

SF Examiner

**Dick Nolan**

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# Press, Don't Plead

The other day I got a phone call from an old friend who, when asked an honest question, invariably responds with an honest answer. He was in a certain mild panic. Heat was being applied as the result of some truth I had printed. Object of the heat was to sweat out the dirty dog who had told the truth, and insure that he'd never do it again.

My correspondent wanted a fresh assurance that I would, in the jargon of these nervous times, "protect my sources." That he'd even ask struck me oddly, I thought it was well enough known by now that I never discuss "sources" with anybody at any time.

Now this is an old phenomenon of the news trade. But I do seem to be getting that "protection" demand more often lately, and can only attribute this to the stamp and style set upon the nation by Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew, encouraged by the media experts who have made themselves such a large part of their game.

All that's required in our continuing struggle for a free press is, of course, a dogged display of iron on the part of the press itself. In the larger sense it's the people's battle, but the people can't be expected to wage it, even if they wanted to, which is a doubtful proposition in itself.

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SOME THOUGHTS along these lines brought me an interesting note from Peter Davis, the film-maker who produced that excellent documentary, "The Selling of the Pentagon," among others. From New York, Davis wrote:

"I would like to tell you how important I thought your column on December 31st was. It seems to me all branches of the press spend too much time complaining about buffoons who attack them, and not nearly enough searching around for things the buffoons would rather not see printed.

"I hope I can be allowed to think you speak for broadcasters as well as writers when you declare your independence as resoundingly as you did in that column.

"Despite the special licensing problems of broadcasters, I always thought that our best defense after a controversial broadcast would be to hang ahead with more and better reporting instead of pleading for our rights. Our rights in any case have to be insisted upon, not whimpered for."

On the same theme, Richard Reeves, of New York Magazine, sees the present press struggle as a betterment of the press through the infusion of iron into the spines of reporters.

All Nixon and Agnew (and all the little Nixons and carbon-copy Agnews) are trying to do, says Reeves, is to put down a rising of the working press, many of whom have begun to think of themselves as reporters again, rather than as receptacles for public relations handouts and prepared statements.

"We'll be better and tougher for it," says Reeves. "At least we, the working press, will be freer, more independent, in a real world where the ownership of the press is interconnected, where every publisher's office is decorated with autographed photographs of Presidents, Governors and generals."

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JOURNALISM is changing for the better, says Reeves. Reporters, more of them, are "concerned with expanding the press's area of influence, seeing ourselves, not a little arrogantly, as the public's last, best line of defense against an unresponsive and often downright dishonest Establishment."

New breed reporters aren't going to chippy around cultivating what many of the old stars attained, the endless capacity for being used.

Pressures from the Nixon mob and all the little Nixons in all the little courthouses may inspire the working press to a new realization of its true importance. It may even, says Reeves, "raise journalism from craft to profession."

A new wind's arising. Take heart.