

Charles McCabe Himself

'I'd Rather Be Rather . . .'

LIKE MILLIONS of people I was witness last week to the rather painful confrontation between President Richard Nixon and telly reporter Dan Rather. I ended up with decidedly mixed feelings about the whole thing.

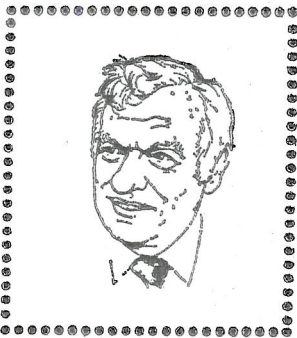
There is nobody, but nobody, to whom I will relinquish my credentials as a Nixon-hater. I've despised the man since he first turned up as a congressman in Washington after World War II, and in those days when he campaigned for the Senate in a Navy officer's uniform which he had negligible right to wear at the time.

There was a period, when I worked in Washington, that the feeling was decidedly mutual. I hope the Lord will forgive me, but there's just no way I can like Dick Nixon.

Yet the other night, March 19 to be exact, I found myself on his side. His questioner, Mr. Dan Rather of CBS, is a young man who is terribly full of himself. Rather asked the President a long, fiercely involuted and almost incoherent question about the Watergate mess.

The President could not conceal his irritation, since Mr. Rather had made a thing of his personal vendetta with the White House and its occupant. The President testily asked the telly man if he was running for something. After a tedious interlude which held boos as well as applause, Rather neatly made riposte. "No sir, Mr. President," he said, "are you?"

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DIRTY POOL on both sides? Fair play on both sides? In the position of Mr. Rather, I doubt if I could have resisted the temptation to reply as he did. Yet there was something frightfully wrong about the whole thing.

I was brought up on the thesis that newspapermen are not news. It is a good thesis. If a newspaperman instead of Joe DiMaggio had married Marilyn Monroe, his name would quite rightfully have been buried back in the eczema ads. Newspapermen were not supposed to make either waves or news, which are about the same thing. It was a form of indignity when, for reasons wholly beyond his control, a reporter figured in a news story.

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I WAS on Rather's side in his exchange with the President, as I usually am; but I was against Rather. As a reporter friend said to me the other day, "A reporter reports news, he doesn't make news, and seldom if ever should his name be involved in the story unless (1) he is underpaid and a byline bolsters his ego in lieu of a fair salary or (2) he is an actor or entertainer who gets his name in the billing."

The second alternative is unfortunately where we're at. Mr. Rather and a good many of his colleagues are show biz. Vide, those terrible "newsmen" who give the local news on Channel 7. News reporting has nothing to do with show biz, or should have nothing to do with show biz.

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WHAT IS NEEDED is an emaciated, self-effacing Associated Press man (and most of them were just that in my day) to ask tough questions in a toneless voice. The best White House reporter I ever met was a guy named Eddie Folliard of the Washington Star, and who ever heard of Eddie Folliard? He knew what he was after, he always asked the right questions and usually got the useful answers. He wouldn't have known what an ego trip was.

There's nothing wrong with being a theatrical presence in a medium which is basically theater. The Chancellors and the Cronkites and the Howard Smiths are show biz, and rightly so. They orchestrate and interpret the news through their personalities. But where the news is actually made, like in a presidential press conference, show biz stands out like an orchid in a spaghetti tin.

It ain't right.