

(FILED PAGES)

Compare with column as carried by NYTimes 28 Dec 72. Deletions consist chiefly of two penultimate paragraphs, which might have been included had the illustrations been omitted.

'News' becomes about what the White House says it is

DEC 29 1972

Tom Wicker

NEW YORK—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 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,

Here we go again!



—Bissell in The Nashville Tennessean.

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 Truman seems to have understood — that Mr. Nixon, like any President, usually gets all the better of it in his dealings with the press.

'News' from Paris

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

An anonymous source

Therefore, with the exception of 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 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.

Orchestrated sources

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 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.

Even 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 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.

(1/2, New York Times Service)



Clay Whitehead
In Nixon's image