

Fifth Estate Slips Quietly Into 14th Year

Fifth Estate Collective

1979

The 13th Anniversary of this newspaper passed last month with only the Detroit liberal daily, the *Free Press*, taking any notice (they called us “an anarchist National Lampoon”). We had initially planned a big hoopla celebration, not so much to congratulate ourselves, as to give vent to our desire to have festive get-togethers, but for a number of reasons (mostly related to sloth) we let the auspicious occasion slip by. Actually, to a very large degree, the Fifth Estate is an anomaly, a left-over from the ‘sixties that should have gone out of operation with the 450 other Underground Syndicate members that have disappeared since the heyday of the counter-culture. To be sure, a number of “underground” papers still exist in the U.S. but all of them (about 20) have mostly made their peace with the society they once contested and are now content to report on local entertainment and politics no more dangerous than squabbles within the Democratic Party.

The *Fifth Estate’s* survival in the wake of the almost total disintegration of the underground press movement seems to us to be in a good part due to the geographical accident of being published in Detroit. Why this city should be able to nurture a radical newspaper when no others seemed to be able to, escapes us. Perhaps it’s that since the paper’s inception, it moved steadily leftward until we simply fell off the spectrum—where we now find ourselves safely and securely lodged.

The paper began as the brainchild of a precocious teenager who had worked during the summer of 1964 on the *Los Angeles Free Press*, the first of the undergrounds, and came back to the Motor City all excited about doing the same thing here. The paper’s curious name is also an LA import having been that of a Sunset Strip coffee house and adopted for reasons lost to antiquity. Ostensibly it refers to going one beyond’ the fourth estate (the press), but why a coffeehouse would have a name such as that is anyone’s guess. Fortunately, by now the name just functions as a proper noun and although there have always been moves to change it, it appears to be what we are stuck with.

Politically the *Fifth Estate* announced in its inaugural issue of November 1965 that it proposed to be the “voice of liberal Detroit” and that it would take no sides, just report the facts in news articles. However, within four years the FE was at the center of New Left militancy in Detroit and regularly featured guns, bombs, Black Panthers, Viet Cong, and exhortations to revolution on the cover with articles that reflected all of the cultural and political excitement of that period (in retrospect, a lot of the buffoonery that passed as serious as well).

After the decline of the New Left in the early ‘seventies, the paper passed into a period of grim workerist leftism soon to be followed by a stab at becoming a commercial weekly all the while maintaining a semblance of radical and, to an extent, anarchist politics. In fairness to those who operated the paper in those days, it should be stated that these were the darkest moments for publishing such a paper and that none of the current staff were associated with the project at that time, so criticism comes easily.

Even still, by 1975, the FE had about played itself out and the staff about burned out. With only three regular staff members left and the paper on the verge of bankruptcy, a group of us, including members of the current staff who at that time were loosely associated in what was called the Eat The Rich Gang, announced we would take up operation of the paper but on a completely different basis. This non-violent (although heavily resented by the remaining staffers) coup turned the paper towards its current direction (i.e. falling off the spectrum) and it was

decided the paper would go from weekly to monthly publishing, commercial ads would no longer be accepted (ads had been appearing in the final months for cigarettes and “X” rated movies), and the politics of the paper would reflect a “libertarian communist” viewpoint.

Well, most of our current readership knows the rest of the story. It’s been up and down since then with lots of low points, but much more highs with all of us on the staff having grown immensely through the contacts with a readership that takes no shit from anyone, particularly newspaper writers. The relationship has forced us to grow on all levels, personally and politically, but there is no telling where it will all lead.

Years ago we dumped the ideology of revolution and the mythological baggage that comes along with it. Left now with only the desire for revolution and the utter destruction of this vile society, the direction ahead is anything but clear. All we have is our hatred for what is and our dreams for what could be, and the increasing need to stay in contact with those who feel similarly. After all the arguments are said and done, that is why we do this.

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