

## Against Rabid Commentary, 1928 & 2010

*John Q. Barrett\**

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In summer 1928, a time of pitched policy debates and impending electoral contests, a New York State lawyer who was active in Democratic Party politics began to write occasional pieces for his local newspaper.

The column was called “Between Neighbors.” In his first output, the columnist explained that his writing would be “more or less serious,” and that it would be aimed at his politically diverse upstate neighbors:

These neighbors of mine are a representative cross-section of the community, and are made up of Republicans, Democrats and people who are not affiliated with any party. Therefore in talking about politics, I am keeping that fact in mind and have no intention of using the shop-worn methods of condemning everything on one side and praising everything on the other side of the political fence.

The day has gone by when you can fool people into believing that the nation or a state or a country or a city is going to the dogs just because one political party happens to be in power in it. People are sick of the kind of editorial writing which sees only good in every measure and every man sponsored by one party and only bad on the other side. So, too, it is the little provincial papers that today in the news-columns magnify as first page news any disagreements in their opponents’ camps and run only a half inch on the back page about any trouble in their own camp.

That is one reason why the bitterly partisan press is losing its influence in this country. The other reason is that

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\* Professor of Law, St. John’s University School of Law, New York City, and Elizabeth S. Lenna Fellow, Robert H. Jackson Center, Jamestown, New York ([www.roberthjackson.org](http://www.roberthjackson.org)). An earlier version of this text was posted to my Jackson Email List on March 24, 2010.

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there is more and better education everywhere and readers do not as much as formerly take the views and news of a one-sided paper as Gospel Truth. I told [the local newspaper editor] I hoped he would get some Republican to write each week in this paper, but if he can't find one, I shall try to be as fair as I can.

Although these ideas were as wise and fitting in 1928 as they are today, the lawyer did not, in the end, have much time to live up to them as a newspaper columnist. He earlier had held political office. That fall, after publishing ten columns in two months, he gave up the pastime to accept his party's nomination to be a candidate. (Robert H. Jackson, another upstate New York lawyer who was the candidate's friend but also had a more booming law practice, became involved sporadically in the campaign.<sup>1</sup>)

That November, the former *Beacon Standard* columnist, Franklin D. Roosevelt, was elected governor of New York.<sup>2</sup> In that office and in his next office, he got, at least sometimes, the fair and balanced media coverage that leaders and policies, and also we neighbors in the audience, deserve.

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., *Honorary Vice Chairman Are Named for Roosevelt Rally*, JAMESTOWN EVENING JOURNAL (Jamestown, NY), Oct. 18, 1928, at 6 (announcing Jackson as one of the honorary chairman of the Democratic campaign meeting in Jamestown that Roosevelt would be addressing the next day).

<sup>2</sup> See Franklin D. Roosevelt, *Between Neighbors*, THE STANDARD (Beacon, NY), Aug. 2, 1928, at 1 (the first FDR column); see also *F.D. Roosevelt Turns Columnist*, N.Y. TIMES, Aug. 3, 1928, at 38 (reprinting the column). Roosevelt's 1928 columns and his earlier newspaper writings are collected in *F.D.R. COLUMNIST*, edited by Donald Scott Carmichael with a Foreword by Eleanor Roosevelt (Chicago: Pellegrini & Cudahy, 1947).