

The theory of Culture Creep

Katherine Burch
Pilot editor

William Proctor has a theory in mind about *The New York Times*. He sees this huge world-renown newspaper as influencing the world's values and opinions in the form of culture creep. This is the approach of his book *The Gospel According to The New York Times*.

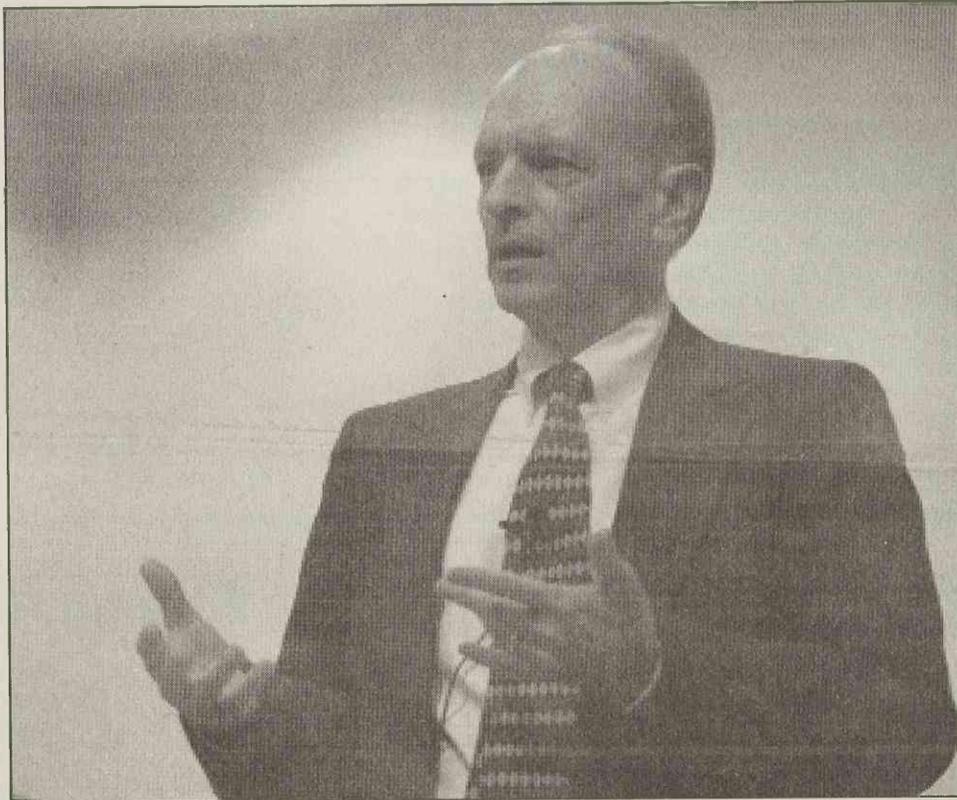
During his speech on his book and the theory of culture creep, he stated that many are touched by the "tentacles of *The New York Times*" and it has a "tremendous effect on those who read it."

Proctor is a former Marine JAG officer who served during the Vietnam War. After leaving the military he became a reporter for the *New York Daily News*, writing daily about the court system in New York City. The *News* is a competitor with *The New York Times*.

He believes that the *New York Times* has a focused way it works to influence opinions over time, such as these public opinion areas: homosexuality, abortion and the death penalty.

"A quick example of mindset changes is in 1982, 34% regarded homosexuality as an acceptable lifestyle," said Proctor. "In 1999, 50% found it acceptable...look at that figure in comparison to the Northeast media where 75% look at it as okay."

Another example Proctor mentioned, was that in 1988 80% of Americans saw the death penalty as being okay while 66% today see the



Pilot Photo by Joy Marinelli

William Proctor explains his theory of culture creep and *The New York Times* at Hamrick Hall auditorium.

"Corporate culture in The New York Times pervades throughout the news media"

author William Proctor

penalty as acceptable.

According to the author, these changes in percentages were shown through the editorial page and in slanted news coverage by *The Times*.

"There is a blurring of lines of actual news and editorials," said Proctor.

In the 1970s, there was colorful writing, but accuracy was still the key item in a news story, Proctor said.

The newspaper began stepping away from straight news coverage during the 1980s and 1990s, according to Proctor. He pointed to the

use of slanted news stories backed up by editorials and opinion editorial pieces as the way the newspaper influences its readers.

The Newman Foundation, described as a watchdog group, did a study over twenty years from 1977 to 1997 looking at over 6000 articles. In the study, straight news coverage declined from 49.8% in 1977 to 16.2% in 1997. The study also found that in major newspapers it was not just the facts but news analysis and editorializing increased.

This occurred according to Proctor because *The New York Times* helped by setting the agenda for other news organization.

"*The New York Times* has resources that make television news shows look puny," said Proctor. "Networks know the *Times* is much more in depth."

The *New York Times* can have more influence on setting agendas because of one thing: space.

"They have a lot more space to use on subjects," said Proctor. "For example,

there was five times more information on abortion in *The New York Times* than in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*."

In his book, Proctor writes that the *New York Times* is establishing a more liberal mindset among those in the mass media.

He described the agenda setting by *The New York Times* in the form of the seven deadly sins.

These seven deadly sins he described included a nervousness toward religious certainty, capital punishment, the second amendment in reference to gun rights, censorship, no limitations on abortion and transgender rights.

According to Proctor, these seven areas are touching news media throughout the United States.

"Corporate culture in *The New York Times* pervades throughout the news media.

"They have a tremendous reach and their power is significant," said Proctor.

There is not an easy answer to fixing this agenda setting.

Proctor posed this solution creating a counter-balanced paper that presents both sides.

"Fair and balanced in objectivity, all sides of stories, newspapers can put all sides in a story," said Proctor.

As for the reporters in the news business Proctor said, "Most got into news as cynics or go into news and become a cynic."