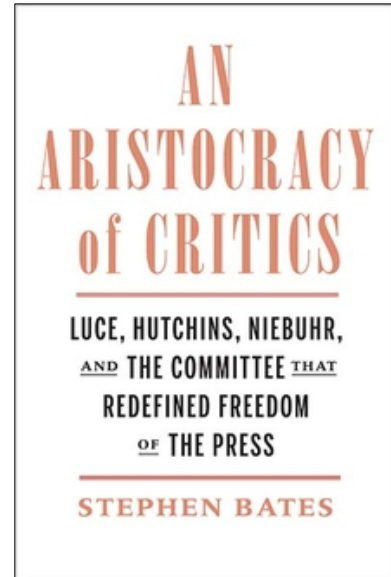


Stephen Bates, **An Aristocracy of Critics: Luce, Hutchins, Niebuhr, and the Committee that Redefined Freedom of the Press**, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020, 336 pp., \$28.00 (hardcover).

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Published when the international influence of the United States was near its zenith, the general report of the Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press, *A Free and Responsible Press* (1947), has become a minor classic in the U.S. conversation about freedom of speech. Conceived and funded by *TIME*'s Henry R. Luce, the commission began its work in wartime and wrapped up shortly after the end of World War II with the publication of six books, including *A Free and Responsible Press*. The text presents the consensus among the 13 commissioners as it emerged from discussions over the course of three years, at 17 separate meetings in Chicago and New York. It was drafted by Hutchins himself after two others—Robert D. Leigh, the most senior staffer of the commission, and Archibald MacLeish, a member of the commission—had seen drafts of their own rejected by the commission.



Author Stephen Bates' **An Aristocracy of Critics: Luce, Hutchins, Niebuhr, and the Committee That Redefined Freedom of the Press** draws on the archives of the commission, as well as those of Time, Inc. and the *Chicago Tribune*, to tell the story of the commission's work and legacy. Covering a specific moment in the careers of various intellectual luminaries in the mid-century United States, the book is likely to interest a range of historians of ideas and culture, particularly those interested in freedom of speech, mass society, and media policy.

The author sets two goals for himself. The first is to follow Louis Menand in appreciating "ideas as always soaked through by the personal and social situations in which we find them" (Menand, as cited in Bates, p. 6). Bates offers biographical sketches of several commission members, as well as others in the little network around Hutchins, who served as the president of the University of Chicago from 1929 to 1951. He begins with a satisfying depiction of the personal relationship between Hutchins and Luce, and his portrait of Luce as a character is perhaps the most vivid in the book.

Personal portraits are not the book's strength, however. Bates describes the career of the reactionary publisher of the *Chicago Tribune*, Colonel Robert R. McCormick, and relates that McCormick turned against Hutchins after initially embracing him. He recounts how the only female affiliated with the all-White, all-male commission, paid staffer Ruth Inglis, wrote Hutchins as the commission was disbanding, saying, "You are smart and true and you greatly resemble my father" (p. 176). Shortly afterward, Inglis befriended Senator Joseph McCarthy and called on the House Unamerican Activities Committee to

investigate Hutchins. What kinds of personal relationships were in play in cases like these? Bates seems to have made the most of the sources he had to work with, but the sources seem to be better for raising such questions than for answering them.

The attention given to the personal and social pays off all the same. The reader comes away with a clear sense of how the commission worked and of the intellectual currents in play in its deliberations. MacLeish and Niebuhr were the most progressive commissioners. John Dickinson had worked for the Justice Department under Franklin D. Roosevelt in the 1930s, but by the time he served on the commission he was "a New Deal apostate" (p. 7). Dickinson steered the commission away from arguments in favor of government intervention in the media industry.

Bates' approach reveals how the commission was entangled in the fundamental dilemma it sought to grapple with: the tension between the general public interest and the private interests of a small capitalist elite in control of something fairly new, what Hutchins called "the press as an instrument of mass communication" (Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1947, p. 1). Luce's \$200,000 grant provided salaries for Robert Leigh and three other staff, as well as generous stipends for commission members to attend meetings. By the time Hutchins was finalizing the report, Luce's money had run out. To finish the job, Hutchins secured \$15,000 from his friend, ad man William Benton. Benton then prevailed on Hutchins to change the commission's "Free and Accountable Press" to *A Free and Responsible Press*.

Margaret Blanchard (1977) and Victor Pickard (2015) have argued that what came to be known as the social responsibility theory of the press gave cover to publishers and broadcasters seeking to preserve their private prerogatives. For Pickard, the social responsibility theory created ideological space for today's "corporate libertarian" media regime. Bates avoids staking a claim in this and other debates, but he does find that the Hutchins Report was rescued from oblivion by *Four Theories of the Press* (Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1956), which cited *A Free and Responsible Press* as the authoritative statement of social responsibility theory.

Bates' second stated aim is "to consider the lessons of the Commission on Freedom of the Press in the context of our own era" (p. 7). His methodology is not really suited to this task. Exhaustive archival research has brought him close to the commission's work, but it does not lead to a systematic analysis of how the commission's lessons—whatever they may be—read today. The closest Bates comes to such an analysis is in the final chapter of the book, with a somewhat cursory comparison of *A Free and Responsible Press* to a 2019 Aspen Institute-funded report by the Knight Commission (2019).

His subtitle suggests the commission "redefined" freedom of the press, but Bates' text does not explicitly say what he had in mind by this. He argues that the commission anticipated three ideas regarding press freedom usually attributed to authors who came later. "The members distinguished two types of liberty before Isaiah Berlin, sketched the philosophy of communitarianism before Amitai Etzioni, and advocated a right of media access before Jerome A. Baron" (p. 5). If such ideas were most memorably articulated after the commission did its work, surely that work was part of a general milieu, in which these ideas were percolating.

Bates might have pursued his second goal more deliberately by examining the connection between the social position of the commissioners and the content of their work. *Aristocracy of Critics*, Luce's description of the commission, makes an apt title for the book. Almost all members of the commission were eminent professors. None were journalists. All were, Bates says, at the heart of the American establishment. John Dickinson was a descendant of a delegate to the U.S. constitutional convention. All but Arthur Schlesinger, who was half Jewish, were protestant White men: "a relatively homogeneous lot" (p. 50), as Bates puts it. A more concerted focus on how this homogeneity influenced the commission's agenda and conclusions might have been fruitful.

To the extent he addresses this question, Bates says that "commission members identified with the masses" (p. 193). This is one way the report expresses the ideology of the New Deal, a dispensation that was dissolving even as the report was published. The appearance of commission members Hutchins and Niebuhr on the cover of *TIME* indicates a much less circumspect relationship between elite and popular culture than what exists in the United States today, and the commissioners tended not to question elite actions or motivations. As Bates notes, *A Free and Responsible Press* does not endorse a watchdog role for the press. In one commission debate, Beardsley Ruml endorsed government lies, declaring that "we are probably one of the most bigoted, race-conscious peoples of the world, but it is better not to stress the fact" (Ruml, as cited on p. 108).

Scrupulously researched, *An Aristocracy of Critics* will stand as the definitive historical account of the Hutchins commission's proceedings, though a more fully contextualized picture of the commission's significance emerges in other accounts, including those by Bates (1995, 2018) himself. If Bates' stated goals are a starting point for critical appraisal, the endpoint is this: He is reticent to advance a provocative claim about what his research means. Positioned now as the leading authority on the Hutchins commission and its history, he is certainly qualified to do so.

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