

FIRST AMENDMENT:

Two examples of responsible stewardship of First Amendment freedoms, in which areas of controversy merited dialogue beyond mere "Letters,"

RACE  
Newspaper 1988  
CA, Dec 16,  
Is Attacked  
On Articles

By LINDA S. WALLACE

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Willis and Maxine Smith, executive director of the Memphis branch NAACP, said at a joint press conference that the articles should have focused on the "good" Tate is accomplishing rather than his finances.

"We now perceive that racism threatens to impede any efforts to improve neighborhoods occupied by the black citizens of this community," Mrs. Smith said. "We therefore join the realists in challenging the press, and particularly The Commercial Appeal, to re-evaluate its position and join those of us who care about our city to encourage developers and lending institutions to continue their effort to rehabilitate and revitalize neighborhoods which have been neglected and forgotten for so long."

Last week, Mrs. Smith was quoted as saying she "just can't see how poor people are going to profit out of this type of manipulation." She said she has toured the renovated homes since then and now thinks "there should have been different aspects given other than what The Commercial Appeal had given."

Tate said his goals is to provide housing for people with low and moderate incomes. However, several real estate officials and attorneys have questioned whether the project will displace area residents by inflating housing costs. Rents in the renovated units in some cases will increase by \$100 a month. Willis yesterday responded to those concerns by saying residents in those areas were "underpaying," not "overpaying" rents. "Nobody needs any help from white dogooders who want to protect them."

Editorial Climate!  
We Don't Make The News, Folks; We Just Report It  
CA, Sun. Sept. 14, 1980 D1

FROM ROBERT L. Stewart of Hernando, Miss., comes a letter which reads, in part:

"This will not be a complimentary letter, so right here is where I expect you to round file it or make an airplane.

"I would not like to know that your effort at a column printed in (Wednesday's) newspaper is the best you could do. I would like to believe that you are brighter than such a stinking effort indicates. Today's article is simply pure trash . . .

"There is not one single sports writer or reporter or editor in the city of Memphis. I frankly do not understand what you people consider your job to be. Maybe sports critic, satirist, joker or you may possibly consider your job to be the destruction of Memphis State University in particular and Memphis sports in general.

"What this city needs is a good 10-cent cigar and at least one newspaper with intelligence enough to realize that derogatory commentaries and story lines can only hurt this city as a whole. Memphis State University has to bear most of your inept writings and negative attitudes, but the entire city is very much hurt by the lack of enthusiasm and the failure of you people to report or write about sports in the area in a positive and constructive way . . ."

THERE WAS MORE, but that is the general drift of what Mr. Stewart had to say. He was reacting to a column conceived as a tongue-in-cheek puzzlement over Memphis State's star-crossed attempts to replace football coach Richard Williamson, who was relieved of his command after a 2-9 season this fall.

Ordinarily this newspaper publishes signed letters without comment, offering the public a forum through which to state its cases. But Mr. Stewart raises some questions that need to be



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answered, because others — including the president of Memphis State University — lately have expressed similar confusion over the role of newsmen trying to cover the Tiger coaching situation. As recently as Thursday, MSU president Dr. Thomas G. Carpenter remarked in The Commercial Appeal: "The newspapers are killing us on this. They are hurting the university and making it extremely difficult for us to do our job."

So maybe it is time to restate some purposes. When Mr. Stewart says, "I frankly do not understand what you people consider your job to be," he needs clarification.

And the answer is fairly simple: At The Commercial Appeal, our job is to inform our readers. Period.

Unfortunately, we sometimes have to tell readers things they don't really want to hear . . . wars, riots, inflation, punk rock, etc. And firings of football coaches. But we don't make the news. We just print it.

SOME READERS REGARD bad news as negative views, but the

terms are not exactly synonymous. When we report a mugging, it doesn't mean we are in favor of it. When a politician gets caught with his hand in the public's purse we put it in the newspaper, not because we endorse theft but because we think voters ought to know who's stealing.

We hear that word "negative" a lot. Some football fans accuse us of negative reporting when we list the scores. Maybe they have a point. When your team gets waxed, 61-7, there are blamed few positive vibes emanating from the scoreboard. But we feel obligated to print the score, whether we like it or not.

And Memphis State fans and administrators are not the only ones thus agitated by our coverage of current events.

When University of Arkansas football players get arrested on charges ranging from rape to cattle rustling, we report it. When the University of Tennessee fires its best running back for assorted training violations, we say so. When Vanderbilt goes 2-9 and bounces another coach, it makes news. If a retired athletic director at Ole Miss takes potshots at the school's incumbent quarterback, we quote both sides in the hassle, and when Mississippi State has to do time in the NCAA slammer, you read about it in The Commercial Appeal.

IN ALL THOSE instances, and others, we hear accusations that our reporting is negative. We have grown to expect those reactions; they come with the territory. But we continue to report such stories out of a conviction that the guy paying the freight — the fan at the ticket window — deserves to know what he's buying.

What people have to understand is that newsmen — at least those employed by this newspaper — are not paid to promote or to

undermine any institution or enterprise. We merely tell our readers what is happening in the world and let them draw their own conclusions. Columnists are a mite different in that they sometimes try to inject humor into the grim facts, the intent being not to play the role of mad bomber, but to suggest that issues like football do not, after all, rank up there alongside Armageddon.

For the record: Reporters, sports editors, editors and, Lordy, maybe even corporate kings in that Great Front Office Up Yonder would like nothing better than to report a 12-0 football season at Memphis State University. And not just because some of our guys are MSU alumni, either.

See, in our business, it is easier to cover winners than losers. And I mean *light years* easier. Winners are happy, talkative people who like to see reporters coming. (Well, usually. Some of us have covered winners like Woody Hayes and Bobby Knight, and if you think they're tough under ordinary circumstances you ought to see 'em when they *lose*). Losers sulk a lot and accuse newsmen of printing negative stuff.

SO, YEAH, THOSE of us covering Memphis State and Tennessee and Ole Miss and Vanderbilt would love to see those people win — big. And when they do, we will report it. With enthusiasm.

In the meantime, if it is "negative" news whenever a prospective coach turns down the Memphis State job, we'll have to print it anyway. I just have a feeling that given the opportunity to do it all over again, Memphis State administrators might pursue their new coach in a more orderly fashion . . . and spend more time talking to the 90-odd coaches they say want the job and less time with guys who don't.

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