

Presk
10/20/76

Mr. Kelley's View of the Press

NO ONE WHO HAS followed the reforms of the FBI undertaken over the last several years by the Ford administration doubts that the agency is now far beyond where it was in the days of J. Edgar Hoover. It is a more responsive agency, a less defensive one, and it has been working hard to correct many of the defects that placed it in political trouble. Because the bureau was so well on the road to recovery, the undelivered speech of FBI Director Clarence Kelley the other day is a disturbing affair.

Mr. Kelley was scheduled to speak Friday night before the New Mexico Press Association in Albuquerque. While his plane was preparing to take off after a stopover in Chicago, Mr. Kelley was called off by Attorney General Edward Levi, who had been read parts of the advance text by White House Counsel Philip Buchen. Both agreed that Mr. Kelley's prepared remarks did not reflect the press policies of the Ford administration, and when those objections were expressed to Mr. Kelley by Attorney General Levi, the FBI director scrapped his prepared text.

With just two weeks to go in a close presidential election, Mr. Kelley's superiors in the Ford administration were plainly worried about the political repercussions of his prepared speech. Mr. Kelley's text announced that the FBI was on the verge of punishing those journalists whose stories and editorials were considered "hostile" to the bureau. Journalists whose work was found by the bureau to be fair would still have "my deepest respect and cooperation," Mr. Kelley said. He went on:

"But if a journalist continually displays an obsession to support his own hostile notions about our agency, or to support a boilerplate editorial policy without regard for objectivity, then he cannot expect to continue to enjoy any sort of productive relationship with us."

Mr. Kelley immediately acknowledged in his prepared remarks that "as a government agency we are accountable to the people," but he added that "we will not continue to throw open the doors for those who invariably dash us with scalding water." He stated as his justification for such measures that "I owe it to the 20,000 other FBI employees (and) to more than 215 million Americans not to gratuitously contribute to the destruction of the FBI's credibility."

Nothing could more undercut the FBI's credibility than a selective policy of news distribution. Something like that thought, in addition to political considerations, must have occurred to Messrs. Buchen and Levi. That it didn't occur to Mr. Kelley is the pity of the whole episode. Mr. Kelley said later that he didn't write that speech but that he agreed with its contents. That, too, is regrettable. Mr. Kelley seems to think that critical reporting and editorializing are the equivalent of being scalded in hot water. We think of debate and criticism as indispensable elements in a democratic society.

Though the FBI has come a long way, it is obvious from Mr. Kelley's undelivered speech that it still has a long way to go.