

Clark Mollenhoff—from journalistic zealot to the Nixon team

By James B. Snyder and Robert F. Hickox

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DOUGLAS CHEVALIER

"I'm frankly confused over my old friend's latest move," mused the muffled, long distance voice of novelist Fletcher Knebel from Cuernavaca, Mexico. "It's like the Knight of the Holy Grail becoming a member of the King's Guards." As if that comparison wasn't sharp enough, Knebel honed another one: "It's almost like the detective suddenly switching sides with the guy he's been chasing."

Knebel's old friend was sitting 1,800 miles away behind a desk in the mausoleum-gray Executive Office Building. At best, it was an unlikely spot for Clark Mollenhoff, who spent more than 20 years on the other side of government desks confronting bureaucrats, congressmen and presidential aides with incisive questions of mismanagement, inefficiency and corruption.

More than an investigative reporter, Mollenhoff was a journalistic zealot. As a correspondent for Cowles Publications' *Look* magazine, *Des Moines Register & Tribune*, *Minneapolis Star & Tribune*, his tenacious digging and relentless interrogations helped uncover a cluster of national scandals from Dixon-Yates and Jimmy Hoffa to Bobby Baker and Billie Sol Estes. Barging around Washington like a crusading juggernaut, the hulking 6-foot-4 Mollenhoff collected 20 top journalism awards, including the Pulitzer Prize, three Sigma Delta Chi awards and the Heywood Brown Memorial Award, turned an embarrassing arc light on every administration from Truman through Johnson and more than once drove President Eisenhower to glowering exasperation with his persistent press conference probing.

Yet, since last August, Clark R. Mollenhoff, 48, journalist, author, lawyer, nemesis of government secrecy—has been a presidential aide, with the sworn duty of safeguarding Richard M. Nixon from sudden unexpected exposure to the same arc light that chagrined his predecessors. A handout from Mollenhoff's office under the heading: "Presidential Ombudsman (Special Counsel to the President)" compares his new role to that of a government operations committee of the Senate or House. It notes instances where Presidents Truman, Eisenhower and Kennedy made mistaken comments at press conferences "... because they relied upon the normal administrative chain of command." The statement adds that "President Nixon, who had extended experience in dealing

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with congressional investigations, realizes the hazard of dealing with information that comes through the bureaucratic chain of command and wants to keep the possibility of error down to a minimum."

While many of his former colleagues in the Washington press corps may find it difficult to picture him as the Nixon Administration's resident ombudsman, Mollenhoff eschews any notion that his job change constitutes a major defection. Swiveling his 250 pounds around, Mollenhoff leans forward across the desk, unconsciously picks up a pencil. "There's really no change at all," he shrugs. "My objective inside and outside the government has been to work toward good government, honest government. That's what I'm trying to do here and I'm having many of the same difficulties trying to convince people within the administration of the need to play it straight."

Playing it straight—and honest and "working like hell" are recurrent themes in the Mollenhoff Credo. He reworks the phrases often, fixing the listener with a steady gaze that assures this is no put-on. And, if you think it is, because it sounds square and right out of the Iowa cornbelt, well then, you're already a victim of your own put-on.

Despite 20 years in Washington, Mollenhoff remains eager, uncynical and, essentially, a product of that same cornbelt. Born in Burnside, Iowa, Mollenhoff attended St. Cecelia's Academy, a Catholic high school in Algona where he was a journalism classmate of Mackinlay Kantor. Married, the year after gradua-

tion, he attended Webster City Junior College and earned a law degree in 1944 from Drake University Law School.

While at Drake, Mollenhoff got his first taste of newspaper reporting, pounding the police and court beat for the *Des Moines Register*. On weekends, he pounded offensive linemen as a tackle and co-captain of Drake's football team. Upon graduation, Mollenhoff could have slipped into a New York Giants jersey as a prime draft choice. (He still maims his Chevy Chase neighbors occasionally in touch football.) Instead, he opted for a Naval uniform and spent two years as a boat group commander on a troop transport in the Pacific. Discharged as a lieutenant (j.g.), he returned to the *Register* as an investigator and political writer.

A year spent at Harvard in 1959 as a Nieman Fellow (A *New York Times* editor once stalked out of a lecture, after Mollenhoff kept questioning him on why the lead sentences in the *Times* were so long) and Mollenhoff won his spot in the Cowles Washington bureau.

Now, 10 years later, Mollenhoff says that "when I was on the outside, I was tolerant with reporters who, perhaps, hadn't been as thorough or in-depth as I was. Now I'm trying to be the same way with some of the people in government, who are obviously inexperienced, in this first term of a new administration."

With six months of White House duty under his belt, Mollenhoff affirms "there's not an agency or department that I haven't looked

into," within his carte-blanche, unrestricted areas of responsibility. "I get calls from agency heads who are jittery or from newspapermen. I'll check it out first to see if it's just a rumor. Sometimes, I can go right to the source and settle the problem right there, without maiming the President." But department heads are aware of both Mollenhoff's reputation and availability. When a sticky question is raised over someone's conduct, "they come around to me," he says.

While Mollenhoff remains tight-lipped about specifics, he cites one actual—but anonymous—case: One agency head became concerned about an administration appointee. A possible instance of fraud was mentioned. "You see," says Mollenhoff, "many of these people are nervous, they know of mistakes made in past administrations and they don't want to get caught later on over something they should have taken care of earlier." He checked with other agencies which were also involved, ferreting out discrepancies in different versions of the story. "I talked to men in the field, I asked a lot of questions." In this case, he claims, there was no conclusive evidence of fraud, yet the individual's conduct was such "that we felt he should go, and he did resign. He happened to have been a strong supporter of Richard Nixon. "But," he adds "before we presented the facts to the President, we gave the man a chance to explain. You just don't go to a man in the dead of the night and fire him."

Although Mollenhoff has been portrayed as
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the administration's "House Dick" and "chief investigator," he insists "it would be ludicrous to say that I could do a better job than the investigative agencies of the government." Still, Mollenhoff recently combined his old sleuthing traits with the newly acquired—and considerable—clout of a special presidential counsel to force information out of the Pentagon into the hands of the Senate's Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, probing alleged misconduct by Army noncoms in directing operations for enlisted men's clubs. "The McClellan Committee wanted certain information," recounts Mollenhoff, "Mel Laird wanted them to have it, but they weren't getting it. When the committee complained to me, I got on the phone and called over to the legal staff at the Pentagon and said 'What the hell goes? Give them the facts.' I said, 'You know the Secretary wants the committee to have this information.' I still had to fight them inch by inch. It's the same old problem of bureaucracy." Hovering a beefy fist over the desktop, he grinned, "I still

get just as irritated on the 'inside' as I did on the 'outside.' "

What Mollenhoff considers 'irritation' would more likely be described as full-blown fury by those who know him, who have watched him in action and who have read any one of the books he has banged out since 1962, excoriating the corrupters of the federal government. The titles read like epithets: *Washington Cover-Up*, *Tentacles of Power*, *Despoilers of Democracy*, *Pentagon*. Burdened with scores of footnotes and appendices, the heavily documented texts attest to the law degree Mollenhoff earned, but never professionally used. A moralizer, a strong reactor to good and bad with little patience for any nuances that might fall between. His writings carry a drive-them-from-the-temple, self-claimed "righteous indignation." Knebel, who worked with Mollenhoff in the Cowles Washington bureau for a number of years before converting his typewriter to the production of best-sellers (*Seven Days in May*), probably knows the White House ombudsman as well as anyone. "Clark had utter contempt for guys in government who didn't have what

he felt was enough integrity. He'd get on someone like the Royal Canadian Mounties," Knebel laughed. "But sometimes I felt he had the harshness of the prosecutor . . . not quite enough tolerance, at times." Yet, he quickly stressed, "that never diminished our friendship . . . and just having him there made us all dig harder."

Knebel, in fact, may well have written the best and most concise description of Mollenhoff in his novel *Vanished*. The novel, written in the first person of a White House press secretary, introduces one of the main characters—Dave Paulick, a newspaperman—with this sketch:

"Paulick was a brusque, sharp, cocky, unrelenting mountain of a man, with bull shoulders and hands that belonged to a pro football tackle. He was as nonpartisan as litmus paper and as incorruptible as Jehovah.

"He grated on me, probably because I, like all Washington officials, feared him. Yet, I respected the bulldozer in him and admired his craftsmanship as I would that of any pro. More than that, I secretly envied him, because, in

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Paulick, I saw the kind of newspaperman I should have been, but never was."

Knebel admits the character was drawn from "a melange of Clark Mollenhoff and Izzy Stone (I.F. Stone, editor of his own Washington newsletter.)"

Shortly after Mollenhoff cleaned out his desk on the ninth floor of the National Press Building to submerge his talents "inside" the government, he resurfaced to publicly confront the press over what he termed "outrageous stories" dealing with Clement Haynsworth—the White House's first choice to fill Abe Fortas' seat on the Supreme Court. Although Mollenhoff first sparred briefly Nov. 7 with correspondent Martin Agronsky on the latter's WTOP-TV show, that was just the prelim. Mollenhoff's real targets were columnists Frank Mankiewicz and Tom Braden.

Four days later, Mollenhoff was back on the tube again, this time for the main bout. His co-advocate on the Haynsworth appointment was Sen. Marlow Cook (R -Ky.). In the other corner were Mankiewicz, Braden, Agronsky, William Eaton, Washington correspondent for the *Chicago Daily News*, and John Kilpatrick of WTOP. At issue were Judge Haynsworth's tax-deductible gift of a house to Furman University, his stock holdings and a land transaction involving 26 people, including Bobby Baker and Haynsworth. Mollenhoff blasted the press-at-large for what he felt was only superficial

digging on the stories, accused Mankiewicz and Braden of writing "sneaky" columns and charged the pair with perpetrating a fraud. He charged, in part, "We have before us now a man named Haynsworth who has made a complete full disclosure despite the fact that there are a lot of columnists around who will take little things out of context, who will perpetrate frauds upon the American people on various aspects of his finances."

"I don't think that Clark ought to sit here," Braden replied, "and say that the two of us are perpetrating frauds on the American people. I don't say things like that about you."

Then. . .

Mollenhoff: I didn't say that about you, but I have the columns here in case you happen to want me to to.

Braden: I don't think it is becoming for you, who is (sic) the special assistant to the President, to make statements like that about newspapermen.

As Mollenhoff repeated the "fraud perpetration" charge, Agronsky interjected, noting Mollenhoff's legal background, and asked him if he was sticking to the charge. When Mollenhoff held fast, Braden refused to ask him any more questions.

Yet Mollenhoff insists that the Braden-Mankiewicz rhubarb was not his intention. "They sought it from me on television," he says. "I wasn't going to name them until they asked me to. I had never attacked an individual member of the press." On the contrary, he



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said, "I praised many of them in my books, men whose competence generally had never been cited anywhere else."

Still, he maintains Haynsworth was a victim of character assassination. "He's a very decent, honorable guy," Mollenhoff asserts, "Clement Haynsworth is unusual in his ethical standards. I'd say that very few in government, in the Senate and House or the newspaper business can match him. It was a case of sloppy, superficial reporting."

Rifling through some papers, he extracts a copy of a letter from Haynsworth, and shrugging, passes it across the desk. "You might be interested in this." The "Dear Clark" letter reads:

I do not think the story in today's Washington Post will do any harm with anyone who reads it closely and who knows about such things. For radio and television, of course, it is capsuled with slant words which assert impropriety without suggesting where it lies.

On a local radio broadcast (Greenville, S.C.) today, the announcer had approximately this to say: "New charges have been made against Judge Haynsworth. He is charged with having given his home to Furman University, reserving life estates and taking an income tax deduction. Opponents of Judge Haynsworth think this may have an important bearing on his confirmation."

I suppose I might as well confess that I made other gifts to Furman, where I went to school. I give them something every year. I make donations to my church every year and to the United Fund of Greenville. I give something every year to Harvard Law School and to others.

If you wish you might inform the gentlemen of the press, so that they can charge me with those things, too, without the need of further inquiry.

Adds Mollenhoff, "You should understand that, on Haynsworth, I never got into the right or wrong of appointing him, based on his philosophy or because he was from that part of the country. That was entirely the President's decision. Understand, too," he says, "the easiest thing in the world for me to have done was to go to the President and say 'we'll have a problem on this man's confirmation; we better throw him overboard.'"

While Braden may not have thought it becoming for Mollenhoff to criticize the press, he shouldn't have been too surprised by the outburst. For years, Mollenhoff—in a kind of love-hate relationship with the Fourth Estate—has been rapping the press; particularly the Washington press, for not checking facts, for over-relying on government handouts and generally falling down on the job of informing the public.

Lately, in fact, Mollenhoff feels press treatment of his own role on occasion has not been accurate. *Newsweek* recently quoted Mollenhoff as saying Vice President Agnew's now-famous speech on the press originated in the White House and reflected the President's thinking. "That's not true," says Mollenhoff, "I just plain never said that at all."

Newsweek has also indicated that Mollenhoff moonlighted speeches for Barry Goldwater during the 1964 campaign. "I never moonlighted or took a nickel from anyone," says Mollenhoff. "What happened was . . . I delivered a speech in 1964 to the Iowa Manufacturers Association, on the TFX, Billie Sol Estes and Bobby Baker. The speech was printed in several different publications, including the

Congressional Record. The Republican Party, the Goldwater people lifted my thoughts from the speech and used them as their own ideas and their thoughts. That's what happened."

Obviously, Mollenhoff's pronouncements over the years on the press were hardly geared to win him a round of drinks at the National Press Club bar. Members of the press are uniquely birds of a feather and when one of their ranks fouls the nest, a little wing-clipping is in order.

In 1964, Mollenhoff was vice president of the Press Club, assured by unbroken tradition that the following year he would automatically become president. But Mollenhoff had neglected a cardinal rule of politics: Don't abuse the electorate. He had stumped around the country, harping on the failings of the newsgatherers of the nation's capital.

An insurgent group sprang up to oppose him and in one of the largest Press Club election turnouts, Mollenhoff—and the unwritten rule of succession—were defeated 408 to 401.

In retrospect, Mollenhoff comments "It was probably a good thing for me, I guess . . . I got the time to write a couple of books . . . you know," he says evenly. "One of the guys who voted against me told me afterwards that he only wanted to cut my victory margin. He thought it would take me down a peg or two . . ."

If he had refrained from publicly needling his colleagues and instead just hewed to his own manual of reporting, he would have easily been elected president of the club. But then the easy route has always been abhorrent to Mollenhoff. "I remember when I first began covering Jimmy Hoffa—and I was pretty aggressive in my pursuit of him," he understates. "I was interviewing him at breakfast one morning and he suddenly leans over the table at me and says: 'God damn it, Clark, everyone has his price. What's yours? I know you newspapermen don't get paid much—not enough for you to get on my back like this.'"

"I said 'Jimmy, there's no price . . . now let's get on with the interview.' I kind of liked Jimmy," he smiles, "even tried to reform him. But he became so basically evil, always trying to work the angles." Yet, Mollenhoff surmises, "I'm sure that he was highly idealistic when he first started in the labor movement. Jimmy had a lot on the ball. He just made the wrong alliances early in life and finally became a total cynic."

The interview was running over. His secretary had buzzed him twice, but Mollenhoff was reaching back to his apprenticeship in the early 1940s at the *Des Moines Register*. "I saw the same thing then covering the police beat and the courts—the petty corruption, the pay-offs, so many injustices involving little people. I could see the pattern then, this . . . this perversion of the operation of American democracy."

And then, rising from the desk, the President's ombudsman shook his head, "You know, when I was a kid, I thought I had missed it all. I kept wishing I'd been born 30 years before . . . when there was so much corruption to expose . . . pretty naive, wasn't it?" ■