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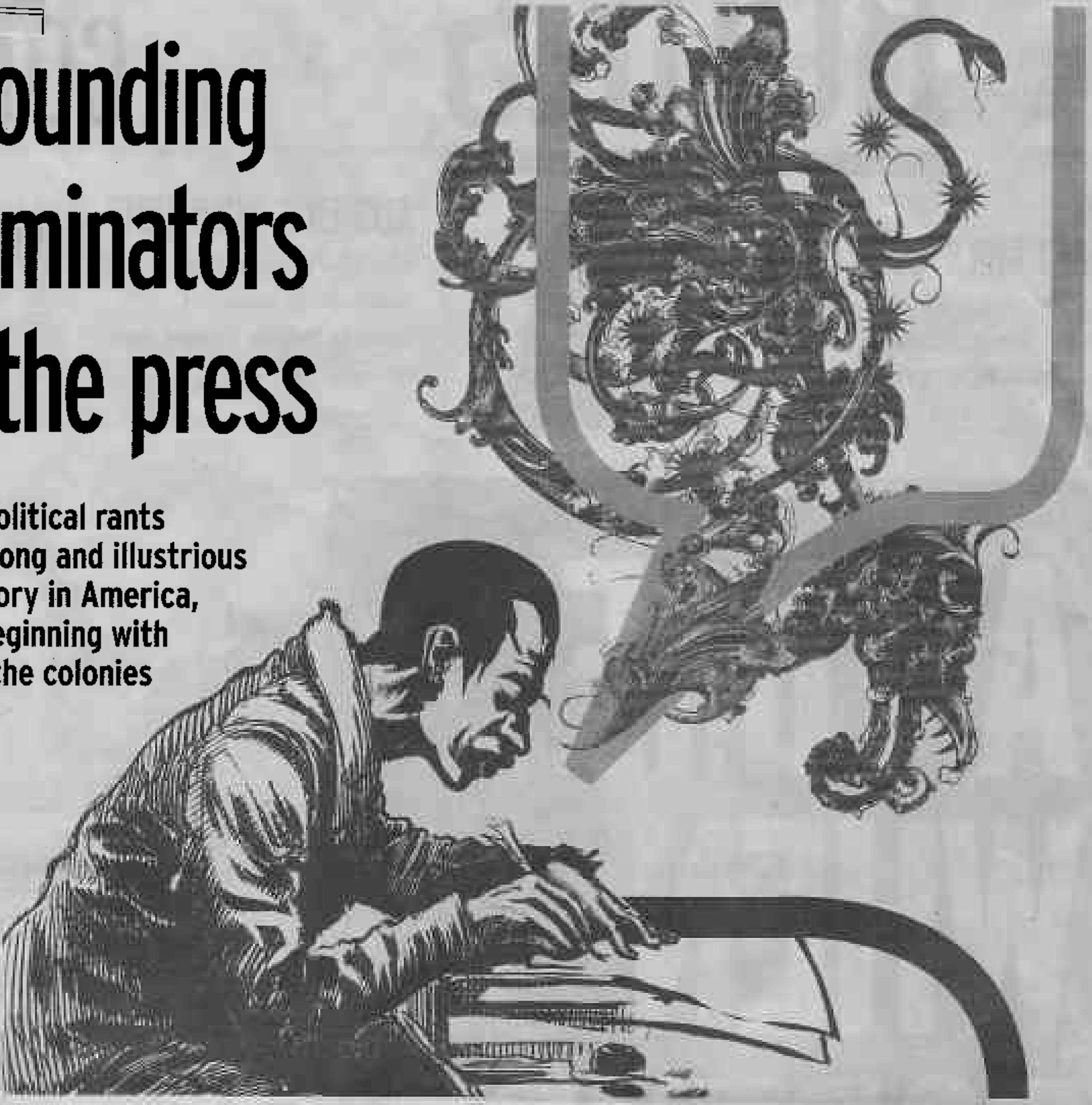
Founding fulminators of the press



Political rants have a long and illustrious history in America, beginning with the colonies

HISTORY

INFAMOUS SCRIBBLERS
THE FOUNDING FATHERS AND THE ROWDY BEGINNINGS OF AMERICAN JOURNALISM
BY ERIC BURNS
Public Affairs. 480 pages. $27.50.

BY CAROL FELSENTHAL

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into such a screeching critic of George Washington that the elder Franklin bemoaned the paper's "malignant industry and persevering falsehoods" aimed at "destroy[ing]" public confidence.

Early newspapers, Burns argues, had no interest in objectivity. "Professions of impartiality I shall make none," pledged the editor of the Porcupine's Gazette in its first issue. As the decades passed, there was no move toward "a nonpartisan publication," which would be "too noncommittal for the exigencies of the times." After the colonies won independence, the Gazette of the United States bannered the motto, "He that is not for us, is against us" — a far cry, Burns observes, from "All the News that's Fit to Print."

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and lose my freedom." When Parliament quickly repealed the Stamp Act, papers ran hulking headlines and gave away copies citizens waved as they ran through the streets. But a year after the repeal of the Stamp Act came more taxes, including the fateful one on tea. Burns dates the first newspaper syndication to the reprinting, in 21 of the 25 newspapers then publishing, of John Dickinson's pro-independence "Letters from an American Farmer in Pennsylvania to the Inhabitants of the British Colonies."

Sam Adams, son of a brewer, Harvard graduate, cousin of the far more judicious John Adams, used his Boston Gazette as "less a source of news than a vehicle through which Americans could 'spit their venom' at royal officials." His paper published a "blacklist" of colonial officials so that his followers would know whom to attack, and a list of atrocities

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Yet the patient reader who sticks with Burns, who has written social histories of alcohol and of tobacco in America and currently hosts Fox News's media criticism show "News Watch," will be rewarded by some fascinating detail — offbeat biographical takes, for example, on the Founding and often Feuding Fathers. Worth the price of the book is Burns' account of a celebrity sex scandal, circa 1791, involving Alexander Hamilton, whose wife was then pregnant with their fifth child, and whose lover, Maria Reynolds, later joined her husband in blackmailing Hamilton.

Burns' graphic description of the drudgery of early American printing features Ben Franklin in Boston, unhappily indentured to his older brother, James, and his New England Courant. Stirring tree sap into a stinking gelatinous goop called lampblack, Ben made ink, later cleaned the type with lye, and the "beaters" with urine — perhaps hosing them with his own equipment.

James wanted to keep Ben, then 16 and longing to write, doing the dirty work — "an anonymous printer rather than an applauded litterateur." But Ben secretly wrote popular essays under the *nom de plume* "Mrs. Silence Dogwood" and knew he could not serve out his indenture. A year later, in 1723, he ran away to Philadelphia. Burns depicts James as a scoundrel who used his paper to inveigh not only against the Crown, but also against smallpox inoculation. He had no informed opinion, but "despised" Cotton Mather, a proponent of inoculation.

The younger Franklin kept his hand in the newspaper game — he owned the Pennsylvania Gazette — and later tried to make a printer/newspaperman out of his grandson Benny. But Benny turned his paper, the Aurora, into such a screeching critic of George Washington that the elder Franklin bemoaned the paper's "malignant industry and persevering falsehoods" aimed at "destroy[ing]" public confidence.

Early newspapers, Burns argues, had no interest in objectivity. "Professions of impartiality I shall make none," pledged the editor of the Porcupine's Gazette in its first issue. As the decades passed, there was no move toward "a nonpartisan publication," which would be "too noncommittal for the exigencies of the times." After the colonies won independence, the Gazette of the United States bannered the motto, "He that is not for us, is against us" — a far cry, Burns observes, from "All the News that's Fit to Print."

Editors who supported the Federalists (partisans of strong central government, as exemplified by Washington and Hamilton, his treasury secretary) battled those who supported the Republicans (power to the states as exemplified by Washington's secretary of state, Thomas Jefferson). Anything went. Jefferson regularly leaked secrets to the editor of his mouthpiece, the National Gazette, by giving the man after-hours access to his office and leaving out documents for him to read.

Except for the New York Post, which Hamilton had a hand in founding in 1801, none of the newspapers that Burns describes still publish, which is just as well. Publick Occurrences Both Foreign and Domestic, the first newspaper in North America (1690), "the National Enquirer of its time," published by a "rabid anti-Catholic" with "mercury in his blood," featured reports of Indians ("miserable salvages" [sic]) who tortured white men, and the King of France, who "used to lie with" his son's wife.

Classified ads were then, as now, a profit center. But the most profit was in ads for "servants run-away." Many colonial printers, Burns writes, "could not have stayed in business . . . without profiting from the sale or return of the human property of others." An ad for "Two young likely Negro men, country born, bred up in a farm and can do all manner of plantation work," ran in Franklin's Pennsylvania Gazette.

Although diatribes against the crown often bore no resemblance to the truth, newspapers drove the push for independence. The Pennsylvania Journal reported the made-up "news" that parents would have to pay the Crown 15 pounds for the birth of every boy; 10 for every girl.

The Stamp Act, passed by Parliament in 1765, imposed taxes on printed matter from diplomas to newspapers, and provoked from the New Hampshire Gazette: "I must die, or submit to that which is worse than Death, be Stamp'd and lose my freedom." When Parliament quickly repealed the Stamp Act, papers ran hulking headlines and gave away copies citizens waved as they ran through the streets. But a year after the repeal of the Stamp Act came more taxes, including the fateful one on tea. Burns dates the first newspaper syndication to the reprinting, in 21 of the 25 newspapers then publishing, of John Dickinson's pro-independence "Letters from an American Farmer in Pennsylvania to the Inhabitants of the British Colonies."

Sam Adams, son of a brewer, Harvard graduate, cousin of the far more judicious John Adams, used his Boston Gazette as "less a source of news than a vehicle through which Americans could 'spit their venom' at royal officials." His paper published a "blacklist" of colonial officials so that his followers would know whom to attack, and a list of atrocities supposedly committed by British soldiers — whether true or not was beside his point. Late in 1773, writes Burns, Sam Adams and his friends "sat in the Gazette's back room and began to plan the Boston Tea Party."

The British recognized the power of these impertinent papers in "constantly remind[ing] the colonists of the cause they shared," and so Redcoats set "upon print shops. … Sometimes, rather than wrecking the supplies and equipment, they stole them and delivered them to Tory publishers for more sympathetic use."

When Ben Franklin's grandson published treasonous letters purportedly written by Washington but actually "complete fabrications," they were, Burns writes, "too good to check." If the quote prompts the reader to recall Dan Rather and the National Guard letters, that's likely just what the author — once again showing that the excesses in today's media are nothing new — had in mind.

P.S. When I watched Burns' "Fox News Watch" last Saturday, I was stunned to see him push his own book, using one of his regular panelists, Cal Thomas, to lead the parade of praise. The segment opened with a clip of Burns on "The Daily Show" joking with Jon Stewart about the book. That accomplished, each of the panelists — Kay Hall, Neal Gabler, James Pinkerton, and Thomas — offered a plug. Burns, the media critic and chronicler of press abuses past, should have known better.

Carol Felsenthal is the biographer of Katharine Graham and S.I. Newhouse Jr., among others. She also writes magazine profiles and teaches "Writing Profiles" at the University of Chicago.