ists who can cover increasingly complex issues has created a press corps that is "better educated, more highly-paid, more sure of itself" on average than are most Americans. As a result, says Kraft, reporters now hold the attitudes of most affluent, highly educated Americans—including skepticism of military and law enforcement officials and a receptivity to minority complaints. They tend to dismiss Middle America's anxieties about gun control and abortion as "disconnected single issues." The reaction has been unmistakable: Public confidence in the print media, for instance, fell from 24 percent in 1975 to 19 percent in 1980, according to a Harris poll.

Lately, journalists have contended that "the news" is so important to America's well-being that reporters' rights supersede everyone else's. In 1971, for example, the *Stanford Daily News* unsuccessfully argued in the courts that the Constitution shields newspaper offices from police searches even when the information sought is crucial to law enforcement. In the 1978 *Farber* case, *New York Times* attorneys contended, in vain, that a reporter's right to keep his sources confidential outweighs a criminal defendant's right to confront his accuser.

The First Amendment and freedom of the press are precious, Kraft writes, "but not transcendent in value." Only by dropping their self-righteous posture and acknowledging competing claims will journalists regain public support.

H. L. Mencken, Closet Feminist

"H. L. Mencken and Equal Rights for Women" by Edward A. Martin, in *The Georgia Review* (Spring 1981), University of Georgia, Athens, Ga. 30602.

An avowed connoisseur of voluptuous, compliant women and a confirmed bachelor most of his life, Henry Louis Mencken (1880–1956) encouraged his reputation as one of America's most piggish male chauvinists. Yet much of his locker-room rhetoric was a satirical put-on, masking ardently pro-feminist views, contends Martin, an English professor at Middlebury College (Vt.).

Starting out as a reporter and editorial writer in Baltimore, Mencken emerged in the Roaring Twenties as one of America's leading cultural commentators. It was a period when sexual tensions had flared, notes Martin. The Nineteenth Amendment gave women the vote in 1920. The free-living flapper was in vogue. Mencken often lampooned the sexual revolution, paying leering tribute to flappers and buxom waitresses in his writings, and ridiculing the stridence of the suffragettes. In his *In Defense of Women* (1918), he burlesqued the absurdities of male-female relationships by showering the fair sex with outrageously lavish praise.

Yet the same Mencken, in a more serious vein, described his feminine ideal as "emancipated from convention and superstition . . . the full equal of her man." He endorsed women's suffrage in his editorials. Privately, he associated with independent, professional women, such as Sara Haardt, the writer whom he married. And as book critic for *The*

H. L. Mencken let it be known that "rosy, healthy, appetizing" flappers (as immortalized by 1920s illustrator John Held, Jr.) were his feminine ideal. Was he, in fact, a "closet feminist"?

Courtesy of Mrs. John Held, Jr.

Smart Set, he praised works that supported women's cultural emancipation, such as Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*.

As a young man, Mencken had been discouraged by his father from entering the "feminine" world of literature and compelled to join the family cigar business. The experience, writes Martin, made him sympathetic to women's efforts to escape the roles that social convention imposed on them. (One result of the feminine experience, he believed, was a "cynical humor"—not unlike his own.)

Mencken was a conservative man. He lived in the Mencken family home until his marriage at age 50. He cherished many orthodox notions of femininity—wanting no "grotesque parody" of a man "smoking bad cigars, monkeying with his labor and vices." But he held that neither sex, "without some fortifying with the complimentary characteristics of the other, is capable of its highest reaches of human endeavor."

The Scoop Syndrome

"Rush to Judgement" by Martin Mayer, in *American Film* (June 1981), Subscription Service, P.O. Box 966, Farmingdale, N.Y. 11737.

Most Americans agree that network TV newsmen's finest hour came in the aftermath of President John F. Kennedy's assassination in 1963. TV coverage of the shooting of President Reagan last March, by contrast, was marred by rumor-mongering and major factual errors. Mayer, an *American Film* contributing editor, blames a post-Watergate suspicion of "official information" and a new breed of TV journalist.