

EX-ADVISER ADVISES EDITORS

Bundy, Victim of the Backgrounder

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McGeorge Bundy, erstwhile adviser to two presidents, advised the American Society of Newspaper Editors how they could do better.

He told them that he really can't tell from reading their papers just what is going on.

In his White House days, Bundy was always the first to know who was doing what to whom. Now, as a simple newspaper reader, if the president of the Ford Foundation could be called that, he has difficulty following the action.

He is, like the rest of the public, reading stories that begin, "The President is said to feel . . ." or "The State Department is embarrassed." From New York, he cannot unerringly name the recorder of the President's emotions, or divine the depth of the blush on the cheek of Foggy Bottom, or why it is significant.

"Backgrounder" Victim

He is, in short, the victim of the "backgrounder." The "backgrounder" is the journalistic equivalent of the anonymous telephone call or the unsigned letter. It puts into circulation delicate information without identifying the source. Edwin A. Lahey, one of the city's most distinguished and irreverent reporters, calls it "a vicious

device" that serves the vanity of the press and the purpose of the cautious official.

Bundy, the ex-official, regards backgrounders as necessary. Bundy, the newspaper reader, regards them as evil.

A one-time dispenser of backgrounders, he thinks they can be useful. But when he opens his morning paper, he is confused.

Bundy cited the case of a recent story in a Washington paper that quoted "a high government official" warning about a sharp rise in war costs. Eventually it came to him that the unnamed Jeremiah was William McChesney Martin, chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, in what Bundy called "his normal state of alarm."

Then having proved how misleading it can be, Bundy, an establishment man, went on to defend the backgrounder, which is a prized institution of the Washington press establishment.

"Safe and Sane"

"Sometimes—and the times can be very important—the only safe and sane way to report the facts is to report them anonymously," he said.

Bundy noted that the backgrounder is cherished by two groups, government officials and the press. The public, of which he is now a member, is the loser.

Some journalists are satisfied, Bundy said, to tell their editors what they have been told, thus giving both parties the happy feeling of being "in." Attendance at a backgrounder is a status symbol for the Washington press corps. A man who is not on the lists of the secretary of state and the secretary of defense

can not hold up his head at the Gridiron Club.

Bundy wishes the press would be a little more sophisticated and restrained about what they do print out of these mutually consoling sessions, where the official can restate history, score off an enemy or float a dangerous idea to a select audience, with the public none the wiser about his actions.

Reporters should not print inflated nonsense out of these seances just because their opposition is present and will do the same, Bundy said.

"Background" should be used as background, the former Harvard Dean told the editors, that is, for possible future reference.

Cozy, Fuzzy World

They should, Bundy advised, "go openly for real hard news." That is exactly what most of them want and try to do. But the editors were left to

figure out for themselves how Washington reporters who boycott "backgrounders" on principle can compete with reporters who spend most of their professional lives in the cozy, fuzzy world of "not-for-attribution."

It has reached the point where officials call in the press before they give a speech so they can tell them "for background" what they really mean in case the speech does not make it clear.

"We have," said Bundy, in his most militant anti-backgrounder phase, "the greatest guessing game on earth—in which the editors always know and the government usually knows—and the public very seldom knows what's going on. Could there be a startling reversal of the purpose of a free press?"

But he only wanted to strike at the practice, not to kill it. He may be back.