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William S. White*

When he was campaigning in the Democratic primaries in 1968, Eugene J. McCarthy developed a distaste for one particular tendency of the press corps following him. If one reporter described his behavior in some particular way, other reporters were inclined to do the same. Thus, if one publication pointed out that his support among black voters was shallow, there would soon be similar stories in other publications. McCarthy was bemused by the "herd" instinct. He might speak 10,000 words in a single day and yet most of the newsmen would find the same sentence or idea to be the "relevant" news of the day "Reporters are like swallows on a telephone wire," McCarthy would say, "If one of them flies away, all of them decide to fly away."

The "swallow" theory of news reporting has been the special complaint of the Nixon Administration in its recurring wars with the press and it is the principal theme of this book by a former newsman who worked for the President for two years. The major media, he contends, are staffed with conformists of a liberal persuasion who follow each other willy-nilly. If the *New York Times* found the Administration lagging in the enforcement of civil rights laws, so would *Time*, the television networks, *The Washington Post*, and *Newsweek*. All of them, Keogh continues, have a vested interest in discovering or inventing calamities, because news of conflict and failure is more salable than news of "pleasant" events.

There is enough truth in these allegations to make knowledgeable people inside and outside the media world uncomfortable. There *is* a kind of common point of view that occasionally leads the major media to build on each other's accounts. There *are* certain widely-shared assumptions about American society within the trade and those assumptions *do*, on occasion, produce a kind of journalistic blindness to specific happenings. When a partic-

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ular event occurs that reinforces one of those assumptions, it tends to be given emphasis even if the event is proven untrue or inconsequential. The condition is not, however, as simple as Mr. Keogh describes it here. He seems to believe that the press simply did not like Mr. Nixon and was determined to describe his Administration as one filled with amoral ogres. I think that it is more complex than that.

Perhaps the best example of what is right and what is wrong with Keogh's argument is in the account of Representative Hale Boggs' accusation, in 1971, that the Federal Bureau of Investigation had wiretapped the telephones of several members of Congress. His charge was widely reported when he first made it. It was featured on television news and in front-page stories. Commentators and columnists tended to accept it as plausible and used it to renew their demands for Hoover's dismissal. After several days, however, it became clear that Boggs had no evidence.

The critical point here is why the media gave continuing coverage over a period of days to a charge for which there was no substantiation. Keogh's explanation—that media moguls just did not like Hoover—is too simplistic. They had been conditioned to suspect that the charge might be true by a long history of the Administration's receptivity to wiretapping and its official policy of refusing to disclose, in many cases, who it was wiretapping. The aura of secrecy, coupled with the celebrated cases of proven illegal wiretapping, had created the widely-held suspicion that anyone was vulnerable to an FBI tap. It was this assumption, based on a series of developments over a period of years, that created the conditions in which the Boggs charge was accepted as plausible and worthy of heavy reportage. It was not, as Keogh claims, merely the "herd's" dislike of J. Edgar Hoover.

It is this sort of shallow analysis, or non-analysis, that makes Mr. Keogh's book virtually useless. *President Nixon and the Press* is little more than a collection of gripes—some of them well-founded, some of them not. It merely recounts the episodes in which he believes the Nixon Administration was unfairly treated by the media and lets it go at that. There is no indication anywhere in the book that he approached the issue the way most reporters do: Try to find out why something happened. Whether he talked to a single correspondent about the Hoover stories or any of the other episodes described is not apparent.

The superficiality of Keogh's critique comes thudding home in his concluding chapter, entitled "The Essential Mission: To Inform":

What the journalist must do is to constantly keep in mind that the first duty is to tell the people what is going on, no matter what anyone's opinion might be. This duty becomes more compelling

and more crucial as society becomes more complex and differences on issues become more labyrinthine.

That is a very good idea. To inform people about a complex subject is a very notable endeavor. It is unfortunate that Mr. Keogh did not try to do that.