

President vs. press

By Robert Manning

THE ARTILLERY OF THE PRESS:
Its Influence on American Foreign Policy. By James Reston. Harper & Row. 116 pp. \$3.95.

One day late in 1961, President Kennedy discussed with his counselors a decision to increase the American "presence" in South Viet Nam from a few hundred "military advisers" to a military force of 15,000 men. Undersecretary of State George Ball opposed this, arguing that it would seriously alter the character of the war and might eventually suck more than 300,000 American men into action there. Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara agreed that Ball's reservations were fair ones, but they were willing to risk the consequences. Kennedy decided that he was too.

Hindsight marks that decision as a critical step in this country's creeping escalation toward international tragedy and a domestic crisis of politics and morality. Yet in the news reports of the day it was characterized only as a "modest" increase in American advisory help to the beleaguered South Vietnamese government.

What if news reporters had been told of the full discussion? They would have reported that the United States had decided to increase its commitment to 15,000 men, that this might lead to the involvement of as many as 300,000 soldiers—then unthinkable—and that the President's advisers disagreed about taking such a step. If the newsmen had told that story, how would the American public have reacted? Would the course of history have been changed?

These are the sort of questions James Reston raises in this brief but valuable book, an expansion of his three Elihu Root lectures delivered last year before the Council on Foreign Relations. He raises them carefully, he discusses them quietly, he weighs them sensibly, and

he avoids suggesting answers where there are none. The result is an enlightening though disturbing examination of the inevitabilities and dangers of the Constitution-decreed conflict between press and government in the United States. Drawing on his experience as a foreign correspondent and more than 20 years as the distinguished Washington correspondent and, more recently, an associate editor of *The New York Times*, Mr. Reston focuses his discussion on

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foreign policy. He is concerned with "the old problem of the people's right to be informed and the government's obligation to govern effectively, which sometimes means governing secretly." It is a problem that afflicts few countries as it does this open society, and one that presents extra hazards in an age when so many other governments enjoy and exploit the luxuries of secrecy and censorship without fear that a rambunctious editor will blow the whistle on their operations.

Just as in the 1963 Congressional hearings over the so-called "management of news" he distinguished himself as the sole journalistic witness who talked sense, Mr. Reston illuminates his work by recognizing realities which many other journalists dislike to concede. He insists, for example, that publishers, editors, and broadcasters have duties to the public as well as many prerogatives and privileges; he believes that too many



journalists "are not likely to spend more time thinking about their duty than about their economic security." He concedes that reporters and editors frequently hold back important news (advance knowledge of the Kennedy Administration's plans for the Bay of Pigs is a prime example). He is not afraid to suggest that patriotism and the pursuit and disclosure of important facts do not always mix. He is unhappy about the quality of news presentation and analysis offered by most of the American press, and he wonders whether "it may be that news and analysis of news in a democracy are too serious to be left to newspapermen." His prescription is to bring into print on a *regular* basis many of the "new class of public servants" who move about in government, foundation, academic, or journalistic circles—men such as McGeorge Bundy, John Ken-

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neth Galbraith, Theodore Sorensen.

Mr. Reston knows that journalism in this country, good as it may be, is not nearly so good as its practitioners keep saying it is. That he is not alone in this opinion is demonstrated by the vigor with which Americans reach beyond their daily newspapers (fewer than ever in number, though with an all-time high circulation of 60 million), to buy millions of weekly papers, magazines, newsletters, dopesheets, and journals of opinion in an effort to learn what entertainment-conscious daily newspapers and broadcasters have failed to tell them.

At the center of Mr. Reston's concern rest two convictions: that the power of the Presidency has grown steadily since World War II, particularly since the advent of nuclear weapons, and that the power of the press, "and even of the Congress," to restrain the President has shrunk during the same period. Even Congress' ultimate weapon, the power to deny the President the funds to carry out his programs, is inhibited in foreign affairs by the dangers inherent in repudiating the Chief Executive in the face of enemy attack — especially when this might transfer to Congress responsibility for any subsequent crisis.

As for the news media, Mr. Reston says, "Never have reporters and commentators reached so many people in America with their news and views as they do now, or had so little power to change the direction of the nation's foreign policy." The Presidential news conference, once thought of as a means of restraining the President or calling him to account, is now, in Mr. Reston's view, used by the President to attempt to control the press. In more than three years of helping to prepare for dozens of Presidential news conferences between 1962 and 1964, I cannot recall more than five or six questions that had not been anticipated by Presidents Kennedy or Johnson or their advisers—and these were relatively insignificant. Until the leaders of the Washington press corps find a way to substitute for their present scattershot ap-

proach some organized, intelligent examination of the President on selected crucial issues or programs, the President will continue to manipulate his questions.

Mr. Reston rightly believes that there should be an improvement in attitudes toward the needs and obligations of the press on the part of government officials. It is disturbing

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that so many high officials in Washington, some of them otherwise sophisticated, are inclined to the view that the only good press (i. e., the one deserving co-operation) is a compliant press. And it is discomfiting to know how little they are willing to examine reporting or analysis that does not conform to their own notions.

The Artillery of the Press, if anything, understates what is wrong on the part of the government, but it does so in ways and with illustrations that make the book prescribed reading for high government officials, if they will be so good as to look up for a moment from their cables and interdepartmental memoranda.

Mr. Reston is more concerned, or so it seems to me, with the shortcomings of journalism, with the need for turning around the present imbalance of triviality over thought, of profits over responsibilities, and with the growing need for the communications industry to woo a larger share of the top-grade talent that now goes into other careers. For all the glumness of the picture he paints, Mr. Reston is no pessimist:

On the one hand it appears that much is wrong, obsolete, false, and maybe even dangerous in relations between the American people and their government in the field of foreign policy; and yet on the other hand, the results are not too bad . . . The central fact is that the United States has changed its policies fast enough to be an effective force in world affairs.

Surely, in the temper of the moment, many commentators,

students of government, and politicians will not altogether agree with that judgment, but it underlies a basic Reston confidence that "the serious minority"—that element of American society Matthew Arnold once called the "remnant" of wise and intelligent citizens—is growing in size and influence; it may become strong enough to bring into being more serious newspapers and even a healthy, farflung educational television network in the United States. It can happen. The question is, are those who dominate the printing presses, the air waves, all the vast resources of sight and sound, going to muster the will and talent to meet the challenge? Or will some giant computer of the future compress all the "communication" of the 20th century under such an epitaph as that accorded by John Morley to the works of Carlyle: "The history of silence in 30 volumes by Mr. Wordy"? 