

Nixon Makes Up With the Press

In his speech the President had a kind word to say about "a vigorous free press." And so it will go. Every young red-blooded American reporter will fight for a press ticket to the White House the night the President gives his big formal dinner for Eric Sevareid, Jack Anderson, Mary McGrory, David Brinkley and — and of course — Larry O'Brien.

One of the more painful aspects of the Watergate aftermath and hangover is sure to be the Nixon Administration's efforts to make up with the news media.

The President has had instinctive misgivings about newsmen for a long time. The feeling reaches back to the early post-World War II era when, failing to get a job as an FBI agent, he moved into politics — a career characterized by a long series of crises and extraordinary durability and success.

In his pursuit of Alger Hiss, as a young congressman on the House Committee on Un-American Activities, Nixon shared the committee's periodic censure by the liberal press and, naturally, resented it.

He found a friend and supporter in the pack, however, as he always has. The late Bert Andrews, Washington bureau chief of the late New York Herald Tribune, saw in the young Californian a future leader.

Nixon experienced some trouble with inquisitive newsmen covering his 1950 race for the Senate against Helen Gahagan Douglas. In 1952, he felt that reporters made much too much of the "slush fund" charges against him. In 1956 he found it hard to understand why the newspapers and TV gave so much play to the efforts of Harold Stassen and others to persuade President Eisenhower to dump him off the second term ticket.

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IN THE 1960 RACE against Jack Kennedy, Nixon concluded that the reporters assigned to his campaign trips were largely Democrats, even though their publishers and network heads were mostly for him. After many of his speeches, the candidate would repair to a curtained-off section of his plane by himself, and be unavailable for news conferences. On the other hand, Kennedy would come down the aisle of his press plane and gab with anybody who wanted to talk.

In 1962, after losing to Pat Brown in the California governor's race, Nixon delivered his memorable last blast at American journalism in general. Two years later, working for his Wall Street law firm, he was as relaxed and happy as he had probably ever been.

Four more years beyond that, he was President of the United States, and finally in a position to do something about all the real or imagined slights the media had piled on him through his political life.

In the years leading up to the exposure of Watergate his suspicions of old were transferred to willing allies, notably Vice President Agnew and his ghostwriters.

Reporters, commentators, papers, networks were singled out as irresponsible propagandists against the White House cabal. Some newsmen went to prison. TV stations were told they might lose their precious licenses if they continued to accept certain network commentaries.

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"POLITICAL PLUG-OLA," White House hatchetman Clay Whitehead said in this connection. As for the traditional White House press conferences, they virtually disappeared.

Now there will be a wrenching change which will embarrass both sides, if it can be said that what has happened in the past was a matter of sides.

"The White House apologized to the Washington Post for its earlier denunciations of the newspaper's disclosures in the Watergate affair, and said President Nixon would meet with reporters more frequently in the future," reported the UPI.

Ron Ziegler, White House press secretary, in making the announcement, seemed in a mood to say "Oops, sorry," to the Post's investigative team of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, whose digging for Watergate facts he had characterized as "stories based on hearsay, character-assassination, innuendo or guilt by association."