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To: PRESIDENT-ELECT RICHARD M. NIXON

Date: November 23, 1968

From: Theodore H. White

RE: Press Policy

Bob Finch has suggested that I send you a few quick reflections on White House information policy. Thus I make bold to do so, out of some ten years in and out of the White House Press offices.

Every President must have a policy on information. And whatever he does, no matter how innocent, he will be accused of "manipulating the press." All Presidents have been so accused, and so will you; the tradition runs back to the attacks on George Washington and further. Julius Caesar was also so accused when, as elected leader, he published the world's first newspaper the "Res Diurna", to rouse the voting masses against a reactionary Senate.

Of all governmental information systems, my experience over the years is that ours works best. Nonetheless it is now obsolete and should be reorganized. No Chief of State elsewhere operates with so slim a staff at his disposal to explain his policies. In most of the western capitals I have covered, there is an established Ministry of Information, headed by a Minister of Cabinet Rank; indeed, in our own government, the Pentagon disposes of hundreds of information officers; State Department has scores. But the President of the United States operates with a corporal's guard.

The problem in reorganizing White House press services are two:

- a) definition of functions
- b) sheer physical space

Let me speak to the first of these problems; I am not familiar enough with the housekeeping of the White House area to be able to speak competently of the second.

II

The title of White House Press Secretary can mean all or nothing. It can become as meaningless as it became in the last two years of the Johnson administration or as meaningful as it was under Hagerty, Early, and Salinger. But whatever the title of your top man in information you must, yourself, accept him as a man of cabinet rank; he must enjoy your full confidence; he must have access to all meetings of the cabinet, to the National Security Council in times of crisis, to your meetings with the Congressional leadership. Whether or not he is taciturn or talkative, your information man must always know what is going on at the top level of government. This is the first requirement. For the purposes of this memo I shall call him your Secretary of Information.

The second requirement, I believe, is that he have across-the-board policy authority over all other information officers, the Assistant Secretaries of Public Affairs in Defence, State, (VOA, USIA) Justice, etc. This should not be day-to-day supervision; it should be an authority clearly to be invoked and best invoked

as senior partner of the community of information. In times of crisis, for example, as when the Regular Army must intervene in a race riot, the information services of the Defence Department must take policy guidance from the President's Secretary of Information, who, in turn, takes guidance from the President. The President's personal briefings ^{before} ~~his~~ his press conference^s, to give another example, should usually be preceded by an earlier meeting at which the Secretary of Information calls the Assistant Secretaries of State, Defence, Justice, etc. to inform him, or join with him in informing the President, of the questions and problems which the media are pressing on their attention.

The Secreatry of Information should not be an easily available figure on a day-to-day basis. He should, like the Secretaries of Defence, State and Treasury, be available only on a now-and-then basis to senior members of press and media for discussions of major problems; he should be able then freely to discuss policy, the President's thinking, the President's view of the present and future.

He must have an awareness of history-- i.e., he must know what the difference is between a technical release of information and a statement of policy. One of the sad footnotes of the Vietnam war was that the announcement of the entry of our troops into combat was made by Robert McCloskey, a career civil servant and news officer in the State Department-- not by the Assistant Secretary or Secretary of State, or the President himself. When the nation goes to war and faces a crisis, the Secretary of Information must decide how the news

is broken. He should be your chief personal adviser on when and how you speak to the nation. The Secretary of Information must be a truthful man; he cannot afford ever to lie or deceive; and the actual operation of the White House news mechanisms should fall, under his supervision, to others.

III

Of the White House news mechanisms, I have the following to say:

There should be a chief White House news executive-- call him Press Spokesman or what you will. And he must be much better and more generously staffed. Under him come the following functions, some already recognized, some which should be created and staffed from egg:

#The spokesman should, himself, give the twice daily briefings to the regular White House press corps-- his range of announcements being whatever you and your Secretary of Information decide: appointments, minor or major; movements; visits; guest lists, etc. His direct clientele are the news agencies, the news magazines, the daily papers.

#He should have a deputy of almost equal rank solely concerned with television, and the servicing of television both in its daily mechanical needs and its long-range projects.

#There is need of another deputy, preferably a French-speaking American with past service abroad, who can entertain and answer questions of the foreign press. It is

the foreign press that reaches the huge constituency of our allies abroad, hitherto ignored, and our enemies. Most foreign newsmen in the United States are underpaid, aspiring youngsters, lonely Africans or Asians, or old hacks grateful for the smallest kindness. But some of them are men of great dignity; and the senior correspondents of the French, British and Russian press are men of vital importance. Such men will work out their own relations with your White House press spokesman and with your Secretary of Information. And they should not be restrained from doing so.

#There is need of some former magazine editor on this White House staff to service the needs of the hundreds of magazine writers and free lancers who see the White House as a storehouse of all sorts of feature material and who have all, hitherto, been so completely ignored by the White House press services. As newspapers decline and magazines across the country take their place, the importance of such free lance reporters grows. They have particular needs in the servicing of "soft news" or "slow news" which the White House press spokesman in his crush of daily pressures cannot possibly meet.

#There is, also, a future need, not necessarily immediate, for servicing the scholarly and book journalism of the country. Politics have become a participant sport in this country; historians and political scientists are now as common as county sheriffs; and all of them, however ignorant, write books or articles on politics and the White House. They

reach specialized but critical audiences. There should be a man to receive them, study their needs, then pass them on either to the press spokesman, the Secretary of Information or lesser sources, depending on whether their mission seems a major, or a frivolous one.

#Lastly, the matter of the press aide to the First Lady. I know nothing about covering First Ladies, or what the girl-correspondents want; I can barely distinguish black faille from black lace, an oyster fork from a fish fork. (I had never heard the word "crewel" until you held up Julie's medallion on TV.) The press aide to the First Lady is, I hope, someone with whom she feels personally comfortable; but she should also be responsible to the press spokesman at the same time, and coordinate.

IV

There are then, the matters of housekeeping and access.

#The present press quarters of the White House are mean, cramped and impossible to work in; although Johnson has done more to improve them than any other President in my memory, they are still inadequate. The press has had direct access to the White House going back far beyond the days of Abraham Lincoln; by now, their own numbers create their own plague.

I do not know how to solve the problem of space for the press in the White House; there is no such press area at the Kremlin, or at Ten Downing Street, or at the Hotel Matignon. Our system has just grown up this way; perhaps the East Wing could be used as the base of the press and the press spokesman;

or perhaps such good working conditions could be made available at the Executive Office Building that the press would prefer to work there. Obviously, you must export this housekeeping problem to your Secretary of Information, or Press Spokesman, who should assemble the heads of the various White House press associations and chiefs of the TV nets to work out a solution.

#Access: Every President since time out of mind has been plagued by leaks from the White House. Some have tried to cut off all access to the White House staff except for appointments arranged by the press secretary. This has never worked. If there is a discipline to be placed over the White House staff, you must do that internally; no press secretary can or should attempt to impose it on the press. If you cannot trust your men to know when to hold their tongue and when to talk, when to give an appointment and when to deny one, they should be fired. But an attempt to close leaks by placing the internal White House staff off limits to all press will backfire.

#There is finally your attitude to the entire mechanism. The Secretary of Information, or Press Spokesman, can reach every major news agency and television net by instantaneous hookup for your message. If you touch the web of communications it will not only quiver in response, it will occasionally over-react. Some Presidents have abused their position at the center of web-- either by summoning the press too quickly to attention, or by jack-rabbitting it out of bed in the middle of the night, or by alternately kowtowing to it (and denouncing it.)

I believe that the tradition of the Nixon campaign of 1968 was an excellent one; we were well-treated; we were respected; none of us have grievances.

The communication mechanism consists of human beings, professionals trying to do a job. They do not have to be cultivated, nor does a President have to lift his shirt to show them his belly-scars. They need only a fair, even opportunity to get at the news that comes from the White House.

Press conferences are a necessity; by now, the President's year-end conversations with the three big TV nets have become a tradition and a useful one; occasional Presidential interviews with major members of the American press, and rare ones with leaders of the foreign press, can be invaluable to you in making your thoughts known. Any opportunity to circumvent the working press by dealing over their heads with their publishers and executives, to their exclusion, will ultimately backfire. The support of publishers and executives in the media can be immensely valuable and need not be excluded. But the daily stream of reporting from the working press and mediamen is what sets the climate of public opinion. The President needs not their affection, but their respect which, I think, he has won this year and which, I hope, he retains.