

# The Press And the 'Opposition'

Like it or not, the press has become an issue—and a source of controversy—in the conflict over Watergate and impeachment.

From both political flanks, urgent warnings have been sent that whenever and however Mr. Nixon's case is disposed of, the press's turn will come next. "It scares me to hear the number of people who really want some controls put on the press," says a conservative friend from Idaho. "You will be fighting for your civil liberties for the rest of this century like you've never had to fight before," says a liberal from New York, "and I'm not certain you'll win."

In the essay concluding Time Magazine's admirable treatment of the press controversy last week, its managing editor, Henry A. Grunwald, wrote that "in declining to give Nixon the benefit of the doubt, in refusing to yield him the last word, the press has become—as its critics contend—more than an observer and expositor. It has become, quite involuntarily, a participant . . ."

How did the press get into this role? Well, the traditions of muckraking investigative journalism are old ones in America. Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein were following the footsteps of generations of police reporters when they began scouting on their own among the witnesses, the victims and perpetrators of the Watergate crime and coverup.

As their original stories (viewed skeptically by many other reporters) were confirmed and the enormity of the case became clear, the massive forces of modern electronic and print journalism descended on the President and his men.

Pack journalism always produces excesses, whether the story is a war, a campaign or a scandal. In this case, along with some solid scoops, a number of unverified rumors, false innuendos and a good deal of genuine but properly secret material — including verbatim grand jury testimony — found its way into print and onto the airwaves. The readers and viewers began to feel they were being drowned in a flood of information — and misinformation.

But there is something else that explains why the press has not been able to preserve its neutrality in this struggle. And that is, very simply, that the

political opposition—the Democratic Party—has defected in its role as an opposition.

Ever since impeachment became a possibility, the responsible leaders of the Democratic Party have clammed up tight. Their reasons for doing so are clear. They are acutely aware that since a Democratic Congress is literally sitting in judgment on a Republican President, they must not give the public any indication they are prejudging the case for partisan reasons.

But the silence Democratic leaders have adopted in their quest for nonpartisanship has left it to the press to provide the commentary—and, on occasion, the rebuttal—to the vigorous efforts by Mr. Nixon and his allies to shape public opinion to his own ends.

Thus, when the Judiciary Committee Democrats refused to open its hearings to coverage, reporters were forced to use leaked and nonattributed information to give the readers another perspective on the proceedings than that provided, so eagerly, by presidential lawyer James St. Clair. As a result, the press has become—as Pat Buchanan and other White House critics note—a party to the dispute over leaked testimony, not a neutral referee.

Unfortunately, this habit of the political opposition letting the press do its work for it is becoming a pattern in American public affairs. During the Vietnam debate in the 1960s, it was not the Republican party leaders who challenged the assumptions and facts underlying the policies of Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. The Republicans wrapped themselves in togas of bipartisanship, just as the Democrats now are taking vows of nonpartisanship.

Modern Presidents are happy to exploit this habit, knowing it is easier to win a public relations battle with the press than a political war with the opposition party. Mr. Nixon refuses even to allow his advisers to testify before committees of the Democratic Congress, while encouraging them to engage reporters in debate at press conferences and on television panel shows.

Recent Presidents have been positively chummy with the nominal leaders of the political opposition—witness Kennedy's and Johnson's palsy-walsy relationship with the late Everett Dirksen and Mr. Nixon's courtship of Mike Mansfield. At the same time, they have carried on public vendettas against "opposition" journalists.

"Who elected David Halberstam to run our Vietnam policy?" Kennedy demanded of the New York Times. "Are you running for something?" Mr. Nixon asked Dan Rather.

The answer, of course, is that no one elected any journalist to anything. But where are those who were elected to provide opposition to the President? Where is the opposition party? They're busy being bipartisan or nonpartisan. And it's their defection that has cast the press in the uncomfortable role.