

The Fearless Spectator

Charles McCabe

The Press, and Watergate

LEST we newsies all go mad with complacency, it may be useful to examine just how much the papers of the country had to do with exposing Watergate, the greatest political scandal in our history.

There are those who, like President Nixon in his August 22 news conference, take the line that the crisis in confidence which Watergate produced was largely caused by politically motivated journalists, who hated Mr. Nixon personally. This is giving the press far too much credit, not only for malignancy but for fearless digging.

The press really did little or no investigative reporting, as old-fashioned reporting is now rather pompously called. This is the conclusion of an investigation commissioned by the Los Angeles Times and carried out by Edward Jay Epstein. Mr. Epstein wears the toga of press critic for the New Yorker, once so brilliantly graced by the late Joe Liebling.



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MR. EPSTEIN re-read the clips on Watergate of the Washington Post, the New York Times, the Washington Star-News, the Los Angeles Times, the Miami Herald, Time and Newsweek. The record is not flattering to the growing myth that a fearless press broke the Watergate story.

"While there are moments of brilliant and insightful reporting on Watergate," Epstein found, "the assumption that the press was responsible for breaking the case, and all that followed, is not borne out by the sequence of events established in the senate testimony."

What the press did was not dig, but accept leaks. Within a week of the Watergate break-in, nearly all the pertinent facts were in the possession of the FBI and other government agencies. Over a period of long months these facts were leaked to

newspapers, chiefly the Washington Post.

The leaking was political in motivation. The leaks came from career officials of the FBI and the Justice Department, and even from Republican Senators on the Hill. The leakers were men in open revolt against the systematic corruption of the judicial process by White House and Creep executives under the leadership of the almost universally hated Haldeman and Ehrlichman combo.

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WHAT brought the roof down on Mr. Nixon, in the end, was less the press than the arrogance of the men he chose as lieutenants, and the open contempt they showed to the legislative and judicial branches of the government.

On the press side, this whole matter of reporting by leak shows a basic weakness of our press structure today. It is obvious that people leak news to the press, not to help the press ferret out the truth, but to use the press for the leaker's own ends, which in this case were clearly political. The chief editorial problem in these situations would seem to be: How much are we being used? How much harm are we doing by using leaked stuff? Where is the line where we would be better off NOT using such?

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A WHOLE new brand of reporters has sprung up in Washington whose business is essentially being sneaks, trafficking in leaked or stolen documents.

These highly honored parasites of the press are not reporters at all, in any substantive sense. They are journalistic fences.

I recall a highly respected Washington correspondent of the '50s who won his Pulitzer by simply running over to the law offices of Abe Fortas almost daily, and having leaked to him the juicy details of a political scandal which was decidedly in the interest of Mr. Fortas to publicize. This is reporting?

Mr. Epstein justly notes: "Almost all journalistic honors are awarded for making exclusive disclosures, not for resisting publishing unproven allegations. It was thus the Washington Post, not the New York Times, that won the Pulitzer Prize for Watergate.

"And in the two preceding years Pulitzer Prizes went to the New York Times and to columnist Jack Anderson for publishing what were essentially stolen government documents."