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The President's Feud With the Press

The hate affair between President Nixon and elements of the press is poisoning the flow of information to the American people.

Presidential press conferences deteriorated last year into shouting matches. The efforts to control tempers at the latest give-and-take last week scarcely concealed the underlying hostility.

Yet 80 per cent of the nation's newspapers endorsed Nixon for President in 1968, and an overwhelming 92 per cent supported his re-election in 1972. Why has the relationship gone sour?

Richard Nixon came to power with the conviction that he had gotten there by circumventing the working press and could govern successfully only so long as he continued to do so. Reporters were to be given comfortable accommodations, fed with daily trivialities and occupied with diversions. But they were to be kept away from the news.

The Nixon presidency drew a curtain of secrecy between its internal operations and the outside world unprecedented in the memory of Washington observers. The President did not want the acts and policies of his administration to reach the people through what he considered the distorting prism of the press. What he wanted known he would communicate directly via television talks or other tightly controlled mechanisms.

Not only was the press distrusted. The millions who composed the permanent government were suspect, too. The highest military officers were denied the kind of critical information it was previously considered essential they have.

Even the President's own appointees, the top few thousand in government, were given minimal initiative and not trusted with sensitive information in their areas. This denigration of the regular institutions of government was, in part, aimed at the press. What officials did not know they could not leak.

Deep suspicion and a sense of lifelong grievance — all too often confirmed — were accompanied in President Nixon by a desire for solitude and a craving for an orderly environment undisturbed by trivial interruptions or internecine discord.

In the past, he had made mistakes and lost elections by trying to direct everything personally. He was determined never again to spread himself so thin. He would encapsulate himself from unnecessary turmoil, dealing regularly only with those select few who had learned not only to resolve conflicts but to modulate their personalities so as not to jar his sensitive vibrations. And so he came to act through other men who aped him and tended, in the way of young men, to out-Nixon Nixon.

The trouble with all this was that a seething enterprise like America cannot be compartmentalized, cordoned off and led from a glass bubble. Bureaucrats who are denied trust will become untrustworthy. Officers who are sealed off from information they need will find ways to acquire it. Subordinates blocked from access to the President will grow uneasy and begin to connive at office politics. Suspicion and hostility at the top will at length permeate an organization with apprehension, jealousies and moral rot.

It could not work for a more important reason. There is a fundamental conflict between uniformity and diversity, between politician and press, that

is built into the American character and system.

It is the mission of the press to give the people an alternative to the official version of things, a rival account of reality, a measure by which to judge the efficacy of rulers and whether the truth is in them, an unauthorized stimulus to action or resistance.

Long before Americans could vote directly, in effect, for their Presidents or their senators, before the vote was given to the poor, to women, to blacks, the role of the village editors and dissenting pamphleteer — as monitor, arbiter, critic and rival of the politician — was imbedded as a fundamental of the American system.

From its primitive state when any wanderer, if he was cantankerous enough, might set up his press and begin to assail his townsmen, the press as an institution has evolved through alternating chapters of disgrace and sublimity, of prostitution and martyrdom, of somnolence and vigilance, taking form in a thousand press rooms, in billions of miles of teletype tape, in the numberless newsrooms of radio and television, gradually assuming the role and shape that confronted Richard Nixon as he sought and finally won the presidency.

He came to think he could stand against or outside of that historical process. He thought he could play to the friendly press and put the hostile press in a bottle. For a while, it seemed to be working — on the surface.

But under the surface, the press was beginning to sizzle in an investigation ferment. What it couldn't get the easy way, it began to go out and dig for. And the underbelly of his administration was becoming a sieve. It was to be, ironically, the day of the investigative reporter.

Many of the exposures that have brought the administration low were leaked to the press by persons within the government who did so as a silent protest to the Nixonian approach to government. Some of those exposures would not have been published, or would not have been sought so diligently, were it not that the Nixon presidency inspired in the press an adversary relationship that went beyond the constitutional requirement.

In seeking to contain the press and to control leaks and to silence criticism, the Nixon presidency committed first the blunders and then the crimes which placed them in the hands of those from whom they had so carefully planned to escape.