

No time to droop

The estimable and admirable Bob Considine addressed himself briefly to Watergate in these pages the other day, and found himself terribly bored. It's a pity. We could use a bloke of Considine's talents exploring this topic, instead of his turning away to easy stuff.

Our man looked at a few of the duller paragraphs from the Judiciary Committee's exhaustive 4,000-page report, printed these as samples of how dull it all must be, if anybody were to trouble to read it.

In so doing, Considine forcibly made the point I urged on the trade a few columns back, to wit: Readers don't get bored with stories, editors do. American journalism has a hit-and-run tradition. A good clean murder, briskly served up, neatly disposed of, is ideal. Like an airline meal or a TV dinner, also very modern American; you don't have to sweat much preparing it, nor spend any time at all in the clean-up.

Watergate doesn't fit the quickie tabloid format, nor does the maze of related evidence. That we got the story at all suggests to me that the news trade has matured considerably since "Love Nest Killer Tells All" sold papers. That journalists, mostly young, have never ceased to dig gives me hope for the old print medium.

The problem, a 4,000-page report filled with legalese, Newspeak, Nonspeak, and the high pidgin of the civil service, is exactly what we're here for. The task is one of search, extraction, and translation. When reporters recoil from it, the public is cheated. Rendering 4,000-page reports into sharp and interesting English sentences is the primary task of the ink brigade. Equally as important is the pursuit of news leads tucked away in such reports — all of them, wherever they take us.

The laziness of much of the press corps, alas, is something politicians and bureau-

crats have long since learned they can use to their advantage.

A common technique of these bright boys is to present the assembled press with a choice. On one hand, the 400-page or 4,000-page report; with charts, diagrams, formulas, and the most convoluted language of which the staff is capable. With it, a handy-dandy press release, brief, quotable, and telling the story as the bright boys want it to be told. Which do you want, old lazybones? And your editors — do they know the difference anyway?

For years, until Watergate's kid reporters rattled their beads, the White House press corps gave every evidence of being as lazy as any in history. There was also the institution of the leak, and the suggestion that if you were a good, lazy dog you would get leaked upon every now and then. Not for quotation, not for attribution, but worth a front page by-line.

The New York Times raised leak-receptiveness to an art form, and was pretty smug about it, as a matter of fact, until the Washington Post and Watergate. The Post made the Times compete. The rest of the press, which in the early flush was taking bows like a ham tragedian playing the Podunk Opera House, scrambled along behind.

Long before Watergate, old I.F. Stone was making a solid reputation in journalism, especially among younger reporters, by mining those scorned governmental reports for nuggets of news. I guess he didn't take to those bottle glass spectacles just from reading his invitation to cocktails and dinner.

What we have in that 4,000-pager my old page-mate was scorning is a mass of testimony extracted under oath. Other stuff as well, but a lot of the kind of statements reporters can't easily get, lacking as they do the power of subpoena. Competently done, the translations will fascinate.