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Mr. Nixon and the Bishops of Journalism

By JAMES ARONSON

The comments about relations between press and President remind me of nothing so much as the celebration of a pontifical mass.

In solemn tones, sometimes angry, always earnest, the bishops of journalism command obeisance to precedent and tradition (give or take a little here and there), and then conclude with the inevitable incantation to the glory of freedom of the press. This liturgy, to my mind, deserves a decent cremation with all the platitudes about John Peter Zenger.

Since the First Amendment protections for the press were designed to insure the watchdog role of the press

against Government in the public interest, the only proper relationship of press to Government (and President) has to be an adversary one. In practice it has never fully been that. At present it is less than ever. The adversary relationship has been worn down on each side to a level most accurately described as a plateau of partnership.

To ask, as Eric Sevareid has, for more candor from the least candid President in history, is an exercise in absurdity. Mr. Nixon is incapable of candor. To ask, as William H. Lawrence did, for more courage by the Washington press corps, is noble but futile. With some honorable exceptions, this press corps has become a gentle-

men's club. It has an unwritten code of punishment for those who violate the rules with excessive initiative.

The Washington press corps has the power to alter an increasingly uncomfortable public relationship between Government and press. But they will not act because they do not wish to alter an extremely comfortable private relationship between Government and press.

Take, for example, the extraordinary performance of Secretary of Defense Laird on Jan. 20, fumbling his way through a series of misrepresentations about increased United States air forays in Cambodia. Not only did the reporters not pursue glaring contradictions, but the reporter even asked

Mr. Laird whether the increased air activity was justified by the implications of the Nixon Doctrine and by lack of Congressional prohibition. Mr. Laird replied with enormous relief: "You are correct on both counts."

Take, for example, President Nixon's statement during his televised session with four network news correspondents early in January that the United States and the Soviet Union had reached an "understanding" on Oct. 11, 1970, that the Soviets would not attempt to build a nuclear submarine base on Cuban soil. This was Page One news. Two days later, the last sentence of a brief item deep inside the paper noted that the White House had changed the date of the "understanding" to Oct. 13.

Had the President been that careless? Not at all. His advisers had done their homework poorly. Oct. 13 was the date of the Tass statement in which an authoritative Soviet spokesman charged that the allegations about a submarine base were "sheer concoction," and declared that the Soviet Government was continuing to abide by the 1962 Kennedy-Khrushchev agreement.

Any correspondent who had followed the submarine-base furor closely could, in my view, have determined that in reality no new understanding had been reached last October; that the President and his men, having utilized the new "crisis" for election purposes, were now extricating the Government from a crisis atmosphere by employing the Tass statement as an "understanding." But there was no investigation or follow-up by any newspaper or network.

In discussions with young journalists and the political radicals of the "underground press," I found an enormous degree of disenchantment and disgust inspired in part by episodes just described.

This lack of respect for the approach of their publicized colleagues in journalism—and the obvious condoning of this approach by publishers and network managers—has brought into being muck-raking publications in several cities of the United States. Along with these publications, there has developed a movement for greater participations by staff members in shaping the policies and content of newspapers.

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It is clear that resistance to these demands will be vigorous. If the young journalists fail in their effort—and there is little reason to expect success—it is conceivable that the country may see the beginnings of a truly "alternative" communications media.

It would be directed and staffed by the disenchanted young journalists, forced by their ideals and convictions out of the general press, and by their colleagues of the underground press. It would be a union of professional expertise and political experience.

The beginnings would be modest but neither candor nor courage would be in short supply.

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