

FILE
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Jack Anderson's "Apology"

Elsewhere on this page today we reprint excerpts from the extraordinary exchange between the columnist Jack Anderson and Senator Thomas Eagleton on *Face the Nation* Sunday. Mr. Anderson reveals in that exchange some very peculiar and unsatisfactory notions concerning journalistic responsibility—and some absolutely bizarre notions concerning “conscience.” Jack Anderson, you will remember, was the man who went on the air with allegations of “drunken and reckless driving” citations against Senator Eagleton in his home state, allegations which the columnist was later to concede he had not been able to verify. Having first invoked competitive pressures as an excuse for his behavior—which was no excuse at all—Mr. Anderson proceeded on *Face the Nation*, where he was among the journalists interviewing Senator Eagleton, to offer the Senator an apology. Or something.

The columnist, as our excerpted remarks will show, in the first instance put it very plainly: “I do owe you an apology. I’ve always told my reporters, Senator, that a fact doesn’t become a fact for our column until we can prove it.” Somewhat prematurely, as it turned out, Senator Eagleton graciously accepted Mr. Anderson’s apology and even commended his “moral character” for admitting a mistake. Whereat—or shortly after—Mr. Anderson announced, positively stricken with more-in-sorrowism, that he only wished he could “retract the

story completely.” But, the columnist continued, “I cannot do that yet. My conscience won’t allow me to . . .” The point, to the extent that one was discernible, seemed to be that Mr. Anderson’s conscience would not permit him to retract the story (for which he had already apologized) because it still might prove true.

The logic in all this really devours itself: how can you concede that you have no business airing a story that does not yet exist as a story by your own standards and then refuse to “retract” it? Isn’t the question whether it should ever—so to speak—have been “tracted” in the first place? And didn’t Mr. Anderson concede that it should not have been? What exactly was Mr. Anderson refusing to “retract” if not the allegations which, by his own account, it had been irresponsible to broadcast? We do not know how Jack Anderson’s reporters—the staff upon which he claims to have imposed such strict journalistic standards—are meant to receive this latest bit of delphic instruction from the master. But for our part, we believe Senator Eagleton was right on the money when he objected to the distinction and observed that it hardly seemed equitable to him. Sunday’s exchange on the television program did nothing to alter our opinion that the Anderson performance has been a reckless and wholly regrettable excursion into the worst kind of “journalism.”