

## Book World

*In the White House*

NO THANK YOU, MR. PRESIDENT, By John Herbers.

(Norton, 192 pp., \$7.95)

Reviewed by

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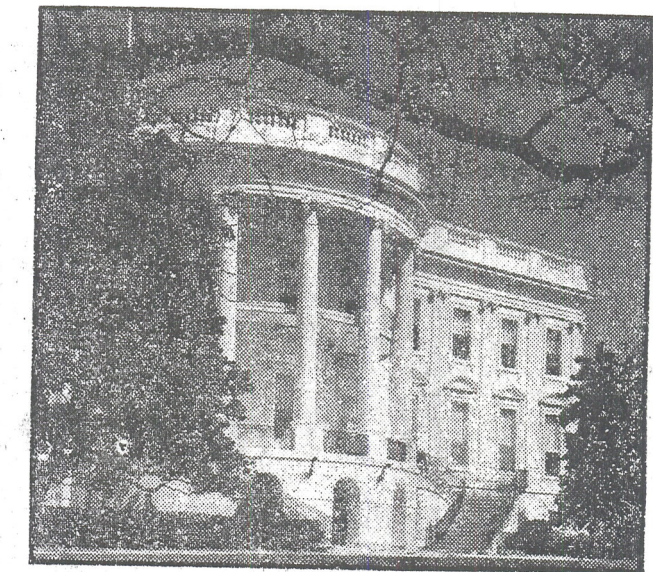
Watergate has become a classic example of the press's function as a countervailing force to the executive in the government of a democracy, as well as an example of official corruption and the abuse of presidential power. But students of the press are still unsure whether the media displayed courage and intelligence in fulfilling that function, or whether it flinched, hesitated and nearly failed to function at all.

John Herbers was a New York Times White House correspondent from the beginning of Richard Nixon's second term until well into Ford's first. He certainly knows there is something wrong with a system that assumes everything a president says or does is news of substantive importance when it may be only political image-making. He knows that the White House can cut off reporters' "access" if they question or criticize too sharply. Sometimes it seems as though his primary pur-

pose is to make these points. But he provides few examples of how he solved these problems as a reporter and little hope of changing the system that gives rise to them.

Herbers is at his best when he says that White House officials rarely imparted any useful information to White House correspondents, making it "a beat without sources. Other than reporting official acts and statements, with whatever interpretation I could muster, covering the White House became a matter of trying to perceive through sight and sound what was happening and build stories on that perception. To my surprise, it turned out to be more reliable than any official word from those strange men who held Washington in their grip."

I wish Herbers had given us a dozen examples of his efforts to perceive through sight and sound. One good one was the presidential birthday party at which King Timahoe, the Irish setter, licked birthday-cake icing off the jacket of the distraught President. In his story that day Herbers jux-



taped the neurotic ambience of the party with the end of the disclosure phase of "Operation Candor."

Another example was Herbers' impression that Ron Ziegler, Nixon's press secretary, showed a natural affinity with Soviet spokesman Leonid Zamyatin at a 1973 summit press conference—"the same spirit of we-the-government know best."

For two reasons, he says, the White House press room is the last place to start an investigation of crime and official corruption. One is that a White House official who wanted to expose his colleagues would not trust a White House reporter because "the interplay of reporters and officials within the institution" might inadvertently reveal the source. The second is that "a White

House reporter's prime job is to find out and report what kind of government the President is presiding over and what is the quality and direction of his leadership." The length of time it took White House reporters to find out and report that Nixon was presiding over a government that violated both the code of the United States and the code of common decency as it grasped for power was one of the journalistic failures of Watergate.

Too often, the White House press corps appeared to hesitate while outsiders like Woodward and Bernstein and Seymour Hersh unraveled the Watergate tangle. One might hope that John Herbers would explain why. But his book, unfortunately, does not.