

Criticizing the President [editorial]

The shallowness of President Nixon's commitment to freedom of opinion, of speech and of press is dramatically illustrated by the extemporaneous talk he gave Monday [16 Oct] to relatives of American prisoners of war in Vietnam. It is in fact the repeated evidence of the Administration's apparent willingness to erode the basic Constitutional guarantees of the First Amendment that forms one of the weightiest arguments against the President's re-election.

Mr. Nixon could hardly have exposed his latent tendencies more clearly than when he berated "the leaders of the media . . . the presidents of our universities and the professors and . . . some of our top businessmen" for their failure "to understand the importance of great decisions and the necessity to stand by the President of the United States when he makes a terribly difficult, potentially unpopular decision . . ." [italics added].

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Mr Nixon's real quarrel with "the so-called opinion leaders" is not that they choose his difficult decisions to criticize; it is that they dare to criticize his decisions at all. And his Administration has waged a constant battle to avoid debate, to evade the responsibility of public discussion, to bypass Congress and, most serious of all, subtly to intimidate critics and to undermine freedom even to the point of interfering - as in the truly

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ominous Watergate episode - with the normal political processes of American democracy.

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It is when the honest critics of Presidential policy refrain from expressing themselves for fear of incurring Presidential displeasure that this country can really begin to worry that it is starting down the short steep trail toward authoritarianism.