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FOURTH ESTATE

and

CHIEF EXECUTIVE

A Study of Private and Public Relations

10 Judy O'Neill and Ron Nessen -
12 the former with great appreciation
for kindness, interest, and free
access to information;
12 the latter with sincere good
wishes for continued success
in an impossible but vital job.
Stuart Dean Levitan

Stuart Dean Levitan
New College

Senior Thesis
June, 1975

For
The Inspiration
They Have Provided
This Thesis Is Dedicated To:

Mary McGrory

Richard Milhous Nixon

My Parents

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PREFACE

This could have been a great thesis.

The fact that it is flawed cannot be blamed on the following roll of people who generously offered their time and experience in explaining to me some of the mysteries of the subject under study: James Reston, of The New York Times; David S. Broder, Lou Cannon, Carroll Kilpatrick, Charles Puffenbarger, Charles Seib, and Peter Silberman, all of The Washington Post; Helen Thomas and Frank Cormier, of UPI and AP, respectively; Peter Lisagor, of The Chicago Daily News; Richard Strout, of The New Republic; Hugh Sidey, of Time; Jack Germond, and Norman Kempster, of The Washington Star; Dan Rather, Bob Schieffer, and Phil Jones, all of CBS; Clark Mollenhoff, of The Des Moines Register; Ben Bagdikian; David Wise; Robert Novak; Martin Nolan, of The Boston Globe; Jerald terHorst, of The Detroit Free Press; Allen Otten, of The Wall Street Journal; Deputy White House Press Secretary Gerald Warren; Professors Phil Robbins and George Willson, of The George Washington University; and Victor Gold. I am also grateful for the advice given by Professor Justus Doenecke, of New College; I apologize to him, and to the other members of my baccalaureate examination committee, Margaret Bates and Robert Benedetti, for the pressures I have placed them under by finishing the project so late. Finally, my thanks to William Jelin and Debra Olsen, for reasons too personal and numerous to list. They know why.

INTRODUCTION

The President of the United States is the most powerful man in the Western World. The press is often the most powerful private institution. When they meet, the results are often explosive, occasionally quaint--and always important.

Our awareness of the President is based on press reports. These reports cannot help but be influenced by the newsman's subjective impressions of the President, which in turn are outgrowths of the President's attitudes towards the press. I take as my basic premise, therefore, that Presidents get the kind of press they deserve.

The matters I propose to examine are those private and public relations between the press and Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon. I apprehend these relations to exist on two planes--the extremely informal and the strictly formal.

In the former category, (Chapter One), I begin with an overview of the four Presidents' reading habits, with special focus on the effects of President Kennedy's considerable interest in newspapers and magazines. I then move to a look at Presidential attitudes towards reporters as individuals, and note the effects as that attitude changed from disinterest, to affectionate salesmanship, to overzealous manipulation, and finally to open hostility. Interwoven in the chronological discussion are portraits of the press secretaries, a look at the issue of "news management," the ethical and personal ^{dilemma} ~~problem~~ created when a reporter is also the President's friend, and the genesis of Lyndon Johnson's "credibility gap."

Chapter Two, a consideration of the public interaction known as the press conference, is divided into three full subsections. After a brief

statement of the problem, I begin the search for its causes and solutions. I start by outlining two of the ways by which Presidents consolidate their natural control of the proceedings, namely the use of opening statements and planted questions. This leads to mention of those flaws for which reporters must assume most of the blame--inadequate preparation and a hesitancy to follow a colleague's unfinished line of inquiry. The technological growth discussed in greater detail in the following section is here cited as a mitigating factor, as the pressman's deficiencies are explained in terms of stage fright. Because these flaws often produce highly imperfect questioning, I next discuss the problem a President faces when he is prepared for a question which is never asked. This section on format closes with a look at the traditional means for closing a press conference, and some notable exceptions to the rule.

The second section is devoted to the problems and promises entailed in the steady technological development the press conference has undergone in the last twenty years. After dealing with the worst-case most often cited by opponents of electronic media coverage, I survey the steady advances wrought by Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy. Although worried at first that Eisenhower might in fact discontinue the press conference, reporters soon learned that his administration was committed to providing the fullest communication then possible. Starting with the first full transcripts produced for publication, Eisenhower and Press Secretary James Hagerty eliminated all the honored traditions regulating press conferences. Their release of tape recordings of the proceedings placed the President's words, for the first time, in direct quotation. A year later another momentous step was taken, with the first appearance at a Presidential press conference of television and newsreel cameras. Although this marked the limits

of Eisenhower's innovations, it was enough to cause serious concern among many pressmen.

That concern intensified at the next logical development, the live telecasting of a Presidential press conference. Hagerty had reserved for himself the right to edit the films before release, but President Kennedy abandoned this last restraint. Again serious warnings were raised about the wisdom of this venture.

From this decade of development and doubt, I turn to the third section, the decade of Presidential destruction of the press conference. This section presents a detailed examination of the steady deterioration of the press conference, a decay induced by Johnson's monumental abuse and Nixon's calculated disuse. This section, and the second chapter as a whole, close on a discussion of whose interests the press conference ought to serve.

I will return to that issue in the conclusion, after setting down my interpretations of the lessons to be learned from the studies in the first two chapters.

CHAPTER ONE :

PRIVATE

Existentialism is not the reporter's way; he lives, not through himself but through his stories. The daily by-line is more than a mere ego-trip, it is a re-affirmation of life. Which is not to say that morale goes unaffected by the vagaries of publication; a variety of factors (prominence, exclusivity, etc.) contribute to the degree of positive reinforcement each edition brings. And for White House correspondents, there is an added aspect, often difficult to measure, but always important in ways that transcend any individual newsman's consciousness: Does That Man read your copy?

Press critic Ben Bagdikian calls the serious newspaper in Washington a "universal intelligence system," a blatantly public medium which "provides the soundest selection available, inside government or not, or those public events that need to be considered." Bureaucratic Washington is a culture awash with words on paper; any paper noticeable above the flood becomes important, and words that are so noticeable that they are seen by the President "become supremely important." There is "no faster or surer way" to get a message to the President of the United States than by having it appear as news in The New York Times or The Washington Post. Their editors and correspondents decide what every policymaker in Washington will read each morning; thus they "condition the approach of leaders to every new day in the history of the republic."¹

Newspapers do not merely educate the President; they vitalize the government. Shining the spotlight on a problem "forces the government to make decisions and to announce them." The traditional role of the free press is "intensified when a President not only reads, but lets everybody know it."²

The historical record presents many contradictory assessments of President Eisenhower's reading habits, and offers scant hope for determining accurately the amount of attention he paid to the press.

"President Scans /10 Papers Daily" reported the Associated Press in June, 1959. Eisenhower was said to receive the morning editions at breakfast and "he usually gets through all of them at the breakfast table. Nobody," the wire service reported, "contends that he reads them from front page to back. Some...he reads thoroughly, others sketchily."³

The President himself presented a quite different picture less than a year later. Asked at a press conference what his "regular habits (were) for keeping up" with what the press reported about him, Eisenhower replied that he "just couldn't be bothered."

I don't know whether you can call it a habit, (he said) for the simple reason that it takes a lot of time if I was going to keep track of what all you people say. I take the, what I call the important sections of the Sunday papers that review national and international events, and those are the things I study carefully.⁴

Looking back on this exchange a few years later, Eisenhower implied that he was surprised his answer was "taken at face value," and said it seemed to "please those who welcomed the idea that I never read anything other than short memos and Westerns." This impression, he said, was false. He recalled that he would rise early, and when his military aide came "to start the day, he usually found me under the sun lamp, with the better part of two newspapers read." So much for scanning ten papers at the breakfast table. The better part, Ike explains, "because I did not believe that slavish cover-to-cover reading was warranted, and certainly not the guesswork and personal interpretations of many columnists." Whenever he found that a newsman "strayed too far from the facts," Eisenhower "thereafter ignored his column."⁵

Although Eisenhower maintained that he regularly read at least a half dozen columnists, Emmet John Hughes offers conflicting evidence. "He stubbornly refused to pay even passing heed to daily editorials or columns," Hughes wrote, "and he burst forth impatiently if a member of the Cabinet even casually alluded to any such source of comment: 'Listen!'" Hughes remembers hearing the General exclaim, "Anyone who has time to read columnists obviously doesn't have enough work to do." ⁶

Somewhere in the middle of all these conflicting recollections and interpretations lies the account of Sherman Adams, Assistant to the President. "Eisenhower glanced at several papers every morning," Governor Adams wrote, "but the one more often on the top of the pile was the New York Herald Tribune" --a strongly Republican newspaper. "He paid little attention to the newspapers that continually belabored him," Adams recalled, "and seldom read the Washington papers." He remembered hearing the President once remark: "If you want to find out how the people feel about things, read the papers -- but not the New York or Washington papers." ⁷

Many of the political specialists close to President John F. Kennedy also felt that the New York Times was out of touch with the mainstream of American popular thinking. "Nobody in Iowa or California reads the Times or even cares what it thinks editorially," Appointment's Secretary Kenneth P. O'Donnell remarked one day when a Times editorial ruined JFK's morning. "You and the President exaggerate its importance," he told Press Secretary Pierre Salinger. Perhaps, replied Salinger; but he was "still willing to bet that from now into infinity," it would "continue to be the first paper our Presidents glance at every morning," and its reporters would "continue to receive the red carpet treatment at the White House." ⁸

The reading habits of President Kennedy became legendary, and were more important than merely denoting a difference in personality and intellectual habits from those of his predecessor. Said by James Reston to "drink printer's ink like other's have their morning coffee," his affection and attention to the newspapers "produced a special tone in the whole musculature of government decision, far it involved the President, in fact or in spirit, in policymaking far below the White House level." Habitually reading the same newspapers, the President and his aides "not only knew the same things, but the subordinates knew the President knew." ⁹

Kennedy's attention to the press had a double-edged effect, affecting those within his official family differently from those outside. Those lacking an existing channel of access would use the press "to obtain presidential attention...when they could not get by the White House staff." ¹⁰

The reverse was true for those already in the federal establishment, where "everyone spoke with greater restraint." There was, notes Bagdikian, a "remarkable unanimity of expression by the official family." This, he says, came from a "consciousness of the sharp eye in the White House scanning the news columns or that more likely repository of candid end-of-the-evening remarks, the women's pages." All officials knew that "whatever they told an interviewer might get reported and be read by the President." ¹¹

As a newspaperman and then as a politician, John Kennedy exhibited a close affinity for words. He once demonstrated his attention to detail and his understanding of nuances when he told Newsweek bureau chief Ben C. Bradlee that he was "disappointed [Newsweek columnist] Ken Crawford changed 'pompous' to 'imperious' in his column on Arthur Krock." ¹² Bradlee declines to inform us how JFK knew what was in the original draft of the article.

Those who travelled on the 1960 campaign swings found that a newspaper or magazine "wasn't safe" around Kennedy. Apparently this fate befell even those working in the White House. As Pierre Salinger recalls, Kennedy was a "compulsive pilferer of newspapers and magazines. When he... saw one he had not read on my desk, he would invariably walk off with it. No one on the staff was safe from his shoplifting."¹⁴

Cruising at a speed said to approach 1200 words per minute, Kennedy found time to read more than twoscore papers and periodicals, "gliding through every section from sports to finance."¹⁵ More comfortable with the papers he had read since his youth, and more respectful of their publishers and pundits, Kennedy displayed his Eastern provincialism by reading no West Coast papers. The only non-Eastern seaboard papers he regularly read were the Atlanta Constitution, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, and the Sun-Times and Tribune, both out of Chicago.¹⁶

An alleged attempt to diversify Kennedy's reading material resulted in one of the most embarrassing episodes of his administration. The incident also demonstrates a classic example of the politics of lying.

Billy Sol Estes was a man very much in the news in February, 1962. A financial manipulator from Pecos, Texas, Estes had built an apparent financial empire based on elusive fertilizer tanks and cotton acreage allotments. His arrest in March by the FBI sent shudders through the Washington political establishment, where he had high connections. Earl Mazo, Richard Nixon's biographer and political reporter for the New York Herald-Tribune, jumped on the story and began writing it hard; the Kennedy administration watched in growing dismay.¹⁷

Concurrently, another scandal was breaking--the alleged preferential treatment afforded some powerful Republicans, including Eisenhower's Treasury

Secretary, George S. Humphrey., in the purchase of goods from government stockpiles. In the President's view, the Herald-Tribune was downplaying the stockpile scandal because it involved Republicans, and giving wide attention to the Democratic Estes scandal. JFK's suspicions were supported by the fact that Herald-Tribune publisher John Hay Whitney was himself named in the stockpile case. ¹⁸

The Washington Post reported on May 30, 1962 that Kennedy, "whose patience with newspaper criticism often grows short, has ordered the cancellation" of the 22 White House subscriptions to the Herald-Tribune. He and Mrs. Kennedy were "known to have been annoyed more than once by sharp criticism and stories they believed unfair" in the Republican paper. ¹⁹

The next morning's UPI dispatch was gentler, quoting unnamed White House officials as attributing the cancellation to a drive for "diversification of reading." It was said that the President "decided it would be to his advantage and to the advantage of the staff to receive newspapers from other parts of the country." It was at this time that the St. Louis paper was brought into the White House. ²⁰

In a front-page editorial that day, the Herald-Tribune said it hoped the President would renew his subscription, which it trusted had not been cancelled because of "hard reporting of our greatly respected staff" or by editorial criticism of the administration. ²¹

Additional details emerged the following day, when the stockpile story coverage first became a public issue (the initial Post dispatch mentioned only the administration's displeasure with the Estes coverage). Although Press Secretary Salinger "insisted his displeasure with the Herald-Tribune's editorial comment and news treatment had nothing to do with the cancellation," he said the "culmination" came May 23 when the paper "completely ignored"

the stockpile investigation conducted by a Senate committee. Government witnesses that day testified that former Commerce Secretary Sinclair Weeks decided to let a California company "buy out" of a copper contract with the Government; the company thereby received a "windfall" gain of \$6,338,328.²²

A Herald-Tribune spokesman said that, while the story was not carried in the City Edition, it was carried in the final edition. Salinger replied that the White House received both editions, and neither carried the stockpiling story.²³

The New York Times does not like to needlessly antagonize Presidents needlessly, and will often do them favors in the way of complimentary editorials, or reports which give them more than the benefit of the doubt. Unnamed "inside" sources are often used by government officials who want to release their side of a story without being held accountable. The combination of these two drives produced a story on June 4 which demonstrates that "All the News that's Fit to Print" may sometimes entail pure deceit.

According to unnamed "informants," the cancellation of the Herald-Trib "jarred and surprised President Kennedy" [false], who had "carefully nurtured relations with the newspapers" [true]. Said to have expressed "considerable irritation" at some stories in the Republican paper [true], Kennedy "intimated he did not see any point in reading it." [true] He was then "taken literally... by eager aides (who) thought they knew what was to be done" [false]. The cancellation then was a "sharp reminder of the power of the slightest presidential suggestion." [false]²⁴

In reality, President Kennedy told Salinger "several times to cancel the subscription." Because Salinger felt his anger would in time subside, he ignored this executive directive. But one day Kennedy came across the

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man responsible for the White House subscriptions and "ordered him to cancel the Herald-Tribune." Naturally, the President was "aghast when the story hit the newspapers." Until August of the following year, when the paper was officially--but without explanation--re-instated, Kennedy and his aides read bootleg copies.²⁵

David Wise, then the Herald's White House reporter, adds a human interest footnote to this episode. He tells of receiving a phone call early one morning from Salinger, who "just wanted to tell you the President's reaction to this morning's Herald-Tribune." He then quoted his boss, The President of the United States, as exclaiming, "The fucking Herald-Tribune is at it again."²⁶

Shortly before the bouhaha over the Herald-Tribune, and eight days before Salinger's private call to Wise, President Kennedy was asked at a press conference for his appraisal of press coverage of his administration. "Well, I am reading more and enjoying it less," he replied, to the laughter of the newsmen. He went on:

But I have not complained, nor do I plan to make any general complaints. I read and talk to myself about it, but I don't plan to issue any general statement on the press. I think that they are doing their task, as a critical branch, the fourth estate. And I am attempting to do mine. And we are going to live together for a period, and then go our separate ways. [laughter] ²⁷

Lyndon Johnson paid as much, if not more, attention to the press than Kennedy did, but his Weltanschauung towards it was drastically different. Kennedy was a hobbyist of the press, often angry at the object of his addiction, but always returning to it with full affection. Johnson, who²⁸ "monitored his public image with more zeal" than any other President, observed the press as part of the "astonishing portion of attention (he) gave to public relations." Not only did he read a dozen newspapers; three television sets for simultaneous viewing were installed in the Oval Office, alongside AP and UPI tickers.²⁹

Johnson and his aides "seemed to ring like burglar alarms" whenever the President's name was mentioned in the public prints. The editor of a small west Texas newspaper claimed he got a phone call from the White House after a three-paragraph story linking Billy Sol Estes with the President appeared on an inside page; the call came so fast that the publisher was able to delete the story from later editions. A newspaper reporter who wrote a critical story for a morning paper got "three telephone calls from the White House aides before breakfast." A television correspondent was "awakened in the middle of the night by the White House, which had heard that he planned to make some critical comments the next day."³⁰

Although he periodically denied that he read newspapers or watched television newscasts, Richard Nixon devised the ultimate system for keeping up with what the press reported. Every evening, Mort Allin and his three assistants worked well past midnight preparing the President's Daily News Briefing, a complete rundown on national and foreign news. The classified document generally ran 60-70 pages, and carried detailed listings of what the newscasts carried, what the nation's major newspapers printed, and the comparative play each item was given in each medium. The purpose of the summary, Alexander P. Butterfield testified, was "to give the President an feel for the news and how some of the President's policies or legislation might be playing around the country." Butterfield, a former Deputy Assistant to the President, told the House Judiciary Committee that Nixon "read (the summary) carefully...he was interested in the press." ³¹

I am also interested in the press. And I am interested in the Presidents.

The President of the United States is the most powerful man in the Western World. The press is often the most powerful private institution. When they meet, the results are often explosive, occasionally quaint--and always important.

Our awareness of the President is based on press reports. These reports cannot help but be influenced by the newsman's subjective impressions of the President, which in turn are outgrowths of the President's attitudes towards the press. The interaction between the two can be extremely informal or strictly formal. In this paper I will examine various aspects of the private and public relations between the press and Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon.

Freedom of the press is protected by the first amendment; the powers of the presidency are enumerated in the second article. There is no constitutional link binding the fourth estate and the chief executive. Although we are said to be a nation of laws and not of men, the most important variable affecting this delicate condition is the personality of the President. He may look upon the press with affection, and try to charm it; or he might regard it with suspicion, and attempt to subvert it.

President Dwight D. Eisenhower pretty much ignored the press, holding himself aloof and apart from close contact. "He departs neither liked nor disliked," wrote Editor and Publisher the week of his retirement, "but pretty much unknown." The trade publication noted that he tended to refer to reporters as "you people." No offense was taken at this, however, because he referred to Members of Congress as "those people." ¹

Presidents Roosevelt and Truman had entertained newsmen informally at Sunday evening suppers and Potomac River poker cruises, but these "little semi-intimacies...were gone." ² Eisenhower "tended to be rather formal in his press relations...a feeling of distance between the President and the press has persisted." ³ Veteran correspondent Merriman Smith said Ike tended to "stiffen when he is around reporters, even socially, as though he expects someone to hurl a volley of unpleasant questions at him." ⁴

After a year in office, Eisenhower discussed his attitude towards the press. One of the "particular difficulties" of being President, he said, was that he had "many good friends among newspaper people," but he couldn't "pursue these friendships as freely as before." The reason was that "when a President meets a newspaperman, it was not understood he was meeting a friend; ⁵ he was meeting a newspaperman, and that was something else again." In other

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words, Eisenhower suggested that he was aware that if he received working newsmen he would be "suspected of giving them news exclusively." This he could not do, in light of his announced policy of giving no exclusive interviews.⁶ This ban extended even to a newsman who was writing an authorized account of the Eisenhower administration.⁷ He did, however, grant occasional private interviews to publishers and editors: from "time to time" he also chatted in his office with officials of the White House Correspondents Association.⁶

President Eisenhower ~~designed~~ ^{declined} to involve himself in the grubby details of self-promotion; he apparently was also willing to forgo exerting much influence in the establishment of policy. Furthermore, he was thrice felled by serious illnesses. Even when in good health, he held no more than two press conferences a month; sometimes he went many weeks without such a gathering. Finally, he had a strong disinclination against seeing reporters on an informal basis. These factors combined to give James C. Hagerty wholly unprecedented prominence as Eisenhower's press secretary.⁹

From the outset of the General's administration, it was clear that Hagerty would be the primary source of White House information. Eisenhower held only 14 press conferences his first eight months in office, the first not coming until February 17. This was not readily noted by the public, however, because Hagerty more than sufficiently filled the news gap. No drying up of White House news was apparent, because Hagerty held two-a-day briefings himself, in which he spoke authoritatively as Presidential Spokesman.¹⁰

The official sanction with which Hagerty conducted his briefings is demonstrated in the authoritative Department of State Bulletin, an official weekly journal. The Bulletin never quoted FDR's press secretary, and quoted

Truman's only once. Hagerty, however, was quoted frequently, beginning in May, 1953.¹¹ "No press secretary in memory has been permitted to speak with so much authority on so many subjects," wrote Cabell Phillips.¹²

Many observers felt that Hagerty was as much press agent as press secretary. "Hagerty is press agent pure and simple, and his job is to make his client look good at all times," Stan Optowsky wrote in the New York Post. "So he cheerfully admits to the techniques which his detractors fervently damn."¹³ It was contended that he channeled the favorable announcements from throughout the executive branch --e.g. the successful launching of a rocket-- but not the unfavorable ones through his office. Optowsky also charged that he kept reporters so pre-occupied with "hagerty-made-news" that they had no time to hunt for embarrassing items. A variation of this technique was demonstrated on the frequent and lengthy Eisenhower vacation trips. To maintain the appearance of continuing activity by Eisenhower, Hagerty lugged briefcases of proclamations, announcements, and releases. Hagerty is said to have remarked after one hard day on the Gettysburg farm, "Boy, I had to scrape the news off the walls today."¹³

Hagerty also won wide-spread acclaim for his handling of the various illnesses that befell the President. Thrice Hagerty was the sole link between the Presidential sickbed and an anxious world, and thrice he won plaudits. "The flow of information left nothing to be desired," wrote one scholar. Hagerty's briefing operation in Denver at the time of the 1955 heart attack "won the undying gratitude of the correspondents by the thoroughness and frequency."¹⁴ Even the traditionally cynical J.R. Wiggins of the American Society of Newspaper Editors Freedom of Information Committee praised the White House staff for "keeping the public fully informed on the President's illness."¹⁵

Eisenhower unwound a little as the 1960 elections approached, holding a few black-tie dinners for newsmen with a dozen correspondents at each. The New York Times was pleased that he had reversed his policy of "arms length dealing with all news media." Hopefully, the "after-dinner discussion can end the freeze in which the President has kept his press relations since a month after entering the White House." Press Secretary Hagerty had "been urging Mr. Eisenhower for several years to invite small groups of correspondents...so they would have a better chance to know the President."¹⁶ Although reporters were "scrambling for invitations," Editor and Publisher wasn't very enthusiastic; the opening came, they said, "kind of late in the game."¹⁷

Eisenhower waited until he was almost out of the White House before attempting a relationship with newsmen. John F. Kennedy's mutual fascination with the Washington press corps began in 1956, when the Senator made his abortive bid for the vice-presidency.¹⁸

It is possible that Kennedy's rapport with the press was the key to his narrow victory in 1960. "There is no doubt that his kindness, respect and cultivation of the press colored all the reporting that came from the Kennedy campaign," wrote Theodore White, "and the contrast colored adversely the reporting of the Nixon campaign." Nixon and his staff considered the press "not a brotherhood, but a conspiracy, and a hostile conspiracy at that." Nixon held himself aloof, withheld transcripts of his remarks, and made no attempt to communicate; by the end of the campaign "he had succeeded in making them predominantly into that which he had feared from the outset--hostile." A reporter transferring to the Kennedy campaign underwent a miraculous conversion, "as if he were transformed in role from leper and outcast to

friend and battle companion." Kennedy would tell reporters about dispatches he had liked, he would ask their advice, and he was available for conversation; by the end of the campaign the newsmen "had become his friends, and, some of them, his devoted admirers."¹⁹

Once elected, John Kennedy would remember his friends--and his enemies.

"Reporting," the ~~Brothers~~ Alsop once wrote, "offers the sense of being engaged in the political process of one's own time."²⁰ Nowhere is this truer than in Washington, and never was it more true than in the days of the New Frontier. But although President Kennedy enjoyed a degree of accessibility and warmth ²²unmatched by any previous or succeeding administration, criticisms of his news policies reached serious proportions.²¹

"A President who knows how to write a news story and a First Lady who can snap a good news picture will be residing in the White House after January 20," gushed Editor and Publisher the week after Kennedy's election.²²

"President Kennedy and some members of his administration have made statements and taken action with respect to information matters which add up to a disturbing trend in that area," the same periodical editorialized two weeks after the inauguration.²³

"The seasoned and in part sophisticated press corps generally has embraced the new administration with enthusiasm verging on awe," observed Robert Manning.²⁴ "News management exists in a form of direct and indirect action," enforced more boldly and cynically than by any previous administration," Arthur Krock darkly commented. "This is a public relations project and the President is its most brilliant operator."²⁵

John F. Kennedy had been described as a "meticulous and accurate writer with a great ability to organize his stories" when he worked for International

News Service following World War II; as Editor and Publisher noted shortly after his nomination, "the phrase 'I used to be a newspaperman myself,' could truthfully be used by Mr. Kennedy." This familiarity with the world of the fourth estate was to stand him in good stead throughout his career.

Even politically hostile publishers "couldn't resist the surefootedness of his conversations about newspapers and magazines," Ben Bagdikian recounts. "The Kennedy interest was genuine and his knowledge sound." Unlike his predecessor, Kennedy had many free and easy relationships with reporters as well as editors. "For the first time in memory," Fletcher Knebel wrote, "a President is accessible to almost any reporter...."

Times pundit Arthur Krock castigated the use of "exclusive" interviews, claiming it amounted to "selective personal patronage," a means of "managing the purveyors of the news." Kennedy was forewarned about the press's "jealousy and hostility towards anyone who gives special advantage to any individual reporter," James Reston noted, "(but) he has broken every rule in the book and gotten away with it." Far from doing away with personal interviews, Kennedy "made private sessions with reporters almost an extension of his policy making procedure." Although many argued that "this exploitation of modern mass communications unbalances the political system... the new accessibility... is undoubtedly effective."

It certainly was, agreed Ben Bagdikian. Kennedy "seemed to have hypnotic powers over his antagonists, clutching them to his breast and releasing them to walk glassy-eyed from the White House." Even arch-conservatives like George Sokolsky "emerged from private sessions with the President under an old-fashioned Irish spell." By "talking to them like peers and generally liking them," David Halberstam reflected later, "Kennedy flattered the press outrageously... in a subtle and insidious way."

Had Kennedy been deceptive in his dealings with newsmen, his attention to their work would not have won him much durable benefit. He therefore "strengthened his reputation for candor by shrewdly being blunt and candid" on matters which reporters could personally observe and evaluate. New York Times man Tom Wicker once commented to the President that he seemed stiff and uneasy when giving a formal speech. "You're absolutely right," Kennedy replied. "I can't read a speech worth a shit." Even a vicious Kennedyphobe like Victor Lasky noted that Kennedy's "absolute candor in off-the-record briefings won him many friends in the press corps."

The "play" given two Presidential reports of presidential reuninations indicates the drastic change wrought by Kennedy's accessibility; it also illuminates a possible root-cause for Krock's annoyance. "The President Discusses/His Political Philosophy" proclaimed the copyrighted article, prominently displayed in the New York Times. Arthur Krock won his first Pulitzer Prize for that exclusive report of what President Franklin D. Roosevelt "has been saying to his friends." [Among other things, he told them he would "retire to private life on January 20, 1941." That, said Krock, was "his answer to those who have contended that the President has a third term in mind."]

Marquis Childs was one of a dozen correspondents with access to the Oval Office. His report of a similar presidential interview ("JFK Looks Back/On His First Year") was published in his regular position, the op-ed page of the Washington Post (Next to Herblock, just above Letters to the Editor). Such reportage was no longer startling, and Childs won no awards. Arthur Krock would win no more awards, either; he was no longer invited to share the President's thoughts.

[The Kennedy-Krock relationship is a poignant display of presidential

ingratitude to a declining patriarch. Arthur Krock had been a friend of the Kennedy family since the 1930's; he reviewed the manuscript of John Kennedy's senior thesis^{and} suggested the eventual title, "Why England Slept." It was also on his recommendation that Henry Luce wrote the introduction. As Kennedy³⁸ grew in political stature, Krock's column was becoming increasingly burdened by the out-of-touch perspectives of an aging conservative. The first open break came when Newsweek reported that "Mr. Kennedy pays no more than polite attention to Krock."³⁹ Kennedy later told the author of that article, Ben Bradlee, that "Krock had never forgiven him for that story."⁴⁰ Krock retaliated a few months later, writing in the Times that "managed news was any news given to any reporter except Krock."⁴¹ Told by Bradlee that Newsweek columnist Kenneth Crawford was going after Krock by name, Kennedy urged him to "bust it off in old Arthur. He can't take it, and when you go after him he folds."⁴² Kennedy's animosity for Krock finally drove him to attempt a vicious assault on his very career: he once asked Times publisher Sulzberger to stop printing the Pulitzer Prize-winner's column.⁴³]

Kennedy's rapport with reporters was helpful in many ways. Ted Lewis noted in February, 1961, that Kennedy must "sometimes wonder how he can use the press conference to discuss in depth a problem" on which he wants the nation to "know exactly how he stands and concerning which he needs the support of the people."⁴⁴ Actually, Kennedy had given up wondering about the press conference in those terms, and had turned to informal and confidential conversations with reporters; the practice was similar to Frankling Roosevelt's, but on an "unprecedentedly massive scale."⁴⁵

Kennedy clearly understood that he could give detailed explanations of sensitive matters more easily in private conversations than in press conferences. Just after the Bay of Pigs fiasco, he opened a news conference by

stating:

I know that many of you have further questions about Cuba. I made a statement on that subject yesterday afternoon. We are continuing our consultations with other American republics...I do not think that any useful national purpose would be served by my going further into the Cuban question this morning...

Undaunted, a questioner asked if Kennedy had "reached this decision (to approve the anti-Castro assault) against the advice of Secretary (of State) ^{Rusk} and Mr. (Chester) Bowles?"

"I think the facts of the matter involving Cuba will come out in due time," the President replied. "I am sure that an effort will be made to determine the facts accurately. As for me, I am confining myself to my statement for good reason."⁴⁶

The "good reason" Kennedy alluded to was a "background" briefing he held that afternoon with reporters from the Washington Post and the New York Herald-Tribune. Those papers, reflecting generally conflicting political viewpoints, published the predictable administration viewpoint, unmistakably the product of interviews "at the highest level."⁴⁷

When the next Cuban crisis rolled around, it was assumed that Kennedy had held another private post-mortem with favored reporters. Although the diplomatic and military operations were this time successful, a "kiss-and-tell" magazine article raised considerable uproar.

In the months following the resolution of the Cuban missile crisis, there appeared a spate of articles purporting to reveal the "inside story" of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council deliberations. The most controversial of these was the report written by Charles Bartlett and Stewart Alsop for the Saturday Evening Post. Supposedly based on information from reliable administration sources, it claimed that Adlai E. Stevenson, America's Ambassador to the United Nations, had dissented from the President's

decision to blockade the Carribean island. Stevenson reportedly urged that American bases in Europe and Turkey to be removed in exchange for Soviet withdrawal from Cuba, and that political negotiations were preferable to military confrontations. One high-level source was quoted as saying, "Adlai⁴⁸ wanted a Munich." Stevenson denied the validity of the article, and the White House issued a statement saying "Ambassador Stevenson supported the decision taken by the President on the quarantine. The President also expressed the "fullest confidence" in the Ambassador."⁴⁹

The naturally sticky situation was complicated by the common knowledge that Bartlett was one of Kennedy's closest personal friends. As Russell Baker noted, "nobody would have paid much attention if Bartlett's name had not been on the article." But it was. The "ever-suspicious and jealously competitive" Washington press corps assumed that Kennedy had inspired the piece, and that he was the anonymously quoted "non-admirer" of Stevenson.⁵⁰

A fortnight after the article appeared, Kennedy told a press conference that "any historian--and I think this matter should be left to historians--who walks through this mine field of charges and counter charges, should proceed with care. I don't think," he said, "that there's much advantage to press speculation on various positions" taken by members of the National Security Council.

It was "untrue," he added, that the White House had "in any way authorized or suggested the article in the Saturday Evening Post... (or) had made members of the National Security Council available."⁵¹

Also, however, later revealed that Kennedy had reviewed the manuscript, and did make several minor changes. One of these was the deletion of Theodore Sorenson's name from the list of "doves." He also maintained that Kennedy neither inspired the article nor supplied its most notorious quo-

tation.⁵²

General Eisenhower had decided that ^{to} continuing friendships with newsmen was inadvisable for a President, so he cut himself off while in office. JFK also addressed that problem, and came to a quite different conclusion. Still speaking about the Post article, he said:

The reporters who happened to be -- The Presidency is not a very good place to make new friends. I'm going to keep my old friends. But I am responsible for many things under the Constitution, but not for what they write. That's their responsibility, and that is the way we will continue it.⁵³

However much they liked Kennedy personally, reporters were not blind to the fact that his administration was often politically unsuccessful.

"You'll find it a myth that Kennedy got all that good a press," Peter Lisagor told me. "Not for one minute did reporter's affection bend out of shape reporting of his timid, his uncreative administration in the early years."

If objectivity could be measured; Lisagor maintains, one would find that

"Nixon, in his first four years, got a more uncritical press than Kennedy did."⁵⁴

And as reporters became more critical of Kennedy, Kennedy became more critical of reporters. Although his voracious reading habits were legendary (he once privately commented that one of his two mistakes in 1961 was "letting it be known that I read as much as I do"⁵⁵) his sensitivity to press criticism was not so well known. It was not so well known, that is, until reporters began complaining about it.

The New Frontiersman have been "showing great sensitivity and even irritation about public criticism," James Reston reported that first summer.

"They read everything in sight and probably take it more seriously than it deserves,...categorizing reporters as either 'for' or 'against' the administration." They are, analyzed Reston, "almost psychopathically concerned

with that dreadful modern conception of 'their image.'" This line was then adopted by Representative William E. Miller, Chairman of the Republican National Committee. "In administration quarters," he wrote, "reporters are classified 'for' or 'against'." A newsman considered hostile often finds himself scratching for crumbs."⁵⁷

Marquis Childs, the syndicated liberal columnist, agreed with the gist of Reston's analysis. In his opinion, Kennedy was "too concerned...about what his critics in the press and on the air say. Reporters," he revealed, have often been reproached for what some administration figure feels was a critical comment."⁵⁸ Wayne Phillips, former New York Times man, agreed: "Their reaction to criticism is strong. They take vigorous steps to counter criticism." But, he added, "it is not personal reaction. It is purely a political reaction, stemming from a desire to gain their objectives."⁵⁹

Two prominent correspondents from the midwest both implied that Kennedy had, by the end of his first year, restrained his rebukes to reporters. "Extreme sensitivity to criticism has diminished," commented Peter Lisagor. "Reporters resented it and officials found it unrewarding."⁶⁰ Clark Mollenhoff thought there was "occasionally some resentment against those who are regarded as 'against' the administration." But the situation, the Pulitzer Prize-winner said, had "improved as a result of such criticism (as Representative Miller's). It is encouraging that the Kennedy administration is learning," Mollenhoff said, "that retaliation against one member of the press is an attack on all."⁶¹

Kennedy's reprisals to offending reporters may have subsided, but they did not desist. "Never before have so few bawled out so many for so little," wrote Fletcher Knebel in 1962. He reported that many reporters "regarded the Kennedy administration's knuckle rapping of the press...seriously, as

an attempt to pressure them." An equally large contingent, however, "took a light-hearted view of it." The maddening aspect was the inconsistency: "The writer chastised for his choice of words in the morning may find himself embraced by sunset."⁶²

Generally, disapproval was in the form of an irate phone call and an executive cold shoulder. Time magazine once provoked a "truly monumental display of (Kennedy's) anger" by questioning the number of staffers assigned to foreign-policy matters. As a result, Time's Hugh Sidey suddenly found himself in the doghouse for two weeks. Telephone calls went unreturned, as formerly trusted sources were continually out or busy.⁶³ "He ordered the whole White House not to talk to me," Sidey later recalled. "Plus his brother. But that was silly. I knew it was a phoney. Kennedy would call you, bawl you out. But he got over it." Two weeks after the offending article, Sidey was back in the President's good graces.⁶⁴

At times, however, JFK's anger could trigger repercussions which verged on actual repression; for Kennedy proved that he was not above using strong-arm tactics to silence annoying reporters. When David Halberstam was causing concern with his too-accurate dispatches from Saigon--presenting the weakness of the South Vietnamese regime, and the officially denied increments in American involvement--Kennedy personally asked New York Times publisher Adolph Cchs Sulzberger to change Halberstam's assignment. Sulzberger refused, and Halberstam won a Pulitzer Prize.⁶⁵

Even close personal friends could be ostracized with a vengeance, as Benjamin C. Bradlee found out. As chief of Newsweek's Washington bureau, Bradlee was one of Kennedy's closest intimates. He enjoyed dinner at the White House at least once a week, and could place phone calls to the President whenever the need arose.⁶⁶ But a Look magazine article on "Kennedy vs.

the Press" sent him out into the cold--for three months.

Bradlee was quoted as saying: "It's almost impossible to write a story they like. Even if a story is quite favorable to their side, they'll find one paragraph to quibble with." ⁶⁷ Although Bradlee later claimed his comment was made off-the-record, Kennedy's irritation was pronounced. "Jesus," he told Bradlee, "there you are, really plugged in better than any other reporter...getting one exclusive after another, and what do you do but dump all over us." ⁶⁸

Public criticism of Kennedy's sensitivity and alleged "news management" finally forced the administration to defend itself. In doing so, Press Secretary Pierre Salinger also advanced the idea that a study be done of editors and broadcasters to determine if they were handling news properly.

He "vehemently denied" that news management was a policy of the Kennedy administration. "The Government cannot and could not present a false image to the public," Salinger told the National Press Club. "The activities in Washington...are too closely covered by the press to make this possible." He assured his listeners that the desire to present a false image "has not been and never will be the policy of this administration."

Salinger said he thought there was only "one legitimate place where news can be managed--at the desks of our newspaper editors...and radio and television news directors."

"And it is here, I believe," he said, "that the really fundamental study should be made to determine whether news is being managed in the public interest." ⁶⁹

Naturally, Kennedy didn't just complain--he also praised. Fletcher Knebel describes a typical phone call from Salinger: "The President thought your piece on SEATO was superb, remarkably well put together. He just wanted

you to know how he felt." Often Kennedy himself would do the honors. He once confronted New York Timesman Tom Wicker in a pouring rain in Columbus, Ohio, to congratulate him for "that splendid piece this morning." Kennedy didn't reserve his praise for his followers: Holmes Alexander, the most anti-New Frontiersman in Washington reporting circles, was "amazed to find a note of praise from JFK."⁷⁰

The final word on the issue of Kennedy's sensitivity to criticism should go to the late President. "I am reading more," he told a press conference, "and enjoying it less." The reporters laughed.⁷¹

A discussion of John F. Kennedy's press relations would not be complete without mention of Pierre Emile "Plucky" Salinger. The rotund, cigar-chomping press secretary was once a piano prodigy; now, like his boss, he played the press.

Unlike James Hagerly, Salinger had for a boss a man who not only had the inclination but the ability as well to deal personally with reporters. Either in his extensive informal contacts or frequent background briefings, Kennedy demonstrated that he was a master of press relations. As Salinger himself acknowledged, "Kennedy is his own best press secretary."⁷²

Thus, Salinger's role was a very different one from that of his predecessor, and his prominence as a regular and authoritative spokesman correspondingly less. Having been replaced by his boss in some of the traditional functions, Salinger broadened the scope of his activities in two main areas, information and imagery.⁷³ Here he expanded the Hagerly method, and set the stage for later, more complete developments.

Allen Otten was referring primarily to Salinger when he wrote, "Mr. Kennedy and all those around him work intensively to create the 'image' that the White House wants to build. Madison Avenue," he wrote, "could take a lesson from the White House."⁷⁴ Professor Elmer Cornwell was even more impressed; Salinger, he said, had a "central role" in an "image building effort (which) was truly awe-inspiring."⁷⁵ Although he deceitfully denied it, Salinger was the motivating force behind this attempt to "turn the entire Federal bureaucracy into a publicity mill for John F. Kennedy":

At a White House meeting we have been advised again that speeches of Cabinet and sub-Cabinet officers do not contain sufficient references to the President. It is to be kept in mind that, in announcing local projects, the President should be given a credit line in the first paragraph.⁷⁶

He also prevailed upon Interior Secretary Stewart Udall to distribute the following memo, an extension of Hagerty's earlier attempts to highlight the President as Dispatcher of Good Tidings:

It is mandatory that we give the White House 48 hours before we announce contracts. On the Florida matter, for example, considerable mileage could have been made by giving the White House a chance before the weekend of notifying interested Members of Congress. 77

One of Salinger's most ambitious innovations was a series of briefings and luncheons held in Washington. 78 The President at various times greeted editors, publishers, gubernatorial press secretaries, Congressional aides—everyone and anyone who could be politically useful. There was criticism of the program, but Salinger found the benefits outweighed any problems.

No one could convincingly argue that the nation's leading publishers are private people; certainly any meeting between members of that select fraternity and the President must be regarded as a public affair. Yet Salinger attempted to portray a "massive and expensive campaign to woo publishers" on a state-by-state basis as a private affair, secluded from press inquiry. 79 His attempts at secrecy were ultimately unsuccessful, thanks only to the talkative nature of some drunk Kentuckians.

After the publishers disclosed their invitations in September, 1961, Salinger tried to keep the lid on, and would say nothing. Only when the certainty of the invitations was firmly established did he admit the obvious. But he persisted in keeping the guest list, and related particulars, secret. He finally relented, admitting the luncheon's place on the presidential schedule, and disclosing the guest list. It was the "first in a series of state-by-state gatherings," Salinger said; the purpose was an "exchange of views...an attempt by the President to get the feelings from various parts of the country." 80 Newsweek saw perhaps a different motive; was it, they pointedly asked, an attempt to use the guests as launchers of

trial balloons?⁶¹

Salinger implies another reason for the meetings, quite apart from his selfless description of informing the President. After cocktails, lunch and a discussion period with the President, he said, "quite a few changed their minds" about opposing the Kennedy foreign-aid program. Because the publishers were "pleased with the President's frankness--and the honor of being invited to the White House for lunch," his files became "full of letters" from publishers proclaiming a greater understanding of "the President and his problems." He proudly cites one letter from a publisher who said he could "no longer write another glib editorial attacking the President without thinking of that lunch and the great burdens of the American President." Small wonder that he wanted to keep such a successful propaganda tool secret.⁶²

Although Salinger was often scooped by his own boss, he did manage to enliven his daily briefings with a robust wit. After one of Caroline's pet hamsters drowned in the President's bathtub, Salinger explained, "We have a very tight security system around here, but this was an extremely intelligent hamster." ⁶³ [There is no record of his explanation of why the bathtub had water in it, but no President] When he was accused of straying from the text of a White House announcement, Salinger shot back: "I am not a textual deviate." ⁶⁴ A rotund bon vivant and gourmet, Salinger dismissed his chickening-out of the 50-mile hike for fitness then invogue with New Frontiersman with, "I may be plucky, but I'm not stupid." ⁶⁵

When he wasn't entertaining the press corps with his piano composition "Fugue to an Overnight," or whipping up Chinese delicacies, Salinger kept himself busy with a project he called "information council." Others called it "news management."

Centralization of information is rationalized on four major grounds: the preservation of national security; the prominent display of the President; the necessity for coordination; and the observation of policy guidelines.

The problems of an unorganized press office were twice painfully demonstrated to Harry Truman. On the same June day in 1947 when Secretary of State George C. Marshall outlined the Marshall Plan to the Harvard graduates, the President gave out a great deal of news at his press conference. Without any organizational planning by Press Secretary Charles Ross, Truman had "inadvertently 'scooped' his own Secretary of State off the front pages." ⁶⁶

Lightning struck again a short while later, when the State Department and the White House released, on the same day, the following: a presidential

message to Congress on E.C.A., the text of Secretary Marshall's report on the London Conference of Foreign Ministers, the text of the administration's European Recovery Plan bill, and a 227-page memo explaining aid policy. As a result, "only a few major papers carried the text of the Truman and Marshall messages"; the other two important documents, each representing months' work, "were elbowed out of the paper altogether." A simple phone call could have prevented the jamming-up; the next day the White House had no news to release, and the State Department gave out only one insignificant item.⁸⁷

James Hagerty had been working to stave off such mishaps since his days as press secretary for Governor Thomas E. Dewey of New York. While in Albany he had developed the Public Information Council idea, composed of the press relations officers from the several departments. Its primary function was to "serve as a forum for the exchange of ideas." As Hagerty described the parallel effort in Washington, "the object was to get the public relations men to stay out of each other's way and make sure they would not throw out everything on one day." Besides preventing conflicts arising from simultaneously releases, this system also enabled the White House to learn of important departmental announcements, which they occasionally decided to release from the White House instead.⁸⁸

Time magazine summarized publicity co-ordination under Eisenhower this way:

...as no man before him, Hagerty has placed the news systems of all the departments under his sure thumb; he holds regular conferences with departmental press officers, scans departmental news bulletins before they are released--and plays a key part in advising Cabinet members who have got themselves out on limbs and need rescue.⁸⁹

Sometimes that advice to Cabinet members could be brusque. After Agriculture Secretary Ezra Benson expressed a highly controversial opinion which

caused embarrassment when it was published, Hagerty told him: "Ezra, you pulled a boner and the thing to do is to admit it." ⁹⁰

To ensure that no deviant opinions were expressed on matters of policy, Hagerty's office compiled thrice weekly a "newsletter," a single mimeographed sheet "that compresses into a few terse paragraphs the official line on every public issue that comes up, usually replete with pertinent Presidential quotes." This was sent to about 1000 government executives for their guidance, as well as to leading Congressional and Gubernatorial Republicans. ⁹¹

Elaborating on Hagerty's method, Salinger institutionalized a coordinating committee to handle all important news from the executive branch. His plan was to have each department's public information officer "clear with the White House all statements and speeches bearing on important national and international matters." This coordination or top-level information was not unprecedented, he writes; his only mistake was in formalizing the arrangement, and in publicly announcing that weekly meetings were being held of a coordinating committee. The plan--for which Kennedy gave "full backing"--itself was clearly justified, he asserts; "JFK certainly had a right to expect that his administration would speak with one voice and in support of his policies." ⁹²

Salinger's weekly Tuesday meetings were designed to serve two functions. The first was to "survey the latest executive policies and news developments" within the executive branch; to "agree on the form and procedure for their release," and to "range generally over questions of prime interest to reporters" covering the major departments. The meetings also served to "inform all the top press officers of the government what was going on in the other departments," thus lessening the chance that any one of them (especially Salinger) would make a serious mistake at his own briefing. ⁹³

An additional benefit was that information was passed on between meetings; this enabled the President and Salinger to "learn of plans by a government department that had not come to our attention...many of them contrary to the desires and interests of the President." When that happened, the White House would demand modification of the offending material, as Admiral Arleigh Burke soon realized.

Salinger recalls that Kennedy's first instruction to him as press secretary was that he should "take full responsibility for all executive information." He was thus the prime target for "sharp, if not always accurate" accusations of being a closet censor; the first such charge came only three days after the inauguration.⁹⁵

An aide to Chief of Naval Operations Burke brought Salinger a speech that the Admiral was planning to deliver later that week, in which he severely criticized the Soviet Union. Burke was unaware that Premier Khrushchev was planning to free the RB-47 fliers, held by the Russians since July 1, 1960. Theodore Sorenson and McGeorge Bundy agreed with Salinger that Burke's "broadside against the Kremlin was a clear threat to their freedom." Without even bringing the matter to the President's attention, Salinger instructed the Admiral to "tone down his remarks," which he then did.

Naturally this incident leaked to the press, and a full investigation was undertaken to see if the White House was "muzzling the military." Salinger points to Burke's previous record in this field (he was told by the Eisenhower administration to revise no fewer than 14 speeches in 1956 alone) and the fact that his aide voluntarily brought Salinger a copy (which he says is a "clear indication that he was in the habit of doing this before JFK took office") as exonerating evidence.⁹⁶

[It is ironic that Burke was named CNO after his predecessor, Admiral

Carney was fired by President Eisenhower for giving a background briefing with reporters, in which he predicted war with China over Quemoy and Matsu.]

It was largely due to personal attractiveness that John F. Kennedy became the 35th President of the United States. The Richard Nixons were no match for the young and handsome Senator, his pregnant but still stunning wife Jacqueline and their adorable baby Caroline. Public interest in the private lives of the new First Family jumped by quantum leaps, and Kennedy tried bankrolling some of his personal popularity into political support. Gradually, though, his wife's worries of the effect constant media attention would have on the children (John, Jr. was born shortly after the election) and a general wariness of having his privacy invaded caused Kennedy to curtail examinations of his private affairs. 97

The cream of Washington's journalism establishment tensely awaited the President-elect's press secretary, whom they had invited to a working luncheon at the Sheraton Park shortly after New Year's. Only a few weeks had gone by since Pierre Salinger's startling announcement that press conferences would hereafter be available for live telecasting, and they were hoping to get him to reverse the decision. "You're turning the presidential press conference into a side-show," the Washington Post's Edward T. Folliard told Salinger, as the luncheon took on "all the cordiality of a drumhead court-martial." The portly, cigar-chomping secretary not only held his ground on that point--he dropped still another bombshell, exploding their long-held notions of newsmen's prerogatives. 98

Salinger was told that he "must always inform the correspondents" when the President left the White House, and give his destination and the members of his party.

"I don't have to at all," the plucky Pierre piped up. "I don't intend to tell you where he spends his evenings or release the guest list when he

entertains friends." Trying to soothe his hosts, Salinger conceded that, "obviously, you'll be told if he's leaving town or attending an official affair. But he has a right to his privacy."

His hosts--among them UPI's Merriman Smith, Robert Donovan of the New York Herald-Tribune and Pete Brandt of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch -- weren't satisfied. "In that case," one of them shot back, "we'll have to post a 24-hour guard around his office."

"That's your privilege," Salinger calmly replied.⁹⁹

But he wasn't out of the woods yet--still to come was another luncheon, this one arranged by James "Scotty" Reston. Held at the elite Metropolitan Club, it was "ostensibly designed to help Salinger" get better acquainted with the Times's Washington bureau; its "real purpose," however, was to "acquaint Salinger with the Times's view of what constitutes proper Presidential press relations."¹⁰⁰

Reston told Salinger that he was uneasy about Kennedy's "wandering around," his habit of going out for a solo spin in his convertible, or dropping unannounced in at a friend's house. Behavior of that sort was all right for a Senator, Reston declared, but it wouldn't do for the President of the United States. "We can't ever be in the position of saying we weren't there if something should happen to him," the veteran correspondent patiently explained to the youthful press secretary.

Reston proposed a revolutionary solution: assign a press representative to the Secret Service detail that accompanies the President constantly. Salinger quickly and firmly vetoed the idea, noting that in the event of a mishap, "the press would find out about it soon enough anyway."

The assurance that the press would be made aware "soon enough" wasn't good enough for the tenacious Scotsman, who protested that delayed reaction

were ingredients for troublesome misinformation and confusion. He launched into another explanation of the need for a press bodyguard when Salinger cut him off.

"The President will do what he damn well pleases," the press secretary said, bringing the discussion to an abrupt conclusion.

Privately, Salinger realized the weakness of his argument. But he also knew that "wandering around" was one presidential habit he could never change; there wasn't even any sense in trying.

Kennedy proved the wisdom of his press secretary's judgment his first night as President. Still restless after an extensive tour of inauguration banquets and balls, he dropped in at the Georgetown house of columnist Joe Alsop. At two in the morning. Alone.¹⁰¹

President John F. Kennedy was the world's leader. Jack Kennedy was the reporter's friend.

There are inherent dangers to having friendly access to a President. To paraphrase the maxim, "familiarity breeds obligation." Walter Lippmann framed the issue forty years ago:

Much might be said about the personal relations between politicians and newspapermen. They are invariably delicate and difficult. For obviously they must be close; correspondents must see much of the men they write about. Yet if they do, they soon find themselves compelled to choose between friendship and the ties of loyalty that comes from companionship on the one hand, and the stern embarrassing truth on the other. This is the unpleasant side of newspaper work and I have never heard of any way of avoiding it. When a personal friend becomes a public man, a predicament soon arrives in which friendship and professional duty are at odds.¹⁰²

Many reporters faced this test of choosing between personal friendship for Jack Kennedy and professional duty to their readers. Some clearly relished the opportunities, and downplayed any risks. "The hazards are minor," wrote Robert Manning, "compared to the opposite atmosphere, where communion between reporters and officials is confided too much to the calculated machinery of official press relations." To be engaged in the evolution of policies, Manning said, "is worth encouraging even at the risk of some considerable head-turning."¹⁰³

But the presidential-press relationship is not dichotomous; in fact, it is triangular. There can be affection, disinterest --and hatred. This final condition was apparent in the Nixon years, when reporters weren't being seduced--they were being kneed in the groin. According to Hugh Sidey, it was better that way. "It's much better to have a hostile press than a friendly press," he told me. "Distortion can take place in both instances but the worst would be to have the press simply be an arm of the White House."¹⁰⁴

Other reporters hark back to the Kennedy style as the most desirable. Like the Boston Globe's Martin Nolan, they harbor a fond remembrance of things past. "Which would you want," Nolan rhetorically asked, "a nice, kind affectionate man in the White House--or a evil, brooding monster? Sure, I kind of like being seduced."

At the time, though, it wasn't that easy. Rowland Evans felt his close ties with Kennedy adversely affecting his reportorial freedom. "I always had the feeling," he reflected, "when I was writing about President Kennedy that he was standing right there behind me, watching the words and waiting to bore in. No question about it," he declares, "friendship with a President can be a burden on a reporter's professionalism."¹⁰⁶

But Evans's career took an upswing during Kennedy's tenure. The "ageless preppie" teamed up with Robert Novack to form what has since become political journalism's most widely respected syndicate. Evans candidly admits that his friendship with Kennedy helped start the column along. Charles Bartlett also reaped financial rewards as a result of Presidential friendship. Although he rarely revealed any of the confidential information Kennedy gave him, his Chattanooga Times column became a highly marketable item.¹⁰⁷

Peter Lisagor gave the standard speech about the journalist policing himself. Seated beneath autographed pictures of Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, he told me:¹⁰⁸

It's easier being fair and honest if you maintain an arm's-length distance from them all; and whether they want to respond negatively and hostilely or pleasantly and understandingly is almost their affair. As long as you stay level with yourself, and maintain levels of performance for yourself that are decent standards, it really doesn't matter whether they're kneeling you or not. When they start to kneel you or cajole you, it's because they think you can be influenced that way, that your stuff is slanted and shaped for reasons other than what the substance of the news dictates. And when you're in that

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position, they figure, "Oh, he's a whore, we can take him on. We'll take him to lunch, go take him to lunch." You're in bad shape. So the real, ideal situation is to keep them at arms length; if you do know them, let them know first and foremost that you're a newsman. And whatever they try to tell you, and whenever they try to put their arm around you in a subtle psychological way--they understand that it doesn't make any difference. They understand that it doesn't make any difference if they knee you, that you're not going to go out and be vindictive. That you're a straight and level guy. This doesn't mean you're a saint, it doesn't mean anything like that. It just means you've got certain professional standards to which you hue. A lot of the reporters in this town that I've known over the years have been just this type I am describing. Friends of Presidents, friends of Cabinet officers, but straight as a die. And they knew it, the friends knew it--and the reporters knew that that was the best way to function. So the ideal situation is just to be at arm's-length with all of them. And if you're not at arm's-length--remember what your professional standards are.

But that sort of self-righteousness is easy to come by a decade later. The hazards are much more pronounced at the moment of temptation, and the realization of having passed or failed the test of friendship v. duty may come much too late. From his vantage point in 1975, Ben Bradlee looked back on his closeness to the President in the early 1960's. "If I was had," he says, "so be it; I doubt I will ever be so close to a political figure again." ¹⁰⁹ Bradlee now knows he was being tested. He knows he failed.

President Kennedy realized how controversial some of his friendships were. Speaking to the American Society of Newspaper Editors, he addressed the issue with his customary blend of charm and candor:

I do want to say that I am looking forward to all of you coming to the White House this afternoon.... Mr. Arthur Krock has warned of the temptations there and the seductions which take place of the press in the White House, but I want you to know that we expect that you will all emerge with your journalistic integrity and virtue unmarred. You will naturally be courteous to the host on all occasions, but it is not necessary that your views be changed. [laughter] ¹¹⁰

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Lyndon Johnson had it all. And he blew it.

He came to office at a time of national tragedy, enjoying the support of all his countrymen. When he retired, his public approval rating was in the low thirties.

The traditional honeymoon period that every incoming President receives was intensified and extended for LBJ. Normally a President has about three months--a hundred days--to put his administration in order; but, because of the circumstances surrounding Johnson's ascension, traditional practice was side-tracked.

1964 was an election year, and this also worked in Johnson's favor. It wasn't that the press ought to be overly kind to one of the candidates, for that is not its function. Rather, Johnson recognized that he needed the press as an adjunct to his election. Realizing, as he would put it, that you "don't get into a pissing contest with a skunk"--and certainly not at election time, he put on his very best Johnson City manners.

And then, when the election was over and the year's mourning completed, Johnson interrupted the honeymoon waltz. At first he merely stepped on the press's toes; his dissatisfaction would rapidly increase. And although he might only kick them in the shins, the way was paved for the next President--Richard Milhous Nixon--to knee them in the groin. But I am getting ahead of my story.

During the 371 days of Presidential wine and roses for the press, Johnson courted them "with manic zeal." He was indefatigable in his desire to accomodate--and enlist. His ulterior motive was expressed by the new President on that plane back from Dallas: "Play along with me," he told the reporters, "and I'll make you great men." And the unspoken corollary:

Attack me and I'll destroy you. Of course, it was not in Johnson's power to do either, any more than his imperatives could have been in the press's interest. Reporters want neither to sanctify nor villify (beatification is permissible, but only for the martyred). They merely seek to inform, perhaps enlighten. Johnson wanted support, a press corps of public relations men. His attempts at securing this chorus of sympathy was ill-conceived, misguided and ultimately unsuccessful. Really, there could have been no other resolution.

In ancient times, it was said that the gods would destroy men by making them mad. Lyndon Johnson's self-destruction was not due to a sudden aberration of his character; but was the product of a steady accumulation of actions. His downfall may have been written in the stars, but the signature was his own--as were his basic faults. The roll call of Johnsonian affronts to and attacks on the press reads as mournful testimony, an elegy of rising tensions. Set to music, the song had many verses. Its chorus became part of our language: Credibility Gap.

James Reston perceived Johnson's liabilities immediately. "His problems with the press is likely to be edgy," Reston wrote that first week after Dallas. "Johnson is probably more thin-skinned about press criticism than anybody who has worked around here...even his best friends agree that he's almost irrational about it." Still, Johnson was starting with an administration that "has the respect and even the admiration" of the press, and his press relations "should not be a great problem unless he makes them so." He did.¹¹³

Johnson demonstrated his overriding concern with his image only hours after the assassination. Press Secretary Pierre Salinger and Johnson aides Horace Busby and Jack Valenti drafted position papers putting the new President's views in the best possible light; Johnson then ordered Salinger to distribute the material to opinion-shaping newsmen. In short, Johnson wanted Salinger to "openly and blatantly pros^elytize reporters."¹¹⁴

Salinger, who was to remain at the White House for just over three months of the Johnson Presidency, also lodged complaints with reporters about stories his boss found distasteful, an "old habit of Presidents that Johnson carried to extremes."¹¹⁵ Salinger had received similar orders from

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Kennedy, but was convinced they were just passing irritations, and would not follow through. But he soon found that he couldn't do the same with his new boss. "He not only expected me to make the call," Salinger wrote, "but to report back to him on the conversation."¹¹⁶

Bill Don Moyers, one of the trio who succeeded Salinger, once implied that Johnson not only ordered the calls, but also scripted them. Speaking to a journalists convention after leaving the White House, Moyers recounted this dialogue:

The President: "Did you call James Reston a liar?"

Moyers: "Yes, Sir."

The President: "And did you also say that he was an impossible, arrogant biased hack for the New York Times?"

Moyers: "No, Sir, I forgot to mention that."¹¹⁷

Some of the calls were so disastrously scripted, they could not have been the work of a man who understood reporters. Acting on a Presidential directive, Salinger called Rowland Evans, a close friend of the late President's, and upbraided him for an unfavorable dispatch. "You used to have a pipeline over here, but not any more," Salinger told the startled columnist. "Why don't you get wise and get on the team?" Naturally, Evans quite deliberately stayed off the team.¹¹⁸

Johnson's years in Congress had convinced him that reporters were incapable of developing and presenting their own views; he contemptuously regarded them as obedient lackeys of their editors and publishers. Thus a critical story was "seldom viewed by Johnson as an objective analysis";¹¹⁹ rather, it was the result of a plant by a political foe or an antagonistic editor.

The critical corollary to this misconception of the press was that Johnson could "generate favorable stories by the simple expedient of courting influential reporters."¹¹⁹ and feeding them carefully sculpted nuggets

of Johnsonian propoganda. As Majority Leader, Johnson had enjoyed a measure of success in "cultivating a number of submissive correspondents"; this lead him to the "erroneous conclusion that his press relations could be solved by the simple art of seduction."¹²⁰ But Johnson didn't understand the press; "he doesn't understand that a reporter is not like a Congressman-- he can't be bought."¹²¹

Convinced that he was doing right for the country, Johnson looked on the press as merely a powerful means to generate support for his Great Society. "The press," he once said, "is one of the best servants I've got."¹²² And an unfaithful servant soon found there was no middle ground. "Reporters were either good boys," David Halberstam wrote, "in which case he felt he owned them, or they were enemies."¹²³

And an enemy of Johnson was de facto an enemy of the state. The President, said James Deakin, tended to "regard dissent as perversity, and to fret and worry about it, as if criticism was not a duty in a free country but a crime."¹²⁴ "Your damn profession!" The President of the United States once exploded. "Your damn first amendment!"¹²⁵

Unlike Kennedy, who had generally complained only about factual errors, Johnson complained about motives. "His disputes were often over personal motives," Ben Bagdikian notes, "on the assumption that a reporter ought to be 'loyal' or at least 'for' rather than 'against.'" It was another perspective he brought with him from Capitol Hill. Correspondents who covered the then-Majority Leader recalled Johnson greeting them after an unfavorable article¹²⁶ with an annoyed snarl: "What did I ever do to you?"¹²⁷

Johnson vented his annoyance in various ways, from the petty to the truly vicious. Shortly before the Washington Post's Herblock was to receive a Medal of Freedom, the cartoonist sketched a devastating caricature of

Johnson and his aides. The President promptly cancelled the presentation.

Outright character assassination was also employed as a means of silencing press critics. Administration officials were noticed at numerous Georgetown dinner parties, confiding to their table-mates, "Isn't it tragic that Walter Lippmann's gotten senile?" and "As an old newspaperman myself, I'm awfully sorry about the sharp decline in Scotty Reston's reputation."¹²⁹

Like any politician, Johnson preferred to build up rather than destroy. To enlist good soldiers in his Great Society, he courted the high and low alike, carrying on a "bustling cultivation" of each level. Days after his ascension, he abruptly ordered his chauffeur to drive to Walter Lippmann's for tea and consultation; he brought Mr. and Mrs. James Reston to Texas for the Christmas holidays by private plane.¹³⁰ Reporters were given Presidential ashtrays, Presidential pens, Presidential tours, Presidential portraits-- all in a "conscious effort to upgrade the function and prestige of the front-line soldiers" covering the White House.¹³¹ "Johnson," wrote one observer of the period, "tried killing the press with kindness."¹³²

But even as he went about this frantic courtship, Johnson privately knew it was founded on false concepts. "Lyndon, I really must hand it to you," Lady Bird remarked after one White House gala honoring newsmen. "You really were fine to them."¹³³

"Yeah," growled the President of the United States, "but they'll still write it as they please."¹³⁴

Perhaps the most self-defeating aspect of Johnson's many perverse dealings with the press was not his constant criticism of it, but rather his frequent attempts to fool reporters, and hence the public. "The fact that the President of the United States cannot be believed," Charles Roberts wrote in 1966, "is far more ~~important~~ ominous for his and the country's