The Political Fires that Fueled THE COURANT

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According to J. Eugene Smith’s One Hundred Years of Hartford’s Courant (Yale University Press, 1949), George Goodwin started work at The Connecticut Courant less than a year after Thomas Green founded it in Hartford on October 29, 1764; that would have made Goodwin, born January 7, 1757, a mere eight years old. Goodwin’s tasks in those early years included carrying buckets of water to the second-floor print shop above Moorland’s barbershop, wetting the sheets before they went to press, hanging them to dry, then peddling the paper. The Courant office became the perfect classroom for the otherwise unschooled child. Working with Green and his assistant Ebenezer Watson, Goodwin soon mastered the art of setting type, which would become a lifetime love.

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Goodwin proposed to sell him the paper on favorable terms, under two conditions: that Burr join the Whig party, and that he attend the Congregational Church, noted the Commemorative biographical record. Burr turned it down, and Goodwin instead

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The Civil War Years

As the abolition issue was wracking the country, The Courant in 1855 became a soapbox for its new owner, Hartford lawyer Thomas M. Day, whose narrow-minded rants made him an occasional laughingstock. With the Whig Party on the decline, Day aligned The Courant with the anti-immigrant Know-Nothing movement and its rallying cry, “America for the Americans,” referring to native-born colonials. He also promoted white supremacist views not uncommon at the time in dialects that the Hartford Times dismissed as “vapid twaddle” and “dreadfully insipid.” Day published an editorial on March 6, 1856, titled “Sam and Sambo,” that stands as one of the most racist tracts in Courant history. In it, Day misread the nascent Republican Party as “the white man’s party.” The Republicans meant to preserve all of this country that they can, from the pestilential presence of the black race. Some people think themselves witty and smart, in calling this cause the Black Republican cause; to our minds it is aninately.” Day published an editorial on March 6, 1860, titled “Sam and Sambo,” that stands as one of the most racist tracts in Courant history. In it, Day misread the nascent Republican Party as “the white man’s party.” The Republicans meant to preserve all of this country that they can, from the pestilential presence of the black race. Some people think themselves witty and smart, in calling this cause the Black Republican cause; to our minds it is intricately aristocratic; it aims to save the country to the white man.”

Day gradually toned down his invective. Four years later, he steered The Courant decisively into the Republican fold after seeing Abraham Lincoln electify Hartford on May 3, 1860, days after the politician’s famous Cooper Union speech catapulted him to fame. On November 7, 1860, The Courant crowed about Lincoln’s election with a banner announcing “GLORIOUS NEWS! The Day of Jubilee Has Come… Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!”

Among the founders of the new Republican Party were a young Hartford lawyer named Joseph R. Hawley and former Hartford Times stalwarts Gideon Welles and John M. Niles, both of whom had become disgusted with the Democratic Party’s controversial repeal of the Missouri Compromise in 1854. According to Clark’s entries in the Memorial History of Hartford County, together they collected $100 from their partners and proceeded to turn it into one of the nation’s premier Republican organs.

Under Hawley and company, The Courant sharpened the ethics-focused Yankee conservatism of the previous owners while adopting as a guiding principle what they called “gentlemanly journalism.” They refused to stoop to the sensationalism and invasive “keyhole journalism.” They agreed to merge with the Hartford Evening Press, that essentially led to a coup by Hawley, Warner, and a third Evening Press partner, Stephen Hubbard, as they gained control of the profitable, advertisement-heavy Courant and proceeded to turn it into one of the nation’s premier Republican organs.

The Courant’s owners made an auspicious hire in Charles Hopkins Clark, a recent Yale graduate and Hartford Public High School alumnus, gradually becoming its chief editor. The paper struggled with a series of management changes that decade, the new owners in 1867 made a pivotal decision. They agreed to merge with The Hartford Evening Press. That essentially led to a coup by Hawley, Warner, and a third Evening Press partner, Stephen Hubbard, as they gained control of the profitable, advertisement-heavy Courant and proceeded to turn it into one of the nation’s premier Republican organs.

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The paper’s intransigence led directly to the Republican fold after seeing Abraham Lincoln electify Hartford on March 5, 1860, days after the politician’s famous Cooper Union speech catapulted him to fame. On November 7, 1860, The Courant crowed about Lincoln’s election with a banner announcing “GLORIOUS NEWS! The Day of Jubilee Has Come… Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!”

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Heading into the Progressive Era

Clark dramatically expanded the staff and modernized the plant as circulation, which had fallen below 5,000 during a prolonged economic depression, started rising again in the 1890s. One of Clark's key hires was Clifton L. Sherman, who became managing editor in 1893 at age 27. Sherman introduced many popular new features, including puzzles, editorial cartoons, and a children's page, which were becoming standard in the industry.

Meanwhile, The Courant's editorial stance under Clark, while still Republican, became more progressive as it championed community activism, civic causes, and social justice. The newspaper even defended labor unions in the face of workplace abuses. "The labor union is the development of the self-interest of the employed against the selfishness of the employer," Clark wrote on July 2, 1902, in advocating for following the Golden Rule in business dealings. But the paper remained so politically Republican, for a time it publicized only the GOP candidates for office, rarely mentioning the Democrats.

With the death of Warner in 1900 and Hawley five years later, Clark continued fine-tuning The Courant's Republicanism. Like Hawley, Clark was prominent in the national Republican Party and counted presidents William McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt, Calvin Coolidge, and William Howard Taft as personal friends. Clark considered Roosevelt "our greatest man"—until Roosevelt bolted the Republican Party in a split with President Taft in 1912 to form his own Progressive Party.

Clark in his later years became more idiosyncratic in his editorial policy, staunchly opposing Prohibition and women's suffrage, for example, while supporting a woman's right to smoke. (Famously, Connecticut was not one of the 36 states to ratify the 19th Amendment giving women the vote.) His hardened Republicanism and unrelenting criticism of President Woodrow Wilson increasingly alienated his managing editor. In a twist reminiscent of Alfred Burr's falling out with The Courant and move to the Times, in 1919 Sherman left and soon became editor of the Hartford Times, leading it to a new era of prosperity as the state's dominant newspaper from the 1920s through the mid-1960s.

A Break with the Republican Party

With Clark's death in 1926, The Courant moved to a more moderate, even liberal, Republicanism under new editor Maurice S. Sherman (no relation to Clifton Sherman), who laid the groundwork for an editorial philosophy that would continue for nearly half a century. Sherman, who was hired away from The Springfield Republican, was, like Clark, personal friends with U.S. presidents. Unlike Clark, he quickly made clear that The Courant would no longer be a Republican Party organ. Instead he promoted an editorial mindset that welcomed a diversity of opinions. Sherman instituted "The People's Forum," which generated letters to the editor by the thousands. He also established a new fairness policy: "To gather all the news worth gathering within its field and to present it without bias," joining many other newspapers that had moved away from overt partisanship except on the editorial pages.

The Courant continued espousing moderate Republican principles under succeeding editorial directors Herbert Brucker (who became a nationally known champion of freedom of information), William Foote, and Charles Towne. It was not only after the Hartford Times folded in 1976 that The Courant took on a more clear-cut nonpartisan editorial stance under editorial director John Zakarian, who served from 1976 until he retired in 2004.


The nonpartisan editorial stance continued under his successors Robert K. Schrepel (2005-2007), and Carolyn Lumden, who remains The Courant's editorial page editor. Zakarian, who died in March 2014, in a 2012 interview expressed pride in The Courant's ability to mature editorially despite the divisiveness inherent in politics. Readership surveys, he said, showed that The Courant had achieved a remarkable editorial balance. "The majority of respondents, like 46 percent, said we were middle of the road; 28 percent said we are too conservative, 26 percent said we were too liberal. So we were sort of right down the middle."