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**ORWELL MEETS NIXON:**  
When and Why 'The Press' Became 'The Media'

By Martin F. Nolan  
Shorenstein Fellow, Fall 2004

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Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy

John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University

Fall, 2004

## **ORWELL MEETS NIXON:**

### **WHEN AND WHY 'THE PRESS' BECAME 'THE MEDIA'**

**By Martin F. Nolan**

The applicant is eager:

“I know I haven't had any experience, sir. But still, I think I'd make a good reporter.”

The editor is unmoved:

“Sorry, fella! Can't use you.”

In the next panel in the June 1938 edition of *Action Comics*, the first comic book featuring Superman, Clark Kent enters an alley and disrobes, revealing his red cape, blue leotards and his mission in life on this alien planet:

“If I get news dispatches promptly, I'll be in a better position to help people. I've got to get that job!”

His first self-assigned story is to break up a lynch mob at the county jail. The sheriff thanks the caped intruder and asks, “Who are you?” “A reporter,” Superman replies. “Let's get the prisoner back in his cell.”

The prisoner then addresses his rescuer:

“Ya saved my life an' I'm not forgettin' it. I'll let ya in on a red-hot story!”

“Let's have it!”

“I'm bein' held for th' murder of Jack Kennedy. But I didn't do it!”<sup>1</sup>

In 1938, Superman saved an innocent victim and found the real murderer of Jack Kennedy. This comic-book saga contained two lessons for American newspaper reporters in mid-20th century: 1.) Things are not always as they seem; and 2.) Virtue is its own reward.

Superman became popular on the rising medium of radio in the 1940s, as millions nightly listened to a thundering voice describe

Superman, strange visitor from another planet, who came to Earth with powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men; Superman, who can change the course of mighty rivers, bend steel in his bare hands; and who, disguised as Clark Kent, mild-mannered reporter for a great metropolitan newspaper, fights a never-ending battle for truth, justice and the American way!<sup>2</sup>

Radio was a medium mastered by Franklin D. Roosevelt. On Jan. 25, 1961, John F. Kennedy embraced another medium, television. Americans anticipated his press conferences, televised live, as eagerly as they tuned into FDR's fireside chats in the 1930s.

Kennedy's election glamorized politics. A young and vigorous president stood in contrast to the grey men who preceded him in the White House. Dwight D. Eisenhower and Harry S. Truman treated reporters like boys, at best as junior staff officers. JFK regarded them as peers and friends. Amid the glare of television, print still mattered in the New Frontier, as former NBC White House correspondent Sander Vanocur recalled in a eulogy for JFK's press secretary:

Pierre Salinger was the first person in American history to be press secretary to a president who did not need a press secretary. The White House press corps in those days was pretty much made up of print types. (The word `media' had not yet come into the vocabulary. We thought it was the name of a Greek queen, usually played on stage by Dame Judith Anderson.)

The dean of the White House press corps was Merriman Smith of the United Press. On the day after John F. Kennedy was sworn in, he took his wife on a tour of the White House which included the press room, a rather ratty room filled with cubicles and typewriters. Smith was sitting in his cubicle. The President introduced him to Mrs. Kennedy with these words. `Jackie, this is Merriman Smith. He comes with the place.' In a very short time, it could be said that Pierre came with the place.

Many people remember John F. Kennedy's televised news conferences in the State Department auditorium. Not many people remember -- except for those of us who were there -- the twice daily press briefings when reporters gathered around Pierre's desk. No cameras were allowed. Although it has been said that John F. Kennedy was the nation's first television president, I think of him as also being our last print president, someone who could speak in simple declarative sentences rather than in sound bites. Pierre, who came from print, was perhaps our last print press secretary. Like the man he worked for, Pierre also spoke in simple declarative sentences.<sup>3</sup>

The man Kennedy defeated for the presidency in 1960, Richard Nixon, held an opposite view of the press, a festering hostility that dominated his presidency. `I must have heard Richard Nixon say `the press is the enemy' a dozen times,' his former speechwriter, William Safire, wrote.<sup>4</sup>

Language was important to the Nixon White House in its dealing with the press. Had he listened to his chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman, in 1971, ``The Pentagon Papers''

would have been known as ``The Kennedy-Johnson Papers.’’<sup>5</sup> Instead, Nixon heeded his national security adviser, Henry A. Kissinger, whose obsession with secrecy, even secrecy for its own sake, he enthusiastically shared. The Justice Department sought an unprecedented ``prior restraint’’ injunction against major American newspapers. The government lost the case in a Supreme Court decision that strengthened newspapers.

Nixon constantly sought ways to weaken the press, to change Superman back into Clark Kent. He succeeded by finding a lode of Kryptonite, the magic alloy that could sap Superman’s unearthly powers. Its delivery system was what George Orwell called ``the special connection between politics and the debasement of language.’’ In ``Politics and the English Language,’’ Orwell wrote, ``If thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought.’’ The hidden vice among the Clark Kents in Nixon’s world was vanity. Orwell foresaw that ``pretentious diction’’ would infect the language, words ``used to dress up a simple statement and give an air of scientific impartiality to biased judgments.’’<sup>6</sup>

``In our time, it is broadly true that political writing is bad writing,’’ Orwell wrote in his essay, published in 1946, the year Nixon’s political career began. Whether Nixon actually read him or not, the British writer became Virgil to Nixon’s Dante, guiding his charge through the Stygian gloom of Nixon’s disdain for reporters. In the nine circles of this inferno, Nixon would find a place to dispatch those who easily succumb to vanity, flattery and literary sloth. He had been building his ``enemies list’’ for a long time; the ``media’’ section would be heavily populated.

Nixon sought to disarm his critics by changing ``the press,’’ a Constitutionally-protected form of expression, into ``the media,’’ a pejorative. He succeeded. Everyone

who uses ``media'' as a singular noun pays unconscious and ungrammatical tribute to Nixon's efforts.

His relationship with the press was famously uneven. He once liked *The Los Angeles Times* because its chief political correspondent, Kyle Palmer, ``picked Nixon out very early and nurtured him.'' <sup>7</sup> He liked *The New York Herald Tribune*, whose Washington bureau chief, Bert Andrews, helped Congressman Nixon investigate an alleged spy, Alger Hiss. <sup>8</sup> But by the time of his ``last press conference'' after losing the California governor's contest in 1962, his complaints contained not just anger, but betrayal. He found the press necessary during his six-year exile from politics before his election in 1968. He disciplined himself into an occasionally candid, even amiable posture, culminating in what Jules Witcover called *The Resurrection of Richard Nixon*. <sup>9</sup>

As president, he knew enough about reporters to see to their creature comforts, as long as they enjoyed those comforts far away from him. He began by reconfiguring Air Force One. During the flights of JFK and Lyndon B. Johnson, reporters sat up front near the president. Nixon moved the press seats to the rear of the Boeing 707 jet. <sup>10</sup> He also converted the ``rather ratty'' quarters of Vanocur's memory into a larger, two-level press room over and in what had been the White House swimming pool. ``I found out that in the first eight months that I was here, I used the pool only four times, and I just didn't think that was enough use,'' Nixon told reporters on April 2, 1970, then warned some of them with a mordant half-smile, ``You are in the deep end of the pool.'' <sup>11</sup>

Three weeks after that ceremony, he awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom to eight newspapermen, all of whom had covered politics for decades for what Nixon called ``447 years of reporting.'' His remarks were gracious, but he prefaced the ritual

with a Nixonian jibe that referred to Vice President Spiro T. Agnew's attacks on the press and television, suggesting that the subject was often on his mind:

Usually it is expected during any administration that the press is to be the critic of the Government. In this administration sometimes it seems to be the other way around. Now, some would say that is man biting dog. But I don't want to suggest that the press are dogs, so I won't say that.<sup>12</sup>

Nixon was fond of history and historical precedent. There is no evidence that he heeded one of his predecessors, who articulated the most useful view a politician could have on the press. On Jan. 18, 1786, Thomas Jefferson wrote to Dr. James Currie:

It is afflicting that a man who has past his life in serving the public. . . with universal approbation, and with a purity of conduct. . . should yet be liable to have his peace of mind disturbed by any individual who shall think proper to arraign him in a newspaper. It is, however, *an evil for which there is no remedy*, our liberty depends on the freedom of the press, and that cannot be limited without being lost. To the sacrifice of time, labor, fortune, a public servant must count upon adding that of peace of mind and even reputation. And all this is preferable to European bondage. (Italics added.)<sup>13</sup>

Richard Nixon's voice was a rich baritone with a reassuring timbre. His radio speeches were effective and well-received. He had, alas, a face for radio and grew to regard television with rueful expertise. "I am the world's living expert on what television can do for a candidate and what it can do to a candidate," he told the National Association of Broadcasters in 1971.<sup>14</sup>

Television rescued him in 1952 when allegations of improper campaign expenses threatened his place on the Republican national ticket. His televised address was mawkish, maudlin and mightily effective. Nixon called it the "fund speech," but most

call it the ``Checkers speech'' in honor of the cocker spaniel whose central role in Nixon family life beguiled millions, including Nixon's one-man constituency, Dwight Eisenhower.

In 1960, television betrayed him in the first-ever televised presidential debate against John F. Kennedy. Russell Baker, a reporter for *The New York Times*, covered the event for the lead story, with a tight deadline, of his newspaper's first edition. ``I kept my head down, listening, taking notes, and typing throughout,'' he recalled. As a result he covered a radio event and ``thought Nixon had a slight edge.'' Instead, he discovered later, Kennedy triumphed that night:

I missed it completely because I had been too busy taking notes and writing to get more than fleeting glimpses of what the country was seeing on the screen. Most of the country had been looking, not listening, and what they saw was a frail and exhausted-looking Nixon perspiring nervously under pressure.

That night television replaced newspapers as the most important communications medium in American politics.<sup>15</sup>

Nixon's body language, his beard and his sweat proved more memorable than his rhetoric. Thereafter, Nixon still favored television speeches but shunned televised debates in his presidential campaigns.

A president either masters a medium or the medium masters him. In 1860, President James Buchanan wrote to his friend James Gordon Bennett, editor of *The New York Herald*, to complain about the effects of a 16-year-old method of transmitting news:

I do not know whether the great commercial and social advantages of the telegraph are not counterbalanced by its political evils. No one can judge of this so well as myself. The public mind throughout the interior is kept in a constant state of excitement by what are

called `telegrams.' They are short and spicy, and can be easily inserted in the country newspapers. In the city journals they can be contradicted the next day; but the case is different throughout the country. Many of them are sheer falsehoods and especially those concerning myself.<sup>16</sup>

The half-hour network evening news program was five years old when Nixon ran for president. The influence of the anchormen -- Walter Cronkite, Howard K. Smith, Chet Huntley and David Brinkley -- was growing. For Nixon, television news was a doubling of enemies, twin evils for which he had no remedy. He sought a word to lump his foes together, a phrase that would denigrate and discredit them. Since the era of Franklin D. Roosevelt, representatives of the electronic media had argued that ``press'' did not apply to their method of transmitting information. Radio and television executives were often divided, William J. Small, Washington bureau chief of CBS News, wrote in 1972:

I refer to the press as a generic entity including broadcasting. Many of my fellows in broadcasting bristle at the word `press' because of its print connotation. They have tried for years to get press conferences called `news conferences' and to have press secretaries called `news secretaries.' They are probably right, but this book is my capitulation to custom. I surrender to those who call us all members of the press.<sup>17</sup>

Nixon's White House was in no mood to surrender. Radio and television were media through which a president could ``go over the head of '' reporters and speak to Americans directly. While freedom of the press was enshrined in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, radio and television stations were licensed by the Federal Communications Commission. So, as William Safire recalled,

In the Nixon White House, the press became `the media,' because the word had a manipulative, Madison Avenue, all-encompassing connotation, and the press hated it.

`Press' conferences became `news' conferences, ostensibly because the word `press' was usually applied to writing press and the conferences included electronic journalists, but really because he wanted to leave the impression that the conference was the President's conference to make news. Not the press's conference with the President.<sup>18</sup>

The phrase ignited dissent. In the *Making of the President 1972*, Theodore H. White dismissed the new word as an encroachment of advertising jargon into news:

Media is a word invented by advertising agencies. Essentially, it is a phrase in the advertising man's sales pitch to manufacturers about the cost-effectiveness of their advertising dollar. A maker of goods has just so much money to be budgeted for reaching potential customers -- and advertisers measure the reach in Cost-per-Thousand, or so many dollars per thousand of potential audience. `Media' is a quantitative commercial term and measures the relative effectiveness of spending to reach such thousands via newspapers, magazines, radio, television, billboards or direct mail. `Media' is an outsider's term, and no journalist thinks of himself as a member of the media. The author will do his best to avoid the use of the word `media' in the rest of this book and refer to members of the news community by the old-fashioned `newsmen.'<sup>19</sup>

(Old-fashioned, indeed. In 1968, few women covered presidential politics.)

Teddy White also influenced a change in the metaphor of political writing. Emphasizing back-room intrigues and offstage drama, White's narrative of presidential politics read like a thriller. *The Making of the President 1960*, published in 1961, helped intensify interest in politics as entertainment. Kennedy's election and the new multi-media age meant a candidate was judged more on ``performance,''' ``charisma'' and how he ``projected'' his ``image.''

These theatrical and cinematic traits were far removed from the major entertainment venue of pre-Civil War America, the racetrack. In 1844, James Knox Polk

was the first “dark horse” in presidential politics.<sup>20</sup> For more than a century, front-runners, also-rans and running-mates were “groomed” for the presidential “sweepstakes,” their chances relentlessly “handicapped.” By the late 1960s, candidates as assembled nags seemed like mezzotint relics.

Nixon, in his 1968 campaign, noticed this shift in metaphor. Theatrical qualities now mattered more than stallionlike speed and endurance.

On February 26, 1967, a *New York Times* headline read:

Romney Is Given a Mixed Review.<sup>21</sup>

On February 27, 1967, *The Washington Post* headline on its story read:

Views on Romney Tour Mixed.<sup>22</sup>

The governor of Michigan, George W. Romney, had been touring Western states prior to announcing his candidacy for the Republican presidential nomination. This change in metaphor was not welcome to an old mudder like Nixon, whose rivals had showbiz credentials. One was the newly elected governor of California. “Reagan is Unquestioned Star of Conference” was the headline in *The Great Falls Tribune* for the former actor's debut at the 1967 meeting of the Western Governors Association in Montana.<sup>23</sup>

In a time of turbulence for the press and American society, a journalistic response was to name all things new. Thus was born “the New Left,” “the New Politics,” and, improbably, “the New Nixon.” No one doubted the authenticity of this apparition more than the old Nixon. He sought to preserve his deniability in the 1968 campaign, knowing then (and forgetting later) that any politician’s pattern of perjury could transform Clark Kents into Supermen. During his 1968 campaign, after he enumerated six reasons why he

would not answer three questions he had just asked himself, he said to spectators and a subdued press corps:

Now you see, despite all the talk you've heard about 'the New Nixon,' he still approaches problems in the same lawyerlike, on-the-other-hand fashion.<sup>24</sup>

After the presidencies of Kennedy and Reagan, theatrical metaphors declined and the press returned to the paddock. Orwell explained why "dying metaphors" appeal to political writers:

There is a huge dump of worn-out metaphors which have lost all evocative power and are merely used because they save people the trouble of inventing phrases for themselves. . . . Many of these are used without knowledge of their meaning (what is a 'rift,' for instance?), and incompatible metaphors are frequently mixed, a sure sign that the writer is not interested in what he is saying. Some metaphors now current have been twisted out of their original meaning without those who use them even being aware of the fact. For example, *toe the line* is sometimes written as *tow the line*. Another example is *the hammer and the anvil*, now always used with the implication that the anvil gets the worst of it. In real life it is always the anvil that breaks the hammer, never the other way about: a writer who stopped to think what he was saying would avoid perverting the original phrase.<sup>25</sup>

A century after other forms of entertainment have eclipsed horse racing, racetrack metaphors persist. What Orwell called "exhausted idioms" survive because of laziness, a journalistic vice most politicians readily exploit. As late as the elections of 2004, when readers saw "down to the wire," they might have wondered about this wire. What does it look like, what color, what size? Few readers or writers knew.

In the Nixon era, reporters, particularly those covering presidential politics, happily abandoned turfside because it meant a rise in status from tout to drama critic. The

dress code changed from Runyonesque garb, reeking of the stable, to formal wear, redolent of opening-night excitement. Reporters happily abandoned the police precinct and other ratty quarters for cozier surroundings.

Television reinforced a new role for the press. Long accustomed to sideline anonymity, reporters found themselves onstage when President Kennedy brought live television to presidential press conferences. Several preened and asked lengthy, donnish questions.

In 1971, after two years in the White House as counselor for domestic policy to Nixon, Daniel Patrick Moynihan returned to private life and wrote “The Presidency and the Press” for *Commentary*:

One’s impression is that 20 years and more ago the preponderance of the ‘working press,’ (as it liked to call itself), was surprisingly close in origins and attitude to working people generally. They were not Ivy Leaguers. They now are or soon will be. Journalism has become attractive to elites. This is noticeably so in Washington where the upper reaches of journalism constitute one of the most important and enduring *social* elites of the city, with all the accoutrements one associates with a leisured class. (The Washington press corps is not leisured at all, but the style is that of men and women who *choose* to work.)<sup>26</sup>

Another student’s eye, after a lifelong obsession, keenly measured this new leisured class:

A bygone era’s ink-stained wretches, as depicted in the classic film *The Front Page* -- amiable, scandal-mongering slobs sitting around the courthouse pressroom playing cards and waiting for the next hanging – have become our era’s self-certified saviors of the Republic.<sup>27</sup>

Richard Nixon wrote these words in his last book, *Beyond Peace*, published in 1994, the year of his death. In *Nixon at the Movies*, Mark Feeney notes this “posthumous shiv at reportorial ribs” and sees a pattern:

The reference to *The Front Page* (1931) may seem like an afterthought, but it is by no means gratuitous. Part of Nixon’s problem with the press was that by the time he began to joust with it, it had acquired an enviable image, thanks to Hollywood. As we have seen, politicians generally fare badly on the screen. For every Jefferson Smith, there are several Willie Starks. Not so with journalists; the balance tilts very heavily in their favor. And as Nixon spent some four decades forced to observe, the odds are against you when your opponent has a halo, worn at however rakish an angle.<sup>28</sup>

From the 1930s to the 1970s, they had advanced from slobs to snobs, as Moynihan argued. He was, despite Hibernian hyperbole, prescient. In the 1970s, the elites of America were drawn to the dilemma of Richard Bellamy on a British melodrama telecast on PBS, *Upstairs Downstairs*. The widower of Lady Marjorie Bellamy, who has perished on the R. M.S. Titanic, finds himself financially embarrassed, as he tells her family solicitor. “I enjoy writing,” he said, but needed more money “unless you want me to go into hack political journalism.” Sir Geoffrey Dillon’s mustache twitches as he replies, “No, of course, I wouldn’t expect you to do anything as distasteful as that.”<sup>29</sup>

Orwell knew whereof Bellamy spoke, and knew that the meandering of “hack political journalism.” was an occupational hazard:

This mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence is the most marked characteristic of modern English prose, and especially of any kind of political writing. As soon as certain topics are raised, the concrete melts into the abstract and no one seems able to think of turns of speech that are not hackneyed: prose consists less and less of *words* chosen for

the sake of their meaning, and more and more of *phrases* tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated henhouse.<sup>30</sup>

With this field of folly before them, Nixon and his wordsmiths decided to change ``press'' to ``media,'' the Latin plural of medium. ``It is natural to fall into a pretentious, Latinized style,'' Orwell wrote, knowing that his fellow scribes were suckers for a more elegant-sounding word:

There is no real need for any of the hundreds of foreign phrases now current in the English language. Bad writers, and especially scientific, political, and sociological writers, are nearly always haunted by the notion that Latin or Greek words are grander than Saxon ones.<sup>31</sup>

``Media'' was just such a grand Latinism, an apt word for those seeking to create a grand conspiracy, one that would write as with one pen. Nixon sought a phrase that would yoke the sage and sober Walter Lippmann to the most loutish talkshow barker. ``Media'' caught on because the media liked it, indeed, liked it so much that they converted it into a singular noun, a corruption of language and of thought that survives as a Nixon legacy.

Railing against poor George McGovern, who looked like an easy November opponent, Nixon, in June of 1972, sent a memo to staff members, often using ``media'' as a singular noun:

The Eastern Establishment media finally has a candidate who almost totally shares their views. Here again, if you consider the real ideological bent of *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and the three television networks, you will find overwhelmingly that their bias comes down on the side of amnesty, pot, abortion, confiscation of wealth (unless it is theirs), massive increases in welfare, unilateral

disarmament, reduction of their defenses, and surrender in Vietnam. Now they have a candidate within sight of the nomination who shares all these views. Now the country will find out whether what the media has been standing for these past five years really represents the majority thinking of the country or is, in fact, a minority view.<sup>32</sup>

Whatever the name and however bureaucratic his prose, Nixon's goal remained the same:

It is very important in terms of the final campaign that the media be effectively discredited.<sup>33</sup>

William Safire, after he left the White House to become a columnist for *The New York Times*, wrote more than a dozen books on language. At least twice, he took credit for coining, in a speech for Vice President Agnew, "nattering nabobs of negativism," explaining it as a response to Adlai Stevenson's "prophets of doom and gloom."<sup>34</sup> But he reversed course on one phrase from that era in *On Language*, published in 1980:

On the plural of 'medium,' it's 'media,' – which means that you should keep the singular and plural separate. One newspaper is a medium of communications; two newspapers, or two television networks, are media. If you say 'The media is,' you're wrong; the correct construction is 'The media are.' I have good reason for banging my spoon against the highchair on this; we should resist the notion that 'the media' is one, vast, amorphous lump. By preserving the plural form, we assert the diverse idea.<sup>35</sup>

Diversity was not a favored concept in the Nixon White House. The president wanted his enemies filed under one label. Smoothing his path from "press" to "media" was the popularity of Marshall McLuhan, a professor at the University of Toronto. His aphorisms were inscrutable but popular.

“Goodbye, Gutenberg” was his theme, as McLuhan foresaw a post-literate society. He did not predict that another appliance, the personal computer, would become as important as the television set. In order to be computer-literate, users had to be literate. McLuhan’s musings and his polysyllabic Latinisms attracted zealots to a cult where only the select could decipher the indecipherable. McLuhan’s *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* vibrates with briskly-written history and dramatic predictions:

The classified ads (and stock-market quotations) are the bedrock of the press. Should an alternative source of easy access to such diverse daily information be found, the press will fold.<sup>36</sup>

Such a prospect might have pleased Richard Nixon, but in 2004, 10 years after Nixon’s death and 40 years after this forecast, the printed medium was not yet dead and was still printing classified ads and stock quotations. McLuhan gave academic cover to purveyors of the day’s buzzwords. Who or what was “hot” or “cool?” It mattered to those in the press who liked being in the media.

In the White House, attitudes were less academic. On June 1, 1972, weeks before the break-in and burglary of Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate Office Building, White House Counsel Charles W. Colson wrote to Haldeman:

I hate the (New York) Times as much as anyone else and would like to be in the first wave of Army shock troops going in during the second term to tear down the printing presses.<sup>37</sup>

In what would have been Nixon’s second term, Colson and Haldeman were serving jail terms.

On March 19, 1974, Nixon appeared at the annual convention of the National Association of Broadcasters in Houston, part of his effort to counter the House Judiciary

Committee's investigation into the possibility of his impeachment. The session focused largely on his relationship with reporters. He reverted to the word "press," not "media," having, in the final months and weeks of the Watergate scandal, fallen far off message.

To a question about suggestions that he resign, the president hearkened back to a 1972 decision, sounding another note of betrayal:

The bombing began, we lost planes, and at that time I can assure you that not only my friends but many others who had supported the actions that I had taken to attempt to bring the war in Vietnam to an honorable conclusion, criticized and criticized very strongly what I had done. Great newspapers like *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Washington Star*, that had previously editorially supported me, for example, were among them, and many Senators as well as other public figures spoke out.<sup>38</sup>

"Do you feel that the press is kicking Nixon around again?" a broadcaster asked. Nixon replied:

There is always an adversary relationship between the President and the press. That is healthy, that is good. I think the press has a right to criticize the President, and I think the President has the right of self-defense. I would suggest, also, that we should follow this rule: the President should treat the press just as fairly as the press treats him.<sup>39</sup>

After complaining that "80 percent of the people listen to television and radio," he was asked, "Do you feel that this country would be better off tonight and in the immediate years ahead if the Watergate break-in had gone undetected and that the actions of that group of people had never been reported to the American people?" "Certainly not," the president replied. "The action was wrong; the action was stupid. It should

never have happened. It should not have been covered up.’’ Then he launched into a reverie of self-pity that lurched into a familiar attack:

I would also suggest, not by way of defense, but I was often criticized after the '60 campaign that I always ran my own campaigns. In the year 1972, I am afraid I was too busy--the trip to China, the decision on May 8 with regard to the bombing and mining in the Haiphong area, the trip to the Soviet Union, the negotiations in Vietnam which brought that war to a conclusion--that I frankly paid too little attention to the campaign. Now, I don't intend to be in another campaign, needless to say. But I also want to say that if I had any advice for candidates in the future--run your own campaign, regardless of what the press says.<sup>40</sup>

Ralph Renick of Miami asked, ``Do you still feel tonight that you are being victimized by television reporting, network reporting, and could you be more specific?’’ The answer included a Nixonian protesting-too-much non-denial denial:

Well, as far as network reporting and television reporting is concerned, I realize that bad news is news, and good news is not news. I realize, too, that people don't win Pulitzer Prizes by being for; they usually win them by being against. I don't mean to say that in criticism of those who award the prizes, because that is part of the job of a good investigative reporter. But I don't think that--speaking to my long-time friend from Miami--I don't think any useful purpose would be served by me in talking to many of the Washington press, the regional press, and our friends from the NAB to discuss the President's problems with the press. Let me just say this: I am not obsessed by how the press reports me. I am going to do my job, and I am not going to be diverted by any criticism from the press, fair or unfair, from doing what I think I was elected to do, and

that is to bring peace abroad and, I trust, prosperity without war and without inflation at home.<sup>41</sup>

Nixon had done well in this format, televised live, as a Phoenix broadcaster noted, saying, “What I would like to ask you, sir, is why this accessibility has not marked your Administration throughout the entire tenure of your years in the White House?” Nixon agreed:

I would suggest that in the future, as I see the future, it is likely that I will continue to have a considerable number of meetings with the press, and I would welcome the opportunity to take the questions that people from Phoenix and the Washington press corps ask. I will try to answer them as responsibly as possible.<sup>42</sup>

It was a promise he did not keep. Unlike his angry farewell in Los Angeles in 1962, this really was Richard Nixon’s last press conference. The last question was about history and power. “History shows that Andrew Johnson gave up everything that the Congress asked him for when he was the subject of an impeachment investigation,” said Tom Brokaw of NBC News. “So, Mr. President, my question is this: Aren't your statements to that matter historically inaccurate or at least misleading?”

The answer was, in turns, deferential and defiant:

Mr. Brokaw, it is true, as you say, that the only other President who was exposed to an impeachment investigation was Andrew Johnson, and insofar as that particular part of your question is concerned, you are correct. . . .

With regard to the problem, I simply want to say this: It is difficult to find a proper way to meet the demands of the Congress. I am trying to do so and trying to be as forthcoming as possible. But I also have another responsibility. I must think not of myself but I must think also of future Presidents of this country, and I am not going to do anything, and I am not going to give up to any demand that I believe would weaken the Presidency of the United States. I will not participate in the destruction of the Office of the President of the United States while I am in this office.<sup>43</sup>

Nixon was out of office six months later. Thirty years later, when Brokaw retired as anchor of NBC News (not ``discredited,’’ as Nixon had hoped), Ken Auletta of *The New Yorker* spoke to Terence Smith on the PBS *NewsHour*:

Well, Terry, 27 million people every night, roughly, are watching the three evening newscasts. That’s an awful lot of people. If you walk through an airport with any one of the anchors, I dare say that they are better known than, say, Tom Cruise, is. You think that’s probably not true, but it actually is.<sup>44</sup>

In a novel published three years after Nixon’s resignation, *Full Disclosure*, Safire includes an argument between a future U.S. president and his press secretary. Facing a possible scandal, the boss accuses his spokesman of siding with White House reporters against him:

Smitty was wary. ‘What makes you say that, Mr. President?’

‘Easy. When you’re on their side, you call them ‘the press.’ When you’re on my side, you call them ‘the media.’’

‘Do I do that?’ Smitty hated to be so transparent. He recalled how the White House in the early ‘70s changed the nomenclature from ‘press conference’ to ‘news conference’ to shift the emphasis from the press to the news the President would generate.

‘Anyway, you’re better off with a press secretary than a media secretary.’

‘I guess so,’ said the President, and Smitty knew he thought the opposite was true.<sup>45</sup>

The opposite was often true in the White House when Nixon and his men tried to twist language. In Safire’s novel, Washingtonians every Sunday watch a news program, *Meet the Media*. The phrase did not catch on in nonfiction reality.<sup>46</sup>

Every misuse of ‘‘media’’ recalls Orwell’s warning. ‘‘The slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts,’’ Orwell wrote, as he lamented the fact that ‘‘bad usage can spread by tradition and imitation even among people who should and do know better.’’

He also suggested that for every misuse, there’s a motive:

The inflated style itself is a kind of euphemism. A mass of Latin words falls upon the facts like soft snow, blurring the outline and covering up all the details. The great enemy of clear language is insincerity. When there is a gap between one’s real and one’s declared aims, one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish spurting out ink. In our age there is no such thing as ‘keeping out of politics.’ All issues are political issues, and politics itself is a mass of lies, evasions, folly, hatred, and schizophrenia. When the general atmosphere is bad, language must suffer.<sup>47</sup>

Jimmy Breslin, a careful writer who worked for *The New York Herald Tribune*, *Newsday* and other newspapers for more than 40 years, expressed the same view differently. ‘‘The plural of media,’’ Breslin said, ‘‘is mediocre.’’<sup>48</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> E. Nelson Bridwell ed., *Superman From The Thirties To The Seventies*, (New York, 1971), pp. 23-25.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Letter from Sander Vanocur, Nov. 1, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> William Safire, *Before the Fall*, (New York, 1975), p. 342.

<sup>5</sup> Fred Emery, *Watergate: The Corruption of American Politics and the Fall of Richard Nixon*, (New York, 1994), p.40.

<sup>6</sup> *The Orwell Reader: Fiction, Essays and Reporting by George Orwell*, (New York, 1956), p. 358.

<sup>7</sup> David Halberstam, *The Powers That Be*, (New York, 1979), p. 256.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 259.

<sup>9</sup> Jules Witcover, *The Resurrection of Richard Nixon*, (New York, 1970).

<sup>10</sup> Joseph C. Spear, *Presidents and the Press: The Nixon Legacy*, p. 66.

<sup>11</sup> *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Richard Nixon* (Washington, D.C., 1970), pp. 357, 358.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 385.

<sup>13</sup> James E. Pollard, *The Presidents and the Press*, (New York, 1947), pp. 55, 56.

<sup>14</sup> Melvin Small, *The Presidency of Richard Nixon*, (Lawrence, Kansas, 1999), p. 249.

<sup>15</sup> Russell Baker, *The Good Times*, (New York, 1989), p. 326.

<sup>16</sup> Pollard., op cit., p. 298, 299.

<sup>17</sup> William J. Small, *Political Power and the Press*, (New York, 1972), p. 10.

<sup>18</sup> Safire, op cit., p. 351.

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- <sup>19</sup> Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President 1972* (New York, 1973), p. 249.
- <sup>20</sup> William Safire, *The New Language of Politics: An Anecdotal Dictionary of Catchwords, Slogans, and Political Usage*, (New York, 1968), p. 101.
- <sup>21</sup> Martin F. Nolan, "Speak Into the Cupcake, Please," *The Atlantic*, Vol. 222, No. 4, p. 121.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.
- <sup>25</sup> Orwell, p. 357.
- <sup>26</sup> Daniel P. Moynihan, "The Presidency and the Press," *Commentary*, Vol. 51, No. 3, March, 1971.
- <sup>27</sup> Richard Nixon, *Beyond Peace*, (New York, 1994), p. 257.
- <sup>28</sup> Mark Feeney, *Nixon At the Movies*, (Chicago, 2004), p. 134.
- <sup>29</sup> PBS, *Masterpiece Theatre*, "Upstairs Downstairs: A House Divided," Nov. 10, 1974.
- <sup>30</sup> Orwell, p. 357.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 358.
- <sup>32</sup> Safire, *Before the Fall*, p. 360.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 361.
- <sup>34</sup> William Safire, *Quoth the Maven*, (New York, 1993) p.36; Safire, *In Love With Norma Loquendi*, p. 241.
- <sup>35</sup> William Safire, *On Language*, (New York, 1980), p. 210.
- <sup>36</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, (New York, 1964), p. 186.
- <sup>37</sup> Melvin Small, p. 232.
- <sup>38</sup> *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Richard Nixon*, (Washington, 1974), p. 285.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 285.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 290.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 293.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 295.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 298.

<sup>44</sup> PBS, *NewsHour*, Nov. 23, 2004.

<sup>45</sup> William Safire, *Full Disclosure*, (New York, 1977), p. 121.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 214.

<sup>47</sup> Orwell, pp. 363, 364.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Jimmy Breslin, Boston, July 22, 2004.

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