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The Washington Post

AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 12, 1971

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The "Routine" Investigation of Daniel Schorr

"I now believe there was never a job to be offered"—the remark was made by CBS correspondent Daniel Schorr apropos of the strange goings on between the White House, the FBI and Mr. Schorr's friends, neighbors, relatives and employers who were interrogated about him recently by federal agents claiming he was under consideration for a high level government job. In response to Ken Clawson's story about all this in The Washington Post yesterday, the President's spokesman, Mr. Ziegler, has asserted (1) that Mr. Schorr was being investigated as a candidate for a position in government, (2) that the administration is not at liberty to say what that position was and (3) that no attempt at intimidation of Mr. Schorr—whose television reportage and commentary have been a source of some displeasure in the White House—was even remotely contemplated.

The known facts of the matter, the bare bones of what has been ascertained could sustain either version of the story. They are simply that Mr. Schorr has incurred the wrath and occasional complaints of Nixon administration officials — most recently of Charles Colson in the White House; that more or less simultaneously with one of these episodes in August an FBI investigation of Mr. Schorr was undertaken at the initiative of Frederic Malek's office in the White House; that the investigators were informed that Mr. Schorr was being checked out by way of clearance for a high level job; that neither Mr. Schorr nor his employers could ever find out what that job might be or whether it even existed.

We are perfectly prepared to believe—or at least to have it demonstrated—that Mr. Schorr was in fact being considered for a post in the Nixon administration. For all we know, Tom Wicker may be in line to replace Attorney General Mitchell and Sander Vanocur may be headed for our embassy in Saigon—after all, everything is possible. The point is that the administration would not have to be cutting through such a heavy fog of suspicion on what it insists was a "routine" check, if some of the White House staff principals involved were

rather more famous for their scruples and if administration behavior in general did not make it so easy to believe that government might well be abusing its powers in this fashion. Consider Messrs. Colson and Malek, who are best known in certain political and administrative circles around town for the skill of their blunt instrument work. The scurrilous, last minute ads of the 1970 congressional campaign, the summary kicking out of Secretary Hickel's staff, the dangerous and backfiring attack on George Meany at the time of the President's announcement of his new economic policy—these are among the juicier episodes with which these aides have been associated. We say "associated" because such things have a way of never becoming entirely open or clear. Mr. Colson in particular seems to have come to public attention chiefly through an unending series of denials and clarifications of episodes the administration would rather not discuss.

More important than the fact that these two men were said to have been involved—one with the initiation of the investigation, the other in pressing complaints with CBS—is the fact that the administration has given vent at such levels to the theory that the media, or certain parts of it, are peopled by men and women who have neither the country's nor the government's best interests at heart. The campaign to discredit both the motives and the product of much of the press, taken together with the administration's propensity for confusing criticism with conspiracy and worse, is essential background to understanding the fuss. In past administrations, investigations have been undertaken of press leaks, as they have been in this one. The present affair is something quite different. As a measure of how far this administration has let its bad temper with the media take it, you could try a simple question on yourself: Which would surprise you more: to learn that the administration had named a well-known and highly respected critic, such as Daniel Schorr, to one of its top jobs or to learn that it had been hounding and harassing such a critic?