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The President and the Press

"I am not obsessed," said President Nixon last week to the National Association of Broadcasters, "about how the press reports me."

The observation came in the course of a question-and-answer session in which he repeatedly made offhand references and digs at the press, highlighted by this bit of irony: "The President should treat the press just as fairly as the press treats him."

Against the well-documented backdrop of Mr. Nixon's contentious relations with the press over the years, there could be no mistaking what he meant: that he was ready, as ever, to give as good as he got, and that he was sure he would be getting plenty.

It may be, as the President said, that he is not obsessed about the press. But there has been no national politician who has demonstrated greater conviction that the press (including radio and television) has been his undoing, and has spent more time, emotion and effort combatting it, than he has.

Perhaps the best recent illustration of that conviction—and his bitterness about it—was his Oct. 26 press conference attack on television network reporting. "I have never heard or seen such outrageous, vicious, distorted reporting in 27 years of public life," he said, when asked in the climate of Watergate about shocks to the nation's confidence.

A few moments later, when asked by Robert Pierpoint of CBS News what it was "about the television coverage of you in these past weeks and months that has so aroused your anger?" the President responded: "Don't get the impression that you arouse my anger . . . You see one can only be angry with those he respects."

The bitterness of that answer revealed a deep-seated animosity that goes back to the President's earliest years in national political life. As both presidential candidate and White House occupant, Mr. Nixon has treated the press as a hostile and dangerous force to be neutralized or, if possible, undermined. Convinced that the press helped defeat him in 1960 and 1962, he deliberately constructed his campaign of 1968 and his presidency thereafter to shield himself from the press and also to subvert its credibility.

In 1968, he removed whatever spontaneity he could from the campaign and showed himself essentially in well-staged events that dictated favorable press coverage. Despite efforts by the

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press to elicit his plans to conclude the Vietnam war, he navigated that campaign without ever spelling out those plans. And by constantly reminding reporters—and the public—how badly the press had treated him in 1962 in California, he kept them on the defensive.

When the press raised questions about his conduct of the war, Mr. Nixon sent Vice President Spiro T. Agnew on a hatchet mission against them, with one clear and paramount objective—to undermine the press' credibility.

With or without Mr. Nixon, of course, the American press does have a serious credibility problem. For all the lofty journalism society pronouncements, it still deals too much in violence, in sensationalism and in shoddy workmanship. But acknowledging these shortcomings does not make the President's case, which is that the press is some kind of enemy force that has been and remains the cause of his political difficulties.

As in the past, the press has reported many things concerning Watergate and associated developments that have hurt Mr. Nixon. But it has not committed the damaging deeds. The press did not break into Democratic headquarters at the Watergate on June 17, 1972; the press did not establish the "plumbers' unit" in the White House; the press did not break into the office of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist.

And the press did not pay hush money to the Watergate defendants; or try to cover up such payments or improve Mr. Nixon's homes at Key Biscayne and San Clemente at taxpayers' expense; or backdate a donation of vice-presidential papers for maximum tax deductions or lose the original deed for that transaction; or tape conversations secretly in the White House; or erase 18½ minutes of conversation from a key tape.

These facts are self-evident, yet it is clear that the game of Beat the Press that Mr. Nixon has played so hard for so long touches a very responsive chord among Americans.

Not the least of the ironies the other night, when the President made his sometimes gratuitous, sometimes patronizing remarks about the press, was

the fact that many of the broadcasters in his audience applauded him enthusiastically.

Members of the press should not kid themselves that their own confidence in the honesty, fairness and professionalism of their business is universally shared and accepted. Anyone who has ever heard George Wallace give "the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Time and the Newsweek" a going over from the stump and has heard the thundering response—North and South—knows press credibility is shaky.

The press' record of reporting on Watergate and the other stories that have caused Mr. Nixon so much recent grief has, or should have, done much to buttress its credibility. But public confidence is a very perishable commodity and no matter how much truth the press reports, its effort will mean little if that which is reported is not believed.

That is why the climate of hostility that exists between Mr. Nixon and the press, so clearly demonstrated in recent televised exchanges between them, is probably more damaging to the legitimate interests of the press than to those of the President.

If the President can succeed in painting the press as a band of irresponsible bullies engaged in a personal vendetta against him, the role of the press as an independent conduit of information to the public in the critical weeks and months ahead will be seriously undermined. As the nation, along with Mr. Nixon, approaches an ordeal that will test the strength and justice of the political system, it is especially important that the press conduct itself in a manner that minimizes this possibility.

It is a time, certainly, for putting hard questions to the President. It is a time, for instance, to press him when he sidesteps important questions, as he did in Houston when asked whether he would honor a subpoena for tapes and documents from the House Judiciary Committee. It is a time for tenacity on the part of the press, to get at the truth. But equally important, it is a time for civility on the part of the press, to be credible in the public's eye.

Otherwise the press will be hard put to counter efforts by those damaged by bad news to slay the messenger who brings it, and thus somehow invalidate the bad news.