

# 'Fairness' of the Media

WASHINGTON — The press is what keeps public officials reasonably honest in this country. What is said on television, or in the news columns, about a given official can mean political life or death.

Still, the politicians never abandon the dream that somehow they can frighten or flummox the American people into giving politicians the right to decide when the press has or has not been "fair."

ALL ONE NEED DO is look at the ITT mess to see how futile it is to try to computerize a formula to determine fairness.

Mrs. Dita Beard, the ailing ITT lobbyist, testified from her hospital bed that she did not write all of the memorandum published by columnist Jack Anderson linking settlement of an anti-trust suit against ITT to that conglomerate's decision to contribute heavily to the financing of the Republican convention.

But the nation's newspapers gave major emphasis to Mrs. Beard's surprise testimony that someone from the White House called ITT to inquire about a \$600,000 contribution, at least some of it to finance President Nixon's campaign for reelection.

Was it "fair" of the press to dwell on this alleged call rather than the attempt to discredit the memo?

Given the power to judge, Sen. Roman Hruska, the Nebraska Republican, would surely say "unfair." He argues that the Anderson memo has been totally discredited and that the Senate hearings it provoked ought to end immediately. As he sees it, the

press is just publicizing "a political circus."

Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, the Massachusetts Democrat, would say in this instance that the press was "fair and responsible." He thinks that, rather than justify closing the hearings, Mrs. Beard's testimony only added to their urgency.

News reporters and executives figure that with all the document shredding, late disclaimers, sudden discoveries of witnesses, unexpected assertions of White House calls, the whole business becomes more "relevant" every day.

In this case the Democrats will find the press eminently fair because the Republican ox is being gored.

The ITT case shows that when politicians start jockeying for advantage they can't agree on the color of the sky, but each one knows an unfair, too-powerful journalist: one who has just hurt him.

STILL, SOME IDEALISTS argue that the government must force on television more "standards . . . rules, public accountability." Some argue for greater freedom of the general public to go on television and sound off. CBS Vice President Richard W. Jencks noted accurately that this would be to "exalt free speech at the expense of free press."

The ITT affair ought to be proof enough that politicians are blinded by an insatiable thirst for survival, and "fairness" for them is one-dimensional. Government ought never be the judge of the "fairness" of TV or any other part of the press.