

Intellectual Heft:

A.J. Liebling as a Critic of Anti-Intellectualism in American Journalism

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Abstract

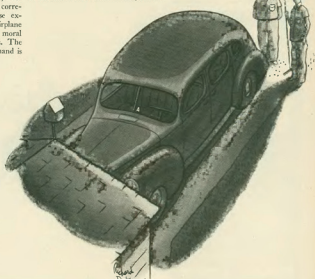
One aspect of A.J. Liebling's tenure as the press critic for *The New Yorker* that has not been previously explored is his role as an opponent of the anti-intellectual tendencies of American journalism. This paper examines all 82 of Liebling's Wayward Press columns and finds that his essays regularly fit into the three categories of anti-intellectualism identified by Richard Hofstadter and codified by sociologist Daniel Rigney, as well as a fourth, new, category of anti-intellectualism endemic to professional journalism.

THE WAYWARD PRESS

THE great row over Edward Kennedy's Associated Press story of the signing of the German surrender at Reims served to point up the truth that if you are smart enough you can kick yourself in the seat of the pants, and throw yourself out on the sidewalk. This is an axiom that I hope will be taught to future students of journalism as Liebking's Law. The important aspect of the row, I am sure, is not that Kennedy got his dispatch out of Europe before the SHAEF Public Relations House wanted him to but that only three representatives of the American press were admitted to see the memorabilia in the history of man, and they only on condition that they promise not to tell about it until the trip leader general in charge of public relations gave them permission. No correspondent of a newspaper published in the United States was invited to the signing, besides Kennedy, Harold Lawes of the United Press, and James Kilgallen of Hearst's International News Service, the official but included four radio men, an official correspondent for State, G. Storer, and a collection of French, Russian, Australian, and Canadian correspondents. Whether a promise exacted at this one, in an airplane several thousand feet up, has any moral force is a question for theologians. The only parallel I can think of is the case of Harold the Saxon, who was shipwrecked in the territories of William of Normandy at a time when Edward the Confessor was getting on in years. William, taking Harold into protective custody, made him swear not to climb the English shore after Edward died, but when Harold got home he roared a toast at William. Anglo-Saxon historians have since expressed a good deal of sympathy for Harold's point of view, but the Church held with William. I suppose that Kennedy should have refused to promise anything and thus made sure of missing an event that no newspaperman in the world would want to miss, but I can't imagine any correspondent's doing it.

THE A. P. SURRENDER journalists didn't get, had led directly to the kind of official controversy for the press that the Reims arrangements initiated, with the accompanying wrangling, and, conversely, by announcing it promptly you make the showing step. Moreover, the Germans had broadcast the news of the armistice several hours before Kennedy's story appeared on the streets of New York, and Abbe, the O.N.T.S. American Broadcasting Station in Europe, broadcast it in twenty-four languages, including English, within an hour after. The thing that had agreed not to. But the old-fashioned "combination" was an agreement free means that he sent out a story after all the correspondents on the assignment had agreed not to. But the old-fashioned "combination" was an agreement free means that he sent out a story after all the correspondents on the assignment had agreed not to. But the old-fashioned "combination" was an agreement free means that he sent out a story after all the correspondents on the assignment had agreed not to.

For many years before this war, the editorial end of the American newspaper business had been running from news gathering to shopping for a pack of the press associations and syndicates. A few newspapers, such as the *Times* and *Herald Tribune* here and the *Tribune* and *Daily News* in Chicago, went into wholesaling in a modest way themselves by writing up their own syndicates, getting the Press used to make its reporters at Public Headquarters any out of combat nations. The willingness of the large American news organizations in the European Theatre of Operations to be herded into the one-on-one combination, in return for favors that independent



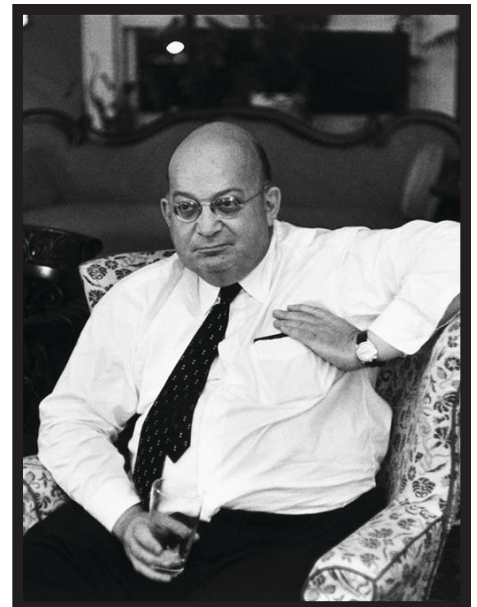
As war as I can figure it, I get fourteen miles, 950 feet in the gallon."

Richard Hofstadter's Three Categories of Anti-Intellectualism in American Life, as Codified by Daniel Rigney:

- Religious Anti-Rationalism: "Warm" emotion vs. "cold" reason, and absolutism vs. relativism.
- Populist Anti-Elitism: "In any society with democratic aspirations, we may expect a mistrust of claims to superior knowledge or wisdom on the part of an educated elite, especially when such claims are suspected to be instruments in the service of class privilege." (Hofstadter)
- Unreflective Instrumentalism: "[T]he devaluation of forms of thought that do not promise relatively immediate practical payoffs." (Rigney)

One Addition to Rigney's Categories:

- Unquestioning Professionalism: Reporters who unquestioningly accept the norms of their profession are actively opposing an intellectual approach to news, and therefore contribute to the atmosphere of anti-intellectualism that pervades American journalism.



Liebking on Anti-Intellectualism

1945: [T]he writer suffers from the vocational craving to have something to say.... He discounts the truth of what he writes before he even sets it down, but he feels that somehow he is performing a function. The reader leans to make the same discount, and after a while, though he continues to buy the paper and look at it, he ceases to pay any attention to what it says.

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1947: [Hearst editor Arthur Brisbane has] a sublime, half-educated confidence that his readers were totally ignorant—a point of view which was the great man's chief legacy to American journalism.

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1953: Newspapers were shot full of stories of cheery-ho all through the depression. On the World-Telegram, where, as a reporter, I had an assignment to write a funny story a day during that period, we used to mix cheery-ho with an article known to the trade as stark tragedy, and run them in effective juxtaposition.

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