

The One-Party Press

By George Seldes

WINDSOR, Vt.—On the first anniversary of Watergate, and for several weeks now, the American public read and heard universal praise, appreciation and applause for a free press in a free country. A confirmation in 1973 of Jefferson's 1787 view that newspapers without government would be preferable to government without newspapers. American democracy again had shown the world that a press free from all outside restraint, even from self-criticism by a council, had proved the best of all possible systems.

In editorials, news columns, and addresses at professional meetings there were references to "the finest hour" in investigative journalism, "the press's greatest triumph in recent years," "a time of vindication" for the "role of the Fourth Estate" in the United States.

The very opposite (it seems to me) is true. Watergate (it seems to me) is the latest and best illustration of the failure of the press to serve the public.

We have exactly 1,764 daily newspapers. If instead of the one word "press" the words "an overwhelming majority of the nation's newspapers" were substituted, the preceding judgment would be more accurate. The majority press failed the public: four or five, perhaps one or two more newspapers, not only reported a burglary story June 17, 1972, but continued to investigate and report facts until they could no longer be covered up. The press failed in 1972; one fist-full of daily newspapers achieved historic distinction.

In a review of the Watergate year I find, for example, in Newsweek this alarming statement: "Many newspapers buried the item, if they bothered to print it at all." They buried or suppressed not news of a burglary of

a home or even a bank, but of one great political party's headquarters by hired representatives of another great political party

Again, here are the facts gathered by a noted journalist, and critic of journalism, in 1972, months before Watergate monopolized the headlines. According to Ben H. Bagdikian these are the four newspapers which kept on digging out and publishing the news: Washington Post (2 fulltime reporters, 8 others), Washington Star-News (4 fulltime), The New York Times (wound up with 12), Los Angeles Times (3 on Watergate first day; many more later; this newspaper had endorsed Nixon).

The great press chains notoriously failed, or refused to investigate—and America is becoming more and more a nation in journalistic chains: Newhouse (21 Washington correspondents, none on Watergate), Gannett (12 correspondents, none on Watergate), Copley chain (7 correspondents, none on Watergate).

The survey also shows the networks, ABC-TV and radio with 16 correspondents, CBS and NBC each with 25, and not one on Watergate.

According to Bagdikian, "no more than 14 reporters" of the nation's 2,200 in the Capital, began investigating Watergate in 1972 and reporting the news adequately.

Why should this have happened? One answer may be because we have a one-party press today, just as we had in 1924, when it generally suppressed the Teapot Dome story, until two courageous dailies forced the facts upon the corrupt Administration two years later.

A month before the Nixon landslide, Editor & Publisher's poll showed 548 dailies for Nixon, 38 for McGovern; 17,532,436 circulation for Nixon, 1,468,223 for McGovern. No one seems to have called front-page attention to this shocking fact except The Wall Street Journal, which moreover noted that

"support for McGovern is so slight . . . that The New York Times alone accounts for 55 per cent of all the circulation favoring him." In other words, the pro-McGovern circulation outside the metropolis was less than half a million readers.

No one pointed to or "viewed with alarm" the more alarming fact that there were twelve states without one Democratic newspaper. And, inasmuch as there were five for McGovern in Massachusetts, this means sixteen states with the press totally committed to one party.

The polled newspapers voted 93 per cent for Mr. Nixon. Several of the 6½ per cent which did not are probably included in the annual honor rolls, and deserve the thanks of a grateful republic for the new investigative reporting which exposed the greatest corruption in American history.

When Adlai Stevenson in 1952 coined the phrase "a one-party press in a two-party country," he said he was gravely concerned for the future of "our free society." Percentually the day. Morally and ethically it is better. It is amazing how so few great newspapers have done so much for so many in exposing Watergate.

George Seldes, a former newspaperman, is author of "You Can't Print That!"