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The Press As Ostrich

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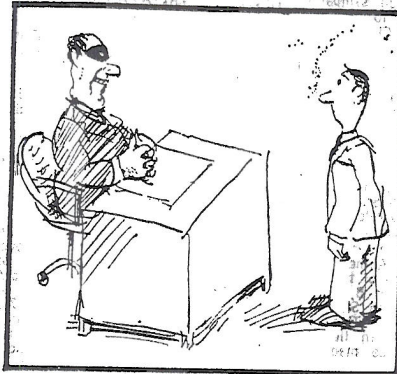
KANSAS CITY, Oct. 25—The newspapers here, as might seem to befit the heartland of America, are supporting Richard M. Nixon for re-election. So are hundreds of others across America, in one of the strangest paradoxes of a paradoxical election.

In Chicago last week, for example, the conservative Tribune announced a \$1,000 contribution to the defense fund of Peter Bridge, the New Jersey reporter who was then in jail for refusing to answer certain questions put to him by a grand jury. The Tribune also ran an excellent editorial defending the reporter's necessity to be free of this kind of harassment in the interest of informing the public; yet, The Tribune, too, is supporting Richard M. Nixon, whose Administration carried to the Supreme Court and won—with the concurring votes of four Nixon appointees—the case which made reporters like Mr. Bridge vulnerable to prosecutors and grand juries.

That is only one example. The hard fact is that the great preponderance of the metropolitan press is supporting Mr. Nixon for re-election. Each gives plausible reasons; The Atlanta Constitution, for instance, pegged its endorsement to what it saw as Mr. Nixon's greater competence. None, however, has cited, because no sensible editor could, Mr. Nixon's concern for the First Amendment and the Bill of Rights, upon which the very existence of a free press depends.

It may well be (in fact, that this Administration is less sensitive to First Amendment rights than any since that

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of John Adams and his Alien and Sedition Acts. Why should anyone, let alone newspapermen, think that in a second term things can do other than get worse, in light of this record:

¶The first "prior restraint" in American history, imposed for nearly two weeks by injunction on The New York Times, The Washington Post and other newspapers, until the Supreme Court finally ordered the Administration to stop preventing publication of the historic Pentagon Papers.

¶The still existing possibility and the often-voiced threat of criminal prosecution by this Administration of reporters and newspapers involved in publication of those important historical documents.

¶The practice of issuing subpoenas to reporters in order to subject them to inquisition by grand juries about confidential sources and the contents of their private notebooks — a practice which, as noted, was upheld by the Supreme Court at this Administration's insistence and by the votes of its judicial appointees.

¶A full-scale F.B.I. investigation of a reporter—Daniel Schorr of C.B.C.—considered unfriendly by some of Mr. Nixon's men.

¶Vice President Agnew's determined and vitriolic campaign of denigration and denunciation of television and newspapers, which undeniably has diminished public confidence in a free press and probably has inhibited many editors and publishers from exercising

to the full their constitutionally protected freedom.

¶Mr. Nixon's subtle, but no less consistent, attacks on the press, most recently his claim that "opinion makers" have a duty to support the President — a claim which, like the Bridge case, brought many a pious protest from Nixon-supporting newspapers.

¶The most "closed" Administration of modern times — one in which the President avoids news conferences and the ad men who surround him assiduously manipulate the news — as when they recently prevailed on A.B.C. to ask White House-planted questions of Senator McGovern, on a program on which Mr. Nixon himself refuses to appear.

All this strikes directly at or corrodes the First Amendment immunity of a free press; but those who depend on such guarantees ought to be equally concerned about the other depredations on the Bill of Rights wrought by the Nixon Administration and in some cases approved by a supine Congress: unlawful wiretapping, political surveillance, dragnet arrests, preventive detention, conspiracy trials and the unsavory list of sabotage practices coming to light in the wake of the Watergate case.

That so many American newspapers, for whatever reasons, are nevertheless supporting Richard Nixon and those he has brought to power only raises these sad and no doubt futile questions: If the Bill of Rights and the First Amendment are not vital to a free press, what is? If a free press won't stand up for them, who will?