

It Wasn't the Press, It Was Mr. Nixon



James Kilpatrick

OUT IN Albuquerque, N.M., recently, I happened to be addressing the annual banquet of the National Legislative Conference. It had been a long evening and it was perhaps a mistake for a speaker to talk about Mr. Nixon at all.

But this was the top of the news, and I began by remarking the tragedy of a President who had resigned his office because of the certainty of impeachment and the probability of conviction.

"Horse manure!" cried a gentleman on B Deck of the speakers' platform. "The press drove him out!"

"Nonsense!" I replied.

The gentleman departed, I persevered, and the conference at last adjourned. But it occurs to me that, while "horse manure!" is a sufficiently definitive accusation, "Nonsense!" is hardly a comprehensive reply. The gentleman's charge merits a more measured answer.

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THE CHARGE is widely attested in my mail. A gentlewoman in New Orleans complains of the "dirty and vicious" conduct of the press. A gentleman in Fayette, Mo., identifies himself as one of "many millions of Americans who firmly believe the American press drove Mr. Nixon out of office."

Very well. The press (by which is meant the great newspapers and the TV networks) may have erred from time to time in its coverage of the Watergate story. As Reporters Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward concede in their best-selling book, there were certain excesses of zeal.

But the record of the press is amazing-

ly good. Corruption in high office is news. Gross corruption in the highest office is big news. The Watergate story, taken as a whole, dealt with unparalleled corruption of the presidential office. The stark chronicle of men indicted and imprisoned, climaxed by the President's own confession of duplicity and his subsequent resignation, abundantly supports an editorial judgment: In terms of politics and government, Watergate was the biggest news story since Hayes-Tilden in 1876.

Did the press hound Mr. Nixon out of office? I deny it absolutely. It was not the press that burglarized the Democratic national headquarters. It was not the press that covered up the involvement of top officials of the reelection committee.

The press did not hire a squalid trickster and set him to writing anonymous letters. The press had no part in preparing an "enemies' list" — a list to be used in harassing the press. It was no anchorman who sought to manipulate the CIA. No editors extorted illegal campaign contributions. The media were not involved in erasing tapes and falsifying transcripts.

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THESE ACTS were the responsibility of the President and the President's men. In the beginning, the press — chiefly Bernstein and Woodward — exposed some of these acts; but as the story gained momentum, the role of the press was largely to report the evidence exposed by the courts and by Congress.

When the dam finally broke on August 5, the President's resignation was impelled not by the press, but by a flood of denunciations from his disillusioned supporters on the Hill.