

Assault on Press Seems to Continue

By Jack Anderson

A contrite President Nixon told newsmen on April 30: "Continue to give me hell when you think I'm wrong." One week later, the Justice Department obtained the indictment of Boston Globe reporter Tom Oliphant for accompanying a mercy mission which attempted to drop food and medicine to the besieged Indians at Wounded Knee, S.D.

This appears to be a continuation of the relentless assault upon the press by the government at the same time that the President's communications aide, Herb Klein, is assuring influential editors: "We want a new relationship with the press."

Never in the nation's 200-year history has there been such a campaign of jailing, tailing, tapping, harassment and vituperation against reporters. Oliphant's mistreatment is merely the latest in a series of incidents.

Under the U.S. Constitution, newsmen are supposed to be free to pursue the news wherever they can find it. They have gone into enemy territory in time of war; they have taken great personal risks to keep the public informed.

Mercy Drop

In this spirit, the 27-year-old Oliphant covered the prepara-

tions for a three-plane mercy drop to the Indian militants. Then he went along on the flight and nearly lost his life in an accident. He wrote two exclusive stories about the event.

But Oliphant writes for the Boston Globe, a newspaper which displeases the White House. FBI agents, under orders from Justice Department representatives, obtained a warrant for his arrest.

First, they broke into his former home near Boston early in the morning and terrified the occupants who were still in bed. The FBI squad departed in confusion after discovering they had pounced upon the wrong house.

Oliphant, meanwhile, learned the FBI had located his new home in Washington and were preparing to descend upon it. While his wife and three children waited apprehensively, he rode a bus downtown and turned himself in.

Reporter's 'Riot'

On the basis of information from an informer whom some of the prosecutors now doubt, a federal grand jury was prodded by the Justice Department to indict Oliphant. The charge: he allegedly conspired

to promote a "riot" by raining food and medicine on the Indians at Wounded Knee.

The key allegation against him is that he "had in his possession \$10,000 for use in obtaining aircraft and food, medicine and other supplies. . . ." The truth is that the newsman left to accompany the mission on such short notice that he had only eight dollars in his pocket and a credit card.

Yet Oliphant faces 15 years in prison if the Justice Department can find a jury to convict him. This is unlikely, since the prosecutors will have a hard time finding 12 American citizens who will convict a newsmen for reporting the news.

The Nixon administration tried to nail my associate Les Whitten on a similar charge. FBI agents handcuffed and jailed him while he was reporting on the return of Indian documents to the government. In Whitten's case, the grand jury refused to believe the FBI and the Justice Department dismissed the charges.

'Improper'

Yet Oliphant was indicted even though the U.S. attorney for South Dakota, William Clayton, a GOP politician and ex-county prosecutor, had

never even read his stories. In our talk with Clayton, he said it would be "improper" for him to say whether he pushed through an indictment under pressure from Washington.

One of the Justice Department attorneys handling the case in Washington is Richard Vosepka, a former Marine captain with only one year of non-military practice. His attitude toward the press can best be summed up by quoting some of his answers to our questions about the case.

• "Don't be pushy," he snapped.

• "I don't give a s--- if that's a legitimate question," he responded to another question. "I always go through the chain of command."

• "I'm not going to talk with you any further," he said finally.

Among saner heads in the administration, there is a feeling that the Oliphant case is smearing new egg on the friendlier face the President is trying to turn to the press even before the old egg can be wiped off.

But at this writing, the case remains in the hands of those Nixon disciples who feel the President is best protected by locking up the people who write unfavorable stories.