

## **Press Freedom and Political Crisis:**

### **Nixon, Watergate, and the Media**

© Mark Mantho

As the Watergate scandal moved from "third-rate burglary" to "constitutional crisis," the chilly relationship between President Nixon and the press grew yet more rancorous. The press viewed Nixon as a Machiavellian manipulator; the president saw the media as an obstreperous band of jackals eager for his hide. Both camps were correct.

After Nixon's landslide reelection in 1972, he determined it was time to take on the press. As Joseph Spear recounts in his book Presidents and the Press: The Nixon Legacy, throughout the early months of 1973 Nixon sought to antagonize and intimidate the media. Referring to the American pullout of Vietnam in a January 31 news conference, Nixon said, "As far as this administration is concerned ... we finally have achieved peace with honor. I know it gags some of you to write that phrase, but it is true." In February, National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger – who told the *New York Times*' James Reston that reconciliation between president and press would not occur until the latter "acknowledges it was wrong" about Vietnam policy – planned a trip to China and North Vietnam. Because of the nature of the trip, and because "facilities" were lacking, Press Secretary Ron Ziegler informed

White House reporters "we decided we could not provide transportation to members of the press." Clay Whitehead, Nixon's director of telecommunications policy, warned owners of network TV affiliates that if they refused to censor news programs emanating from Washington and New York, their licenses could be revoked. On February 26, *Washington Post* publisher Katharine Graham, along with reporters from the *Post*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Star-News*, and *Time* magazine were served government subpoenas, ostensibly relating to a series of civil suits. (Spear 189-191)

As the scandal unfolded, however, Nixon was thrown on the defensive. In the month of March alone, Press Secretary Ziegler fielded 478 questions about Watergate. On April 17, Nixon told the press that after an internal review, allegations of White House involvement in the scandal were being investigated. Press Secretary Ziegler was forced to concede that previous denials of a White House connection were now "inoperative." The next day, reporter Clark Mollenhoff spoke for many in the media when he confronted the beleaguered Ziegler. "Do you feel free," asked Mollenhoff derisively, "to stand up there and lie and put out misinformation and then come around later and say it's all 'inoperative'? That's what you're doing. You're not entitled to any credibility at all." After Nixon announced the resignations of

Halderman, Ehrlichman, Dean and Kleindienst,<sup>1</sup> Zeigler apologized for previous denunciations of the *Washington Post* as purveyors of "shabby journalism." White House correspondents became increasingly hostile, frequently jeering as Ziegler attempted his daily briefings. ("If I said something wrong, I'll retract it," promised Ziegler at one point. Sneered a reporter, "If you get something *right*, retract it.") There was a "sadistic quality" to the questioning, allowed Peter Lisagor of the *Chicago Daily News*, "but they (came) from a frustrated, outraged and indignant press corps." (Spear 194-195)

Months passed without respite from fresh press charges – the president had an "enemies list,"<sup>2</sup> the president was a tax cheat, the president tapped his own brother's telephone – and Nixon began to show the strain. On August 18, 1973, Nixon delivered a speech at the New Orleans convention of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Though greeted warmly, he stumbled over words repeatedly (a rarity for Nixon). Afterward, Ziegler followed the president through a crowd of onlookers, trailed by reporters and cameramen. An angry Nixon grabbed the press secretary, turned him forcibly around, and pushed him back toward the journalists. "I don't want any press with me and

---

<sup>1</sup> H.R. Halderman, Nixon's White House Chief of Staff; Chief Domestic Affairs Advisor John Ehrlichman; John Dean, counsel to the president; and Richard Kleindienst, Attorney General.

<sup>2</sup> Reporters who displeased the president were followed, investigated, barred from covering White House events or otherwise harassed. In the summer of '73, a place on Nixon's "enemies list" became a badge of honor – and prestige – among Washington journalists. Columnists and reporters Howard K. Smith, Jack Anderson, Neil Sheehan and Gary Wills all made the grade. Nearly 27 years after the fact, National Public Radio's "senior news analyst" Daniel Schorr, at the time a Washington correspondent for CBS, never tires of reminding listeners that he, too, was important enough to be a Nixon "enemy."

you take care of it," snapped the president. The incident received prominent play on all three of the network news programs that night. Historian Stephen Ambrose, in the third volume of his biography of Nixon, writes that in the wake of the outburst, media speculation grew "that Nixon was either 'on the sauce' or 'off his rocker.'" In Washington, rumors went around that he had gone to the hospital in July not for viral pneumonia but because he had suffered a stroke." (Ambrose 210-211)

The president sought to rebound from the New Orleans episode by holding a hastily scheduled press conference outside his home in San Clemente, California. Voice wavering, Nixon again mispronounced or slurred his words. At one point he was interrupted by a reporter, and took the opportunity to point out that in the past 30 minutes, not a single question unrelated to Watergate had been asked. Nixon was queried about a previous statement that unspecified elements were using Watergate to block administration aims. "I would think that some political figures, some members of the press, perhaps, some members of the television (sic), perhaps would exploit it." Employing a favorite tactic, Nixon added, "I don't impute ... motives, however, that are improper." Then the president went on to do just that. Many people refused to accept the results of the '72 election, he said. "After all," Nixon continued, "I know that most of the members of the press corps were not enthusiastic – and I understand that – about my election."

(Ambrose 212) Nixon, always happiest when on the attack, was (in the words of one assistant) "jubilant" over his performance.

Following a week of tumultuous events, by October 26, 1973, relations between the president and the media hit rock bottom.

In what was glibly dubbed "the Saturday Night Massacre," on October 20 Nixon ordered Attorney General Elliot Richardson to fire Watergate special prosecutor Archibald Cox. Richardson resigned instead. Nixon then turned to Deputy Attorney General William Ruckelshaus to do the job. Ruckelshaus refused and was promptly fired.<sup>3</sup> Between October 23 and 24, 22 bills requesting an impeachment investigation were introduced in Congress. On October 25, Kissinger, who was now Secretary of State, declared that U.S. military forces were on "DEFCON III" alert (just short of full readiness) in response to possible Soviet intervention in the Middle East. (The U.S.S.R. had asserted that if America failed to act, it would unilaterally impose a cease-fire between Egypt and Israel, which the Israel's had broken.) Some media reports suggested Kissinger's DEFCON III announcement was a cynical attempt by the administration to distract attention from Watergate.

This was the situation Nixon confronted as he stepped before the microphones on Friday, October 26. What was his response to calls for impeachment? "Well, I'm glad we don't take the votes of this room (sic), let

---

<sup>3</sup> That left Robert Bork, then Solicitor General, to do the deed. Bork was deputized acting Attorney General and, expressing no qualms, swiftly discharged his duty. One assumes that Bork's role in "the Saturday Night Massacre" came back to haunt him 14 years later, when Judiciary Committee Democrats torpedoed his nomination to the Supreme Court.

me say," replied the president, noticeably tense. Could the country withstand the "shocks" of recent days? Nixon started to talk about the fortitude of the American people, then, his anger rising, segued into an attack on the electronic media:

I have never heard or seen such outrageous, vicious, distorted reporting in 27 years of public life. I am not blaming anybody for that. Perhaps what happened is that what we did brought it about, and therefore, the media decided that they would have to take that particular line.

But when people are pounding night after night with that kind of frantic, hysterical reporting, it naturally shakes their confidence. And yet, I should point out that even in this week, when many thought that the president was shell-shocked, unable to act, the president acted decisively in the interest of peace, in the interest of the country, and I can assure you that whatever shocks gentlemen of the press may have, or others, political people, these shocks will not affect me in doing my job. (Spear 200)

Later, Robert Pierpoint of CBS wondered what, specifically, had

"aroused your anger" about network news coverage.

Nixon: Don't get the impression that you arouse my anger.

Pierpont: I'm afraid, sir, that I have that impression.

Nixon: (Smiling grimly) You see, one can only be angry with those he respects. (Spear 201)

Nixon subsequently attempted to differentiate between reporters and columnists, but the damage was done. He answered a few more questions and abruptly left the press room.

Ultimately, Nixon had only himself to blame for Watergate, but some of his criticisms of the media were valid. On May 29, 1973, for example, the *Washington Post* reported that Watergate prosecutors told the Justice

Department that compelling Nixon to appear before a grand jury was legally justified. Responding to the article, press secretary Ziegler decried "a shocking ... irresponsible abuse of authority on the part of federal prosecutors" and correctly stated that leaking information about grand jury proceedings was unlawful. (Ironically, the *Post* ran Ziegler's statement next to the story.) Also that spring, the *Post* reported federal prosecutors had been informed by top officials of Nixon's reelection campaign that presidential aide Chuck Colson had advance knowledge of the Watergate break-in. The allegation was never proved. According to Joe Spear's Presidents and the Press, *Post* reporters Woodward and Bernstein "named three Nixon campaign officials who received transcripts of the Watergate tapes. No evidence ever surfaced to support that story." (Spears 228) On March 29, 1973, ABC's Sam Donaldson quoted a single source in reporting that Watergate burglar James McCord alleged that a former presidential assistant, Harry Dent, had been part of a "sabotage and espionage operation directed by the White House." The charge was false. In November 1973, the *Wall Street Journal* reported Nixon had "soundly slapped" Master Sergeant Edward Kleizo at McCoy Air Force Base, intimating the president's nerves were frayed. Kleizo debunked that notion and claimed Nixon's "slap" was a gesture of affection. (Spears 229)

To some spectators, press treatment of Nixon had crossed the line from hard-nosed investigative reporting into the realm of personal vendetta.

Senator William Proxmire, a Wisconsin Democrat, declared that media reports were "grossly unfair" and warned the press was indulging in "McCarthyistic destruction" of the president. The London *Times* editorialized that the *Post* and the *New York Times* were hampering the execution of justice by "publishing vast quantities of prejudicial matter." Presidential speechwriter and former journalist Ray Price later wrote, "Wrongs had clearly been done, but they were not particularly new or unprecedented. What was new was the sustained intensity of the media coverage, the increasingly open animus, even hate, that suffused it, and the collapse of all bounds of restraint as the psychology of the chase took over, the pack in full cry in pursuit of a single prey." Even ousted special prosecutor Cox censured the press for self-righteously appointing itself "the fourth branch of government" and expressed reservations about media conduct toward Nixon. (Spears 227)

Though the president's transgressions relative to Watergate remain indefensible, some facts his media critics prefer to ignore bear repeating.

Nixon complained bitterly that while other presidents (particularly Democratic ones) engaged in illegal or unethical behavior, only he was held accountable by the press. There is much truth in the charge. Presidents as far back as Roosevelt had made secret White House recordings. Kennedy and Johnson had used the FBI and the IRS to bug and harass political enemies.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Some well-known examples: As his brother's Attorney General, Bob Kennedy signed off on FBI bugging of Martin Luther King, Jr., and had tapped reporters; Johnson regularly used

Nixon certainly detested many reporters and politicians, and frequently railed against them to aides. He also urged action to "get" his foes. But no connection between Nixon and the White House "enemies list" was ever established, nor did the IRS go after anyone on the list.

Nixon blundered badly, inexcusably, in sending FBI agents to seal off the offices of Cox, Richardson, and Ruckleshaus after firing the special prosecutor. After this admittedly shocking development, NBC's John Chancellor gravely intoned that "the country tonight is in the midst of what may be the most serious constitutional crisis in its history." Asked columnist Carl Rowan rhetorically, "Has President Nixon gone crazy?" Nixon was actually compared to Hitler. Yet as Stephen Ambrose observes, the firing of Cox itself was hardly unconstitutional: "Nowhere in the Constitution do the words 'special prosecutor' occur. (Cox) was appointed by the Attorney General; he and his staff drew their salaries from the Department of Justice; they were part of the executive branch. ... Unquestionably, Nixon had the right to fire Cox." (Ambrose 249)

Ambrose also asserts that although Nixon was pilloried for profiting financially as president, he was not the first contemporary chief executive to do so. Minus a "questionable" tax deduction after backdating his vice presidential papers, Nixon did nothing illegal. (Ambrose 283)

---

the FBI to dig up dirt on adversaries. (There is some evidence to suggest Roosevelt did this as well.) LBJ also bugged Robert Kennedy and Nixon's airplane during the 1968 campaign. In 1963, RFK had the Internal Revenue Service perform an extensive audit of Nixon's finances.

His own culpability aside, why was the press so zealous in chasing Richard Nixon out of the White House after Watergate? Broadly speaking, such behavior can be attributed to two basic factors.

The first is that with few exceptions, the press mistrusted and even hated Nixon. These feelings can be traced back to Nixon's pitiless (and nakedly self-serving) prosecution of the Alger Hiss case. His rough treatment of opponent Helen Gahagan Douglas in the 1950 California senate race (it was she who coined the appellation "Tricky Dick") also aroused antipathy among some in the press. Not coincidentally, both Hiss and Douglas were Democrats, as was most of the working press throughout Nixon's career. As Eisenhower's "hatchet man" in '52 and '56, Nixon proved a valuable asset, eagerly bashing the Democrats as "pinkos" and "fellow travelers." After failed campaigns for the presidency in 1960 and the governorship of California two years later, the national press was heartily sick of him. Nixon, of course, harbored a like disdain for the media, an attitude plainly evident during his infamous "last press conference."<sup>5</sup> When Nixon finally won the presidency in 1968, a large part of his success was based on shrewd manipulation of the press, a strategy deeply resented by frustrated reporters. By the time Watergate broke, therefore, journalists were ready to pounce.

---

<sup>5</sup> On November 7, 1962, the night he lost the governor's race to Pat Brown, Nixon addressed the assembled press. "For 16 years, ever since the Hiss case," said Nixon, "you've had a lot of fun – a lot of fun – you've had an opportunity to attack me and I think I've given as good as I've taken. ... I leave you gentlemen now and you will now write it. You will interpret it. That's your right. But as I leave you I want you to know – just think of how much you're going to be missing. You won't have Nixon to kick around anymore, because, gentlemen, this is my last press conference. ... " (Ambrose, Nixon: The Education of a Politician, 1913-1962, 671)

As important, Lyndon Johnson's lies and distortions about the war in Vietnam had an incalculable effect in shaping the sharply adversarial demeanor of the press toward government. Many journalists had become disillusioned about the motives of the president – any president. This disenchantment, coupled with their visceral dislike for Nixon, produced a combustible mix.

It remains an open question as to whether press treatment of the Watergate affair (and all its ancillary off-shoots) was a healthy development for journalism or the country. In my opinion, it was not. That Nixon should have resigned is obvious. That he was hounded mercilessly by the media is, to me, equally obvious. I'm not sure Watergate could have played out in any other way, but I sincerely wish it had. The sensationalistic, "Did you commit adultery" journalism of today was born during Watergate. It's a fair bet that many Americans, including journalists, wish that baby had been strangled in the crib.

### Works Cited

Ambrose, Stephen. The Education of a Politician, 1913-1962. New York: Simon and Schuster. 1987.

- - - - Nixon: Ruin and Recovery, 1973-1990. New York: Simon and Schuster. 1991.

Spear, Joseph C. Presidents and the Press: The Nixon Legacy. MIT Press. 1984.

