



Nixon Could Call Off the Wolves

Joseph Alsop

THE problem of the freedom of the press is being endlessly agitated, too often by members of the press who are either self-righteous or self-pitying or both. But there are times when lines should be drawn, and this happens to be one of them.

Consider, for example, the extraordinary dragnet subpoenas just issued to the publisher of the Washington Post, Katherine Graham, three members of the Post staff, and assorted other newspapermen. They are part of the huge crop of subpoenas, sprouting from the maze of suits and counter-suits born of the ugly Watergate case.

The particular suit in question is a civil one, brought by former Secretary of the Treasury Maurice Stans against the former chairman of the Democratic National Committee, Lawrence O'Brien. The dragnet subpoenas were issued at the behest of Kenneth Parkinson, lawyer for Stans, and also lawyer for the Committee to Re-elect the President:

★ ★ ★

THE dragnet subpoenas amount to a demand for full disclosure of the inner workings of the newspaper business, including reporters' sources and everything else. The demand originates in a civil, not a criminal proceeding. The subpoenas will rightly be resisted up to the Supreme Court, if necessary, but at heavy expense for all the incidental costs of resistance.

For these reasons, the dragnet subpoenas constitute an unquestionable, gross and unjustifiable invasion of the freedom of the press. Worse still, this is an invasion that the White House could easily have prevented, or at least have called off. No one can suppose that Kenneth Parkinson would have issued his subpoenas,

or have persisted in them, if the President had sent down the necessary order.

The same rule applies to the speculative suits being brought by people unpleasantly close to the White House, with the aim of seizing control of the Washington Post Co.'s television stations in Miami and Jacksonville, Fla. Here it should be noted that the present round of suits are sequels to an earlier suit brought by the super-crony, Bebe Rebozo, and that unlovely political operator, former Senator George Smathers, of Florida.

★ ★ ★

IN this earlier suit with the same aim, the Washington Post repelled the attack, but only after paying the legal costs of the Rebozo-Smathers group. This was a bit like paying for wolf's dental work, after he has done his best to bite you. That amounts to encouragement for wolves, even though the practice is now frowned upon by the Federal Communications Commission.

The wolves (to continue the image) were no doubt far more encouraged by the open detestation of the White House for the Washington Post, which was greatly inflamed during the campaign year. The climate positively invited an attack on the Post's television franchises, by hard-headed men not averse to a good gamble with the chance of a big pay-off. Such are the men now trying to take over the highly profitable Miami and Jacksonville stations.

To subject a newspaper to financial penalties for political disagreements, is a most obvious invasion of the freedom of the press. President Nixon has been shamefully, badly advised, simply because he has allowed it to appear that he was at least a passive party to this.