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Press Lauded for Watergate Role

The Watergate scandal and the insistence of the press in probing into its roots were termed here yesterday an "almost classic example of the press exercising its right to know and the government attempting to make that information unavailable to the public."

Making the secrecy charges against the government was Harry S. Ashmore, president of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions and winner of a Pulitzer Prize in journalism for editorial excellence.

Ashmore, a former executive editor of the Arkansas Gazette, spoke at the all-day discussion meeting sponsored by the Center.

The meeting attracted more than 1100 persons to the Grand Ballroom of Fairmont Hotel and also featured Rexford G. Tugwell, one of the original "Brain Trusters" of the Roosevelt Administration of the early 1930s.

Tugwell discussed his proposal for a new United States Constitution, a project sponsored by the Center.

Ashmore viewed with little enthusiasm the present "adversary system" of press and officialdom being at loggerheads over the public's

right to know about its government.

"The problem," according to Ashmore, "is to keep what we got and add to what is missing."

What may be missing in the future, according to Ashmore, is public educational broadcasting, which he described as "now come under the onslaught of the White House" because of cutbacks in federal grants.

"The British have done this (public television) with success," Ashmore noted. "The Canadians have done the same. We could do it too."

Of continuing pressure and criticism of the mass media for being bearers of bad tidings, Ashmore observed:

"There are going to be times when the media will be unpopular. It must go against the public pulse because the public is often wrong.

"The media have the role of arguing public policy. That is what editorial pages are for and they are liable to be unpopular."

On the problems of consolidations of publications and other media sources, Ashmore said he viewed the decline in numbers of media voices as a result of technological advances of the times. —By William O'Brien