

No Questions, Please

By Anthony Lewis

If Americans learned anything from Vietnam and Watergate, it should have been the need to question official truth. The press especially. The experience of those years showed its critical function in a democracy: assuring that the governed, not just the governors, have the facts to decide public issues. The press's duty is to challenge official truth, to take nothing for granted.

All that seems obvious. Or it did until the Mayaguez affair, which was a telling occasion for the press as for politicians. The skeptical soul had to wonder, then, how deep the lessons of Vietnam and Watergate had gone. For across the country most of the media, far from challenging the official version of events, echoed the uncritical cheers mostly heard in Congress.

In light of that general performance it was surprising, the other day, to find a critic of television complaining that one program had exhibited negativism toward President Ford's handling of the Mayaguez. Benjamin Stein, writing in *The Wall Street Journal*, attacked the May 15 edition of the N.B.C. *Nightly News With John Chancellor*.

Some of Mr. Stein's criticism was subjective or depended on having seen the particular program. He described one reporter whom he criticized as

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immaculately dressed, presumably a suspicious trait. Another reporter, after quoting Congressional reaction to the ship's rescue, called it a political plus for Mr. Ford. That, said Mr. Stein, was an insinuation that the President's motive was political.

But it is the larger critical premises that are interesting. There were vinegary little drops of cynicism in the program, Mr. Stein said. Would he have preferred little drops of sugar water about a sudden and at that point largely unexplained military action?

After the lies they have told and the laws they have broken in recent years, are officials entitled to a presumption that their hearts are pure and their lips untouched by anything but truth?

To raise doubts about a Presidential action, Mr. Stein suggested, was covert editorializing unless the doubts could be attributed to a responsible, representative person. But taking the official line at face value and simply reproducing it is presumably not editorializing. That is some theory of journalism.

N.B.C.'s legal reporter, Carl Stern, was a particular target of Mr. Stein. His faults were as follows: He noted that Congress, having demanded just two years ago that it have a voice in the use of military force, had now ac-

quiesced in Mr. Ford's unilateral action with barely a whimper. After quoting White House counsel in support of the Mayaguez action, Mr. Stern quoted Raoul Berger of the Harvard Law School in criticism of it. And Mr. Berger, Mr. Stein said, might be unrepresentative.

One wonders how Mr. Stein would arrange to have only representative criticism of the lawfulness of Presidential actions. Should there first be a poll of all constitutional law scholars in the country? Who is to decide on eligibility?

In any event, the press's duty in our system is not to be escaped by a search for representative outside critics. Was it wrong for newspapers on their own to raise legal questions about Richard Nixon's tax deductions, or his theories of Presidential power?

It is the job of a qualified legal reporter such as Carl Stern to point out the questions and the consequences for the law in an episode as significant as that of the Mayaguez. If not a single Senator had opposed Lyndon Johnson on Tonkin Gulf, it would still have been the press's duty to question the official version of events.

One would think, from the Stein complaint, that President Ford's handling of the Mayaguez had been overwhelmed by one-sided criticism. But of course the contrary is true. How many American viewers or readers know that Mr. Ford's action was in conflict with the explicit words of a law barring the use of combat forces in Indochina? How many are aware of doubts about the necessity for the military action, and about its cost?

The last and most amazing of Mr. Stein's complaints was that John Chancellor and others at N.B.C. write their own copy, leading to a diversity that can be bewildering. But diversity of expression is our ideal, and in this age of concentration we encourage it within single news organizations—including *The Wall Street Journal*. Mr. Stein suggested a guiding editorial hand to make sure the news was not self-contradictory. That sounds like a plug for Pravda.

It is sad to find elements in the press itself seeking to tone down its already inadequate skepticism toward official truth.

But that is nothing new. In the nineteen-twenties Humbert Wolfe, a British civil servant who dabbled in verse, wrote:

*You cannot hope to bribe or twist,
Thank God, the British journalist.
But seeing what the man will do
Unbribed, there's no occasion to.*