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Lessons of Watergate

We have it now on no less an authority than the President of the United States that a "vigorous free press" serves the useful function of investigating and reporting to the people on the performance of their government.

Mr. Nixon's declaration on that point Monday evening is an example of the several civics lessons on the free press and government made available to us, courtesy of the Watergate conspiracy.

I am not certain that the full import

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of these lessons has become apparent to us yet, but at least two seem to have manifested themselves recently. It is clear, first of all, as Watergate reminds us again, that a free press must be prepared to take a lot of abuse from politicians when the going gets rough.

Also, once the quarry seems to be nailed and falling, the forest awakens with excited chatter, some of it truth, some of it foolishness and some of it dangerous.

It is not just that journalists must "pursue the courage of their convictions," as Attorney General Kleindienst urged two vigorous Watergate reporters a day before the White House coverup began coming unstuck in earnest. It is also important to be mindful of the need for zeal to be tempered with judgment, now that so many disclosures are tumbling all around town.

Two examples of that zeal will suffice for now. On several occasions in the last several days, major news organizations have featured prominent declarations that Watergate principals have conceded to their "friends" their role in some Watergate-connected wrongdoing. John Mitchell was reported to have told "friends" of his prior knowledge of the plan to wire-tape Democratic headquarters—although, of course, Mitchell also added that he wouldn't have any part of it.

In the same vein, and of the same ilk

of reporting, is the anticipation of indictments by grand juries in various places. Some newsgatherers have reached the point of actually saying that some principal in the affair is about to be indicted, without more than a passing reference to a source.

On this last point, Louis Nizer, the author of "The Implosion Conspiracy" about the Rosenberg case and another book of recollections about his legal practice, "My Life In Court," expressed a sensible caution recently on the CBS Morning News.

Nizer reminded his interviewer, John Hart, that it was just 20 years ago that this country went through a terrible agony which destroyed lives through innuendo and unproved allegation without benefit of a forum where the truth and falsehood could contend fairly.

Nizer's point, although perhaps stated too simply to reflect the complexities of Watergate, extracts a valuable lesson from McCarthyism. McCarthy was cunning in setting the context of suspicion, thus making shreds of facts seem like monuments of truth. In such an atmosphere, reputations were wrecked by dark deeds done in corners—by whispers, hints, innuendos.

Investigative reporting has surely just experienced its finest hour in American history. Now that so much is known, there is a danger of much foolishness being peddled and purchased by reporters trying to keep pace with the unraveling scandal.

As in the time of McCarthy, when serious charges are in the air it frequently becomes convenient for poten-

tial targets to blame each other, seeking to immunize themselves by shifting the spotlight elsewhere. There is some evidence that this is occurring in the Watergate case. What is already one of history's nastier political incidents is taking on ever more sordid aspects.

So it is just another of the lessons for journalists and their audiences to be aware of; in times of dramatic disclosure, the mass media can become overwhelmed by the drama—and irresponsible in the bargain. Those very same news organizations that all but ignored Watergate eight months ago are among the first today to pass along some of the flimsiest of allegations and make lead stories of them.

There is yet another civics lesson

which relates to the business of journalism and the public, and it is perhaps the one over which we should want to ponder the longest. It is the matter of those robust denials which issued forth from the austere setting of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, and which since have been declared "inoperative."

Having re-read the denials from June to April, I am struck by the question of credibility. At a time when the press, by Vice President Agnew's own recent concession, was being "abrasively" attacked, when it was being characterized repeatedly as irresponsible, the administration put it to the public to choose to believe the press or the government. Now, consider what the press conveyed to the public from associates of the White House:

Clark MacGregor (Oct. 16): "The Washington Post has maliciously sought to give the appearance of a di-

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rect connection between the White House and the Watergate... a charge The Post knows, and a half dozen investigations have found, to be false."

Ronald Ziegler (Oct. 16): "I will not dignify with comment stories based on hearsay, character assassination, innuendo or guilt by association... the President is concerned about the techniques being applied... in the stories themselves."

Sen. Robert Dole (Oct. 16): "Like the desperate politicians whose fortunes they seek to save, The Washington Post is conducting itself by journalistic standards that would cause mass resignations on principle from the Quicksilver Times."

Charles W. Colson (Nov. 11): "The charge of subverting the whole political process... is fantasy, a work of fiction rivaling only 'Gone With the Wind' in circulation and 'Portnoy's Complaint' for indecency... the tragedy of The Post's handling of the Watergate affair is that the net impact was probably to erode somewhat public confidence in the institutions of government, and it also eroded... the confidence of a lot of fairminded persons in the objective reporting of The Washington Post."

John Mitchell: "All that crap! You're putting it in the paper? It's all been denied... Good Christ. That's the most sickening thing I've ever heard."

Now Mr. Ziegler has apologized to The Washington Post, and various officials of the newspaper have accepted the apology. Somehow, an apology to one newspaper by one dissembler misses the point.

The point is that the news media were being used to carry bold-faced lies to the American people. The civics lesson is that in this instance truth defeated falsehood, for which we can all

be grateful, as long as we aren't complacent in the belief that it always will. If the sorry saga of Watergate does nothing else, it ought to etch that lesson into our collective consciousness for all time.

In this, Jefferson and George Mason, Madison and the rest of the framers of the Bill of Rights have had their faith renewed, even while the inheritors of the legacy of their design tarnished that trust elsewhere.