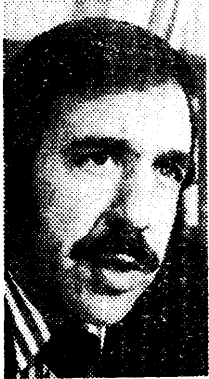


Did press add fuel to the Nazi furor ?

It is inevitable that after any big event these days the role of the press in creating or expanding or influencing that event be examined.



DAVID GOLDBERGER

The recent actions by Chicago Nazis fills the bill perfectly because it has filled the pages of the press and the screens of the TV stations for the last 14 months.

The legal wrangling, the angry words, the accusation and counter-accusation culminated

recently in two speeches that drew about 28 and 25 Nazis, respectively. The crowds, mostly angry, that attended the speeches were much larger, of course.

But the thought that Nazism or even formalized racial hatred was going to be a viable political movement in America has pretty much been laid to rest.

Few people, however, really thought that the Nazis would be successful. Even those people who reminded us that Hitler started with very few men in a beer hall in Munich had little belief that Nazism would somehow "catch on" in Chicago or America.

RATHER, THE ISSUE of the Nazis centered not on what they were going to say but on two other things:

- Whether they had a right to say anything at all.
- Whether their assemblies would lead to violence.

Roger Simon



It is the belief of David Goldberger, the American Civil Liberties Union lawyer who successfully represented the Nazis, that the press concentrated much more on the second issue than the first. And by doing so, he says, inflamed an already volatile situation.

I should make clear that I called Goldberger and not vice versa. Goldberger answered honestly and frankly, but he also stated that he had enough enemies at the moment, and didn't need a fight with the press, too. He did agree to speak, however, because he believed that the subject was not only important, but a continuing problem.

"The press influenced and shaped these recent events separate from the participants," he said. "The press spent a great deal of time forecasting violence. And I think there is a danger here in creating a self-fulfilling prophecy.

"That is not a statement of criticism. That is a flat fact. I am not angry or bitter, but a lot more people were drawn into the controversy due to the focus on the drama and the potential for violence rather than on the serious constitutional questions."

GOLDBERGER MIGHT be right, I told him, but since the possibility of violence

was real, especially if the Nazis had marched in Skokie as originally planned, how could the press have ignored it?

"I'm not saying the press should have ignored it," he said. "I'm saying that the focus was all wrong. The balance. And I'm not even talking about the editorial writers or even the columnists-I agreed with some and disagreed with others. Rather I'm talking about the day-to-day news coverage.

"The day-to-day coverage concentrated not on the issues of free speech, but on who was going to get hit. Where people were buying helmets. On the most polarized of positions.

"I think we should all ask ourselves if this really was the dispute. Was this really a dispute between people who held extreme right-wing opinions and those who wanted to do them physical violence? Was this really a dispute between the Nazis and the Jewish Defense League?

"Or was this a constitutional question with far-reaching impact?"

I THINK A FLAW in Goldberger's argument is that the two questions were inextricably bound. Since the very essence of the Nazi philosophy was a particularly ugly brand of violence (genocide), it might be asking a little much for the press to treat the issue as a debate over constitutional law.

Also, the potential for violence was real, actual and reached far beyond any media creation Goldberger is correct, however, in realizing that the press, especially television, almost always will give more coverage to the dramatic than the undramatic.

"I'm not saying that the press covers the dramatic rather than the real issues through maliciousness," Goldberger said. "I

think it is just sloppiness. And I don't have a solution. Censorship is not the solution. But there is a real problem.

"I see the power of the press as awesome. And in the future, I don't see the press acting any differently. It is the nature of the beast."

ALTHOUGH THE NAZI assembly in Marquette Park on Sunday ended in 72 arrests, there seems to be a general feeling that the issue has run itself out. The coverage of that event by both Chicago downtown dailies seemed to reflect conscious restraint.

The Tribune put the main story inside the paper without any front-page pictures and ran a descriptive column on Page 1. While The Sun-Times gave it front-page treatment and seven pictures, its entire coverage was only 20 paragraphs long and did not directly quote the Nazis.

And while Goldberger believes that this is like locking the barn door after the horse has gone, he, too, hopes that the furor over the Nazis is diminishing.

It is a widely shared hope and one that virtually no one can argue with, but it may be wishful thinking. The press may have "awesome" power, but it is better at reflecting rather than leading society. And I'm not sure that the public is quite as ready to forget the Nazis as the press hopes it is.

A Chicago policeman came to see me this week. It is his job to protect the Nazis in the streets as it was Goldberger's job to protect them in the courts.

It is not a job the policeman is looking forward to. His views will be presented Sunday.