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Criticizing the President

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 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].

Mr. Nixon thereby betrays his ignorance of and indifference to the meaning of a free press and a free opinion. It is precisely when the decisions are "terribly difficult," whether popular or unpopular, that it is most incumbent on a free people in a functioning democracy to express its views. The fact is that the press in particular and leaders of opinion in general, including specifically the intellectuals and "some of our top businessmen" to whom Mr. Nixon referred, have a special obligation to voice their opinions on matters of public policy affecting the future and the very survival of our country. Nor, of course, are the "opinion leaders" immune from criticism themselves.

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Mr. Nixon adroitly placed emphasis in his talk on his own courage in taking "potentially unpopular" decisions,

the implication being that he refuses to be howled down by the mob. Unfortunately, the decision to bomb Hanoi and mine Haiphong last spring—as indeed the decision to continue up to this very day the heaviest bombing program in history against the Vietnamese people—does not appear to be unpopular with Americans at large. 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 ominous Watergate episode—with the normal political processes of American democracy.

What does Mr. Nixon expect those of us who disagree with his politics to do? Does he think we would be doing our duty if we withheld criticism when we thought criticism was justified? In the case of Haiphong and Hanoi, it is quite true that the predicted dire consequences in respect to American relations with the Soviet Union and Communist China did not materialize. But the extreme risk—quite apart from the question of morality—was there; and it would have been a dereliction of duty on the part of the critics if they had chosen to remain silent and to have failed to call the country's attention to the hazardous course the United States was then pursuing.

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.