

The Press: A Lack Of Vigor

By Haynes Johnson

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IN THESE post-Watergate days of self-congratulations among members of the American press, it is popular to hear all the old journalistic chestnuts about rugged independence and the people's right to know and the special adversary role that must exist between journalists and public officials. Watergate, it is being said, was the American press' finest hour, a classic example of what freedom of the press is all about.

The Nixon administration, ironically, is lending credence to this impression of an all-powerful press performance. The Vice President has warned his "good friends and old sparring mates in the nation's press" that their splendid Watergate role ("to their great credit") has now changed. In the weeks and months ahead, he says, the news media will be put to an acid test in deciding how to handle "those sensational leaked-source stories that might boost circulation but which could also malign the innocent and help to acquit the guilty."

A presidential propagandist, Pat Buchanan, has mounted a familiar administration counter-attack. In his view, the liberal, elitist, Eastern press axis is up to its old conspiratorial tricks. It is carefully orchestrating a campaign designed to discredit the President and arrogantly "demand that he surrender a slice of his government to his ancient adversaries." Other administration aides have been busily promoting the wisdom of a London Times editorial that takes the American press to task for conducting a presidential "trial by newspaper allegation."

And while the White House is anxiously awaiting — and assiduously trying to discredit—the forthcoming testimony of John Dean, this private word is being passed from some people in the Executive Mansion: The polls are wrong, the President is still immensely popular, and the press will pay the penalty for its excesses in the Watergate coverage.

A Permissive Tabby-Cat

ALL THIS IS HEADY material for the American press, particularly as the accuracy of so many controversial Watergate reports continues to be confirmed. The trouble with these accolades is that, with a few shining exceptions, they aren't deserved. Far from being the fiercely independent government interrogator of vaunted legend, by and large the press has been a permissive tabby-cat. Its record on Watergate, as media critic Ben Bagdikian has said, is hardly praiseworthy. The vast majority in the press, as he has noted, were only spectators at "the biggest political story of our time."

But the problem of the press goes beyond its specific handling of Watergate. Writing in this pages last Sunday, William Greider spoke of the mentality and attitudes of those implicated in the scandal. Watergate, he said, was crime-by-the-group. Well, it seems to me that when the definitive book on Watergate is written—the book that explores and explains all the national attitudes that contributed to the corruption—the American press must share in the collective guilt.

For the press, Watergate was only a symptom of a larger pattern of behavior, a pattern that permitted it to be used by government, a pattern that exalted and sanctified the presidency into an office that could do no wrong, a pattern that led many in the press to think of themselves either as important adjuncts of government policy-making or key components of a patriotic team.

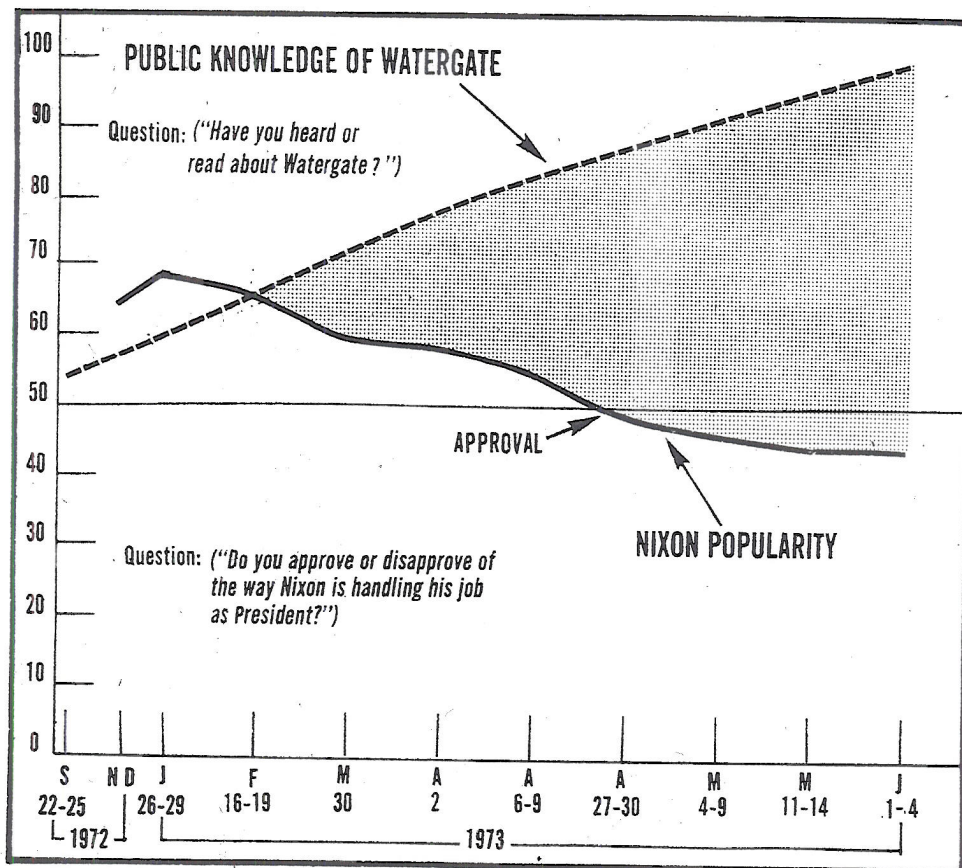
In spite of its breast-beating stance of independence and unrelenting government criticism, for years the Washington press corps was a willing accomplice of government secrecy, official trial balloons and justifications for policy failures. It was, for the most part, a staunch supporter of government policies, especially in foreign affairs. (It is hard to realize now, but as late as Aug. 8, 1967, Sen. J. William Fulbright was describing The Washington Post, the present *bete-noire* of the government, as "a newspaper which has obsequiously supported the administration's policy in Vietnam.")

Over the years, a cozy relationship developed between the working press and Washington officials. The press cooperated—indeed, often helped draft the rules—for mutually advantageous private meetings in which public officials were allowed to advance positions, many dubious, many purely political, under a cloak of anonymity. These background meetings, as they came to be known, were both the grist for the Washington press and the vehicle for Washington officials.

The officials quickly learned they could promote pet projects and policies anonymously, and pass on tidbits of gossip for which they would not be held accountable. Journalists came to like the informality and the close association with the cream of Washington officialdom. Out-of-town publishers and editors relished having their men in Washington set up meetings with major figures, including an occasional presidential session. Reporters could glory in the social relationships they were able to develop. It was heady wine to be able to call the eminent secretary or ambassador by his first name, and even more seductive to be referred to in turn on a first-name basis. (Even now, I hardly know a prominent journalist who doesn't say, with casual and familiar pride, "Henry" when referring to Henry Kissinger.)

Joining the Government

AS A COROLLARY to these kinds of relationships, the lines between press and government often became blurred. A genera-



By Joseph Mastrangelo—The Washington Post

President Nixon's popularity rating, as charted by successive Gallup polls, has dropped as public awareness of Watergate has risen.

tion ago, few who went into daily journalism thought of their work as a springboard to government service. A young reporter might have wanted to follow the example of an Ernest Hemingway and leave journalism to become a novelist; but he didn't look to the government for the fulfillment of his ambitions. In recent years, this has changed notably. Not only do journalists go into government, primarily as press or public relations aides, but often they consciously take that step in hopes it will lead to a more powerful role in the press.

Carl Rowan went from reporter to government official to columnist and commentator. John Chancellor followed a similar route and returned to network television in a higher position. James Haggerty was a reporter, press aide, and then a network executive. Robert Manning, editor of *The Atlantic*, and James Greenfield, foreign editor of *The New York Times*, had come to prominence as State Department officials. Herbert Klein has moved from newspaper work, to a Nixon press spokesman's role, and now into an executive position in television. John Seigenthaler, publisher of *The Nashville Tennessean*, and Edwin Guthman, national editor of *The Los Angeles Times*, had worked in Robert Kennedy's Justice Department.

Nor is lack of professional journalistic background any bar to climbing into journalism's elite for those who served as government press aides. Bill Moyers, Lyndon Johnson's press secretary, became publisher

of *Newsday*, and is now a TV commentator. Tom Johnson, a press aide to LBJ, was recently named editor of the *Dallas Times-Herald*. William Safire, a New York PR man who helped stage Richard Nixon's 1959 "kitchen debate" with Nikita Khrushchev in Moscow, went on to become a White House speech writer; he is now a columnist for *The New York Times*. Kevin Phillips worked for John Mitchell in the Justice Department; he, too, has become a syndicated columnist. Ken Clawson, a *Washington Post* reporter who joined the Nixon PR team in the White House, frankly said his move could turn out to be advantageous in later obtaining a more prominent position in journalism.

None of this is to suggest that the journalists who enter government service are somehow venal or merely men-on-the-make—or that they cannot perform again with independence, integrity, and a better understanding after they return to the profession. But it does indicate a departure from the generally rigid lines that had existed between press and government, and to some degree an inevitable erosion of the journalist's traditional adversary role when dealing with public officials.

A Pugnacious Tradition

ANYONE WHO THINKS the present state of the press in America is outrageously critical of everyone in government from the President on down should look at the earlier record. The modern American



press comes out of a tradition of savage independence, and caustic, often unfair, criticism characterized by a belief that no official is above rebuke or harsh examination.

As James Reston of *The Times* has written in spelling out the old creed:

"The United States had a press before it had a foreign policy. This is a large part of the trouble between its writers and its officials today. The American press was telling the country and the world where to get off before there was a State Department. The 18th Century American pamphleteers not only helped write the Constitution but thought—with considerable justification—that they created the Union. They believed that government power was potentially if not inevitably wicked and had to be watched, especially when applied in secret and abroad, and they wrote the rules so that the press would be among the watchers. In their more amiable moods, they no doubt conceded that the press should serve the country, but they insisted that the best way to serve it was to criticize its every act and thought, and something of this pugnacious spirit has persisted until now."

Certainly that pugnacious spirit existed for a long time. Shortly after George Washington's farewell address, a Philadelphia paper, *The Aurora*, paid its respects to the first President by saying:

"If ever a nation was debauched by a man, the American nation has been debauched by Washington. If ever a nation has suffered from the improper influence of a man, the American nation has suffered from the influence of Washington. If ever a nation was deceived by a man, the American nation has been deceived by Washington . . ."

Some 80 years later *The New York Sun* commonly referred to President Rutherford B. Hayes as "The Fraudulent President." The "fraud" was reiterated throughout the paper in scores of connections.

It is that kind of tradition to which Reston referred. But I think it fair to say that such pugnaciousness has not been a hallmark of the American press in recent years.

So pin no laurels on the press as a whole for Watergate. Salute a few, if you will, but remember that for large segments of the press the Watergate story was basically unexplored. In retrospect, it should have come as no surprise last fall, months after the break-in, that George Gallup would report only about half of the American people had heard or read about Watergate. Or that the President's popularity remained at such high levels for so long while the story was unfolding.

Finally, as the press began to pay more attention and the cumulative weight of the story took hold, those conditions changed. Now, Gallup says, 97 per cent of the people have heard or read about Watergate. As that general knowledge has increased, so has the President's popularity curve continued to plummet.

In the end, the press has done its job, but like so many others involved in Watergate, it has been a most reluctant hero.