

Poison Against the Press

Richard Nixon has been stripped of his presidential powers and has been retired in disgrace to San Clemente. But Nixonism still stalks the halls of government.

The deposed President created an atmosphere, which is best described not by a Nixon critic but by a loyal, longtime aide and admirer, William Safire.

The conservative Safire has always found much to praise in Nixon. But by Safire's account, Nixon came to the White House flawed by a "primal hatred" of the press that was deeply rooted in the real and fancied grievances he had endured during a quarter century under its scrutiny.

"The press is the enemy"—that was the constant watchword in the Nixon White House. Under press criticism, reports Safire, Nixon "seethed inside." He "took everything critical as a personal blast at him; when he read a byline, the writer came to life in his mind, grinning evilly at him."

Once Nixon had the power of the presidency at last in his hands, he employed it in a multiple offensive that sought to cripple those elements of the press he saw as hostile.

In a memo to H. R. Haldeman, President Nixon set the tone of his press policy. "The basic need is not PR but PO," he declared. "That is, not Public Relations but Presidential Offensive."

The poison that Nixon spread against the press, unfortunately, didn't disappear with him behind the gates of San Clemente. It seeped into the system and undermines press investigations.

Men in power, and men seeking power, do not relish having their cozy relationships exposed, their sources of money barred and their blunders brought to light. There are no press secretaries to brief those who search after concealed facts, no hucksters to package the suppressed details in attractive press kits. We have never known a government official to call a press conference to confess his wrong-doing, nor a government agency to issue a press release citing its mistakes.

On the contrary, the Nixonites who remain in government obstruct investigative reporters. Doors are closed; files are locked; phones are



slammed down. When this fails, more severe methods are used. Reporters are harassed with subpoenas, contempt citations, court fines, judicial gag orders and actual jailings.

The last thing the Nixonites want to see are stories about official misconduct. For they know that exposure can bring an end to power. The wise Thomas Jefferson had their number 175 years ago. At the end of his first term, he wrote that the most effective guardian of truth was freedom of the press. "It is, therefore, the first shut up by those who fear the investigation of their actions."

Of late, the Nixonites have been treating news as government property. Literally. The cops are called in; the leaker of the embarrassing truth is pursued as a criminal; the newsman who reports it is cast as the receiver of stolen goods.

Take the Federal Reserve Board. This agency plays a central role in our daily lives—turning our credit off and on, raising or lowering the interest rates we pay, inflating our currency at will, bailing out mismanaged banks—all with the public's funds and authority. Yet the inside details of its operations are kept as hidden from us as though the Fed were located in the Kremlin.

Not long ago, a Fed employee showed Consumer Reports magazine a list, compiled by the Fed, of comparative interest rates charged to consumers by the nation's banks. A persevering person could get the same information

By Stuart Leeds for The Washington Post

by calling on each bank. Having it published, however, is easier on consumers and harder on overcharging banks.

Well, the thought of a public document reaching the public drove Federal Reserve Chairman Arthur Burns into a dudgeon. He called in the FBI to hunt down the traffickers in his interest rate list.

Judges and prosecutors in a dozen states are harassing reporters who break crime and corruption stories. Subpoenaed and dragged before grand juries, they must either reveal their sources or face jail sentences for contempt. They consistently choose jail. For they know that once reporters begin betraying sources, the sources will come forward, and investigative reporting will die out.

Who will lose if these attacks continue? Not so much the reporters as the citizens at large. Actually, life would be infinitely easier for the reporters if, instead of digging for the news that the government covers up, they merely published the official releases. It's the citizens who lose. Nixonism is robbing them of their right to know what their government is doing.

Sen. Lowell Weicker (R-Conn.) said it in a nutshell: "With minor exceptions, research shows that every major scandal in public office over the past 20 years was uncovered by the press . . . The free flow of news . . . is the best guarantee that nobody steals America."

© 1975, United Feature Synd.