

The Press as Villain of the Piece

NYT 8/13/74
By Franklin B. Smith

BURLINGTON, Vt. — The American press has destroyed a Presidency of the United States. Although it is too late to help the victims and relieve the enormity of this act, perhaps the press finally will realize the need to reform itself and to return to its basic and historical mission.

What the press helped to accomplish in this last week was a bloodless revolution. It was done with precision, passion and piety.

First it was essential for Spiro T. Agnew to be driven from office. This was achieved through news leaks, speculative stories and other press behavior that once was considered unethical in our profession. Then, with Mr. Agnew out of the Vice Presidency, Richard M. Nixon became fair game and the press zealots hounded him unmercifully to the desired conclusion.

The result is this: Less than two years after the Nixon-Agnew Administration was resoundingly supported by the people in a free election, this nation today for the first time in history has a President unelected by the public he serves. The revolution was complete.

The press, in effect, helped to overthrow our Government, and it did so through means and methods clearly not sanctioned by constitutional law or moral code. The First Amendment

to the Constitution guarantees freedom of the press, but the horrible perversion of that freedom is license, which must not be condoned inside or outside of our profession.

The platitudes about "shooting the messenger of bad news" simply are not relevant here. The publication of news, good or bad, is the essential purpose of the American press, but news leaks, speculations and analyses are masquerades that are demonstrably lethal.

If there is a place for press partisanship, and there certainly is, it is on the editorial pages. Often we are reminded by our colleagues that the American press, on its editorial pages, overwhelmingly supported the Nixon-Agnew Administration during two national elections — and therefore, they assert, the press hardly could be accused of antagonism toward the Administration. But these apologists miss the whole point: The antagonism, masquerading as news, appeared on the front pages. This is how the press destroyed a duly elected President.

For nearly two years the press turned the front pages into an obsession with the Watergate affair. The matter was doggedly pursued by legions of newsmen with an intensity of purpose never witnessed before and most assuredly never to be witnessed again. Why? Not because it was a Government scandal of unusual dimensions, because only later did it gain that appearance, but rather be-

cause of a highly partisan distaste for the Administration in power.

We are told that "luck" played a major role in the progression of Watergate disclosures and allegations. The break-in at the office of a Democratic National Committee might have gone unnoticed, a Federal judge less aggressive than John J. Sirica might have presided at the original trial, the tape recordings might never have been revealed, and so on. But the overkill in press coverage of Watergate was not a product of "luck." It was calculated and it was destructive of everything for which this nation used to stand.

Now, the tragedy having reached its culmination, the press must search its collective soul and ask whether the cause of responsible freedom might better have been served by a dedication to the basic purposes of news gathering and news dissemination.

The role of the press ought to be that of a spectator, alert and concerned, and not that of a participant, intruding and partisan.

Franklin B. Smith is editor of the editorial page of The Burlington Free Press.