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Suggestions For Bearers Of Bad News

According to Albert Sindlinger, the Philadelphia pollster whose daily telephone surveys offer a continuous and up-to-date gauge of public opinion, there are signs that the country is polarizing on the Watergate issue.

It is not the polarization one would expect between Democrats and Republicans or between defenders of the President and his critics. Rather, says Sindlinger, the country is dividing between "those who are very concerned, almost appalled, by the situation, and those who say they have had it and don't want to hear any more about it."

The first group, he says, is the larger, but the second is growing more rapidly and the gap between their sizes is not great.

The views of the two groups are not totally contradictory, of course. Both of them are angry and upset—the former with the President and his men; the latter with those who are telling them about what the President and his men have done.

Newspapers and television stations can confirm the latter reaction from their own experience. The Washington Star-News, which has been generally supportive of the administration but has published some tough editorials and columns on the President's response to Watergate, has had a heavy volume of mail from its readers, running 3½ to 1 critical of the press. CBS has reported that the mail from its viewers on the first two weeks of television coverage of the Senate Watergate hearings found only 27 per cent supporting this expensive exercise in live video journalism. Another 30 per cent of the viewers denounced it as an anti-administration plot, and 24 per cent said it was a bore. (The remaining comments were too scattered to be categorized easily.)

What this suggests is that a situation is developing in which the administration may be tempted to try to make the press, in all its forms, the target of the public anger at what has been happening in Washington. The Nixon operators, it hardly needs saying, are not exactly novices at the old game of whipping up the public against the messenger who brings the bad news. In their present frame of mind, the Nixon men are hungry for a scapegoat onto whom they can shift some of the blame, and we in the press are obvious possibilities for the role of presidential

patsy.

What do we do, under the circumstances? The first and most important answer is a negative one: We do not back off the story. We do not stop covering the Senate investigation or the Justice Department prosecution, nor do we stop pursuing our own leads on what was done to subvert the political and governmental process by men claiming to operate on behalf of the President. This story is important and, even if it galls our readers to learn what has been done by those we have placed in power, the lessons of Watergate must be absorbed and learned.

But there are two or three things the press can do—and ought to do—in this situation.

One is to remember that this story, big as it is, is not the only one in Washington that people are concerned about. The people are, so every survey shows, even more worried about inflation and the economy, and what their government is doing—or failing to do—about that. They also have a big stake in what happens to taxes and trade and the President's budget in this Congress—to mention only a few of the subjects that have been crowded from the news since the Watergate story broke.

The second thing we ought to remember is that the news we are giving people about their government really is very bad news, and it ought to be delivered with a restraint and seriousness that befits the circumstances.

There are some surveys of public opinion taken in the last three weeks that indicate the deepest pessimism about the national future that professional pollsters have ever recorded in this country—levels of pessimism that in European countries have preceded social upheavals. In such a situation, the messengers of bad tidings should speak soberly and with restraint. It is no time for exaggeration, or bad jokes, and it is certainly no time to be displaying lip-smacking delight at the discomfiture of old antagonists in public office.

By and large, my biased opinion is that my colleagues in both the printed and electronic press have handled this story with exactly the professional discipline and restraint that it requires. But the greatest test still lies ahead.

The White House has indicated that Mr. Nixon will hold a press conference on Watergate, perhaps this week. There are many tough questions he has not answered about the case, and reporters have the responsibility to do everything they can to get those answers. But we can do our job without turning the press conference into a bear-baiting contest. We will be judged by our performance in this crisis, just as every other institution and individual who is part of it will be. The better prepared we are, and the more self-disciplined, the better we will serve our profession and our country.