

Constitution Society

John Swinton on the independence of the press

Variations on the quote below have been misattributed as a response to a toast, by John Swinton, as "the former Chief of Staff at the *New York Times*", before the New York Press Club in 1953. However, research reveals that Swinton (1829-1901), after moving to New York, wrote an occasional article for the *New York Times* and was hired on a regular basis in 1860 as head of the editorial staff. Afterward holding this position throughout the Civil War, he left the paper in 1870 and became active in the labor struggles of the day. He later served eight years in the same position on the *New York Sun* and later published a weekly labor sheet, *John Swinton's Paper*.

The

remarks were apparently made by Swinton, then the preeminent New York journalist, probably one night in 1880. Swinton was the guest of honour at a banquet given him by the leaders of his craft. Someone who knew neither the press nor Swinton offered a toast to the independent press. Swinton outraged his colleagues by replying:



There is no such thing, at this date of the world's history, in America, as an independent press. You know it and I know it.

There is not one of you who dares to write your honest opinions, and if you did, you know beforehand that it would never appear in print. I am paid weekly for keeping my honest opinion out of the paper I am connected with. Others of you are paid similar salaries for similar things, and any of you who would be so foolish as to write honest opinions would be out on the streets looking for another job. If I allowed my honest opinions to appear in one issue of my paper, before twenty-four hours my occupation would be gone.

The business of the journalists is to destroy the truth, to lie outright, to pervert, to vilify, to fawn at the feet of mammon, and to sell his country and his race for his daily bread. You know it and I know it, and what folly is this toasting an independent press?

We are the tools and vassals of rich men behind the scenes. We are the jumping jacks, they pull the strings and we dance. Our talents, our possibilities and our lives are all the property of other men. We are intellectual prostitutes.

(Source: *Labor's Untold Story*, by Richard O. Boyer and Herbert M. Morais, published by United Electrical, Radio & Machine Workers of America, NY, 1955/1979.)

Despite the misattribution, the quote raises the issue of whether there is not continuing truth in Swinton's remarks, and whether some candid journalist might not be able to fairly say similar things today. Anyone who has associated closely with journalists can hardly avoid finding a ring of truth in such words, and the best evidence lies in the actual product of journalists and how well, or how poorly, it both agrees with and covers what actually happens, especially involving such things as corruption and abuse of power.



For more on the misattribution, see [John Swinton - Yes, He Said It, But...](#)

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