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 News Problems in Dallas

Reporter Comments on Press Role  
 During Oswald Detention

TO THE EDITOR:

I was on the scene at Dallas as The New York Times correspondent at police headquarters throughout Lee Harvey Oswald's detention. I've had many years' experience with problems of informational relationships between Government agencies and the public under a wide variety of circumstances in war and peace.

What was wrong at Dallas was basically a very simple matter of public relations techniques.

The Dallas Police Department had a high-ranking officer nominally in charge of public relations, Capt. Glenn King. But as so often happens in organizational crises, he was largely side-tracked. The result was chaotic physical conditions that caused virtually the news problems to which the Warren Commission took exception.

The three-day Brannigan in the third-floor corridor of police headquarters could have been avoided very simply by converting the basement auditorium into a press room. There reporters could have been given pertinent information in an orderly way.

Observation of Transfer

It was quite in order, I think, for newsmen—and through them the public—to observe the transfer of Oswald to the county jail, if only to provide evidence that he was not being abused.

The congested situation in the police department basement garage that contributed to Oswald's being shot could have been obviated very simply. If a rope had been stretched across the nearly empty garage 20 feet back from the police van, and newsmen and cameras positioned behind the rope, there would have been completely innocuous observation of the operation without an opportunity for an impulsive attack on Oswald by an interloper mingling in the crowd.

It is in such simple, but vital, fundamentals as these that the avoidance of such unfortunate episodes lies, rather than in lofty drafting of generalized "codes" by news media, law enforcement agencies or anybody else.

Declarations of principles, however noble, made years before and miles away, simply have no practical application when it comes down to the nuts-and-bolts business of one individual getting information from another in a crisis.

But if physical order can be maintained, however extraordinary the situation, there can then be reasoned consideration among all parties about the dissemination of information to which the public is entitled.

GLADWIN HILL.

Los Angeles, Sept. 29, 1964.