
Preface

Since June 1979, when I contracted to write this book, I have been asked 3,285 questions about it. My answers, I think, pretty well summed up my professional philosophy and, in extract, amount to what I would like to say by way of prologue. Herewith, a distillation:

Q: Why would you want to devote a large chunk of your life to a book on such an esoteric subject as presidents and the press?

A: I know it sounds naive, probably even mawkish, but I love the First Amendment and all that it stands for. I have a congenital compulsion to resist any effort to restrict what I can read, hear, say, or write—and this is especially true of information that concerns government and politics. Ours is a government of the people. We are the sovereigns; those who work in government are our servants. We have a right to know what they are doing; they have no right—except in instances where the collective security is genuinely in jeopardy—to restrict or withhold information. It is this principle that the First Amendment embodies and protects, and I consider it the bedrock upon which our participative system rests. Richard Nixon and his associates, I think, cared very little for this love of mine—indeed, I believe they deliberately attempted to smother it. And I think that most presidents have priorities that tend to relegate freedom of speech and press to the wings. I would like the public at least to be aware of this, and it is toward this end that I have labored.

Q: Most Americans probably appreciate their basic freedoms, but many of them also believe the press does a miserable job of informing them. They view journalists as elitist, arrogant, liberal, rapacious, and unpatriotic. One recent Harris poll showed that the public regards the press as less “believable” than the White House. So shouldn’t you be writing about how the press kicks the presidents around, rather than the reverse?

A: It has been said many times but, according to *Bartlett's*, Sophocles said it first: "Nobody likes the man who brings bad news." So it was four centuries before the birth of Christ, so it is now, so it shall forever be. Journalists worry too much about their popularity; it is inherently a lost cause. They should simply report the news and raise hell—as fairly, accurately, and responsibly as they can. That is their duty. It is nice but not necessary to be liked—only to be read. As for the specific charges, they are largely irrelevant. Of course there are some journalists who are elitist, arrogant, liberal, and rapacious. Most are not, but in any case, what does this have to do with the way they perform their basic function of informing the public? Are there good lawyers who are liberal or rapacious? Would elitism and arrogance make a doctor a quack? And a lack of patriotism? Does commentary, interpretation, and criticism constitute treason? A quintessential American named Mark Twain had an answer to that question. Said the protagonist in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*:

My kind of loyalty was loyalty to one's country, not to its institutions or its office-holders. The country is the real thing, the substantial thing, the eternal thing; it is the thing to watch over and care for and be loyal to; institutions are extraneous, they are its mere clothing, and clothing can wear out, become ragged, cease to be comfortable, cease to protect the boy from winter, disease, and death. To be loyal to rags, to worship rags, to die for rags—that is the loyalty of unreason, it is pure animal; it belongs to monarchy, was invented by monarchy; let monarchy keep it. I was from Connecticut, whose Constitution declares that "all political power is inherent in the people, and all free governments are founded on their authority and instituted for their benefit. . . ." Under that gospel, the citizen who thinks he sees that the commonwealth's political clothes are worn out, and yet holds his peace and does not agitate for a new suit, is disloyal; he is a traitor."

It is a fact that we are going through a period of government-knows-best, and the press is not very popular. But it is also a fact that the press protects the public interest and forces the politicians and the bureaucrats to be accountable. The press surely has its faults, but if we are to remain a free people, there are no alternatives.

Q: What about the casual manner in which the press deals with classified information? Journalists don't seem to care about the national security.

A: Of all the vile canards that politicians and government officials have used to provoke the public's wrath against the press, none is more invidious and fallacious than that. It is a sham; it is humbuggery; it is charlatanism of the highest order. In the first place, most classified

information has little to do with the national security and a lot to do with covering up malfeasance, political motives, and embarrassing events. The secrecy stamp is the equivalent of the censor's scissors. Second, the record shows that journalists deal with national security matters in a far more responsible manner than the politicians and government officials whose activities they cover. And nobody—but nobody—is more adept at manipulating the national security concept for their own gain than the presidents of the United States and their minions.

When FBI agents traced money found in the accounts of Watergate burglars to a Mexican bank, Richard Nixon invoked “national security” to call the investigators off the trail. When Jimmy Carter was accused of being soft on defense matters, he declassified the details of research on “stealth” technology that would make American aircraft “invisible” to enemy radar. When the Nixon administration dragged the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* into court in an attempt to stop them from publishing the Pentagon Papers, the judge asked the government's attorneys to pinpoint the most sensitive secret that might be revealed. The lawyers selected “Operation Marigold,” a 1966 U.S. attempt to negotiate with North Vietnam through Polish diplomats. In fact, the details of Operation Marigold had already been disclosed in several publications—including *Vantage Point*, the memoirs of Lyndon Johnson. Indeed, the incident was indexed in Johnson's book, and several hundred words were devoted to an explanation of what it was all about. And Johnson had based his account of Operation Marigold on classified documents that he had carted off to Texas for enshrinement in his presidential library.

Q: What are you so worried about? We have had freedom of speech and press in this country for 200 years. It is guaranteed by the Constitution and will always exist. So what's the big deal?

A: I am convinced that freedom of speech and press would dissipate without constant vigil. It frightens me to think what might have happened, for example, had the Watergate scandal not forced Richard Nixon from office. After the 1972 election, he was flying high and his opponents (his “enemies,” to use his word) were in hiding. After four years of relentless pounding, journalists were debilitated by battle fatigue and the First Amendment was in need of a wheelchair. Had Nixon remained in office, it is entirely possible that freedom of the press would exist mainly on paper and Americans would be reading and watching nothing more controversial than reports on presidential pronouncements, the weather, and pork belly futures.

Richard Nixon was unique only by virtue of his chutzpah and his excess. Day after day in Washington, D.C., politicians and government officials chip away at the First Amendment with chisels that are sometimes blunt, sometimes sharp. Journalistic access is denied here, a Freedom of Information Act request is turned down there. Cost overruns are stamped secret, suspected sources are hooked up to polygraph machines. Consider a few of the events that have transpired just since this manuscript was completed:

- On September 11, 1983, the National Security Council met at the White House to discuss, among other things, what could be done to protect U.S. Marines stationed in Lebanon. The following evening NBC News reported that “top administration officials have asked the president to seriously consider ordering U.S. air strikes on Syrian positions in Lebanon.” Later the same evening CBS and ABC aired the story, and the following morning the *Washington Post* published a similar report. In each case the story was confirmed by White House officials. Said the *Post*’s White House correspondent Lou Cannon: “Short of dropping leaflets over Washington announcing the new policy, it is difficult to know what more the administration could have done to advance the story.” But national security adviser William Clark was incensed over the leaks and urged President Reagan to find and punish the sources of the stories. The president dispatched a letter to Attorney General William French Smith instructing him to use “all legal means” to find the leakers. FBI agents interviewed several cabinet officials and most of the White House staff and closed the investigation in mid-December without identifying anyone who had provided the information to reporters. “There is no evidence that reporters were told anything we didn’t want them to know,” one administration official said.

- Beginning on October 25, some 6,000 U.S. paratroopers, soldiers, and Marines invaded the Caribbean island of Grenada, ostensibly to rescue an estimated 1,100 Americans who, it was believed, might be held hostage by the nation’s restive Marxist rulers. American servicemen were ordered to put their lives on the line, and the taxpayers’ dollars funded the operation—but the American press was completely shut out. White House spokesmen were not told of the invasion and thus fed false information to inquiring reporters. Four journalists who made it to the island during the initial hours of the invasion were flown to a helicopter carrier and held incommunicado. Two days after the operation began, the Pentagon released to the networks film that had been shot by military photographers and cleared by Defense Department censors. Meanwhile, administration officials and spokes-

men used every forum they could find to defend the action. Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger said the officers in charge of the operation had decided they didn't want to have to cope with the press, and he "wouldn't ever dream of overriding a commander's decision." Secretary of State George Shultz said it seemed to him that "reporters are always against us. . . . They're always seeking to report something that's going to screw things up." White House deputy press secretary Larry Speakes claimed the presence of journalists might "distract" military commanders.

- In early December, White House communications director David R. Gergen informed his superiors of his intention to resign and accept a teaching position at Harvard University. His job was abolished and his duties were assumed by deputy chief of staff Michael Deaver and presidential assistant Richard Darman. The scholarly Gergen, who had also worked in the Nixon and Ford administrations, was one of the few officials in the Reagan White House who consistently urged the president and his top aides to moderate the methods they used in dealing with the press. According to published reports, Gergen was disturbed by the efforts to identify and discipline reporters' sources, upset by the decision to restrict news coverage of the Grenadan invasion, and perturbed over his colleagues' efforts to impede the flow of information to the press in general. He was "concerned about this administration falling into the trap of seeing the press as the enemy," said one White House official.

- As this book went to press, the administration was persisting in its efforts to implement President Reagan's March 1983 directive (chapter 8) that would possibly subject to lie detector tests some two-and-a-half million government employees who hold security clearances. The same edict would compel in excess of 125,000 government employees and former employees who dealt with certain types of classified information to submit all their written works to the federal government for "prepublication review." Put another way, Reagan proposed to have the government censor all books, speeches, novels, and newspaper articles prepared by officials or former officials who handled the nation's secrets. At a hearing held by the House Government Operations Committee in October, former under secretary of state George Ball lambasted the Reagan directive as "an appalling document" and "an absurdity." Said Ball, "This would require the establishment of a censorship bureaucracy far larger than anything known in our national experience." Both the House and the Senate passed legislation to put the executive order on temporary hold. The furor, however, did not deter deputy assistant attorney general Richard K. Willard, the pleasant,

reasonable-sounding, thirty-five-year-old official who headed the task force that authored the directive. He just wanted to intimidate federal employees, Willard once said, “change the attitudes of government officials” so they would “come to believe that it is wrong” to leak. “I think if we can reduce the volume of leaks by 50 percent,” Willard said, “that would make a very serious contribution to improving our country’s ability to carry out foreign policy, defense policy, and improving the effectiveness of our intelligence agencies.”

In other words, you should know only what the government deems you should know. Makes things easier, you see.