitted to. It is necessary, to keep the waters pure."

Yet as president, Jefferson became disenchanted with the press. "Nothing can now be believed which is seen in a newspaper," he wrote in 1807. "Truth itself becomes suspicious by being put into that polluted vehicle. The real extent of this state of misinformation is known only to those who are in situations to confront facts within their knowledge with the lies of the day."

Newspapers had become exploitative. "Our printers raven on the agonies of their victims, as wolves do on the blood of the lamb," he wrote to fellow Virginian and future president James Monroe in 1811. Five years later, he wrote: "I rarely think them [newspapers] worth reading, and almost never worth notice."

To weed through Jefferson's complex views of the press, Jerry W. Knudson focuses on flashpoints of the Jefferson presidency from 1801 to 1809 and examines how they were covered in eight newspapers, four from each of the two major parties. Oddly, though, this book is more about newspapers' views of Jefferson than the other way around.

The six controversial issues considered are the election of 1800; revolutionary patriot Thomas Paine's return to the United States in 1802 after the failure of the French Revolution; the Louisiana Purchase; the duel in which Aaron Burr killed Alexander Hamilton; Jefferson's effort to appoint Republicans to the Federalist-controlled federal judiciary; and the president's use of an embargo as a weapon of commercial warfare against Great Britain.

Republican newspapers studied are the Boston *Independent Chronicle*, edited by Thomas and Abijah Adams; the Philadelphia *Aurora*, edited by William Duane; the Washington *National Intelligencer*, edited by Samuel Harrison Smith; and the *Richmond Enquirer*, edited by Thomas Ritchie.

Federalist newspapers considered are the Boston *Columbian Centinel*, edited by Benjamin Austin Jr.; the *New-York Evening Post*, edited by William Coleman; the Philadelphia *Gazette of the United States*, edited by Enos Bronson; and the *Richmond Recorder*, edited by James Thomson Callender.

Callender, who felt spurned in his efforts to work for Jefferson, attacked him as an ungrateful betrayer. He accused Jefferson of fathering children with one of his slaves, but the public apparently did not believe the accusations or did not care because it re-elected Jefferson in 1804.

"The rumors," Knudson writes, "that Jefferson had fathered children by his slave Sally Hemings, pushed into print by James Thomson Callender of the *Richmond Recorder*, a defector from Republican ranks, created less of a stir at the time than the furor surrounding Tom Paine. In fact, even some of the Federalist editors would not reprint Callender's stories" (p. 178). Callender had been the last editor released from jail when the Sedition Act expired in 1801, and he made Jefferson's life miserable from then until his death in 1803.

Knudson reports that Federalists had controlled the government and all the related patronage positions for a dozen years and controlled

three-fourths of the nation's presses at the time Jefferson campaigned for the presidency in 1800. As a result, the Federalist press had a sense of entitlement; after Jefferson's victory, it also had bitterness and a period of adjustment.

Republican newspapers celebrated the rise of the common workers while the Federalists feared the victory of the rabble. "They [Jeffersonians] already proclaim in their appropriate jargon, that the 'reign of terror' has ceased," the *Gazette of the United States* said with alarm, "and that the triumph of democratical and republic principles, over a tyrannical aristocracy, is commencing; in plain English, that the rabble has broken over all restraint, and are just preparing to imbrue their hands in the blood of those, who may attempt to stay their progress" (p. 62).

Although the United States owed a heavy debt to pamphleteer Thomas Paine for his work promoting the American Revolution and later supporting the French Revolution, his return in 1802 became a test of the effectiveness of Jefferson's newspaper support, Knudson writes. Many Americans could not forgive Paine for *The Age of Reason* (published in two parts in 1794 and 1796)--a publication that many Christian leaders denounced as atheistic, even though Paine professed a belief in one God and a hope for happiness after this life.

When Jefferson offered Paine passage on a government ship to the United States, a Federalist newspaper wrote: "What! Invite to the United States that lying, drunken, brutal infidel, who rejoiced in the opportunity of basking and wallowing in the confusion, devastation, bloodshed, repine, and murder in which his soul delights?" (p. 71).

After the British had seized American ships in the French West Indies, Jefferson imposed an embargo to earn the respect of Europeans during fifteen months of his presidency. The embargo represented the low point of Jefferson's popularity

because it affected the economy, particularly in New England.

Republican papers supported the administration in language familiar today. The *Independent Chronicle* called opponents of the embargo "nominal merchants"--mere speculators who worked with other people's money. "He *who is not for us, is against us*," the *Aurora* trumpeted. "The *country* calls for the extinctions of faction--and for the direction of all the energies of the noble soul, against the oppressor. There is no intermediate course between *public patriotism* and *perfidy*" (p. 154).

Knudson, professor emeritus of journalism at Temple University, originally wrote *Jefferson and the Press* in 1962 as a doctoral dissertation in history at the University of Virginia. He notes that newspaper and magazine historian Frank Luther Mott approved his research model in 1959 and encouraged him to undertake the project (p. xv). Still, his analysis could have been improved with more incorporation of recent scholarship on both Jefferson and early American newspapers. Unfortunately, too, Knudson does not delve as deeply as he could into Jefferson's often contradictory views of newspapers suggested in the quotations above.

By looking at contemporary newspapers, however, he adds a helpful perspective to the history of the tumultuous partisan press. Knudson likes Jefferson's *National Intelligencer*, which he characterized as well written but ineffective, and Hamilton's *New-York Evening Post* in which William Coleman demonstrated that an editor could be both civil and combative. In his conclusion, Knudson disagrees with Mott's characterization of this partisan era as the "dark ages" of American journalism, positing instead that these newspapers were experiencing the "birth pangs of democracy" (p. 179).

Jefferson's suffering from unwarranted attacks in the press tested his faith in unfettered freedom. Knudson's systematic, disciplined analysis explains some of the reasons an author of the

First Amendment could have become disillusioned by what he had created.

Note

[1]. "Thomas Jefferson on Politics and Government." Thomas Jefferson Digital Archive, University of Virginia Library/Electronic Text Center, accessible at <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/jefferson/quotations/jeff1600.htm>. All quotations from Jefferson are from this site.

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