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Watergate And the Press

Not since last November has Washington witnessed such an orgy of self-congratulation as it has seen this past week. Back then, it was the members of the Nixon Administration and their political agents who were celebrating their own genius in producing the 49-state landslide.

Last week, it was the journalists of the country who were hailing each other—and graciously allowing politicians to praise them—for their splendid work on the Watergate story.

The suggestion here is that the journalistic euphoria is about as ephemeral—to use Cap Weinberger's favorite word—and as ill-deserved as the White House euphoria was last fall. We ain't as good as the returns make us look, either.

Yes, the reporting of the Watergate story has been a classic piece of investigative journalism, pursued with a doggedness and a self-discipline that make all of us proud to call reporters like Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein colleagues.

Sure, the editors and publishers who put their necks on the line, under heavy political pressure and threat of administration retaliation, magnificently justified the constitutional guarantee of press freedom.

But most of us were spectators in that process, and we're coattailing now on the courage they showed and the commendation they have earned. As press critic Ben H. Bagdikian pointed out at the editors' convention last week, "no more than 14 reporters" of the 2,200 regularly employed in this capital did any substantial work on the Watergate case, and the number of publications that pursued it with any measurable vigor can be counted on one hand.

My own columns last fall, when re-read, provide evidence for the observation by The Washington Post's ombudsman, Robert Maynard, that those of us whose supposed insights into the deeper meaning of events gain us editorial-page space in papers around the country did precious little to help readers understand the significance of this political crime.

I take some pride in the fact that a column I wrote last October, on the shielding of candidate Nixon from the press, apparently helped provoke the President into calling his one press conference of the fall campaign.

But anyone who makes a living as a Washington reporter must squirm at the realization that on the occasions Mr. Nixon met the press in the months between the break-in at the Democratic headquarters and the resignation of his top aides, only nine questions—most of them easily deflected—were asked him about the financing and conduct of his campaign aides. We have to do better than that.

First, we have to find some way to revive the institution of the presidential press conference—a vital, irreplaceable institution—which the press itself has allowed to wither into disuse under the antagonism of the last two Presidents.

Then, we must devise some means for equalizing the rules of the game for a presidential incumbent and his challenger. While George McGovern was under microscopic scrutiny from the press—as he should have been—Mr. Nixon kept himself and his organization under maximum-security wraps.

Unless future campaigns are to resemble last year's travesty, the press cannot allow itself again to be manipulated into being a propaganda arm for the President.

To avoid that role, we must become much more assertive of our rights, but that assertiveness requires a degree of public support we do not now enjoy and probably do not now deserve. To earn it, we have to be a lot more honest with our readers about our profession, its value to them—and its limitations.

It is not good enough in this era, for example, for the paper that has been the flagship of American journalism to proclaim each day that it is publishing "all the news that's fit to print."

Far better it would be if we said publicly what we know to be the case: that every day, we print a partial, incomplete version of certain selected things we have learned, some of them inevitably erroneous, all of them inevitably distorted by the need to abridge and by the force of our own preconceptions and prejudices. If we acknowledged that fact of journalistic life, perhaps we would act more quickly—and with less coyness—to correct yesterday's version with today's fresh evidence.

It would also behoove us to examine our own standards—or double-standards—more closely. We could well discuss with our readers, for example, why the same papers that have been so outraged by the threat to civil liberties resulting from the bugging of a party headquarters or the break-in at a psychiatrist's office feel free themselves to print the transcript of secret grand jury testimony, regardless of the risk to the reputations of persons who may be mentioned in that non-adversary proceeding.

There are a great many things we need to do to make journalism more than what Irving Kristol correctly described as "the underdeveloped profession."

Meantime, it would be prudent for us to view this wave of adulation with the same skepticism we direct toward other passing public fancies. Let us be modest in our moment of triumph, ladies and gentlemen of the press, for, as the old saying goes, we have much to be modest about.