

TELLING IT (SORT OF) LIKE IT IS



I do not often look at televised sports events, but when I do it invariably seems that one of those episodes occurs in which one player whumps, gouges or otherwise fouls another, who promptly retaliates, thereby bringing at least four more into the fray. This, in turn, of course produces an angry whistle from the unfortunate who is in charge of law and order, an intervention, I've noticed, whose principal effect is to inflame the loyalties of those on the bench—who immediately rush to the aid of their moiling, fist-swinging pals. I do not bring this up for its inspirational value, but rather because I am about to discuss the current state of relations between the government and the press in Washington.

We needn't linger over the image any longer than it takes to make two points. One is that somewhere at the bottom of the heap there is undoubtedly a provocation, an issue—and maybe more than one. The other is that what we are witnessing, in consequence, is the breakdown of an *agreed-upon* system of amenities and rules designed to govern and more or less tame continuing conflict.

TRADING LEAKS

This last is the part that people in Washington—government and press alike—do not much care to talk about because it doesn't make any of us look very good. But the fact is that for years (and right up into the present) government officials, including those who howl loudest about "leaks," have been freely trading information that is designated secret in return for a certain consideration in its handling by the press. And for just as long, we of the press, who talk of our single-minded devotion to publishing only truth, have been accepting the ever more rococo terms of the offer. It is this system of institutionalized "leaking," now overburdened with years of animosity, mindless invocation and abuse, that shows signs of coming apart. And that does not seem to me a wholly bad thing.

I don't think that many of those sitting in the stands really understand how the thing works. The very word "leak," with its intimation of pending disaster, fails to convey the ordinariness of the transaction that is completed in Washington hundreds of times each day. You tell me what is happening—the arrangement goes—so I will at least understand it and not make a fool of myself in print, and I will handle it in a way designed to spare you inconvenience.

This deal is struck daily over the

phone, at fancy restaurants and in government buildings all over town. We will sit, maybe 40 of us, at a "background" session with a government official or leader of Congress and agree that we will not only decline to say who he is but will also throw a little sand in the public's eyes by putting this single person in the plural, i.e., we will call him "high U.S. officials" or "well-informed sources." We will be told that there are certain things we are about to hear (all 40 of us) that we must not breathe to another soul, and after a perfunctory protest, we will agree. Some, of course, protest more than others. "May, dear," the late Sen. Everett Dirksen used occasionally to warn the fractious Mrs. Craig at his regular Tuesday-afternoon séance, "I am not going to say *another word* until you put that pencil down."

The procedures governing all this may be compared to those governing marriages in feudal Japan. We have "on the record," which permits source and story ("Chicken Little announced yesterday that 'the sky is falling'"). At the other end we have "off the record," in which both source and story are ruled out of print—we can "know" but not "use." In between is "background" or "not for attribution," in which source is camouflaged but story remains ("A usually well-informed official has told the Gazette the sky is falling"). A variation on this is "deep background" or "Lindley Rule," in which the source disappears altogether, leaving only his valuable nugget of news ("The sky is falling, it can be revealed"). There are variations on these variations, too, and certain emergency procedures for use in special situations—but you're not ready for them; no one is.

POTENTIAL DANGERS

The point is that this ornate system is full of potential dangers for both sides, and most of them have been realized in the past ten years. To my mind the basic transaction remains a necessary one: our officials cannot be expected to help the press report intelligently if every frank disclosure is going to cause them trouble. And reporters need—in fact are willing to be jailed for—the right to protect the identity of persons who have risked plenty to help expose official misfeasance or organized lying. But the lazy overindulgence of these arrangements turns governors into public-relations artists and reporters into government flacks. For, paradoxically enough, it is also easier for

news sources to engage in public deception when they can so handily control the material being released and the manner of its presentation.

The press, in my judgment, right now is reacting to years of acquiescence in this kind of manipulation which was, incidentally, carried to dizzying heights by the Nixon Administration. And government officials who have for as many years been passing out genuinely sensitive military, judicial and other information as if it were potato chips are stunned to discover the obvious: that the "classified" stamp has lost its mystique and that, at least temporarily, they can no longer be as confident of controlling the good old "sourced" story. For reporters themselves seem finally to have recognized something else that is self-evident: when you know and I know and 40 of our colleagues know, it can be assumed that Moscow, Peking, Cairo, Tel Aviv, Saigon, Hanoi and all the elevator boys in the Capitol know, so that these oddities and distortions in which we collaborate are for the benefit of some kind of domestic or diplomatic "PR." They are part of "getting the story out."

REVISED SYSTEM

I hate to do this, but if we can look in just once more on our grappling, head-bashing friends back at the sports arena, we can draw one final analogy. For us in the press and for government as well, the equivalent of the resort to violence is the resort to constitutional confrontation. For each new court ruling tends to harden, restrict and define things in a way that makes the ambiguity and informality essential to right government-press relations harder to restore.

That some revision of the system is necessary seems plain to me. What it could be is less plain. Periodically, editors have tried to renovate the crazy structure of organized official "leaks" that is so basic a feature of Washington reporting. Now it is under great strain and may even be in danger of collapsing. The scene, as we now know, will not be restful—but this too will pass. The only thing I am prepared to say is that what comes next—even if only a more disciplined and discriminating use of present methods—will be an improvement on what we have now.

That, of course, is not for attribution.