
From Watchdogs To Attack Dogs

"Read All About It" by Adam Gopnik, in *The New Yorker* (Dec. 12, 1994), 20 W. 43rd St., New York, N.Y. 10036.

"Edge" and "attitude" are very highly prized attributes in journalism today. In a front-page story about President Bill Clinton's trip to Oxford University last June, the once-somber *New York Times* reported that he "returned today for a sentimental journey to the university where he didn't inhale, didn't get drafted, and didn't get a degree." The president is only "the most visible object of this malicious manner," and the *Times* only its most prestigious practitioner, notes Gopnik, a *New Yorker* staff writer.

Many analysts look upon the new approach as the triumph of the "tabloid" style over "serious" journalism. Watergate reporter Carl Bernstein has argued that the "idiot culture" of scandal and sensation must be countered with a reassertion of the investigative tradition that he champions. Gopnik, however, argues that "the new attitudes in the press" are the long-run consequence of "a peculiar twist in the logic of skeptical journalism that Bernstein helped to reinvigorate."

Once reporters got stories and status by

getting close to the powerful in government—which made the journalists more "responsible." That is not as true now. In the past 20 years, Gopnik writes, the press has been transformed "from an access culture to an aggression culture: the tradition, developed after the Civil War, in which a journalist's advancement depended on his intimacy with power, has mutated into one in which his success can also depend on a willingness to stage visible, ritualized displays of aggression."

Post-Watergate journalism may have looked like the hallowed "muckraking" traditions of yesteryear, but Gopnik points out that there was a profound difference: "The new crusaders had no causes, or were not allowed to admit to them." The commercial press still held aloft its traditional ideal of "objectivity," and the crusading reporters had to pay deference to it (or at least give the appearance of doing so) in their stories. The end result of this bind, over the years, Gopnik contends, is the sort of "knowing" yet mindless journalism in fashion today.

"The media," he writes, "now relish aggression while still being prevented, by their own self-enforced codes, from letting that aggression have any relation to serious political argument, let alone to grown-up ideas about conduct and morality." It is, he laments, "the Sam Donaldson era."

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

The Transformation Of Catholicism

"Christianity and Democracy" by Pierre Manent (translated by Daniel J. Mahoney and Paul Seaton), in *Crisis* (Jan. 1995 and Feb. 1995), 1511 K St. N.W., Ste. 525, Washington, D.C. 20005.

Pope John Paul II invites Christians to discover in their religion the true source of the rights of man, and the Catholic Church now celebrates the sacred character of religious

freedom and freedom of conscience. Yet not so very long ago, the church was indignantly denouncing these same rights and condemning the separation of church and state. This turnabout, contends Manent, director of studies at l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris, reflects a profound change in the relationship between the church and democracy.

"If the church initially, and for so long, declared herself against democracy," he notes, "it is because she had . . . the conviction that the modern democratic movement was di-