

Dick Nolan

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Press Must Press

As a seasoned, not to say pickled-in-brine practitioner, I have been observing the latest skirmishes in the press freedom fight with a certain grim amusement, and no surprise whatever.

What the wretches expect from Tyrannosaurus Nix and the hard-nosed beasties around him but a fight for life once they consolidated their power? It does seem to me that we've been whimpering a lot about this, when we ought to be polishing our war clubs and flailing around us with a will.

It does no good, you know, to take this kind of thing to the public, in the manner of a Clarence shrieking for Nanny. The public does not give a fiddler's betch for the problems of reporters and editors, or for the mystical light that is said to shimmer around the First Amendment.

A free press is the kind of institution that nobody misses until it is gone -- and not everybody misses it then, if they happen to be on the right side of the concentration camp wire.

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NOPE, THE JOB of defending the press is up to the press itself, and the best defense of all is, as ever, a determined offensive. Nobody ever really kills a free press. When a free press dies it commits suicide, and it does not do it all at once, but by degrees.

We err badly, for example, in the reverential treatment accorded the Presidency. Who ever said the press covering the President was supposed to be some kind of spoon-fed branch of the White House propaganda corps? When it degenerates to this, as it has, a little bit of suicide has been begun.

The New York Times, which considers itself with awe, set the tone for this kind of thing as much as any single press organ did. The Times developed the "leak" into an art form. Times men went about like baby birds, beaks wide ajar, peeping mightily to have little news gobbets thrust upon them by friendly momma birds in this or that administration.

It is, or ought to be, an axiom in this trade that no politician ever tells a reporter

anything he doesn't want to see in print for his own purposes. He does not act out of regard for the First Amendment, or the people's right to know, or for any of that high-toned jazz. The press is there to be used, in his view, and he uses it.

You start hanging around these power-hungry operators, depending on their largesse, and in no time at all they have the collar around your neck, and you are answering the tug of a leash.

The most fascinating news consists of the stuff the illegitim do not wish you to print. It is digging out this kind of information which makes the game worthwhile; without it you might as well be touting stocks on commission, or fitting shoes somewhere.

Nor am I especially awed by the relationships between the courts and the press. The hell with the courts, I say. Let them run their show, and leave the press to run its, because under the Constitution as interpreted by Jefferson, my institution is somewhat more important than theirs.

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AS A REPORTER I assert the right to print any damn thing I can find and prove true, and that would include memos filched from President Nixon's inside coat pocket, if he left it unattended. It seems to me the Times did little enough with those famous Pentagon Papers.

Most of the weaknesses of the press do not come about as the result of attack from the outside, but because of dry rot from within. A properly functioning press is the people's intelligence service, questing and probing, gathering and interpreting, and on the editorial pages pointing and hollering a lot. And these things are done not in the expectation of any gratitude on the part of the people. At base, they're done for the sheer exhilaration of it, the delicious scratching of curiosity's itch.

Anybody, courts and juries included, who asked me for tapes and notes would get the blandest blue-eyed stare in the western world. What notes? What tapes? Who, me? None of their business. Time we all said go to hell.