

# Watergate . . .

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Watergate, and the vast preponderance of what they reported—and 99 per cent of the factual statements—have proven accurate.

## Newsweek Questionable

The only questionable exercise of journalism I found in reviewing 14 months of coverage was the advance reports in Newsweek predicting White House counsel John Dean III would testify to in his appearance before the Senate Select Committee. It was a clear attempt by a newsweekly to "scoop" the daily press. For example, Newsweek reported as a fact that Dean would testify that White House officials considered murdering Panama's head of government, Omar Torrijos, because of his uncooperative attitude.

Newsweek provided graphic details about Dean's "story" of the planned assassination: "The contract, he (Dean) said, went to E. Howard Hunt, later a ringleader in the Watergate break-in; Hunt, according to Dean, had his team in Mexico before the mission was aborted."

Although the Newsweek story was circulated in a press release, and picked up and repeated by hundreds of newspapers, the sensational story turned out to be untrue—or at least not substantiated by Dean's testimony.

In his appearance before the Senate committee the next week, Dean did not mention anything about an assassination plan. He specifically testified that the Newsweek interview had occurred in the presence of his attorney and, as a ground rule of the interview, he had refused to discuss any of the substance of his impending testimony. It thus appears, if Dean and his lawyer are to be believed on this point, that Newsweek fabricated large parts of an interview—or made it appear that various rumors and stories floating around Washington had been stated in an interview by Dean.

Finally, the question of fairness cannot be assessed without first positioning certain standards. In accusing the press of being "unfair," White House spokesmen pointed to the fact that the press was publishing "hearsay" and "innuendo." In other words, the White House applied the standards of the court to the press. But since the courts and press have manifestly different functions, it seems both inappropriate and unproductive to apply judicial standards to daily journalism.

For example, while most of the stories in the press were based on "hearsay"—or accounts from persons other than actual witnesses to the described events—reporters do not have the power of compulsion (which courts and prosecutors inherently have) to extract

direct statements, especially incriminating ones, from witnesses themselves.

Thus in the case of Watergate in which almost all the witnesses to the illegal activities were either hostile to the press or intimidated by others in power, the newspapers could not have reported most developments in the case without relying on indirect, or "hearsay," evidence. As far as journalism is concerned, the crucial question is not whether a charge would be admissible in court, but whether it originates from a reliable source, and is therefore accurately reported and labeled.

## Contact With Reality

On this criterion, as has been demonstrated, all but a few of the charges have proven valid, and the press can hardly be deemed "unfair" for repeating them. The accusation of "innuendo" which has been leveled against the press also has little relevance to journalism. While in a court there are very strict rules of evidence which specify what may or may not be suggested in the presence of a jury, journalists have no equivalent restraints. Whenever a fact is selected and presented it will carry some suggestion or "innuendo."

The question of fairness rests again not on whether "innuendo" or tacit suggestion was used—it is unavoidable—but on whether what is being suggested corresponds to reality.

On this criterion, Newsweek's story suggesting that the White House considered assassinating its opponents abroad would be clearly unfair because it had no contact with reality; while the press stories tacitly suggesting that there was more to Watergate than was being admitted by the White House—and especially those reports in the Washington Post—would have been considered fair ones (because the suggestion turned out to be perfectly valid.)

There has also been some criticism, most notably by the editor of the Times of London, for prejudging a case before a trial. But again this is applying a quasi-judicial standard to the press. Watergate was no ordinary crime.

The more appropriate question is whether the press was "fair" in presenting both sides of the story, and gave as prominent space to rebuttals and denials as to charges and allegation. (This is the standard of fairness applied to television by the Federal Communications Commission). According to this criterion, the press seemed to be generally fair.

Even the Washington Post, which was most viciously and unfairly attacked by White House and CRP spokesmen, almost always printed the rebuttals and denials—and often these were given almost as prominent placement as the original charges.

The New York Times, the Los Angeles Times and the Washington Evening Star often gave more prominence to the administration's rebuttal than to the original charge.

## Dangers of McCarthyism

The charge of McCarthyism, which has been leveled against the press (ironically by some former supporters of Sen. Joseph McCarthy's witch-hunt for subversives in government), is far more difficult to evaluate.

McCarthyism, as it applies to the press, involves publishing sensational charges without making a diligent effort to determine the veracity of the source of the charge. (Numerous reputations in the early 1950's were sullied because newspapers repeated McCarthy's reckless charges without checking them out).

The press was quite aware of this danger in the Watergate case. Benjamin Bradley, editor of the Washington Post, said he required that all allegations about Watergate be checked out by at least two independent sources before they could be published.

Yet, two sources corroborating a charge might only mean that a rumor was widely circulated. And the fact that extremely damaging charges published in the Post about five different individuals (Odle, Timmons, Sedan, Colson, and Haldeman) later proved to be unsubstantiated by the main source indicates that this double checking" system does not prevent unverified charges from being made. Other newspapers avoided this pitfall by refraining from publishing allegations that could not be thoroughly checked out—and therefore made fewer disclosures about Watergate.

This presents a real dilemma: almost all journalistic honors are awarded for making exclusive disclosures, not for resisting publishing unproven allegations. It was thus the Washington Post, not the New York Times, that won the Pulitzer Prize for Watergate. And in the two preceding years Pulitzer Prizes went to the New York Times and to columnist Jack Anderson for publishing what were essentially stolen government documents.

Do journalists make disclosures even though the secret nature of the material makes it impossible to evaluate allegations in them? If the charges prove groundless the credibility of the newspaper will be diminished in the eyes of their readers and an innocent reputation may be tainted. If, on the other hand, the story is not published, the guilty might escape public scrutiny.

In the case of Watergate, the coverup might have been more effective if it had not been for the Washington Post's willingness to take some risks on stories, and perhaps it is impossible to draw in advance the line between such risk taking and McCarthyism except by looking at the final disposition of the charges. Almost all of McCarthy's charges proved groundless, while most of the allegations about Watergate proved to be valid.

In summation, on almost any reasonable criteria, the press showed a consistent—and unexpected—degree of fairness.

## As Mickey Mouse grins

# Motels run from boom to bust

ORLANDO, Fla. (UPI) — Orlando's motel boom has dissolved in gloom.

Although Mickey Mouse is still as popular as he ever was, two out of every three motel rooms are standing empty each night in this tourist center which was transformed in two years by a frenzy of building unmatched anywhere in the world.

The Orlando area Chamber of Commerce called it the "eighth wonder of the world," when the area's 5,000 motel rooms in 1971 became 24,000 this summer.

Dazzling high-rise motels with gourmet kitchens and bands in their bars had risen where only oranges once grew.

The entrepreneurs, of course, hoped to bed down visitors to Walt Disney World, which will mark the end of its second year of operation Oct. 1 with a total of about 22 million paying customers.

Disney correctly guessed how many visitors to expect and the two large motels inside the park—the Contemporary, and the Polynesian Village, with a total of 1,500 rooms — have been virtually full every night.

But too many others tried to cash in.

Almost prophetically, Blaine Mallard of the Orlando Area Innkeepers Association said recently. "To tell the truth, I'm scared to death. I'm scared out of my wits."

Mallard, who is also president of a corporation which will open 600 rooms by the end of the year, added, "I think you're going to see a lot of hotels change hands, a lot of bankruptcies and probably some that will close up."

True to Mallard's prediction, the Park Plaza Hotel, a lakeside landmark in downtown Orlando, was ordered closed last week.

The 400-room hotel, pictured on many a postcard behind the mists of Lake Eola's fountain, has been losing \$60,000 a month. A federal judge in Miami ordered it closed after the Park Plaza's owner, First Baptist Church Inc. of Margate, filed for a reorganization and "restructuring of debts."

On the same day, the Greater Orlando Innkeepers Association — a rival to Mallard's group — was meeting to try to raise advertising money, claiming motels were "not overbuilt" but "undersold."

The meeting came as the Chamber Commerce reported that occupancy rates had dropped to a 28 per cent average.

Hugh Snow, manager of the Kahler Plaza, the fanciest of Orlando's downtown hotels, says he averaged 32 per cent occupancy in August as compared with 78 per cent a year ago.

The "break-even" point in the industry is considered about 50 per cent occupancy.

Snow, who is also director of the innkeepers association, feels one answer lies in advertising and promotion, and that costs money.

The association is considering charging each motel and hotel 5 cents per room on a weekly or monthly basis for promotion.

"The real problem is that people don't know we have rooms available," Snow said. "We have to get the word out."

When Disney first opened there was a shortage of rooms in central Florida, and many out-of-state tourists found themselves driving 50 miles or more to find a place to spend the night. The word was spread that rooms were scarce.

As a counteroffensive, the Chamber of Commerce a few months ago ballyhooed a promotion offering \$100 to anyone who couldn't find a room.

"Any hotel owner in the area would be delighted to pay it now," Snow said.

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