

Jules Witcover

The Press and Mr. Nixon

After months of sensational revelations and testimony, the Senate Watergate Committee now finds itself televisionless, presumably as a result of the major networks' corrective judgment that the "dirty tricks" phase lacks sufficient viewer interest. Only the public TV nightly reruns remain. The first witness in the second phase of the hearings, White House media expert and political strategist, Patrick J. Buchanan, cooled off the committee with a convincing rejoinder that it was trying to build a case of dirty politics out of examples that really were old-hat practices by both parties.

Yet it would be a mistake to conclude that there is nothing instructive to be culled from a congressional look at the dirty tricks side of politics leading up to and through the 1972 campaign. The stack of White House memoranda made public in conjunction with Buchanan's recent testimony provides a rare insight into the frame of mind that existed within the fortress that was the first Nixon administra-

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tion, especially as regards its relations with, and attitude toward, the press.

One packet of memos covered the White House's efforts to influence public opinion against the press through the press after President Nixon's news conference of Dec. 10, 1970. The memos laid out a letter-writing campaign to influential columnists and newspapers, including sample "letters to the editor" written by Buchanan and an aide, Ken Khachigian. They accused the press of setting "strategy to embarrass the President" in a meeting of about 25 reporters before the press conference and of asking loaded and hostile questions.

A number of the sample letters—all presumably to be signed by "private citizens"—embellished the same charge. One written by Khachigian charged that Mr. Nixon "was faced with questions planted by a cabal of the liberal press." Another said the press conference "looked like a programmed attack on the President."

A Buchanan contribution called it an "incredibly arrogant performance" and asked: "Who in hell elected those people to stand up and read off their insults to the President of the United States—and then ask that he comment?"

Another Buchanan letter charged that the press had a nerve "demanding that the President have press conferences on call"; still another said Mr. Nixon had "handled that pack of wolves gathered in the White House with a great deal more gentility and generosity than their conduct deserved." Khachigian also had "private citizens" calling the press "the War-

locks of Washington," "A bunch of prima donna reporters," and "hatchet men."

What, one may ask, was the inspiration for all this? As one of those who organized the pre-press conference reporters' meeting (while then working for the Los Angeles Times), I can testify to the following:

There had not been a presidential press conference in about four months, a subject of considerable concern to those newsmen who see the conference

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as the one vehicle by which a President can be confronted in public and on the record on pressing issues of the day by an independent source.

About 25 reporters who usually cover White House press conferences met at breakfast to discuss what reporters could do, as individuals, to make the approaching press conference more productive—not how they might gang up on the President.

All but one or two of those invited came. The Washington Post declined and The New York Times' man came as an "observer" only and did not participate in the discussion. Chairman of the meeting was John Osborne of the New Republic, a senior White House correspondent asked to serve because he is held in high regard by his colleagues and most White House personnel alike.

Osborne was asked by the group to go immediately after the meeting to inform White House press secretary Ronald L. Ziegler of its purpose and substance, so that no charge could be legitimately made that it was a clandestine meeting in which any kind of concerted action was planned. This he did, and on request from other reporters, he supplied the names of all those reporters who attended for the official daily press briefing record of the White House.

Well aware of the reigning paranoia within the White House about the press, the reporters conducted their meeting in a manner in which no fair accusation could be made of a "cabal" against the President. Any reporter present was free to write about the meeting if he chose. The Washington Star man present, James Doyle, did so and the story appeared that afternoon. No specific and no actual questions were composed. No collective action whatever was planned for the press conference; individual reporters as always would decide for themselves what questions they would ask.

There was general agreement that more frequent, even regular, press conferences were desirable. But again it was left to each reporter whether that issue would be raised with Mr. Nixon. There was an informal consensus, too, that a major shortcoming was failure of the press to follow up on

questions not fully or directly answered. But here too it was left to each reporter to decide as always whether he wanted to pursue a colleague's question.

For all the discussion, the Dec. 10 press conference produced very little following-up of questions. It was, as customarily, a rambling affair, with the questions probably no more nor less pointed than usual. Mr. Nixon was asked whether he didn't feel "sufficient public interest developed to justify a news conference" sooner in the previous four months. The questioner—Herb Kaplow, then of NBC News, now of ABC News—had attended the breakfast meeting. Mr. Nixon cordially invited suggestions from the press on how better use could be made of the press conference.

As for the subsequent White House characterization of the questioners as "that pack of wolves" engaging in an "incredibly arrogant performance," the transcript fails to convey it. Dan Rather of CBS News did ask the President a tough question—whether he approved of then FBI director J. Edgar Hoover accusing the Berrigan brothers of a crime before formal charges had been made and of calling the late Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. a liar. Nancy Dickerson asked whether in light of rising unemployment and inflation, "it's fair to say that your economic policies have not worked."

Also, a reporter called Mr. Nixon on his labeling of the Mylai incident as a massacre; his pre-trial statement that Charles Manson, charged with murder, was guilty, and his expression that Angela Davis would be brought to justice in her trial. As a matter of defendants' rights, the reporter asked, "How do you reconcile your statements with your status as a lawyer?" The President calmly responded that it was "a legitimate criticism" and that lawyers too make mistakes and "that kind of comment probably is unjustified."

From the memos made public by the Ervin Committee, however, it is abundantly clear that leading White House officials were outraged that members of the press had met—openly, not in secret,—as the White House later suggested despite its knowledge to the contrary. They were outraged, and they were going to do something about it. They were going to expose the reporters for the plotters and bullies they were—in "letters to the editors" secretly ghosted in the White House.

As dirty tricks go in politics, it wasn't all that dirty, it's true. But the target in this case was not an opposition candidate, but the press—unless, of course, the press was considered the opposition. In the siege mentality that existed in the Nixon White House then there can be little doubt that the press was so regarded. And the drumbeat of attacks on the press that has been sounded consistently since then leaves little doubt the attitude, though perhaps somewhat muted now, remains.