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Another Round With Agnew

These remarks by Eric Sevareid were broadcast on the CBS Evening News this week.

The Vice President, Mr. Agnew, proposes that network commentators, like this one and brothers Smith and Reynolds down the street at ABC—people of that type, he says—be publicly examined by government personnel. The public has a right to know, he says, our opinions and prejudices. The phrase, "people of that type," hurts a bit; we certainly don't think of Mr. Agnew as a type; we think he's an original.

What really hurts is the thought that maybe nobody's been listening all this time. If, after some thirty years and thousands of broadcasts, hundreds of articles and lectures and a few books, one's general cast of mind, warts and all, remains a mystery, then we're licked and we fail to see how a few more minutes of examination by government types would solve the supposed riddle.

Mr. Agnew wants to know where we

stand. We stand—or rather sit—right here, in the full glare. At a disadvantage as against politicians; we can't cast one vote in committee, an opposite vote on the floor; can't say one thing in the North, an opposite thing in the South; we hold no tenure, four years or otherwise, and can be voted out with a twist of the dial.

We can't use invective and epithets, can't even dream of impugning the patriotism of leading citizens, can't reduce every complicated issue to yes or no, black or white, and would rather go to jail than do bodily injury to the English language. We can't come down on this side or that side of each disputed public issue because we're trying to explain far more than advocate and because some issues don't have two sides; some have three, four or half a dozen and in these matters we're damned if we know the right answer. This may be why most of us look a bit frazzled while Mr. Agnew looks so serene.

Another reason may be that we

have to think our own thoughts and write our own phrases. Unlike the Vice President, we don't possess a stable of ghost writers. Come to think of it, if there are mysteries around, unseen spirits motivating the public dialogue, maybe that's the place that could use the glare of public scrutiny—that stable of anonymity.

Finally, at the risk of sounding a bit stuffy, we might say two things. One, that nobody in this business expects for a moment that the full truth of anything will be contained in any one account or commentary, but that through free reporting and discussion, as Mr. Walter Lippmann put it, the truth will emerge. Second, that the central point about the free press is not that it be accurate, though it must try to be; not that it even be fair, though it must try to be that; but that it be free. And that means, in the first instance, freedom from any and all attempts by the power of government to coerce it or intimidate it or police it in any way.