

OCT 6 1972

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# Mr. Nixon And The Press

NYTimes  
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WASHINGTON, Oct. 5—You can hardly pick up a newspaper these days without finding some new evidence that the freedom of the press is being nibbled away in this country, and what's equally significant, that quite a few people think this is not a bad idea.

The other day, Chief Judge John J. Sirica of the Federal District Court here enjoined all parties involved in the Watergate political burglary case from discussing it outside the courtroom.

His order covered the Justice Department, the F.B.I., the seven defendants in the case, their attorneys,

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witnesses, potential witnesses, "alleged victims" and "all persons acting for or with them."

If taken seriously, this would cut off almost everybody who knows anything about this case from discussing it with reporters, and the judge wasn't quite sure whether his order would prevent George McGovern from discussing the case in public.

The day before that, Peter J. Bridge, a reporter for the defunct Newark Evening News was tossed in the Essex County jail partly because he refused to tell a grand jury, not the source of his information in a criminal case, but about what might be in his private notebooks on the case.

It is not only that the Supreme Court has enjoined newspapers from publishing information the Government wanted suppressed in the Pentagon Papers case, and that it has decided that reporters must disclose the source of their information in criminal cases. The free flow of information in a democratic society can be interrupted by avoiding the press as well as by threatening reporters with jail or preventing papers from publishing.

For example, President Nixon has just held his first press conference in five of the liveliest news weeks of the

year. He wouldn't comment on the Watergate case on the ground that this might interfere with the judicial process, and he said he wasn't campaigning much because he had to stick around Washington and make sure that Congress didn't pass bills that would lead to a tax increase.

Even when he does go out campaigning, as David Broder of The Washington Post observed the other day, "There is a wall a mile high between Mr. Nixon and the reporters." After following him to California the other day, the reporters were not allowed in the hall and had to watch him on closed-circuit television.

"In every way possible, then," Mr. Broder observed, "the Nixon entourage seems to be systematically stifling the kind of dialogue that has in the past been thought to be the heart of a campaign."

Several things need to be said about this. In the first place, all institutions manage the news in the sense that they emphasize the best in their record and minimize or suppress the worst.

Also, there is nothing in the Constitution that says Mr. Nixon has to debate Senator McGovern or make a single campaign speech, if he doesn't want to. If he can get away with making pronouncements and refusing to make himself available for questioning, meanwhile rising in the popularity polls, it is not surprising that he follows what is clearly a winning strategy.

The consequence of these recent court cases and these successful political and publicity tricks, however, are not unimportant, and this is not merely a struggle between the Government and the press and television. For Mr. Nixon is not only defeating Senator McGovern, but he is defeating the press and what is more important the American democratic system.

He is a master of the technique of propaganda and evasion, and the more they succeed, the more they establish a pattern for the whole Government. Once the officials of a Government see that the President regards report-

ers as instruments of his policy rather than as servants of a society that lives by accurate information—and assumes an attitude of mutual hostility—you may be sure that this mood will infect the whole bureaucracy.

He doesn't have to tell his Cabinet members or White House aides to evade or be suspicious of the inky wretches. Most of them observe his suspicions, and are either unavailable or uncommunicative, and the result is obvious. The people get primarily the information the Government wants them to get.

For under the new court orders, even officials who want to talk about the Watergate case, or the secret Republican campaign funds, or General Lavelle's private air war in Vietnam, or the milk and wheat deals have to recognize now that if they give information to a reporter, no matter how reliable, the reporter may be hailed into court and offered the choice of disclosing his sources or going to jail.

With laws like these plus the techniques of publicity and evasion, even the boldest and most honorable men in Government are now more scarce and cautious than ever in my memory.

This, of course, is precisely what the President and the Vice President apparently had in mind, and let's face it, they have won. The only trouble is that the country is losing something of fundamental importance, and the public is taking it all with indifference if not actual approval.