Walter Lippmann: a giant of 20th-century journalism

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WALTER LIPPMANN: PUBLIC ECONOMIST

Craufurd Goodwin

Harvard University Press, $35

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By GLENN C. ALTSCHULER/Special to The Oregonian

"I do not always agree with you, but what you say almost always makes me sit up and think," Frank Taussig, a professor of economics at Harvard, told Walter Lippmann, "and it always makes me respect the intellectual quality and moral spirit which pervade it."

Lippmann may well have been greatest journalist of the 20th century. Written in accessible (and impeccable) prose, his books, essays, and syndicated columns explained abstract concepts -- public opinion, free markets, Keynesian macroeconomics, and foreign policy -- to politicians, policymakers and millions of lay readers.

Mindful, no doubt, of the screeching and preaching of what passes for political journalism these days, and of the existence of Ronald Steel's authoritative biography, "Walter Lippmann and the American Century" (1980), Craufurd Goodwin, an emeritus professor of economics at Duke University, has made Lippmann's career as a public philosopher the focus of his new book, "Walter Lippmann: Public Economist." The result is an informative account of the challenges of living in a democracy in which millions of citizens appear to lack the knowledge and discipline to address problems "which press for solutions."

Throughout his career, according to Goodwin, Lippmann tried to balance his strong support of free markets "and their limited need for government intervention" with an awareness of market failures and the need for government action to protect the weak and afflicted, especially during depressions. More important, perhaps, was Lippmann's prescient analysis "of the derangement of the relationship between the mass of people and the government." With the public uninformed and subject to manipulation, Lippmann wrote, politicians "are pressed and harassed by the haggling of parties, by the agents of organized interests, and by the spokesmen of sectarians and ideologues."

And just about everyone could be counted on to take the easy way out: to appropriate rather than tax, feed consumption, protect markets rather than open them, be intransigent rather than negotiate, and be drawn downward "toward insolvency, towards the insecurity of factionalism, towards the erosion of liberty, and towards..."
Lippmann looked to schools, the media, and government institutions to foster a better informed and more enlightened public opinion. His most concrete proposal, Goodwin indicates, resulted in the establishment of the Nieman Fellows Program at Harvard, in which talented journalists have been exposed in depth to scholarly disciplines to enhance their understanding of contemporary issues.

Despite its value, Nieman, of course, was hardly enough. And with increasing reliance on technical expertise, with educators uncertain how (or whether) to teach civics, a partisan and polarized political culture, print journalism in crisis over rapidly changing technology, and sound bites in the saddle, we have yet to find a way, as Lippmann put it, to preserve liberty and democracy "before the one destroys the other."

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