

NIXON

Charles McCabe

Himself

SFChronicle

MAR 10 1975

Nixon 'Hounded' From Office?

I HEARD the charge again last night at a party, and I heard it twice. The press, that thing I work for, "hounded" poor Mr. Nixon out of office. The press in general was a culprit, and I in particular was a culprit.

In both cases I retorted: "Speaking only for myself, if I *could* have hounded the rotter out of office, I would gladly have taken on the job; but that is not the way it happened."

Mr. Nixon is no longer in office because of a flaw in his character: he is a congenital liar in his public dealings. Many politicians are liars, born or otherwise, but no President of the United States lied blatantly and consistently to the people of this country about a criminal matter for two whole years. The press carried these lies, and they were shown on the telly. Who, then, is the offender?

Justice Stewart Potter of the U.S. Supreme Court, an eminently conservative man, recently spoke on this matter before the Yale Law School.

"The public opinion polls I have seen," he said, "indicate some Americans firmly believe that the former Vice President and the former President of the U.S. were hounded out of office by an arrogant and irresponsible press.

"... It is my thesis that, on the contrary, the established American press in the past ten years, and particularly in the past two years, has performed precisely the function it was intended to perform by those who wrote the First Amendment of our Constitution."

★ ★ ★

THIS IS TRUE, though not perfectly so. I happen to think the role of the press in getting to the truth of Watergate was something less than admirable. Had the "third rate burglary" been pursued the way any first-rate police story was by any first-rate newspaper a generation ago, there would never have been a second Nixon Administration.

The way the story came to light was close to reprehensible, though its publication required courage. The story was leaked to The Washington Post through its reporters, the Messrs. Woodward and Bernstein, by an informant they call Deep Throat.

★ ★ ★

DEEP THROAT was almost certainly an FBI man. The publicity campaign against Mr. Nixon, using Watergate as a nexus, was almost certainly a conspiracy by that organization to undermine the President. The FBI was sore because of the cavalier way the organization had been treated by the White House Prussian Guard of H. R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman, among other reasons.

If the press was as severely moral as it likes to tell itself it is at its annual conventions, the Washington Post would be chastised rather than praised for joining in a political cabal to discredit a President: rather than doing the job itself with solid police reporting.

★ ★ ★

IF THERE WAS any press hounding in the Nixon Administration, it was done TO the press, rather than by it. Mr. Nixon's hatred of the media is by now well-known. His hatchet man, Charles Colson, was constantly harassing the heads of the radio and television networks with threats of what the Administration could do to them through the Federal Communications Commission, which licenses them. The Washington Post itself comes to mind.

More than once, specific reporters thought to be unfriendly by the Nixon people were asked to be relocated or fired. Mr. Spiro Agnew, when at the height of his power, had as his chief brief the discrediting of the press, those "nattering nabobs of negativism."

You can make a good case for the press *failing* to hound a crooked President out of office. The other way 'round just doesn't wash.