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Nixon's Conflict With the Press



James Kilpatrick

IN AN INTERVIEW with this correspondent last week, President Nixon several times spoke critically of the press. A couple of days after that interview, the two Washington papers carried a "leaked" story that once again cast the President in a contumacious light. The conjunction of events merits reflection.

In our interview, Mr. Nixon complained of one-sided coverage of illegal or improper campaign activities in the past.

The President spoke bitterly of the failure of the press to cover the bugging of his own offices and campaign plane in 1968. He said he had pointed out this misuse of the FBI, "but none of the press has directed any attention to it." The President said, "I understand why, because there is a double standard here."

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THE PRESIDENT several times spoke acidly of "leaked" news. He denounced the publication by columnist Jack Anderson of highly secret minutes of a top security meeting on India and Pakistan.

Mr. Nixon said that "90 per cent" of the Washington press corps is philosophically opposed to his position: "Basically, they're ultra-liberal and I am conservative . . . The reasons for their attitudes toward the President go back many years, but they're basically ideological, and I respect that. If I would pander to their liberal views, I could be infinitely popular with some of our friends out here, and a lot of the heat would go out of Watergate, too. But I will never do that."

Last Thursday the Washington Post broke a story based on the leak of a confidential transcript from the House Judiciary Committee. The Star-News followed

with its own story a few hours later. It appeared from the transcript that on Sept. 15, 1972, the President had remarked to H. R. Haldeman and John W. Dean III that the Post "is going to have damnable, damnable problems . . . They have a television station . . . And they're going to have to get it renewed."

When Haldeman mentioned that the Post owned a radio station, too, the President asked if its license also were coming up for renewal. "The game," he said, "has to be played awfully rough." Of the Post's attorney, Edward Bennett Williams, the President said: "I think we are going to fix the son of a bitch. Believe me. We are going to. We've got to, because he's a bad man."

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MR. NIXON is on sound ground when he denounces the "double standard" applied by major instruments of the press. There is no denying an ideological bias at top levels of the media. The leaking of confidential material, is a breach of the public trust by dishonorable men.

But what of the public interest? It is in the public interest, beyond any doubt whatever, to learn that the President of the U.S. once threatened to use the powers of his office, through the Federal Communications Commission, to create "damnable, damnable problems" for a newspaper he despises.

Such a threat is contemptible. It implies a state of mind, and it implies a view of the presidential office that the people are entitled to know about. With all its sins and shortcomings and its own abuses of power, the press, I submit, is doing better than the President believes at its indispensable and sometimes dirty job.