about a year, the paper was producing a profit of more than $85,000. In 1883 Pulitzer moved to the nation’s center stage, buying The New York World from Jay Gould for $346,000.

As a media mogul, Pulitzer recognized that the vast majority of Americans weren’t all that interested in politics. But as a young man, Morris points out, politics to him “was a siren” (p. 186). Although opponents mocked his too-short buff-colored pants, soiled jacket, and big nose—and even called him “Joey the Jew”—few denied that Pulitzer was a force to be reckoned with on the stump, especially with German-speaking voters and in the rough and tumble of behind-the-scenes electioneering. And, Morris demonstrates, he was a perennial candidate. Defeated for re-election to the Missouri legislature in 1870, he lost a race for the United States Congress in 1880 and won a House seat four years later.

Unlike many of his contemporaries, however, Pulitzer did not stick with one political party. In 1872, he joined the Liberal Republicans, taking to the stump “almost full-time” (p. 92) to support the quixotic presidential campaign of fellow editor Horace Greeley. When Greeley lost and the Liberal Party imploded, Pulitzer switched to the Democratic Party, where he remained for the rest of his life.

Morris struggles, not always successfully, to understand Pulitzer’s political odyssey. Relatively free of Civil War–related partisanship, he argues, Pulitzer never shared the hostility of his fellow Republicans to the Democrats. Taking Pulitzer’s rhetoric at face value, Morris portrays him as an idealist: “The concept of politics with principle might seem oxymoronic, given the nature of politics at the time, but Pulitzer was sincere” (p. 105). Having seen “laws and the Constitution trampled upon, and crime and corruption flourish” (p. 125) under President Ulysses Grant and his cronies, Pulitzer simply decided it was time to get rid of “the great army of office-holders, carpet-baggers, monopolists, protectionists, and all those selfish people interested naturally in alliance with ‘the powers that be’” (p. 107).

Perhaps. But surely the shifting fortunes of the Republican and Democratic parties were at least as important. Missouri Republicans, according to Eric Foner, did not—and could not—depend on black votes to stay in office. More than their counterparts in other states, they barred former Confederates from the ballot box through a complex and comprehensive system of registration laws and loyalty oaths; disqualified them from serving as teachers, lawyers, or ministers; and deemed hundreds of state and local offices vacant, to be filled through appointment by the governor. Equally important, they refused to allow the legislature to lift the disenfranchising provisions before 1871.

Little wonder, then, that as Reconstruction waned the Democrats regained control of the legislature and, in short order, the governor’s mansion. Radicals got an indication of the fragility of political coalitions as early as 1871, Poner
suggests, when previously cooperative Democrats ignored Carl Schurz’s plea that a “semi-Republican” be sent to the State Senate. Pulitzer, no doubt, did not mind joining a winning team. Especially since, as Morris acknowledges, he was “indifferent to the plight of black Americans” (p. 108) and convinced that he had been defeated in 1870 by the votes of 260 Negroes and 60 Frenchmen. In the 1870s, Pulitzer declared that the enemies of the country were not in the South but in Washington, D.C.—and endorsed the immediate enfranchisement of ex-slaves. The reform, he insisted, would not result in the reenslavement or murder of blacks: “The only Negro who has been molested that I know of in the whole state was a fellow in St. Louis County who ravished a poor girl. And he was only lynched. Not by rebels, however, but by honest Germans and strong Union men” (p. 107).

As a Democrat, Pulitzer often used boilerplate partisan prose, praising the common man, pillorying plutocrats and the politicians who did their bidding, and railing against corruption. When Theodore Roosevelt, a rising star in New York politics, declined to say whether he would support Republican James G. Blaine, who had been accused of corruption in dealings with several major railroads, or Democrat Grover Cleveland in 1884, Pulitzer denounced him as yet another ambitious office-seeker, a “reform fraud and a Jack-in-the-box politician who disappears whenever his boss applies a gentle pressure to his aspiring head.” Despite his manifest partisanship, Morris explains that Roosevelt was “a victim of Pulitzer’s stubborn, unbending insistence on principle over compromise or expediency” (p. 222).

Even before he moved to New York, Pulitzer was relatively indifferent to the issues of the day that divided the two parties, including tariffs and civil service reform. And, over time, he grew very chummy with fat-cat Republicans, including lawyer and United States Senator Roscoe Conkling and Chauncey Depew, the president of the New York Central Railroad. Along with William Rockefeller, William Vanderbilt, and J. P. Morgan, he created a private hunting and fishing club on Jekyll Island, off the Georgia coast. Pulitzer remained a democrat and a Democrat; but at bottom, he was a captain of industry.

Pulitzer’s industry, of course, was newspapers. For better and worse, Morris demonstrates, his World set the standard for urban dailies in the late nineteenth century. Pulitzer never forgot that “a news story was always a story.” He pushed his reporters to think like Dickens, create dramas drawn from big-city life, and write in clear, simple prose for working-class readers, many of whom were immigrants struggling to master the English language. To affluent New Yorkers, The World trafficked in sensationalism; to the masses, Morris suggests, the paper nurtured “a sense of belonging and a sense of value” (p. 214).

Pulitzer’s goal, Morris writes, was to publish every day “at least one article so intriguing, so unusual, so provocative that it would cause people to talk about it at the dinner table” (p. 165). Although he had an uncanny ability to recognize human-interest stories ignored by others, Pulitzer sensed that, no matter how compelling the narrative, it would resonate with readers more forcefully if it was hyped. So he hired talented editors who replaced dull headlines with screamers. “Baptized in Blood” was typical: illustrated with a diagram of the scene, it told the story of eleven people, enjoying a Sunday stroll on the newly opened Brooklyn Bridge, who were crushed to death in a human stampede (p. 213).

Convinced that most people “require to be educated through the eyes” (p. 227), Pulitzer printed sketches of criminals, arguing, disingenuously, that the practice would help police apprehend them. When cartoons were still a novelty in daily newspapers, he ran Walt McDougall’s drawings across five columns of the front page. But Pulitzer’s most innovative and ambitious scheme for building circulation, according to Morris, was in “making news from his own news coverage” (p. 166). The World picked fights with its competitors, conducted its own investigations of corruption, pestered politicians and taunted the wealthy. Six months after Pulitzer acquired it, the circulation of his newspaper had tripled and advertising was booming.

Thirteen years later, Morris indicates, “Pulitzer’s World had gone from being the bad boy of Park Row to being a stodgy defender of the political establishment” (p. 328), as William Randolph Hearst beat Pulitzer at his own game in “an epic battle of delirious journalism” (p. 340). The two men loathed one another: “Because of the Jew that owns it,” Hearst proclaimed, The World “is a nasty, unscrupulous damned sheet.” His spine, Morris suggests, resembled that of a copycat, who “enjoyed the company of a mistress . . . and felt stilled by the experience the morning after” (p. 252).

Having already acquired a reputation as a brash champion of the underdog, Hearst threw aside all codes of professional ethics in 1898 and “rode at the head of the pack clamoring for war” (p. 340), dispatching dozens of reporters to Cuba, hiring yachts to carry politicians to the island, and hammering President McKinley for refusing to intervene. In advance of any credible evidence, his New York Journal accused Spain of blowing up the U.S. battleship Maine in Havana harbor, while The World remained more circumspect. Pulitzer, Morris maintains, was reluctant to subsidize his own papers to compete with Hearst. He ordered budget cuts and sold stock to pay for new Hoe color presses. But it wasn’t enough. Forced to lift stories from other newspapers, The World published an account of the heroics of Colonel “Reflipe W. Thenuz”—and suffered the humiliation of an announcement from Hearst headquarters that the name was an anagram spelling “We pilfer the news.” Pulitzer could only watch as The Journal became the first American newspaper to sell more than a million copies of its morning and evening editions. His name was “inextrica-
bly linked with Hearst’s” and the practice that came to be known as “yellow journalism” (p. 345).

By this time, Morris notes, Pulitzer was far less involved in the day-to-day operations of The World. At key moments in the epic battle with Hearst, he remained secluded on Jekyll Island, traveling in England and France, or ensconced in a mansion in Narragansett Pier, Rhode Island, grieving over the death of his teenage daughter Lucille. It is not at all clear, however, that his presence in the newsroom would have made much difference. An advocate of international arbitration, Pulitzer supported war with Spain, but only as a last resort. More significantly, though Morris does not fully realize it, Pulitzer’s recommendations for regaining the initiative from The Journal drew on a Victorian sensibility that limited his commitment to the sensationalism he had helped usher in. Pulitzer directed his editors to concentrate less on competing with Hearst than on improving the character of The World. Once they had recovered the respect and confidence of the public, he claimed, they would destroy “the notion that we are in the same class with the Journal, in recklessness and unreliability” (p. 331).

Pulitzer’s last years were unsatisfying and sad. In 1887, he learned that the retina in his right eye was detached and that the left retina would soon follow. As he became a Croesus, he recognized, he would be a blind one. Pulitzer suffered as well from a generalized anxiety disorder, perhaps brought on by the trauma of his blindness. And even at his best, Morris reveals, his domestic life was turbulent, with outbursts of temper and impatience alternating with long periods of separation from his wife and children.

He didn’t even get much credit for his gift to Columbia University. Vilified as a scavenger who “eats anything, and grows fat on filth” (p. 377), Pulitzer sought respectability for himself and his profession. In 1892, he offered to create a professorship of journalism—and the Columbia trustees rejected the idea. A decade later, he offered two million dollars—a sum that was almost three times the institution’s annual operating budget—if Columbia created a School of Journalism and a prize to working journalists, newspapers, and writers for achievement, excellence, and public service. This time, the trustees, who did not at first know the name of the benefactor, said yes—without much fanfare.

No one, it seems, ever figured out how to please Pulitzer. One reporter with a long tenure at The World vented his frustration to his boss: “To the mottos of ‘Accuracy, terseness, accuracy,’ that are now on the office walls, I would add another line—‘Forever Unsatisfied’” (p. 400). Pulitzer died of heart failure in 1911. He would have been disappointed, Morris concludes poignantly, by the obituaries that appeared on the front page of almost every newspaper in the United States. 

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2. Ibid., 421.