

The Uncomfortable Role of the Press



David Broder

LIKE IT or not, the press has become an issue — and a source of controversy — in the conflict over Watergate and impeachment. More than half the people in the country tell George Gallup they think the coverage of these stories has been excessive and, if I can judge by my own mail, almost as many think it has been biased.

From both political flanks, 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.

In the essay concluding Time Magazine's treatment of the press controversy recently, 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 ..."

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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.

Mob-scene journalism always produces excesses. 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 found its way into print and onto the airwaves.

But there is something else that explains why the press has not been able to preserve its neutrality. And that is, very simply, that the political opposition — the Democratic Party — has defected in its role as an opposition, leaving the press to play its part.

Ever since impeachment became a possibility, the responsible leaders of the Democratic Party have clammed up tight. 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.

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BUT THE silence Democratic leaders have adopted in their quest for non-partisanship has left it to the press to provide the commentary to the vigorous efforts by Mr. Nixon 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 non-attributed information to give the readers another perspective on the proceedings than that provided by presidential lawyer James St. Clair.

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 this uncomfortable role.