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Mr. Nixon and the Press: A 27-Year Conflict

*A view that he
is not well informed.*

By Ben H. Bagdikian

WASHINGTON — President Nixon may be the most elaborately briefed President in our history on what the news media say—and he may be the most badly informed. This does not explain Mr. Nixon's profound animosity toward professional journalism. But it may illustrate how this feeling is reinforced.

Last Monday, Robert Pierpoint and Dan Rather on the C.C.S. "Morning Ntws" interviewed the President's chief media watcher, Patrick Buchanan.

PIERPOINT: We are constantly told by Mr. Ziegler that the President doesn't watch the television news programs. If he doesn't watch them, how do they so incense him?

BUCHANAN: Well, you're also constantly told, Mr. Pierpoint, that the President has a daily news summary which puts together all the quotes and which covers not only network programs but local television, wire service comment, comments by individuals in the political arena and which go on the President's desk in all their pristine loveliness. . . .

How pristine? How lovely? Journalistically speaking, very impure and unlovely.

Mr. Buchanan, whose journalistic experience consists of three and a half years as an editorial writer for a conservative paper, The St. Louis Globe-Democrat, presides over the White House staff that works full time monitoring the media and compiling a daily report, sometimes of fifty pages, delivered each morning to Mr. Nixon, marked "Eyes Only for the President—The President's Daily News Briefing."

In 1971 Don Oberdorfer, then a White House correspondent for The Washington Post, obtained a copy of this "eyes only" daily report. Its contents were marked by two major points of interest:

- It was full of inaccuracies about what the news media had actually said.

- It systematically omitted public condemnations of the President.

For example, Buchanan's report to the President on April 23, 1971, said: "Sevareid said best agents leave F.B.I.; Hoover is surrounded by old cronies." The tapes of Eric Sevareid's broadcast were obtained. This is what Sevareid actually said, referring to the late House Majority Leader, Hale Boggs (*italics added*):

"Boggs charges that the standards of talent within the Bureau have fallen, that the best agents tend to leave; that Mr. Hoover remains surrounded by a group of old-timers loyal and beholden to him."

There are primitive inaccuracies even when the correct report would support the Nixon position. The Buchanan report to the President that day on the N.B.C. nightly news footage on testimony of the former Ambassador to Laos, William Sullivan, was paraphrased:

"Again, Sullivan tried to state that 20,000 refugees had been pushed forward by the N.V.N. . . ."

That is not what the tapes show that N.B.C. said. Buchanan was off by 34 times. The film on N.B.C. had Sullivan saying: "Of the 700,000 or so refugees that have been generated *all but about 20,000* have been pushed forward by the North Vietnamese . . ."

The same Buchanan report said: "Britain and France will go ahead with their S.S.T. production, said Cronkite."

Said Cronkite, according to the tapes:

"Britain and France have agreed to go ahead with the production of *four more Concordes* . . . It represents a postponement of the key decision on whether to go ahead with full production of Concorde."

Factual errors fill the "Eyes Only" report. Correspondents are misnamed, for example. A.B.C. is said to have reported an alleged Jewish Defense League bombing in New York when it did not; C.B.S. did. C.B.S. was quoted as reporting a reduction of "over 100 per cent" in carbon monoxide in car-deserted streets, when C.B.S., perhaps knowing that nothing can be reduced "over 100 per cent" reported precisely a reduction from 20 parts of monoxide per million to eight parts. A report on a Communist leader was attributed to C.B.S. when in fact it was made by A.B.C. Another report was attributed to A.B.C. when it was made by C.B.S.

The same report to the President said that on the occasion of the death of François "Papa Doc" Duvalier in Haiti "Brinkley said that . . . his 'portly' 19-year-old son is said to have 'no interest in or talent for politics.'" Brinkley actually said, "He has displayed no particular interest in, or talent for, leadership."

Here is an example of the systematic omission of condemnation of the President:

An A.B.C. report of a resolution by delegates to a White House Conference on Youth concluded with an appeal by the delegates: "We have tried to be patient, but we cannot remain silent. Mr. President, you have called a White House Conference on Youth to hear our views. This resolution is our answer." Buchanan's report to the President cited the issues that the conference raised, but omitted the challenge to the President to listen.

Another example: The daily briefing quoted A.B.C. and N.B.C. on a speech by antiwar veteran John Kerry, who said on the network footage, "Someone has to die so that President Nixon won't be—and these are his words—the first President to lose a war." The briefing to the President

omitted this challenge to the President.

This report to the President on the news media is filled with error for which major news organizations would fire a reporter. Yet it is precisely the practitioners of this slovenly and misleading reporting who for five years have been lecturing the American press on accuracy, fairness and balance.

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A view that he is not well treated.

Patrick J. Buchanan, speechwriter for President Nixon, appeared Monday on the C.B.S. "Morning News" program with Robert Pierpoint and Dan Rather. These are excerpts from their conversation.

ROBERT PIERPOINT: Good morning. I think, Pat, I'll have to ask you, I'm still in a bit of a state of shock at that vitriolic attack on the news media [by the President at his press conference last Friday]. I have to assume it wasn't directed at me personally although I happened to be the immediate object of it. Just what is it in specific terms, in the last few weeks, that has so aroused the President's anger—and I think it's obvious he was angry despite his denial?

PATRICK BUCHANAN: Well, the first thing I think we ought to consider is the mood in the East Room on the night of the press conference. I don't think it came through on that camera. I think Hugh Sidey described the actions of the reporters as "really dreadful and scornful, that the questions were rude and intemperate." The mood there was really like Sunday afternoon in the Tijuana bullring, in my judgment, and I thought in that mood the President expressed feelings that he had gathered over a period of time.

Let me give you two examples: On Wednesday night, after the President spent a great deal of time working on the Mideast crisis, N.B.C. ran a report which carried all four of the questions out of Henry Kissinger's news conference, which relayed and created the impression—the questions, the answers—that somehow the Mideast crisis had been fabricated for domestic political reasons.

Another is—I think you did, Bob—three pieces, I believe, on Mr. Rebozo's bank in Miami Beach or in Key Biscayne. The impression left by those reports, justified or not, is that there's something wrong with it, that influ-

ence peddling and the like was involved. And the President — Mr. Rebozo is the President's good friend. I read a piece in the Washington Star that indicated—and I think you even stated — that there's no evidence of wrong-doing here.

DAN RATHER: First of all, I do not agree that the atmosphere in the room the other night was that of a Tijuana bullring. In whatever regard that it may have been, it was partly, yes, mostly of the President's own creation. But I'd like to turn the thermostat down on this about two notches, if we may, because I think you'll agree we're talking about something fairly serious here. We're talking about whether a President's ability, continued ability to govern, for one thing. Would you agree with that?

BUCHANAN: Well, I certainly—[crosstalk].

RATHER: . . . very difficult to govern if he stays so low in the polls?

BUCHANAN: Let me say this: You were up—you're sort of in the interior line with the President, you're right up close to him. I was standing next to Hugh Sidey when he made—I mean, he made the observation; and if you stand back—there was the jumping up, the shouting, the screaming of questions, the yelling of "Mr. President—Mr. President" to which he left the room, really did give that—to someone who was standing in the back of it as opposed to you who were very close up front.

RATHER: Let me—let me read you something, if I may. The quote is— is rather long, and for that I apologize, but I don't want to do them a disservice. Part of this quotation comes from David Wise's book called "The Politics of Lying." The other part comes from The Progressive magazine. Neither, I gather, are particularly favorites of you. The question is whether this is a fair assessment, given the facts of the situation, "as President—"—and this is a quote—"as President Richard Nixon has unleashed and personally participated in the strongest, most highly coordinated, and ultimately the most dangerous attack on the nation's Constitutionally protected press since the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798." Unquote.

BUCHANAN: Alien and Sedition Acts, right. Do I think that's justified? Of course not. What we have—What's come up in this country, in my judgment, is like the railroads at around the turn of the century, the networks in the United States have gained a position of power and dominance over the flow of ideas and information to the American people which I think is excessive.

Now, the networks and the news-

papers, the dominant newspapers—The Washington Post Company, The New York Times—have a tremendous power in this society to influence opinion. In our judgment, just as the First Amendment gives you the right of a free press, the right of freedom of speech to criticize us, to say that the President of the United States is not doing a good job, so we can exercise the same freedom to say that the networks are not doing a good job, The New York Times, for example, might not be doing a good job, and The Washington Post might not be doing a good job. I think the First Amendment is a two-way street, as applies to us as well as to you.

PIERPOINT: But no one, I think, would dispute that it's a two-way street. But you bring up a—a subject I think that is a—

BUCHANAN: Sure.

PIERPOINT:—is a very complex one. How are you going to stop the three major networks from disseminating news?

BUCHANAN: Oh, I would not stop them. And I would speak only in my—my—this is my personal opinion. In my judgment, it would be a better situation in this country if, instead of controlling, say, five major markets, the three network news organizations had to compete in those major markets. And I think that you've got to—

PIERPOINT: We do compete in all those markets.

BUCHANAN: Well, you also—you control and own five stations, and they have—have no other choice but to take you news. In my judgment, if there were a competitive situation, and you had, say, eight networks working—a situation similar to—that you have in radio—if there were competing voices, I think you would have far less criticism on the part of government because we said, "Well, people that agree with us could hear—be heard; people that agree with you can be heard." Our concern is not with the exercise of your freedom; it's with the power of the networks.

RATHER: At one time you articulated you felt that antitrust action should be used as a lever to bring the networks in line. Do you still believe that?

BUCHANAN: Well, I wouldn't—My personal judgment is — I said there was nothing go—on-going at the time. My personal view would not be use it as a lever. My personal view, as I've stated, would be—and I don't speak for the Administration—to move with some sort of legislation, actually; not use it as a lever, but to move with it in order to break the power of the networks.