

Reporting on Watergate

Senator William Proxmire's charge that the press has been guilty of "McCarthyistic destruction" of the President in its treatment of the Watergate case is an unfortunate overreaction to a problem that no conscientious editor or reader can afford to ignore.

It is certainly true that both the press and the public must be wary of confusing "disputed, unproven, secret charges" with fact and that no one in this scandalous affair should be judged guilty until so proven through due process of law. It may be that in their zeal for getting at facts that have been assiduously suppressed at the highest levels of government, some members of the press on occasion have rushed into print with reports which, in fairness to possibly innocent persons, should have been withheld, or at least deferred for stronger confirmation.

But it's a gross exaggeration to compare press exposures—which the President himself has lauded—with the wildly unfounded charges and unscrupulous methods of the late Senator from Wisconsin, Mr. Proxmire's immediate predecessor. Unlike many of Senator McCarthy's victims, the object of Senator Proxmire's concern—President Nixon—is in an excellent position to defend himself and has done so forcefully in a nationwide television address and in White House statements that command immediate front page attention.

In his critical speech on the Senate floor, Mr. Proxmire singled out Newsweek magazine, in whose current issue the former White House Counsel, John W. Dean 3d, is said to have told grand jury investigators of alleged White House meetings that seemed to imply that Mr. Nixon had direct knowledge of and involvement with White House attempts to cover up the Watergate operation and related incidents. The Wisconsin Democrat seems to have overlooked a caveat in the Newsweek account which has since been reinforced by the published disclaimers of Senate and Federal investigators. Newsweek cautioned: "One of Dean's tales rested on a chance remark, the other on speculation—and both were thus susceptible to explanations less damaging than he seemed ready to give them. Neither was it certain that he could back them up."

That is a far cry from "McCarthyistic" journalism. The press has an obligation to uncover and report the full story of Watergate—including Mr. Dean's story, whatever it may ultimately prove to be worth. Under a democratic system, the public is entitled to all facts and viewpoints and not just what authorities are willing to reveal. Judgment of course should be withheld until the evidence is all in.