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# Why a Free Press Is Vital

WASHINGTON—Newspapermen are an easy bunch to hate.

They meddle in other people's business. And that has been known to irk all sorts of people, from the two-bit corner pimp who doesn't want his hustle publicized to the powerful men wearing the cloak of the White House who don't want their stupidities and cheatings revealed.

"**WHY SHOULD** a newspaperman have a special right not to testify before a grand jury like the rest of us?" the so-called little guy asks.

So when Peter Bridge, a former reporter for the Newark News, is thrown into the Essex County jail because he won't reveal data other than what he wrote about a housing scandal in that scandal-ridden county, the little guy doesn't care enough to read the facts, or figure out that part of him has been jailed. (A reporter who is forced to tell all he knows about anything is soon without sources, and is useless to the public he protects.)

Even Supreme Court justices are human, and some of them have been harpooned painfully by the press.

So all these factors have merged to create a greater threat to the free press than has existed during my quarter century in the profession.

The irony is that if the public ever had glaring evidence of the need for a free press, or of the truth that the First Amendment protects the people, not newspapers or newspapermen, it is now.

Someone must awaken the American

people to the fact that they would know little or none of the dirty truth about the Watergate scandal were it not for the courageous digging of the press.

If there were no newspapers you would never know that the craving to retain power is so great in the White House that the President's operatives will resort to lawlessness and to some of the most ruthless, unethical tactics ever to despoil a democracy.

It is the press that has revealed the secret slush funds, the secret payoffs, the money sneaked through Mexico, the bag of dirty tricks played on Sen. Edmund Muskie, Sen. George McGovern and other Democrats. But let them throw enough Peter Bridges in jail, or force enough newspapermen to reveal their sources, their unpublished notes, and the press will be powerless to ferret out wrongdoing and scandal and report it fearlessly and without political favoritism.

**DO BEAR IN MIND** that the press that has rendered this service is not pro-McGovern, despite administration wails to that effect. The overwhelming majority of U.S. newspapers are endorsing Nixon, yet some of the most damning evidence dug up re the Watergate scandal first was printed in pro-Nixon newspapers.

The campaign to discredit the press will succeed—unless American citizens face the truth that a free press, however imperfect, is what protects them from a wretched day when the shoddy fascistic tactics employed in this reelection campaign will become routine techniques of political control.