

The Press 'Firestorm'

The News Business

On his desk in the Old Executive Office Building, Kenneth W. Clawson keeps a file at the ready as ammunition when journalists come to call. He has dubbed the file, "The Press Firestorm." It contains what the White House contends are examples of the "outrageous, vicious, distorted reporting" of which President Nixon complained in his Oct. 26 press conference.

While Clawson never actually shows the file to visitors, he lectures from it, and those lectures make two things perfectly clear: (1) The Nixon administration, besieged by mounting criticism, is fighting for its very life; and (2) the press again is a primary target in a determined offensive for the credibility essential to its survival.

This offensive against the press, while similar to others the administration has mounted in its five years, is also different in several important respects from its predecessors.

The first of these is Clawson himself. As deputy director of the Office of Communications, he is calling shots in the White House war against the press as a quarterback calls plays in a huddle. His office is awash with White House staff buzzing in and out.

Unlike other presidentially appointed press critics, Clawson is a seasoned professional journalist who made quite a reputation for himself in five years as a labor reporter on the Toledo Blade before coming to The Washington Post in March of 1968. He worked for The Post as an editor specializing in labor and congressional coverage, went back on the street as a national correspondent covering the Justice Department and finally quit in January of 1972 to join the Nixon administration.

This background gives him an edge over most other press-baiters in the Nixon regime. Every time Spiro Agnew had a close-up interview while he was the administration's press critic, for example, he revealed an awesome gap in his understanding of how this business works. When Jeb Magruder and Charles Colson dabbled in trying to intimidate the press, their memoranda make clear that their mendacity was exceeded only by their lack of any conceptual grasp of journalism.

Clearly, Clawson is a different matter; so, too, is the nature and style of his offensive. With Agnew, the technique was intimidation through bombastic rhetoric that the press carried to his listeners, who, in turn, denounced the press for its "left-wing liberal bias." With Colson, it was the technique of using administration "clout" in the hope of scaring the networks silly.

Clawson uses the normal channels and the velvet touch. He "hustles" — his word — the White House story among the major media. He calls and scolds editors for their perceived lapses. He offers up administration spokesmen — "everybody below the presidential level" — as if proffering hot canapés at a cocktail party.

"You'll never hear any of that 'left-wing liberal bias' crap from me," Clawson says with a proud smile. "That's not where it's at."

Where it's at for Ken Clawson is promoting Julie and David Eisenhower for NBC's "Today" show and sowing plugs in the Press sections of Time and Newsweek for his contention that the media are playing up "the other side" and not giving the administration a break.

excellent example, both in its name and its content. To hear the name is to think that the "firestorm" was either conceptually or actually a press invention.

When Clawson discusses the contents of that file, the substance of the charge that the press created the "firestorm" turns into a slithery demon, one that is very difficult to keep hold of for close inspection.

The conversation began with a simple request. In his Oct. 26 news conference, Mr. Nixon spoke of "outrageous, vicious, distorted reporting." Clawson was asked to document that charge with examples.

That is when he began reading from the "firestorm" file. He began by saying the networks overplayed the call for impeachment of the President by Reps. Morris Udall and Jerome Waldie. "What clout does Moe Udall have?" Clawson demanded to know.

As for Waldie, he said, the press should also have reported the fact that he is a candidate for the governorship of California, "and he is running behind." In other words, Waldie's call for the impeachment of Mr. Nixon was no more than a grab for a headline in Clawson's view and that is how it should have been reported.

He was asked to classify that particular media lapse. Was it "outrageous," "vicious" or "distorted"? He mulled a moment and decided the Waldie example fit into the "distorted" category.

Next there was the matter of George Meany charging that Mr. Nixon was losing his emotional grip. No, Clawson did not think it was wrong to have reported that in the media. After all, Meany is president of the largest labor federation in the western world. But, said Clawson, Paul Hall is president of the Seafarers Union and a member of the AFL-CIO Executive Council and he, alone, opposed that statement. That fact wasn't reported. "Outrageous?" "Vicious?" "Distortion?" Well, none of those, said Clawson; more a lack of "perspective."

Then there was the fact that CBS alone among the networks carried the entire Henry Kissinger press conference live on the day of the Mideast alert. "Perspective" again. "God bless CBS—and you can quote me on that," said Clawson.

And so it went, back to the reporting of the Christmas bombing of 1972 over North Vietnam, forward to the coverage of Archie Cox and back to Daniel Ellsberg. All the while his visitor is trying to hang on to the "press firestorm" and the substance of the charge of "outrageous, vicious, distorted reporting."

There is one last point. Clawson prides himself—and is so quoted in Newsweek this week—on his efforts to make almost anyone of consequence in the administration available to the press. He is also quoted in Newsweek as saying that, "If they were professional journalists, they'd get these people themselves." But he takes pains to outline the difficulties he understands reporters have had covering this administration in the past, gently taking the curse off the accusation of lack of professionalism.

It scarcely adds up to a "press firestorm." The Clawson case, in fact, adds up to about as much legitimate complaint about "perspective" and "balance" as the average city hall or state house reporter might expect from the mayor's flack or the governor's p.r. man. By the end, you would hardly have guessed it was all about a national administration in the deepest trouble of any in our history and a President who claims to be the victim of the most "outrageous, vicious, distorted" reporting he has ever seen in 27 years of public life.

And where it's at is having in reporters from The New York Times and The Washington Post and unloading his version of the allegations contained in "The Press Firestorm" file. That, to Clawson, is part of the new "open" approach of the administration.

In most other respects, the Clawson offensive is strikingly similar to previous White House efforts to bend the press instead of trying to deal on the merits with the particular problem the press is describing.

"The Press Firestorm" file is an