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Government Versus Press: 'Growing Climate of Hostility'

WASHINGTON (AP) — A "growing climate of hostility" in government toward the press was reported to the American Society of Newspaper Editors today by its Freedom of Information Committee.

"Government officials from the lowest levels of bureaucracy to the vice president of the United States himself now often make frontal attacks against the press," said the report for the opening session of ASNE's 1972 convention.

"MEANWHILE," it said, "there is secrecy in government, perhaps more than ever before."

The report was presented to more than 800 editors and guests by Robert M. White II, editor and publisher of the Mexico, Mo., Ledger. It cited ASNE's participation in recent controversies including publication of the Pentagon Papers and the unsuccessful attempt in the House of Representatives to subpoena Columbia Broadcasting System records on the documentary, "The Selling of the Pentagon."

"There is," it said, "a growing, insidious infiltration of secrecy in the very courtrooms of the nation."

The White report noted the continuing use of court subpoenas to attempt to compel the disclosure of news sources. ASNE has undertaken to mobilize support for pending bills to protect the confidentiality of sources, but

has delayed action pending a Supreme Court ruling on the issue.

THE ORGANIZATION has entered the Supreme Court case involving the refusal of New York Times writer Earl Caldwell to disclose as a "friend of the court" his notes on interviews with Black Panther Party members.

The court record shows more than 30 subpoenas have been served on newspapers published by Field Enterprises, Inc., alone in the last three years, White said, adding that "one Chicago Sun Times reporter was subpoenaed to testify in 11 separate proceedings in the space of 18 months."

The report said the best weapon against such action "is the highest possible order of professionalism in reporting," but concluded: "It is, and will always be a continuing battle."

Discussions with Defense Department officials on the Pentagon Papers disclosed that more than 4,000 persons

at the Pentagon alone can classify information secret or otherwise unpublshable, White said. One obstacle to removal of such classified labels by the Pentagon, he added, is that 50 to 60 percent of all the material comes under a joint classification system with the State Department, White House or some other department or agency.

A MILITARY subcommittee headed by Wendell C. Phillippi, managing editor of the Indianapolis News, cited several disclosures by columnist Jack Anderson and others which, he said, indicated "more and more that government secrecy was covering up military incompetence in the Vietnam war."

Phillippi urged that the military's press information offi-

cers be considered on an equal basis with all commanders and staff officers. "Somehow the Pentagon must be convinced," Phillippi's report said, "that it is better to tell the whole story now than make excuses later for not having done it."

He lauded comments by the Army's information chief, Maj. Gen. Winant Sidle, at a conference with Army commanders. Speaking in connection with the slayings of civilians at My Lai the general said:

"Reporters did not create the lieutenant (William L. Calley Jr.) or the incident ... They only reported it. It was just a bad incident of the Army. The press is not interested in exposing the military. It is just trying to do its job in reporting military events."