

ANDRÁS CSILLAG

JOSEPH PULITZER, MASTER JOURNALIST AND BENEFACTOR

An adventuresome youth of seventeen, Joseph Pulitzer (1847–1911) departed from Hungary, his home, in 1864 leaving the age-old hostilities and oppressions of Europe for a new life in America. He viewed the United States as the land of promise, opportunity, and, above all, freedom. Virtually penniless when he arrived, he served eight months in the Union Army. When the Civil War ended, he joined the ranks of jobless veterans. Unable to find work in New York, he headed for St. Louis, traveling the way of thousands of ex-soldiers—by hopping rides on freight trains and walking. He worked his way across the unbridged Mississippi River by firing the boiler of a ferry for several round trips. In St. Louis he labored as a mule hostler, stevedore, hack driver and waiter in a beer garden. There was a time when he lacked money for room rent and slept in a park. From this humble beginning, he started a career in journalism which was to reach towering heights of moral force and influence. His militant, crusading spirit dedicated to the public welfare was to achieve reforms, to win honors for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and its sister papers, *The World* newspapers in New York City.

Fluent in German and Hungarian but limited in English, Pulitzer got a job as a reporter on the German-language *Westliche Post* where he soon demonstrated a remarkable drive and “nose for news”. He turned in so many exclusives that the exasperated editor of another local paper, the *St. Louis Democrat* allegedly roared “I’m tired of having to read a German paper to learn the real news.” Pulitzer

acquired the bankrupt *Evening Dispatch*, merging it with the *Evening Post* in 1878. The new paper, the *Post and Dispatch*, pledged that it “will serve no party but the people ..., will oppose all frauds and shams whatever and wherever they are; and will advocate principles and ideas rather than prejudices and partisanship”—the first embryonic beginning which anticipated the platform now carried daily on the *Post-Dispatch* editorial page. (Dec. 12, 1878)

The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* soon became the talk of the town. New stories exposed corruption in government, gambling, prostitution, a railroad monopoly damaging to St. Louis commerce. A headline shouted “Tax Dodgers” and subheads “Wholesale Perjury as a Fine Art”, etc. Articles were backed up by blistering editorials. Such aggressive journalism was yielding results and reforms in the life of the city. Pulitzer’s crusades used powerful ammunition—solid facts obtained through diligent investigative reporting. The exposés were based on knowledge of political corruption and ways of exposing it. The publisher’s experience as a reporter covering city hall and state capital, as a member of the St. Louis Board of Police Commissioners and as a state legislator served him well. Above all, his crusades were not isolated one-time efforts, but continuing attacks that pounded away with persistence. To arouse public opinion he used what he called “the red thread of continuing force”.

Maintaining his ownership of the paper, in 1883 he moved the center of his operations to New York. Pulitzer undertook new ventures on an even grander scale. He again bought an ailing newspaper, *The New York World*. He called in his former editor from St. Louis and trained a new staff of journalist. It was from this point that his career really began to take off. In the first issue of *The World* under his ownership a manifesto was published that announced a totally new force in New York:

“... There is room in this great and growing city for a journal that is not only cheap but bright, not only bright but large, not only large but truly democratic—dedicated to the cause of the people rather than that of purse-potentates—devoted more to the news of the New than the Old World—that will expose all fraud and sham, fight all public evils and abuses—that will serve and battle for the people with earnest sincerity ...” (*The World*, May 11, 1883)

The robber-baron era was at its height. The United States was expanding and industrializing fast with millions of new immigrants pouring in. Practically nobody took the trouble or time to indulge in the luxury of social concern. New York's handsome facade concealed a sink-hole of selfishness, corruption and despair. Recognizing this, Pulitzer continued the crusade of a social reformer he had started in St. Louis. He listed a number of demands he thought the country needed to bring about social justice: "Tax luxuries, tax inheritances, tax large incomes, tax monopolies, tax the privileged corporations, a tariff for revenue (i.e. not for protection—*A. Cs.*), reform the civil service, punish corrupt officers, punish vote buying, punish employers who coerce their employees in elections." (*The World*, May 17, 1883) It may be noted that nine out of ten of these propositions became laws in due course. Pulitzer brought a quality exclusively his own in journalism, one that the country badly needed. It was the most earnest, powerful and efficient social conscience yet seen in journalism.

In 1887 *The Evening World* was launched, the evening edition of Pulitzer's paper. The combined circulation of Pulitzer's newspapers far outpaced any other New York paper. He was a political reformer and a successful business manager of his publishing company at the same time. The qualities which helped him win over the public were those which appeared every day in his newspapers: easy-flowing style; interesting, sensational stories within the limits of good taste; crusades arousing public opinion; the exposure of social problems; educating the general public to be critically demanding. He rendered a great service by educating the ignorant masses including immigrants. He taught them democracy, the importance of their votes, and maintained that America could be true to its promise. He adjusted his journalistic methods to the needs of the masses (often called "mass-appeal journalism"). His chief weapon was the editorial page. However, he was not to be content carrying out his struggle only through the press. He entered Congress as a representative for New York's ninth congressional district in 1885. For a brief period of time he served there as the first United States congressman of Hungarian origin.

At the time of the Spanish-American War over Cuba (1898) Pulitzer was also waging a fierce competitive war on the newspaper

scene against his chief rival, William Randolph Hearst. Temporarily he resorted to sensationalism in order to gain circulation. It proved to be the greatest blunder he ever made. This was the age of the infamous “yellow press”, full of fake news and jingoism, when many put the blame on Hearst and Pulitzer for the outbreak of the Spanish-American War itself. But later, he again employed a team of first-rate journalists, abandoning cheap sensationalism, and so once again, he won great admiration. He continued, as before, to use his papers to attack social injustice, political and economic corruption, the manipulations by trusts and insurance companies—still all important issues of the turn of the century.

But even before he reached old age or retirement the pace at which Pulitzer worked had taken its toll, wrecking his health. He often suffered from serious depression, which made him an eccentric figure. He was dealt another severe blow: his failing eyesight led to an almost complete blindness. Although this was a great setback in his career he still managed to maintain his high standard of progressive-liberal journalism in the running of his newspapers. Upon his retirement at the age of sixty in 1907 he sent the following message to his papers:

“ I know that my retirement will make no difference in its (i.e. the newspaper’s—A. Cs.) cardinal principles, that it will always fight for progress and reform, never tolerate injustice or corruption, always fight demagogues of all parties, never belong to any party, always oppose privileged classes and public plunderers, never lack sympathy with the poor, always remain devoted to the public welfare, never be satisfied with merely printing the news, always be drastically independent, never be afraid to attack wrong, whether by predatory plutocracy or predatory poverty”. (Quoted by Wilensky, 14.) This became the *Post-Dispatch* platform, displayed every day at the head of the editorial page even today.

Pulitzer’s publishing companies in St. Louis and New York were very lucrative businesses, making a lot of profit. At the turn of the century, Pulitzer could have rightly been held up as a classic example of the “self-made man”. From a penniless immigrant in search of fame and fortune, he went on to become, thanks to his own hard work and determination, a multimillionaire tycoon and a prominent figure in American public life. The Pulitzer Building, erected at the cost of

more than two million dollars on Park Row right across from the City Hall, was the tallest building in New York in 1890. In his private life the Old Man was eccentric and had vagaries. He was known to have entered his lavish office building with the golden dome and full of marble only three times in his life. He spent much of his time traveling around the globe or cruising in his luxury yacht surrounded by a flock of secretaries. He kept in touch with his editors by mail or cable. Sometimes there came from him a blast of telegraphic criticism—as rough as the wires would bear, sometimes there was a word of praise or suggestion for a series of articles.

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After the Civil War philanthropic behavior became a distinguishing aspect of the American national character. An opportunity to perform a great public service came for Pulitzer in 1885. The French sculptor Bartholdi had completed the gigantic, goddess-like figure of “Liberty, Enlightening the World”, a symbolic gift of France to the United States, designed to stand on a small island near the tip of Manhattan in New York. A committee had been formed to secure funds for the construction of a proper pedestal for the huge statue. Enough money had been collected to lay a concrete base but not a cent was in sight to pay for the construction of the great pedestal designed to lift “Miss Liberty” nearly two hundred feet above sea level. The committee vainly sought aid from Congress to avoid shame. This failing, it announced its inability to proceed further and in effect threw up its hands. This was because much of the American public remained critical of the project, especially of its costs. They simply could not understand why the pedestal for the statue should cost as much as the statue itself. Many Americans outside New York considered it New York’s statue. “Let New York pay for it”, they said, while America’s newly rich millionaires were saying and contributing nothing. New York City did approve a grant of 50,000 dollars, but the expenditure was vetoed by the governor.

It was then that Pulitzer, whose reverence for liberty was as powerful as his desire to increase circulation, came to the rescue and

made an appeal to the American public through his newspapers. He published an effective editorial in *The World*:

“ It would be an irrevocable disgrace to New York City and the American Republic to have France send us this splendid gift without our having provided even so much as a landing place for it ... There is but one thing that can be done. We must raise the money ... Take this appeal to yourself personally. It is meant for every reader of *The World*. Give something, however little. Send it to us. We will receive it and see that it is properly applied. We will also publish the name of every giver, however small sum given ... ,, (*The World*, March 16, 1885)

As the fund drive began in both of Pulitzer’s papers in New York and St. Louis, the response was instant and popular. Contributions started to flow in, including, of course, Pulitzer’s own. Ultimately, the Bartholdi Pedestal Fund totaled more than one hundred thousand dollars, representing tens of thousands of donations ranging from a nickel to 250 dollars. The money was soon turned over to the builders and when a French ship brought the statue to New York the 89 feet (27 m) tall, beautifully designed granite pedestal was ready for the great figure that would become, perhaps, the most famous symbol of the United States and freedom. The statue was dedicated in October 1886, with a great naval and civic demonstration. Dignitaries from both countries were in abundant attendance. The sculptor was also present to witness the crowning of his work and the ceremony closed with a brief address by President Grover Cleveland, in which he said, “We will not forget that Liberty has made here her home; nor shall her chosen altar be neglected”. (Seitz, 155–159.)

Whether Pulitzer’s initiative to encourage his readers to make a donation in order to save the reputation of the project was an act of philanthropy on his behalf, perhaps, can be argued. No doubt, this campaign equally served his and his paper’s interests, too. Still, according to the permanent exhibit in the base of the Statute of Liberty highlighting the monument’s history, Pulitzer did have a prominent role in the erection of the pedestal and thereby in the whole process. This role only enhanced Pulitzer’s standing as one of the country’s most famous and respected newspapermen. His love of the fine arts and music was also known. His appreciation and taste were reflected

in his private collection, his relationship with artists as well as in the great benefactions made to the New York Philharmonic Society and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in his last will.

When in the fall of 1886, the renowned Hungarian painter Mihály Munkácsy arrived in New York to present his magnificent canvas “Christ Before Pilate” to the general public in the United States, Pulitzer helped to ensure a most enthusiastic reception in his honor. Not only his paper, *The World*, wrote in admiration about Munkácsy’s work but Pulitzer also did his best to praise the Hungarian artist’s merits at public gatherings and events. At one of the receptions in his honor he said, “We have met tonight to honor Mr. Mihály Munkácsy because he is a great artist and also because he is a stranger in this great republic and needs a hospitable welcome ... We welcome you sir, because true Americans, having no aristocracy, are ready to worship the aristocracy of virtue and the royalty of genius.” (Quoted by Swanberg, 125.) Subsequently Pulitzer commissioned Munkácsy to paint his wife’s portrait.

The best known portraits of Mr. and Mrs. Pulitzer were painted by the American artist John Singer Sargent. Pulitzer was also modeled by the sculptor Auguste Rodin. When his eyesight deteriorated, as with most blind people, melody became a solace. Piano music especially appealed to him; he went to concerts and listened to great players whenever possible. Now and then Paderewski would pay him a visit and there would be a carnival of piano playing in his house. His group of secretaries always included one excellent pianist, whose duties were by no means easy and whose slightest error in technique met with instant and fierce rebuke. The permanent fund of half a million dollars was established for the Philharmonic Society of New York in his will directing “that the income from such fund shall be applied and used to perfect the present orchestra, and to place it on a more independent basis, and to increase the number of concerts to be given in the city of New York, which additional concerts, I hope, will not have too severely classical programs, and to be open to the public at reduced rates, and to recognize my favorite composers: Beethoven, Wagner and Liszt.” (Quoted by Seitz, 464). Pulitzer’s bequest to the Philharmonic was the natural result of his liking for good music. He had helped it before by subscription and a substantial donation.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art received a bequest of more than 900,000 dollars, devoted to the purchase of works of art. In his will Pulitzer testified his lasting admiration for Thomas Jefferson, by setting aside 25,000 dollars “that a statue of that great statesman may at last adorn some public place in New York, the foremost democratic city of the New Republic”. (Seitz, 463.) The impressive statue now stands in one of the inner courts of Columbia University. Another sum of 50,000 dollars was left for the purpose of erecting a fountain at or near the Plaza entrance of Central Park, similar to the ones in the Place de la Concorde, Paris. The fountain now occupies the square on Fifth Avenue in front of the Plaza Hotel at 59th Street. Also, there is another important monument, which is in Paris and was a gift of Pulitzer: the imposing statue of George Washington and Lafayette as they are shaking hands with each other.

Pulitzer’s interest in education, and his desire to open opportunities for young men to advance themselves had a practical manifestation in the 1890’s when he started providing a series of scholarships to students at Teachers’ College, Columbia University, the City College of New York and various other institutions of higher education. Pulitzer also took a keen interest in the work of the black educator, Booker T. Washington and his Normal and Industrial Institute at Tuskegee, Alabama. Following 1901, he regularly and generously supported the Institute, paying for the expenses of several Negro students. As an act of charity and a token of heartfelt sympathy, he also made a donation of 25,000 dollars to the New York Association for the Blind (1909).

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Nowadays, above all, Pulitzer’s name is remembered for the lasting legacy of the Journalism School at Columbia University and the Pulitzer Prize closely attached to that institution. In the second half of the 19th century American colleges and universities continued to be the greatest beneficiaries of gifts, notably the first made by George Peabody, whose educational foundation was established in 1867. Wealthy philanthropists poured fortunes into old institutions and founded new ones; educators introduced new courses and adopted

new teaching methods; professional schools of law, medicine, education, business, and other specialties increased in number. The university founded by Johns Hopkins in 1876 specialized in graduate education. In 1885 the railroad builder Stanford endowed a university in California, while a year later John D. Rockefeller made a gift to resuscitate the University of Chicago. In the same decade Andrew Carnegie enunciated his “gospel of wealth”, stating that the rich should act as trustees for the public benefit. Soon a series of further notable gifts for philanthropic purposes began to attract attention. Bankers, industrialists and other business people, like Andrew J. Drexel, Philip Armour, etc. inaugurated similar institutions of higher education at the turn of the century.

Joseph Pulitzer gained distinction in initiating the training of journalists at the university level. Although himself achieved lasting recognition for establishing high standard, modern journalism, he wanted to raise newspaper standards by endowing a school of journalism. He regarded journalism as a profession (which was unusual at the turn of the century) and envisioned an institution that would not only provide training in reporting and in development of writing style but would promote ethical principles, too. No school of journalism existed when he made his first proposal to Columbia University in 1891. However, the authorities at Columbia were inclined to look rather doubtful upon the proposition. Journalism still hardly qualified as a respectable profession, and *The World's* aggressive liberalism did not make it very appealing to the academics. Also, there were fears that the university's dignity might suffer. The collegiate training of newspapermen was almost as unheard of as advanced studies for salesmen or hotel managers. Pulitzer made it clear that once the gift was made, neither he nor *The World* would have any connection with the institution. Still, his plan met a lot of criticism and underwent much modification in the following years.

As a result of Pulitzer's eloquent and convincing argument for its need, the trustees of the university finally accepted the plan of a graduate school in 1903. It was supported by a donation of two million dollars from the man who masterminded it. Pulitzer, to further justify his idea, wrote the following in an article published by the *North American Review*:

“Our Republic and its press will rise or fall together. An able, disinterested, public-spirited press, with trained intelligence to know the right and courage to do it, can preserve that public virtue without which popular government is a sham and a mockery. A cynical, mercenary, demagogic press will produce in no time a people as base as itself. The power to mould the future of the Republic will be in the hands of the journalists of future generations. This is why I urge my colleagues to aid the important experiment which I have ventured to endow...” (*North American Review*, May, 1904)

This extraordinary statement of hope and faith in journalism was later further developed to the ultimate statement used as the *Post-Dispatch* platform quoted earlier.

Even after signing the agreement with the university prolonged discussions followed concerning organizational matters. The actual building of the institution was delayed—an interval which sadly dragged out until the end of Pulitzer’s life. Eventually, the graduate school in New York opened in 1912, a year after Pulitzer died. Since then, generations of able students who became remarkable reporters, editors and TV personalities have graduated from it, many of whose names are well-known in the United States.

Besides establishing the School of Journalism at Columbia, Pulitzer in his will provided funds for a series of prizes in the interest of literature and good newspaper work. This was a confirmation of the agreement he had reached with the university in 1903 directing the School of Journalism to annually award prizes for excellent achievements in the following categories:

1. For the most disinterested and meritorious public service rendered by any American newspaper.
2. For the best editorial article.
3. For the best example of a reporter’s work.
4. For the American novel which shall best present the wholesome atmosphere of American life, and the highest standard of American manners and manhood.
5. For the original American play, which shall best represent the educational value and power of the stage in raising the standard of good morals, good taste, and good manners.

6. For the best book of the year upon the history of the United States.
7. For the best American biography, teaching patriotic and unselfish service to the people illustrated by an eminent example.

At Pulitzer's request an Advisory Board of experts was to supervise the operation of the Journalism School and the prizes named after him. In time, however, the Board (now called Pulitzer Prize Board) made some alterations in the original awarding plan by adding new categories and broadening the scope of the areas where entries are eligible for a prize. Today, there are 14 different categories in journalism including cartoon and photography, 6 different categories in letters including poetry and non-fiction, and there is a separate category for distinguished musical composition. Each Pulitzer carries a 5,000 dollar prize, except for public service in journalism, which is awarded a gold medal. The prestige and influence that it brings, however, to the winner or the newspaper is incomparably more important than the face value of the prize. Since 1917, when the prizes were first given, a number of outstanding writers, for example, became first famous when they got the award. Among the recipients one can find the names of Margaret Mitchell, John Steinbeck, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Bernard Malamud, Norman Mailer, John Updike, Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Edward Albee, Neil Simon, Carl Sandburg, John F. Kennedy, Archibald MacLeish, Aaron Copland and many others. In the category of journalism, for instance, 1973 was a most memorable year: the gold medal went to *The Washington Post* for its investigation of the Watergate affair.

All the daily and weekly newspapers (no magazines!) published in the United States are eligible for the Pulitzers. Sixty-six jurors, most of them top editors at newspapers nationwide, select and make nominations among the entries to the 18-member Pulitzer Prize Board. The Board, composed of prominent journalists, educators and scholars, chooses the winners for the awards. Sometimes the continual all-America emphasis of the prizes is criticized. The question has cropped up at board meetings now and then when a non-American

novel or play has been deemed superior to anything produced in the United States during the year. Many years ago, a Board member once asked Joseph Pulitzer Jr., grandson of the founder, then chairman of the Board, "Why are we so chauvinistic?" He answered, "That was old J. P. His main notion was to improve things *in this country* and he put it in his will." (Quoted by Hohenberg, 349.)

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