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Mr. Truman, Mr. Nixon And the Press

By Tom Wicker

The late Harry S. Truman, who was anything but a cry-baby like the present incumbent of the White House, is famous for having said that "if you can't stand the heat, you better get out of the kitchen." He also observed, almost jovially, that "whenever the press quits abusing me, I know I'm in the wrong pew." That was in the middle of the 1948 campaign and Mr. Truman knew better than most that while the editorial writers and columnists were mostly against him, the front-page headlines that reflected his "give 'em hell" style were working for him.

The self-serving Nixon-Agnew thesis, on the other hand, is that the American press instinctively or subversively opposes Richard Nixon or anyone who is not a card-carrying liberal, distorts what he says, and thus makes it hard for him to bring the truth to the American people. Parroted by lesser Administration figures like Pat Buchanan, Herb Klein and Clay Whitehead, this thesis also holds that the "irresponsible" press does not reflect the true nature and beliefs of the American people, who are considered to have been made roughly in Richard Nixon's image.

The truth is—as Mr. Truman seems to have understood—that Mr. Nixon, like any President, usually gets all the better of it in his dealings with the press. Columnists and editorial pages may carp, complain, analyze and dispute, but Presidents can almost invariably dominate headlines and news stories.

That proposition was never better demonstrated than in the recent duplicitous Administration handling of the "news" from the Paris peace negotiations. No matter how liberal, Eastern, establishment and dovish the press may be, Mr. Nixon and Dr. Kissinger played on it as if it were an organ, and struck most of the chords they wanted to hear.

They were able to do this for two primary reasons. The first was that, on a matter of high national security such as peace negotiations, they were able to hold any factual information that existed very tightly among a tiny handful of officials; the second was that the tradition and ethic of the American press award a high priority to information deriving from official

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sources—particularly "confidential" information coming from "the highest levels of the Government."

Therefore, with the exception of Dr. Kissinger's two famous news conferences, virtually every item of information given out about the negotiations from October to the present has come from an anonymous source—a "senior Pentagon official" or a "well-placed diplomat" or an "official in a position to know" or a "source

close to the negotiations." Since these anonymous men alone could provide the "news," reporters had to seek access to them; once granted such access, they had to agree to the sources' anonymity; and even when that anonymity proved to have been a cloak under which the public was misled, it still had to be honored if the reporters wanted further access to the same officials—who remained the only people with the "official" information on which the American press feeds so avidly.

Anonymity for sources means that, if they are less than scrupulous, or if they have a purpose of their own, they can say what they will without later having to take responsibility for it. Thus, from October until Dr. Kissinger's second news conference, the anonymous sources were orchestrated beautifully to promise that peace was indeed at hand—just one more talk, one more detail, a bit more coordination. The press dutifully and loudly reflected this view.

But now that Dr. Kissinger has publicly conceded that peace is not at hand and has charged the North Vietnamese with being "totally" at fault, many of the same anonymous sources are being quoted to confirm the charge, to deny that any but military targets are damaged by American bombing, to contend that losses of B-52's are not excessive, and to explain piously that Mr. Nixon will keep up the bombing until the wicked North Vietnamese agree to bargain "in good faith"; the question of Mr. Nixon's own good faith, if any, manages to be all too well obscured.

A "high-ranking officer" in Saigon is quoted as saying during the Christmas "pause" that "I think the White House is saying, let's start meeting in Paris again, and this time no fooling around or we're putting the bombers back up there." An Associated Press lead from Key Biscayne pictures Mr. Nixon in a "vain wait . . . for a peace signal from Hanoi." In both cases, the White House version of events—that the North Vietnamese are at fault in the resumption of bombing—provides the basic viewpoint from which the news is written.

Even Dr. Kissinger's two on-the-record news conferences make the point: no matter how much the analysts in the inside pages may have questioned, first, that peace was at hand, and second, that Hanoi was at fault when peace disappeared, all these critics put together have not been able to catch up to or overcome the impact of Dr. Kissinger's own words on television and in the headlines. Thus, for most Americans, the "news" becomes about what the White House says it is.

SPChronicle version,
29 Dec 72 (filed Nix Ad)
has several omissions,
the most interesting
being reference to
"cry-baby."

New Orleans States-Item,
29 Dec 72 (filed Press)
also has omissions,
chiefly two penultimate
paragraphs.