



Beat the Press

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Washington.

Usually, it is the President who does most of the complaining about the U. S. press, but now he has been joined by the Vice President, who thinks the press is hurting the nation's image by giving Europeans a distorted picture of American life.

In his first back-home speech following his exhilarating international engagement, Hubert Humphrey said the news media had left Europe with the impression that the U. S. is a land of "bombs, fires, disasters." The Vice President candidly added, "I've been wanting to get this off my chest."

There is no better therapy than getting things off the chest. The President does it regularly at the expense of the press, and it obviously makes him feel better, at least temporarily, so there is no good reason for Humphrey, who is very popular with the newsmen, to deny himself the same small indulgence.

In any case, the Washington press is used to it, not just from this Administration, but also from many previous ones. Sooner or later there is always some alienation between the press and any Administration, but the present hostility is different in kind as well as degree.

The reaction of the Washington correspondents springs not from being criticized (they are hardened to that) but from frequently being treated as not quite bright, as a group of simpletons who can be taken in by even the most obvious White House public relation ploys.

The correspondents' experience is not unique: In their acute new study of American diplomacy, Edward Weintal and Charles Barlett note the reaction of embassy row to the same Madison Av. treatment. "What does Mr. Johnson take us for?" one ambassador complained. "To be named ambassador to Washington you have to be a pretty sophisticated fellow," he observed, "and Mr. Johnson treats us like morons."

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The President's worst tantrums about the press (both public and private) have developed a certain predictable pattern: The President suddenly stages a super, unrehearsed spectacular (Guam, Manila, Honolulu), and then cries "foul" when the press reports that these productions have generally had the effect of bending public attention to his will, and at the same time diverting it from less sanguine matters.

The crudest recent example was the way Johnson tried to smother Sen. Robert F. Kennedy's critical speech on Vietnam. On that day the President (1) called an impromptu news conference, (2) made an unscheduled speech at Howard University, (3) announced a new missile understanding with Russia, (4) arranged for dramatic simultaneous statements on the war by Secretary Rusk and General Westmoreland, (5) sent a letter defending Vietnam bombing to Sen. Henry Jackson, which was distributed to the Senate press gallery while Kennedy was talking on the floor.

The White House was furious at suggestions in the press that any of these innocent activities had been timed to black out Kennedy's speech, but even the Senator's Republican colleague, Sen. Javits, accused the Administration of "fevered activity in trying to blot out consideration" of Kennedy's peace appeal.

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A few days later the President complained that his bad news gets into the newspapers while his good news often goes unnoticed. "There is something about our open society that gives the play to what went wrong instead of what went right," he said.

Thereupon Johnson took charge of the news by suddenly

gathering up the government and flying off to Guam. At the end of this exercise, the Washington Star, which has generally supported the Chief Executive's Vietnam policy, said: "If there is any necessary or even good reason for President Johnson's long and somewhat risky flight to Guam, it does not appear on the face of anything that has been published or said about that get-together."

Another Washington paper said that "the President is irritated with reports that his 17,000 mile journey was a theatrical production that flopped, and he has spent considerable time correcting the record to match his version."

The aftermath of Guam, however, has been no emptier than those other publicity extravaganzas at Honolulu in February of 1966 and at Manila last October, but they all served the same purpose—diverting public attention at critical moments.

Even the most friendly newspapers noted that the spur-of-the-moment meeting with Premier Ky in Hawaii took the play away from the Fulbright television hearings into Vietnam. And, of course, the press could hardly fail to notice that the hasty Manila Conference was timed to grab the headlines just before last November's elections.

The upshot of all this is that the President feels the press has gone out of its way to question his motives, while the press, quite predictably, asks, "Who does he think he is kidding?"