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## The Arrogance of the Press

The American press has always been a rather different institution from the British. In so huge a country the local newspaper has acquired much greater power, and there is something forcefully romantic about the status of grand old organs like the St. Louis Post-Dispatch or the Milwaukee Journal, with their humming offices in the heart of town, their squadron of

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reporters, their locally celebrated editors and regionally lionized columnists, their ancillary TV stations, and their dashing fleets of delivery vans. It was a Briton who called the press the fourth estate of the realm, but the Americans were the first, I think, to recognize the concept constitutionally, and ever since the newspapers of America have occupied a station in public life different in kind from their European contemporaries.

In America as a whole the press seems to me to have developed an unhealthy new arrogance. One senses it partly in the dogmatism, often slavishly accepted, of critics and editorial writers but chiefly in the disturbing vogue for investigative reporting. This springs largely, of course, from the success of The Washington Post in exhibiting the immoralities of the

### The News Business

Nixon regime, but it has gone much further now. The press enjoyed that letting of blood, and now too often seems to think that good journalism knows no secrets, respects no privacies, pardons no faults, and brooks no reticence.

A nation, they say, gets the press it warrants, and I think perhaps this predatory journalism does genuinely reflect a meanness or cruelty in the American spirit today. It is bad journalism, to my mind, for it is out of balance. It is unrealistic in its demands. It is immature in its excesses. It is distasteful in its relentlessness. It is often disgracefully inaccurate. It is harmful to the commonalty in its inescapable innuendo that nobody in high office is beyond suspicion. The right to say anything about anybody is not one of the inalienable rights envisaged by the founding fathers.

I find it easy to imagine a tyranny there: those handsome offices, of Journal or Herald-Times, transformed into bureaus of authority, those columnists and talk-show kings revealed as fawning spokesmen of the regime, those investigative tigers translated without much difficulty into agents of police or secret intelligence. It is not hard to see. They are halfway there already, if not in method at least in instinct.