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The Fearless Spectator

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The Fifth Estate

WHEN Richard Nixon uttered his political song of the dying swan after having been defeated by Pat Brown in the 1962 California governor contest, he told the press with a kind of bitter exultation, "You won't have Dick Nixon to kick around any more."

Ten years later, if Richard Nixon has his way, he will not have the press to kick around any more.

The President's war on what used to be called The Fourth Estate — after the feudal trinity of clergy, nobility and bourgeoisie — has become just about total. If the President prevails, which fortunately does not seem likely, he would become a kind of one-man Fifth Estate.

But the threat is there, and decidedly. Things have gone pretty far already. When the press of this country can allow itself to be pushed around like a rag doll by a person like Mr. Nixon, the press of the U.S. is in a bad state indeed.

It has taken the arrogant action of a minor White House communication satrap, Clay Whitehead, to awaken the editors of this country to the threat the White House poses to the First Amendment, which guarantees the freedom of the press.

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TELEVISION OWNERS, who operate under a statute which holds that they need regulation because the air waves properly belong to 200 million Americans, must have their licenses renewed by the government every three years. Whitehead, in an address before a journalism fraternity, unabashedly put the arm on station owners with the following words:

"Station managers and network officials who fail to act to correct imbalance or consistent bias in the network, or who acquiesce by silence, can only be considered willing participants, to be held fully accountable at license-renewal time."

There it is boys. Right on the line. You play it our way or pick up your marbles and go home. Dissent deserves excommunication. Mr. Whitehead also extended a golden carrot — the possibility of five-year licenses and protection from frivolous license challenges.

This is dangerous doctrine. If brought into being, it would be a fearsome weapon in the hands of Mr. Nixon. More important, it would be a fearsome weapon in the hands of the next Democratic president, or the next Socialist president, or whatever.

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MR. NIXON'S hatred of the press is well-known, and obsessional. Despite the fact that the publishers of the country are overwhelmingly on his side, the President is convinced that virtually all of their editorial employees are into a conspiracy to discredit him at every opportunity.

His antipathy to the press is so unyielding that he is reportedly dumping his closest long-standing political associate, Mr. Herbert Klein, on the grounds that he is "too close" to the press. Most of the press regard Mr. Klein, White House director of communications, as about as sympathetic to the press as Tomas de Torquemada was to the slobbering infidel.

Mr. Klein's chief crime appears to be that he was once a newspaperman himself, in San Diego. The President has come to prefer HIS news to be handled by men from Madison avenue.

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THE American Society of Newspaper Editors, not exactly a bolshie group, responded hotly to Brother Whitehead. "So far," the editors said, "the executive branch's technique has been an attempt to undermine the credibility of those segments of the press that the administration has considered unfriendly."

"Now . . . it has rolled out another weapon: the prospect of government control of TV news programming through the threat of withdrawing licenses from those stations that do not monitor network news programs to the administration's satisfaction. There is only one appropriate word for this type of system: censorship."