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Clumsy snooping backfires

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WASHINGTON — In the last few months, the administration has been putting the cops on the Washington reporters again, and there is a lot of talk around here, most of it a little melodramatic, about some dark Administration plot to intimidate or discredit its critics in the press and the networks.

Ever since the publication of the Pentagon Papers, the Justice Department, instead of quitting when it was behind, has been using the F.B.I. to try to prove that there was some kind of conspiracy against the government in the publication of these papers.

This is understandable. The government has the right and even the duty to protect the privacy of its official papers, but its methods are astonishing. It has demanded by subpoena the transcript of an off-the-record talk by Daniel Ellsberg to a private meeting of the members of the Council on Foreign Relations in New York. The F.B.I. has also been inquiring into the private records and even the bank accounts of Neil Sheehan, who broke the Pentagon Papers story in The New York Times, and into the private records of his wife as well.

This has been going on now for over three months, while a grand jury in Boston is summoning Vietnam critics out of Harvard and M.I.T. and friends of Sheehan to tell what they know about Ellsberg and Sheehan. And the habit of us-

ing police methods in these delicate government-press relations seems to be growing.

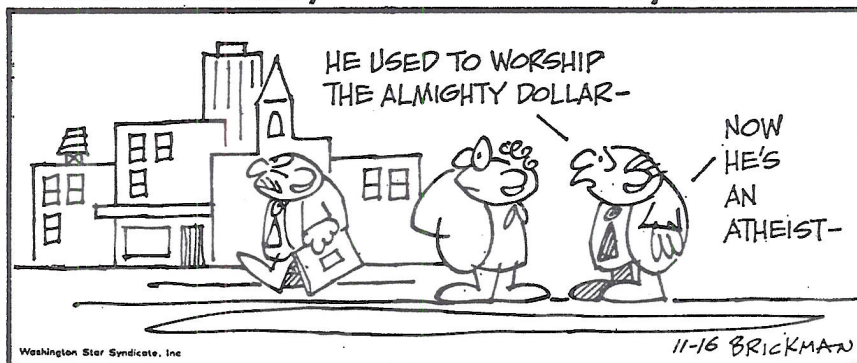
For example, William Beecher of the New York Times wrote a report on the progress of the U.S.-Soviet arms talks late last summer, and the administration has actually been giving lie-detector tests to some of its own officials who are suspected of being the source of his information.

And the latest object of the Administration's concern is Daniel Schorr of C.B.S., a tough-minded and admirably nose old pro, who has been raising some interesting questions about the mystifying contradictions and "clarifications" in the Administration's social and economic policies, and has even had the audacity to suggest from the public platform that maybe the re-election of Richard Nixon is not absolutely essential to the honor and well-being of the Republic.

Thereupon Schorr suddenly discovered not only that the White House was protesting to his boss at C.B.S. about his reporting, but that the F.B.I. was questioning his neighbors and colleagues about his personal life and professional qualifications. When this was made public, the White House explained that Schorr was being considered for an important government job, which Schorr had never heard of, and the White House refused to identify. The disbelieving and

the small society

by Brickman



on White House

derisive laughter that greeted all this is still rattling through Washington.

So obviously, there is something pretty fishy in all this, but probably less than

James Reston

meets the eye. When odd or mysterious things happen in Washington, and you are asked to choose between two possible explanations — a conspiracy or inefficiency complicated by stupidity — it is usually wise to bet on inefficiency and stupidity.

The long investigation of Sheehan and the legal demand for Ellsberg's speech before a private meeting at the Council on Foreign Relations are a puzzle. The F.B.I. doesn't have to ask Sheehan's next-door neighbor if she has any letters from him with his signature: they have his signature on his White House and Pentagon press passes, and there is no mystery about what Ellsberg has been saying about the Pentagon Papers, for he has said it all in public.

The F.B.I. investigation of Schorr is even clumsier, and the explanation of that investigation — that they were thinking of giving him a big government job — is almost funny, until you realize that this sort of thing is actually organized and put in train with the F.B.I. by the political image-makers on the White House staff who claim executive privilege and immunity from questioning by the Congress when they are caught in these peculiar manipulations.

The whole thrust of these intimidating investigations of newspaper or television reporters shows the most abysmal ignorance or misunderstanding of what a reporter's function is. His job is to gather all the information he can, just as a president's ambassador is expected to report all the information he can gather at his post. What is done with that information is not the reporter's responsibility but the newspaper's, just as what is done with the ambassador's information is the responsibility of his government.

Sheehan and Schorr are merely agents of the institutions for which they work, and to single them out and harass them personally does not really help the government but merely stirs up the whole communications fraternity, which, under attack, and only then, is a kind of mutual aid society.

It is easy to understand the zeal of these anonymous image-makers in the White House. They see the terrible dilemmas before the President and resent the criticism of his policies, but one wonders about their judgment, their secrecy, and their immunity from questioning. The Washington Press Corps was here before they all arrived and will be around long after they have gone back to commercial huckstering. It has had to deal with the manipulation of pros on the White House staff from Roosevelt to Johnson, all of whom were at least available for questioning, but President Nixon is served, if that is the word by some key self-righteous amateurs, who have forgotten what destroyed Johnson and what Nixon himself said on his way to the White House.

"It's time," Nixon said in the 1968 campaign, "we once again had an open administration — open to ideas from people, and open with its communication with the people — an administration of open doors, open eyes and open minds."

Well, the plain truth is, and you can check it with Bill Buckley or any other honest conservative reporter or commentator in Washington, this is by far the most closed administration in this town since the last world war, with more decisive power concentrated in the White House than any other, and with more closed doors to that power center than Washington has seen in memory.

And the irony of it is, while all the closed doors and the F.B.I. investigations are intended to protect the President, discredit his critics, and enhance his "image," they merely dramatize his weakness and revive the old doubts about his tricky and manipulative politics.

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