



Section 2

AMERICAN LIVES

William Randolph Hearst

Successful Publisher, Failed Politician

"[Newspapers are] the greatest force in civilization, . . . [able to] form and express public opinion, . . . suggest and control legislation, . . . declare wars, . . . punish criminals, . . . [and by representing the people] control the nation."

—William Randolph Hearst, editorial in the *New York Journal* (1898)

William Randolph Hearst built a great media empire. He published newspapers and magazines, created newsreels, broadcast radio shows, and made movies. However, he never achieved his goal of being a powerful politician.

Hearst (1863–1951) was born to a family made wealthy by owning western mines. He eventually went to Harvard College, where—before being expelled—he became interested in journalism. He persuaded his father to give him a family-owned newspaper, the San Francisco *Examiner*, to run. Hearst hired talented reporters, added new equipment, and printed sensational stories—anything to increase circulation. A letter revealed his view of journalism: “The modern editor of the popular journal does not care for facts. The editor wants novelty. The editor has no objections to facts if they are also novel. But he would prefer novelty that is not fact, to a fact that is not a novelty.”

Soon Hearst had won: The *Examiner* had the largest circulation in the city. He determined to compete against Joseph Pulitzer and his *New York World* next. Hearst bought the *New York Journal* and then raided the *World's* staff by offering reporters twice what Pulitzer paid. At the same time, he cut the price of his paper from two cents to one—forcing Pulitzer to cut his price too. He printed sensational stories and promoted his paper constantly. He publicized murders and then sent reporters out to solve them. He used the paper to denounce the Spaniards for their actions in Cuba and to push President William McKinley to declare war. When war finally was declared, Hearst claimed full credit, calling it “the *Journal's* war.” The paper’s circulation went up.

Hearst added papers in other major cities, including Chicago, Los Angeles, and Boston. He bought magazines. Eventually he added radio stations, a newsreel company, and a film production company. Hearst used these media sources to promote his attempts to enter politics.

He joined the Democratic Party and began to

be a power behind the scenes. He used his papers to promote Democratic candidates—and to severely criticize President McKinley. After McKinley was assassinated, Hearst was criticized by many for having aroused hatred of McKinley.

In 1904, Hearst wanted to be the Democratic nominee for president. Largely by using his vast fortune, he secured more than 200 delegates but fell short of the number needed to win. Two years later, he came within 60,000 votes of winning election as governor of New York. He was defeated, in part, by a revival of the charge that his papers’ attacks had contributed to the assassination of McKinley. Hearst next tried forming a third party, but the effort failed. He became so unpopular that, when newsreels produced by his company were shown in movie theaters, audiences hissed at his name on the screen.

Hearst returned to the Democrats but was never able to run for public office again. His last political act was to help secure the nomination of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1932. Within a few years, though, he had turned against Roosevelt. His papers referred to the president’s “New Deal” program as the “Raw Deal.” Soon the Depression and Hearst’s overspending cut into his fortune. He was forced to sell some of his properties. However, the prosperity of World War II brought back much of his publishing empire by 1945. After a heart seizure in 1947, he spent his remaining years largely as an invalid.

Questions

1. Evaluate Hearst’s philosophy of journalism.
2. Hearst served two terms in the House of Representatives, but was not a successful legislator. What in his character would make him unsuitable to be an effective legislator?
3. Assess the timeliness of the opening quotation by Hearst. Is it as accurate in the 21st century as it was in the late 19th century?