

How Nixon Treats the Press

By Don Bacon

Newhouse News Service

WASHINGTON — The current spitting contest between the White House and the Washington Post illustrates just how little the Nixon Administration understands the press and how frustrated it has become.

Administrations have done sillier things when stung by press criticism or inaccurate reporting — as when President John F. Kennedy canceled the White House subscription to the New York Herald-Tribune — but seldom has one reacted with such clear intent to punish an offending newspaper.

The Post, perhaps the nation's most aggressive newspaper, with the biggest stable of highly-paid, Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative reporters, has riled the Nixon Administration for the past four years.

Supreme Court

It has objected to President Nixon's Supreme Court appointees (and had a role in causing the Senate to reject two of the four selections), complained that the Administration had weakened the federal commitment to civil rights enforcement and other social legislation, and uncovered evidence of misdeed and corruption, including the famous Watergate bugging case, that has reached inside the White House itself.

The White House, on the other hand, sees the Post as the flagship of the "eastern liberal establishment press," about which Vice

President Agnew has spoken so heatedly. It complains that much of the newspaper's reporting and editorial criticism is unfair, unfounded, biased and mischievous.

In the uneasy relationship between presidents and press, a lot depends, now as always, on the point of view.

Watergate

The White House has been particularly upset by the Post's tenacious reporting of the Watergate bugging incident and alleged White House efforts to sabotage Democratic political campaigns. White House officials argue that the Post's stories have been inaccurate and inflammatory, but refuse to spread all the Watergate facts on the table or allow implicated administration figures to tell what they know. The accuracy of the Post's reporting apparently will have to await the judgment of history.

It is hard to pinpoint a decision to retaliate against the Post. White House Press Secretary Ronald Ziegler takes credit for the puzzling decision to restrict sharply the Post's right to cover White House social events, but alleges he has "better things to do than carry out a vendetta" against the newspaper. Any basic decision to punish the Post had to come from someone higher up, perhaps top assistants H. R. (Bob) Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman, who do not hide their minimum regard for the press.

Nixon got the ball rolling



RONALD ZIEGLER
Decision higher up

against the Post several weeks ago when he granted Garnett D. Horner of the rival Washington Star-News an extraordinary interview. Since that time the Post's local competitor has become a regular conduit for stories the Administration chooses to leak.

Mini-Exclusives

Most of it is small potatoes, with the Star-News getting an overnight edge on the announcements Ziegler

plans to make at his next day's briefing. The feeding of these mini-exclusives to the Star-News is intended presumably to bug the Post.

The whole exercise has become something of an in-house joke among the Washington press corps. Correspondents rush each day to buy early editions of the Star-News, expecting to learn what that day's White House announcement is likely to be. But wily editors at the Star-News have lately begun to confound their journalistic competitors by holding back their "exclusives" until the late editions.

If all this sounds ridiculous, that's because it is. The Post has not suffered; its reporters continue to dig up, without willful White House assistance, a fair share of exclusive stories (which must be driving somebody up the wall). And the Star-News, a respected, independent newspaper, finds itself tagged as an Administration mouthpiece, which it isn't and never was.

This sort of ham-handedness would be amusing, if the implications weren't so disturbing.