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Photo by Regina Holder

The Gulf War

Students in the School watch the latest news from the Middle East on CNN between classes. A professor is called to the Pentagon; two students are called up to serve in Saudi Arabia. For more on how the Gulf War has touched the lives of people in the School, please see page 3.

Tom Wicker: Watchdog of government and journalism

By John Bare

It's been said that a 20-year-old who isn't a liberal must be crazy, but if he's not a conservative by the time he reaches 30, he should have his head examined.

New York Times political columnist Tom Wicker, who is long past 30, doesn't fit that theory. In fact, Wicker, a 1948 graduate of the School of Journalism and Mass Communication, is a ferocious advocate for liberal causes. He is also gentle, polite and approachable, not abrasive, crusty and cynical like the old newspapermen in the movies.

Most of all, though, Wicker is full of passion, as he demonstrated by his comments in Chapel Hill on Dec. 12, 1990, when he was featured speaker for the Reed Sarratt Distinguished Lecture. He demonstrated that he still cares deeply about the media, and he used the speech to detail eight examples in which journalists have failed to deal adequately with government and society.

•The decline of substantive reporting in journalism is disturbing, he said, citing the increasing emphasis placed on rock stars, jocks, glitz and jet-set lifestyles.

Infotainment, as the new style of journalism has been dubbed, provides news in the form of slogans, clichés and bumper stickers. The obsession with people, sex and scandal is a problem for newspapers, but it is particularly troublesome for television, from which Americans get most of their information. The trend has also brought increased attention to the details of people's private lives, he said, which has caused reporters to seek out frivolous secrets to stimulate interest among readers.

•Crime is legitimate news and must be reported, Wicker said, but the media often provide only superficial coverage of tragedy.

"The press tends to tell us in lurid details about what's happening on the street, without telling us why, or what might be done about it," Wicker said.

Politicians may not want to tell the public the truth about crime because delivering unpleasant news could cost them an election, Wicker said, but the press has no excuse. Reporters should be thorough enough to point out that building more prisons has not solved the problem; more police officers, more judges and more district attorneys cost money, which may mean higher taxes; and alleviating poverty would go a long way to ending the crime problem.

•The press is guilty of promoting "mindless nationalism," Wicker said. "It roots for the home team."

Covering the crisis in the Middle East with an American bias, he said, doesn't serve readers. Such bias only reinforces readers' attitudes that the U.S. government's international actions are justified.

"Red, white and blue journalism doesn't give the public disinterested information. It gives them false heroes and fake villains," he said.

•Though the press accomplishes its function of government watchdog, it fails miserably in its duty to monitor corporate power, Wicker said. Half of the nation's broadcast and publishing entities are controlled by a dozen large conglomerates, he said, and the result is that journalists are not interested in alienating corporate interests.

The press also fails to consider the effects of corporate power and to question the "official" economic forecasts, Wicker said, thus the "official" view usually becomes the media's view.

•The Dirty Little Secret of Journalism is the mutual

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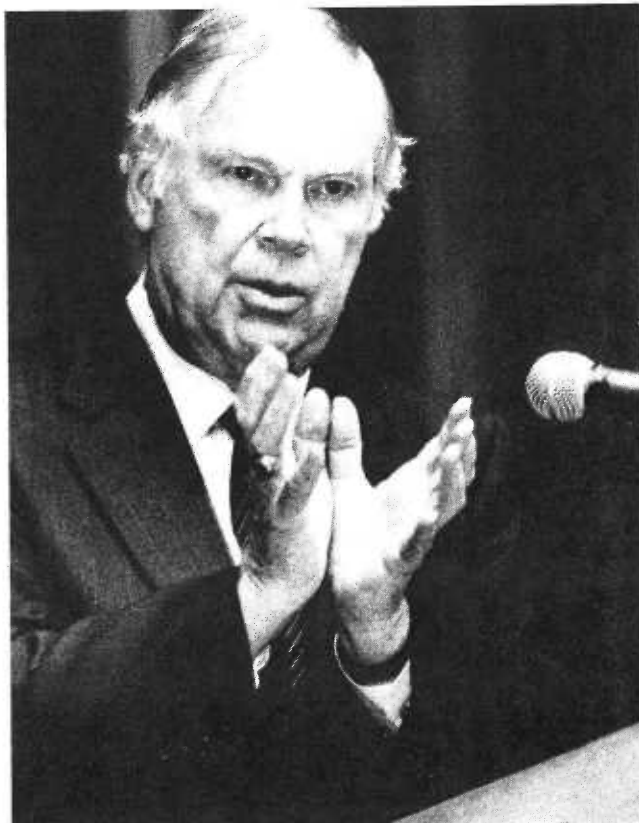


Photo by Becky Kirkland

back scratching in which reporters and politicians engage. It is a battle of access versus favorable publicity. Politicians who hold the power to restrict or increase access may make themselves available to a designated journalist in exchange for positive press. The result: a reporter gets an exclusive story, and a politician gets his particular viewpoint published. Such games debase journalists, Wicker said, and reporters need to stand strong against the temptation to trade a positive story for an exclusive interview. Journalists can succeed, he said, "without bartered access."

"They need you more than you need them," he said.

•Anonymous sources are necessary sometimes, but journalists should not use them as a standard practice. Running stories with unnamed sources undermines the credibility of the story and the newspaper, Wicker said. Thus, it's possible that newspa-

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Tom Wicker

pers should choose not to publish some stories that can only be obtained through anonymous sources. If newspapers cut back on their use of anonymous sources, they will carry more credibility when the situation demands that they be used.

•The press is relying too heavily on non-scientific opinion polls, Wicker said. But even if newspapers obtain accurate survey results, should they rely so heavily on polls in their political coverage? Wicker asked. Too often, he said, newspapers emphasize survey results so greatly that campaign coverage becomes horse-race coverage, with the press more concerned about picking the front-runner than analyzing substantive issues.

•Lastly, Wicker said he is troubled by the "appalling lack of accuracy" in today's press. "Inaccuracy plagues us," he said.

Reporters rely too much on memory, and editors tolerate too many errors, most of which could be avoided by stringent fact-checking and more leg-work. Who cares if there is a little mistake in the headline or the caption of a photograph? Wicker asked. The speaker or the subject of the story cares, he said, and the errors give readers another reason to

believe that the press is incompetent.

The Sarratt lecture series is an endowed tribute to Reed Sarratt, a 1937 alumnus of the School who was a long-time director of the Southern Newspaper Publishers Association Foundation in Atlanta.

The Sarratt lecture, Wicker said, was his valedictory address, since he plans to retire this year from *The New York Times*.

"I plan...when I reach 65, to go straight, catch a few fish, write a few books and read more than that."

Wicker is a native of Hamlet, N.C., but no longer lives in the Tar Heel state. He now maintains homes in New York and Vermont and dictates his column to *The Times* by phone when he is on the road.

Wicker's syndicated column appears twice weekly in 200 newspapers. As a reporter, bureau chief and associate editor for *The Times*, he has covered Congress and seven presidents. In addition to his newspaper career, Wicker has written several books, including *Kennedy Without Tears*, *JFK and LBJ: The Influence of Personality on Politics*, *Facing the Lions*, *A Time to Die*, based on the 1971 Attica prison riots in New York, *On Press* and *Unto This Hour*.

At a breakfast reception Dec. 13 in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication with about a dozen students, Wicker remembered that he chose journalism because it was supposed to be an easy major. Still, the University provided him with courses that laid the groundwork for his career as a newspaperman in Aberdeen, Lumberton and Winston-Salem, N.C., Nashville, Tenn., Washington, D.C., and New York. Specifically, Wicker praised Skipper Coffin's editorial writing course, Phillip Russell's creative writing course and Walter Spearman's leadership.

"For 40 years, I've been able to do my work today and see it in the paper tomorrow with my name on it, for better, for worse," Wicker said to close the lecture. "My work has had identity, and it's given me part of mine. And it's taken me 40 years to realize my identity is all I really own." □

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