

By William Safire

ESSAY

WASHINGTON, Jan. 2—When the White House was in power, one of the most mean-spirited and petty abuses it was fairly accused of perpetrating was "the freeze-out"—a stern direction from on high to cut off some reporter or publication from all communication with White House aides, after a critical or unfair article or commentary appeared.

The freeze-out made life difficult for the reporter but was rarely successful in intimidating a publication. Carried to the extent of slamming the White House door to a white-haired woman reporter covering social events, the freeze-out succeeded only in making the President look ridiculous.

What happens when power shifts from the Presidency to the press?

Consider the case of Alvin Snyder, a White House press aide. Formerly a C.B.S. employe, Mr. Snyder has for the past five years been handling many of the technical television arrangements for the President, working with the networks on how many cameras cover a given event, where the outlets are, who stands against what color backdrop. He also "books" Administration figures on TV panel shows. A quiet, competent, experienced professional.

Couple of months ago, amidst the general leakage of White House memos, a two-year-old memo from Al Snyder surfaced in which he recommended that the White House not make available to C.B.S. a group of people to talk about the Nixon public relations operation—instead, to meet the C.B.S. request by providing an interview with Herb Klein. Not exactly a scandalous memo, but one which evidently caused C.B.S. News in Washington to take umbrage.

On Nov. 7, Mr. Snyder found it impossible to contact the C.B.S. producer who was handling the network pool on the President's energy crisis speech: He was informed that the producer had been instructed by his boss at C.B.S. never again to communicate with that particular press aide.

On Dec. 5, Mr. Snyder tried to contact the C.B.S. producer of the Ford swearing-in; he was rebuffed. The next day, when Mr. Snyder called again, the head of C.B.S. in Washington picked up the phone and said to Mr. Snyder's secretary: "This is Bill Small. Please tell Mr. Snyder that C.B.S. is not accepting his calls."

Next day, Mr. Snyder wrote a conciliatory letter to Mr. Small, pointing out that "the effect of this blacklisting decision makes it harder for me to function here," concluding with

"Let's put aside any personal animosities that may exist. I hope you will agree after a little reflection." The letter was sent back with "I don't—Small" scrawled across the bottom.

Last week a C.B.S. employe did take a call from Mr. Snyder, listened to his plea, then said, "Look—I'm putting my job in jeopardy just by talking to you."

On its face, this "freeze-out" by a news organization of a Government official doing his job is outrageous; C.B.S. has no more right to refuse to deal with any individual in the White House than the White House has to dictate to C.B.S. which reporter it should assign to the White House (as John Ehrlichman once tried to do).

But hold on—I know Bill Small to be one of the best television news executives in the business, and author of an excellent, serious work, published last year, "Political Power and the Press." He is neither a power-nut nor a Nixon-hater—this didn't sound like him.

Reached by telephone, Mr. Small said wearily that there was no C.B.S. policy to blacklist anybody, that he would deal with Al Snyder if he had to, that he might have been smart-alecky in writing that snide comment on what he assumed was a private communication. He didn't recall telling his associates to freeze out Mr. Snyder.

The temptation here is to take the cheap shot—to denounce C.B.S. for beginning its own "enemies list," for doing to an individual in Government exactly what Eric Sevareid would rightly condemn the Government for doing to an individual anywhere.

A subtler point, however, is closer to the truth. Good men in positions of authority can get irritated and act thoughtlessly; their attitudes can be intensified and magnified by subordinates, who want to please and get ahead; the resulting misapplication of power, when exposed, makes good men at the top appear to be petty tyrants—which they are most often not, or at least do not intend to be.

So flow gently, sweet Acton: Among thy green braes is the tendency of power to corrupt by inadvertence or pique rather than venality.

We must blaze back at the insolence of office—government or corporate—whenever it appears, intended or not. But it might help cool passions to recognize that what seems like raw tyranny at the receiving end is sometimes merely a lapse of sensitivity at the source.