

Speaking of a Free Press

200 Years of Notable Quotations About Press Freedoms

Devious Foes of Freedom

“Be not intimidated, therefore, by any terrors, from publishing with the utmost freedom whatever can be warranted by the laws of your country, nor suffer yourselves to be wheeled out of your library by any pretense of politeness, delicacy or decency. These, as they are often used, are but three different names for hypocrisy, chicanery and cowardice.”

John Adams

From an Essay for the Boston Gazette

*1765

Free But Responsible

“The liberty of the press is indeed essential to the nature of a free state; but this consists in laying no previous restraints upon publications, and not in freedom from censure for criminal matter when published. Every free man has an undoubted right to lay what sentiments he pleases before the public; to forbid this is to destroy the freedom of the press; but if he publishes what is improper, mischievous or illegal, he must take the consequences of his own temerity.”

Blackstone’s Commentaries

1765

More Piercing Than Bayonets

“A journalist is a grumbler, a censorer, a giver of advice, a regent of sovereigns, a tutor of nations. Four hostile newspapers are more to be feared than a thousand bayonets.”

Napoleon Bonaparte

**[1769-1821]

Physician, Heal Thyself

“The press must be free; it has always been so and much evil has been corrected by it. If government finds itself annoyed by it, let it examine its own conduct and it will find the cause.”

Thomas Erskine

Scottish jurist

[1750-1823]

Print Nothing, Offend Nobody

“If all printers were determined not to print anything till they were sure it would offend nobody, there would be very little printed.”

Benjamin Franklin

[1706-1790]

Rule for Tyrants

“Whoever would overthrow the liberty of a nation must begin by subduing the freedom of speech.”

Benjamin Franklin

1722

Formula for Safety

“When the press is free and every man able to read, all is safe.”

Thomas Jefferson

1799

Jefferson’s Choice

“The basis of our government 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.”

Thomas Jefferson

1787

Impossible Combination

“If a nation expects to be both ignorant and free, it expects what never was and never will be.”

Thomas Jefferson

1816

The Basis of Popular Power

“Nothing could be more irrational than to give the people power, and to withhold from them information without which power is abused. A people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with power which knowledge gives. A popular government without popular information or the means of acquiring it is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy, or perhaps both.”

James Madison

[1751-1836]

When Reason Is Useless

“If men are to be precluded from offering their sentiments on a matter, which may involve the most serious and alarming consequences that can invite the consideration of mankind, reason is of no use to us, the freedom of speech may be taken away, and dumb and silent we may be led, like sheep to the slaughter.”

George Washington

Address to Officers of the Army

March 15, 1783

The Light That Exposes

“Not for its own sake alone, but for the sake of society and good government, the press should be free. Publicity is the strong bond which unites the people and their government. Authority should do no act that will not bear the light.”

James A. Garfield

[1831-1881]

To Make the Country Safe

“Let the people know the facts, and the country will be safe.”

Abraham Lincoln

[1809-1865]

A Newspaper’s Duty

“It is a newspaper’s duty to print the news, and raise hell.”

Wilbur Storey

Statement of the aims of the Chicago Times

1861

Take the Good with the Bad

“In order to enjoy the inestimable benefits that liberty of the press ensures, it is necessary to

submit to the inevitable evils that it causes.”

Alexis de Tocqueville

French author of “Democracy in America”

1853

Fatal to Despotism

“Given a free press, we may defy open or insidious enemies of liberty. It instructs the public mind and animates the spirit of patriotism. Its loud voice suppresses everything which would raise itself against the public liberty, and its blasting rebuke causes incipient despotism to perish in the bud.”

Daniel Webster

The Ultimate Definition

“When a dog bites a man that is not news, but when a man bites a dog, that is news.”

John B. Bogart

City editor of The New York Sun

from 1873-1890

Why Tolerate Criticism?

“Why should freedom of speech and freedom of the press be allowed? Why should a government which is doing what it believes to be right allow itself to be criticized? It would not allow opposition by lethal weapons. Ideas are much more fatal things than guns. Why should any man be allowed to buy a printing press and disseminate pernicious opinion calculated to embarrass the government?”

Nikolai Lenin

1920

Better Overdone Than Underdone

“If there is one thing we ought to be careful about, it is in regard to interfering with the liberty of the press. ... I think it is a great deal better to err a little bit on the side of having too much discussion and having too virulent language used by the press, rather than to err on the side of having them not say what they ought to say, especially with reference to public men and measures.”

Theodore Roosevelt

[1858-1919]

No Maybe About It

“The First Amendment does not speak equivocally. It prohibits any law ‘abridging freedom of speech or of the press.’ It must be taken as a command of the broadest scope that explicit language, read in the context of a liberty-loving society, will allow.”

Justice Hugo L. Black

U.S. Supreme Court

1929

A Subject, Not a Citizen

“If the press is not free, if speech is not independent and untrammelled, if the mind is shackled or made impotent through fear, it makes no difference under what form of government you live, you are a subject and not a citizen.”

U.S. Sen. William E. Borah

[1865-1940]

Dual Assignment

“The job of the newspaper is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.”

F.P. Dunne (Mr. Dooley)

American journalist and humorist

[1867-1936]

Journalists: Uphold the Truth

“I am a journalist myself and shall appeal to fellow journalists to realize their responsibility and to carry on their work with no idea other than that of upholding the truth.”

Mahatma Gandhi

[1869-1948]

None of Their Business

“The organization of our press has truly been a success. Our law concerning the press is such that divergences of opinion between members of the government are no longer an occasion for public exhibitions, which are not the newspapers’ business. We’ve eliminated that conception of political freedom which holds that everybody has the right to say whatever comes into his head.”

Adolf Hitler

[1889-1945]

No Nation Should Fear the Truth

“We are not afraid to entrust the American people with unpleasant facts, foreign ideas, alien philosophies, and competitive values. For a nation that is afraid to let its people judge the truth and falsehood in an open market is afraid of its people.”

John F. Kennedy

[1917-1963]

Cornerstone of Freedom

“Freedom of conscience, of education, of speech, of assembly are among the very fundamentals of democracy and all of them would be nullified should freedom of the press ever be successfully challenged.”

Franklin D. Roosevelt

[1882-1945]

Why The Press Is Free

“The publisher is not granted the privilege of independence simply to provide him with a more favored position in the community than is accorded to other citizens. He enjoys an explicitly defined independence because it is the only condition under which he can fulfill his role, which is to inform fully, fairly and comprehensively. The crux is not the publisher’s ‘freedom to print’; it is rather the citizen’s ‘right to know.’ ”

Arthur Hays Sulzberger

New York Times publisher

[1891-1968]

Accuracy Equals Fairness

“The first duty of a newspaper is to be accurate. If it be accurate, it follows that it is fair.”

Herbert Bayard Swope

Newspaper editor

Letter to the New York Herald Tribune

March 16, 1958

Free Debate of Ideas

“The basis of the First Amendment is the hypothesis that ... free debate of ideas will result in the wisest governmental policies.”

Chief Justice Fred M. Vinson

U.S. Supreme Court

1948

A Plea for Intelligent Restraint _____

“I have witnessed admirable restraint and judgment by journalists. I have been gratified by the readiness of many of you to carefully consider sometimes withholding publication of information which could jeopardize national interests or to treat or present a story in a manner which meets the public need, yet minimizes potential damage to intelligence sources. The trick is to recognize the potential for damage and to consult on how it might be minimized. We are always ready and available on short notice to help on that.”

William J. Casey

Director of the Central Intelligence Agency

Speaking to the American Society of Newspaper Editors

1966

Inconvenient _____

“The First Amendment is often inconvenient. But that is beside the point. Inconvenience does not absolve the government of its obligation to tolerate speech.”

Justice Anthony Kennedy

U.S. Supreme Court

[1936-]

Democracy Tolerates Satire Well _____

“Since I write a humor column I have a vested interest in a free press. I don’t seem to have any problem making fun of the President of the United States, the Cabinet, Congress, the CIA and the FBI. I don’t know if our leaders read the column or not, but since I’ve been writing it I have had no visits from anyone in a raincoat telling me I better knock it off.

“The people who attempt to do the same thing I am doing in 95 percent of the world are either in gulags under house arrest or are jobless. For some reason not too many governments can handle satire. My heroes in the world are the men and women in these countries who, knowing the consequences, persist in holding up their leaders to ridicule.

“The problem, if there is a problem in this country, is because we have a free press people have no idea what it’s like to live in a country that doesn’t.”

Art Buchwald

Columnist

[1925-]

Freedom of Press Equals Democracy _____

“A democracy ceases to be a democracy if its citizens do not participate in its governance. To participate intelligently, they must know what their government has done, is doing and plans to do in their name. Whenever any hindrance, no matter what its name, is placed in the way of this information, a democracy is weakened, and its future endangered. This is the meaning of freedom of press. It is not just important to democracy, it is democracy.”

Walter Cronkite

Broadcast journalist

[1916-]

All in the Family _____

“The press is like the peculiar uncle you keep in the attic – just one of those unfortunate things.”

G. Gordon Liddy

Watergate co-conspirator

January 12, 1987

A Clear Choice _____

“Given the choice between government regulators and the journalistic judgments of free men and women, we must choose the latter, or we court tyranny.”

U.S. Sen. Robert Packwood

1984

All and Nothing at All _____

“A journalist owes nothing to those who govern his country. He owes everything to his country.”

Vermont Royster

Newspaper editor

[1914-1996]

Speaking from Experience _____

“As long as a country has no civil liberty and freedom of information and no independent press, then there exists no effective body of public opinion to control the conduct of government.”

Andrei D. Sakharov

(Written from exile)

[1921-1989]

Nothing to Read _____

“I’ve never canceled a subscription to a newspaper because of bad cartoons or editorials. If that were the case, I wouldn’t have any newspapers or magazines to read.”

Richard M. Nixon

On NBC Television, April 8, 1984