A famous dissenter calls for a halt to media 'inquisitions' and challenges some versions of his own legend

by J. WILLIAM FULBRIGHT

Heresy though it may be, I do not subscribe unquestioningly to the Biblical aphorism that "the truth shall make you free." A number of crucial distinctions are swept aside by an indiscriminate commitment to the truth — the distinction, for instance, between factual and philosophical truth, or between truth in the sense of disclosure and truth in the sense of insight. There are also certain useful fictions — or "myths" — which we invest with a kind of metaphorical truth. One of these is the fiction that "the king can do no wrong." He can, of course, and he does, and everybody knows it. But in the course of political history it became apparent that it was useful to the cohesion and morale of society to attribute certain civic virtues to the chief of state, even when he patently lacked them. A certain dexterity is required to sustain the fiction, but it rests on a kind of
social contract — an implicit agreement among Congress, the press, and the people that some matters are better left undiscussed, not out of a desire to suppress information, but in recognition, as the French writer Jean Giraudoux put it, that "there are truths which can kill a nation." What he meant, it seems, was that there are gradations of truth in a society, and that there are some truths which are more significant than others but which are also destructible. The self-confidence and cohesion of a society may be a fact, but it can be diluted or destroyed by other facts such as the corruption or criminality of the society's leaders. Something like that may have been what Voltaire had in mind when he wrote, "There are truths which are not for all men, nor for all times." Or as Mark Twain put it, even more cogently, "Truth is the most valuable thing we have. Let us economize it."

In the last decade — this Vietnam and Watergate decade — we have lost our ability to "economize" the truth. That Puritan self-righteousness which is never far below the surface of American life has broken through the frail barriers of civility and restraint, and the press has been in the vanguard of the new aggressiveness. This is not to suggest in any way that the press ought to pull its punches, much less be required to do so, on matters of political substance. I myself have not been particularly backward about criticizing presidents and their policies, and I am hardly likely at this late date to commend such inhibitions to others. I do nonetheless deplore the shifting of the criticism from policies to personalities, from matters of tangible consequence to the nation as a whole to matters of personal morality of uncertain relevance to the national interest.

By and large, we used to make these distinctions, while also perpetuating the useful myth that "the king can do no wrong." One method frequently employed when things went wrong was simply to blame someone else — in a ceremonial way. When I began publicly to criticize the Johnson Administration, first over the Dominican intervention in 1965, then over the escalating Vietnam war, I was at some pains to attribute the errors of judgment involved to the "president's advisers" and not to the president himself — although I admit today that I was not wholly free of doubts about the judgment of the top man.

Our focus was different in those days from that of more recent investigations, especially Watergate, but also the current inquiries concerning the CIA and the multinational corporations. It was sometimes evident in hearings before the Foreign Relations Committee on Vietnam and other matters that facts were being withheld or misrepresented, but our primary concern was with the events and policies involved rather than with the individual officials who chose — or more often were sent — to misrepresent the administration's position. Our concern was with correcting

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In contrast, a new inquisitorial style has evolved, which is primarily the legacy of Watergate, although perhaps it began with the Vietnam war. That protracted conflict gave rise to well-justified opposition based on what seemed to me and still does — a rational appreciation of the national interest. But it also set loose an emotional mistrust — even hostility — to government in general. Somehow the policy mistakes of certain leaders became distorted in the minds of many Americans, especially young ones, as if they had been acts of premeditated malevolence rather than failures of judgment. The leaders who took us into Vietnam and kept us there bear primary responsibility for the loss of confidence in government which their policies provoked. I am as certain today as I ever was that opposition to the Vietnam war — including my own and that of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee — was justified and necessary. Nonetheless, I feel bound to recognize that those of us who criticized the war as mistaken in terms of the national interest may unwittingly have contributed to that surge of vindictive emotionalism which now seems to have taken on a virulent life of its own.

The emotionalism has not survived without cause, to be sure. The Watergate scandals provoked a justified wave of public indignation, and a wholly necessary drive to prevent such abuses in the future. Moral indignation, however — even justified moral indignation — creates certain problems of its own, notably the tendency of indignation, unrestrained, to become self-righteous and vindictive. Whatever the cause and antecedents, whatever too the current provocation, the fact remains that the anti-Watergate movement generated a kind of inquisition psychology both on the part of the press and in the Congress.

If once the press was excessively orthodox and unquestioning of government policy, it has now become almost sweepingly iconoclastic. If once the press showed excessive deference to government and its leaders, it has now become excessively mistrustful and even hostile. The problem is not so much the specific justification of specific investigations and exposures — any or all may have merit — but whether it is desirable at this stage of our affairs — after Vietnam and Watergate — to sustain the barrage of scandalous revelations. Their ostensible purpose is to bring reforms, but thus far they have brought little but cynicism and disillusion. Everything revealed about the CIA or dubious campaign practices may be wholly or largely true, but I have come to feel of late that these are not the kind of truths we most need now; these are truths which must injure if not kill the nation.

Consider the example of the CIA. It has been obvious for years that Congress was neglecting its responsibility in failing to exercise meaningful legislative oversight of the nation’s intelligence activities. A few of us tried on several occasions to persuade the Senate to authorize more effective oversight procedures, but we were never able to muster more than a handful of votes. Now, encouraged by an enthusiastic press, the Senate — or at least its special investigating committee — has swung from apathy to crusading zeal, offering up one instance after another of improper CIA activities with the apparent intent of eliciting all possible public shock and outrage. It seems to me unnecessary at this late date to dredge up every last gruesome detail of the CIA’s designs against the late President Allende of Chile. Perhaps it would be worth doing — to shake people up — if Watergate were not so recently behind us. But the American people are all too shaken up by that epic scandal, and their need and desire now are for restored stability and confidence. The Senate knows very well what is needed with respect to the CIA — an effective oversight committee to monitor the agency’s activities in a careful, responsible way on a continuing basis. No further revelations are required to bring this about; all that is needed is an act of Congress to create the new unit. Prodging the press to this end would be constructive, but the new investigative journalism seems preoccupied instead with the tracking down and punishment of wrongdoers, with giving them their just deserts.

My own view is that no one should get everything he deserves — the world would become a charnel house. Looking back on the Vietnam war, it never occurred to me that President Johnson was guilty of anything worse than bad judgment. He misled the Congress on certain matters, and he misled me personally with respect to the Gulf of Tonkin episode in 1964. I resented that, and I am glad the deceit was exposed. But I never wished to carry the matter beyond exposure, and that only for purposes of hastening the end of the war. President Johnson and his advisers were tragically mistaken about the Vietnam war, but by no standard of equity or accuracy did they qualify as “war criminals.” Indeed, had Mr. Johnson ended the war by 1968, I would readily have supported him as my party’s candidate for reelection.

Watergate, one hopes, has been consigned to the history books, but the fame and success won by the reporters who uncovered the scandals of the Nixon administration seem to have inspired legions of envious colleagues to seek their own fame and fortune by dredging up new scandals for the delectation of an increasingly cynical and disillusioned public. The media have thus acquired an unwholesome fascination with the singer to the neglect of the song. The result is not only an excess of emphasis on personalities but
short shrift for significant policy questions. It is far from obvious, for example, that Watergate will prove to have been as significant for the national interest as President Nixon's extraordinary innovations in foreign policy. The Nixon détente policy was by no means neglected, but it certainly took second place in the news to Watergate.

Similarly — to take a more recent topic of interest to Congress and the press — if strikes me as a matter of less than cosmic consequence that certain companies have paid what in some cases may be commissions, and in others more accurately bribes, to foreign officials to advance their business interests. Such laws as may have been violated were not our own but those of foreign countries, and thus far the countries involved have exhibited far less indignation over these payments than over their exposure by a United States Senate subcommittee. I should not have to add, I trust, that I do not advocate corporate bribery either abroad or at home; nor would I object to legislation prohibiting the practice. At the same time the subject does not strike me as deserving of a harvest of publicity. It disrupts our relations with the countries concerned, and what is worse, it smacks of that same moral prissiness and meddlesome impulse which helped impel us into Vietnam. Furthermore, "commission" payments are not unknown in government business in the United States, and hypocrisy is not an attractive trait. Even in our business dealings with Italy or Saudi Arabia, there is relevance in the lesson of Vietnam: whatever the failings of others, we are simply not authorized — or qualified — to serve as the self-appointed keepers of the conscience of all mankind.

A recent instance of misplaced journalistic priority, which came within my own domain, was the media's neglect of the extensive hearings on East-West détente held by the Foreign Relations Committee during the summer and fall of 1974. The issues involved — the nuclear arms race and the SALT talks, economic and political relations between the United States and the Soviet Union and China — were central to our foreign policy and even to our national survival. At the same time that the media were ignoring the détente hearings, they gave generous coverage to the nomination of a former Nixon aide as ambassador to Spain, a matter of transient interest and limited consequence.

To cite another example: the press and television gave something like saturation coverage in 1974 to Congressman Wilbur Mills's personal misfortunes; by contrast I do not recall reading anything in the press about the highly informative hearings on the Middle East, and another set on international terrorism, held in the spring of that year by Congressman Lee Hamilton's House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Near East and South Asia. The crucial incident, it seems, is scandal — corporate, political, or personal. Where it is present, there is news, although the event may otherwise be inconsequential. Where it is lacking, the event may or not be news, depending in part, to be sure, on its intrinsic importance, but hardly less on competing events, the degree of controversy involved, and whether it involves something "new" — new, that is, in the way of disclosure as distinguished from insight or perspective.

The national press would do well to reconsider its priorities. It has excelled in exposing wrongdoers, in alerting the public to the high crimes and peccadilloes of persons in high places. But it has fallen short — far short — in its higher responsibility of public education. With an exception or two, such as the National Public Radio, the media convey only fragments of those public proceedings which are designed to inform the general public. A superstar can always command the attention of the press, even with a banality. An obscure professor can scarcely hope to, even with a striking idea, a new insight, or a lucid simplification of a complex issue. A bombastic accusation, a groundless, irresponsible prediction, or, best of all, a "leak," will usually gain a congressman or senator his heart's content of publicity; a reasoned discourse, more often than not, is destined for entombment in the Congressional Record. A member of the Foreign Relations Committee staff suggested that the committee had made a mistake in holding the 1974 détente hearings in public; if they had been held in closed session and the transcripts then leaked, the press would have covered them generously.

We really must try to stop conducting our affairs like a morality play. In a democracy we ought to try to think of our public servants not as objects of adulation or of revilement, but as servants in the literal sense, to be lauded or censured, retained or dispensed with, according to the competence with which they do the job for which they were hired. Bitter disillusionment with our leaders is the other side of the coin of worshipping them. If we did not expect our leaders to be demigods, we would not be nearly as shocked by their failures and transgressions.

The press has always played up to our national tendency to view public figures as either saints or sinners, but the practice has been intensified since Watergate. President Ford was hailed as a prince of virtue and probity when he came to office. Then he pardoned President Nixon and was instantly cast into the void, while the media resounded with heartrending cries of betrayal and disillusion. Many theories, often conspiratorial, were put forth in explanation of the Nixon pardon — all except the most likely: that the president acted impulsively and somewhat prematurely out of simple human feeling.

Secretary Kissinger, for his part, has been alternately
led as a miracle worker and excoriated as a Machiavellian schemer, if not indeed a Watergate coconspirator. I was criticized by some of the Kissinger-hating commentators for "selling out" by cooperating with the Secretary on East-West détente and the Middle East. Until that time it had never occurred to me that opposition itself constituted a principle, and one which required me to alter my own long-held views on Soviet-American relations and the need for a compromise peace in the Middle East.

My point is not that the character of our statesmen is irrelevant but that their personal qualities are relevant only as they pertain to policy, to their accomplishments or lack of them in their capacity as public servants. Lincoln, it is said, responded to charges of alcoholism against the victorious General Grant by offering to send him a case of his favorite whiskey. Something of that spirit would be refreshing and constructive in our attitude toward our own contemporary leaders. None of them, I strongly suspect — including Dr. Kissinger, President Ford, and former President Nixon — is either a saint or a devil, but a human like the rest of us, whose proper moral slot is to be found somewhere in that vast space between hellfire and the gates of heaven.

A free society can remain free only as long as its citizens exercise restraint in the practice of their freedom. This principle applies with special force to the press, because of its power and because of its necessity immunity from virtually every form of restraint except self-restraint. The media have become a fourth branch of government in every respect except for their immunity from checks and balances. This is as it should be — there are no conceivable restraints to be placed on the press which would not be worse than its excesses. But because the press cannot and should not be restrained from outside, it bears a special responsibility for restraining itself, and for helping to restore civility in our public affairs.

For a start, journalists might try to be less thin-skinned. Every criticism of the press is not a fascist assault upon the First Amendment. One recalls, for example, that when former Vice-President Agnew criticized members of Congress and others, the press quite properly reported his remarks, taking the matter more or less in their stride. But when he criticized the media, the columnists and editorialists went into transports of outraged excitement, bleeding like hemophiliacs from the vice-president’s pinpricks.

More recently, since Watergate, the press has celebrated its prowess with a festival of self-congratulation, and politicians have joined with paens of praise. The politicians’ tributes should be taken with a grain of salt in any case — they have seen the media’s power and few are disposed to trifle with it. The real need of the press is self-examination, and a degree of open-mindedness to the criticisms which are leveled against it. Journalists bear an exceedingly important responsibility for keeping office holders honest; they have an equally important responsibility for keeping themselves honest, and fair.

I make these general criticisms of the press with embarrassment, because during my thirty-two year public life I was treated for the most part with understanding generosity by the press, most particularly by the newspapers in my home state of Arkansas. Such compliments I have — and I have a few — are essentially aspects the more general problems cited above.

To my considerable personal discomfort I have found myself from time to time under journalistic examination determine — it would seem — whether I was a saint or agent of the devil. Knowing full well that I was not the former, and daring to hope that I was not one of Satan’s minions either, I have sometimes experienced a curious sense of detachment when reading about myself, as if the subject were really someone else. In truth, I have never thought of myself as anything but a politician — until my recent retirement — trying to advance the national interest, as best I understood it, while also doing my best to serve my constituency, readily if not happily compromising between the two when that seemed necessary.

The Arkansas press — including the two statewide newspapers, the Gazette and the Democrat — came closer than others to accepting me on those terms, reporting my often heretical views on foreign policy with reasonable objectivity while also noting my efforts on behalf of agriculture, education, and industry in Arkansas — efforts in which I took and still take considerable personal pride. Even in my last, losing primary campaign in 1974 I was pleased and proud to have the support of the Gazette and the Democrat.

The sophisticated national press — though usually generous and sometimes flattering to me personally — has nonetheless had a tendency to pose certain rather tedious — and in my opinion largely meaningless — "paradoxes" about my personality and my role. Is Fulbright truly a humanitarian idealist, or a racist under the skin? An "international peace prophet," as one friendly writer recently put it, or "plain old Bill," regaling Arkansas rubes with talk about the price of cotton and chickens? How too, they have asked, anguishing on my behalf, can an "urban" internationalist like Fulbright survive in a southern "hillbilly" state like Arkansas? But most of all my friends in the national press have pointed — more in sorrow than in anger — to the "paradox" of my "humanitarianism on a global scale" as against my early opposition to civil-rights

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legislation and, more recently, my dissent from aspects of our Middle East policy and my differences with the Israeli lobby in Congress.

These questions have been posed as a "moral" dilemma, in much the same way that our presidents have been viewed as either saints or sinners. What I perceive in this approach is not a genuine moral dilemma, or even an authentic paradox of personality, but another manifestation of that Puritan dogmatism which pervades our national life, including — to a far greater degree than is recognized — our liberal intellectual community. In the case of the eastern press, the dogmatism is reinforced by arrogance — the arrogance of people who regard themselves as duly appointed arbiters not only of the nation's style and taste but also of its morality. The "paradox" posed about me by a number of writers has never greatly impressed or interested me because it is not really my paradox but theirs. "How," they are asking, "can a man who shares so many of my opinions and prejudices fail so woefully to share them all?"

In fact there are a few rather simple explanations to the so-called "paradoxes" in my career. While believing in the necessity of international cooperation and of the United Nations idea, I have also believed that education and economic opportunity were the best avenue to racial justice in the United States. I did not vote for civil rights legislation prior to the late sixties for two very simple reasons: first, because I doubted its efficacy; second, because my constituents would not have tolerated it. I felt able to challenge some of their strong feelings on such matters as the Vietnam war, I did not feel free to go against them on the emotionally charged issue of race. And as far as the "paradox" of world peace as against the price of cotton is concerned, I see no conundrum at all — I have always been interested in both.

Coming finally to the "paradox" of my "urbane" internationalism as against my "provincial" Arkansas constituency, I take this as no more than a conceit of the eastern "establishment." It has not been my observation that the representation in Congress of New York, Massachusetts, or California has been notably more responsible, intellectual, sophisticated, or humane than that of Arkansas. I have always felt attuned, responsive, and at one with my home state, and although the voters of Arkansas decided after thirty years that they wanted a change, I have little doubt that I survived a lot longer in politics in Arkansas than I ever would have in New York or Massachusetts.

Rather than for my moral qualities I should prefer to be evaluated for my specific positions on specific issues, for my contributions or lack of them as a public servant. That is what counts in a democracy, or in a mature society. It matters little to the nation or to posterity whether a president or senator met some individual's or group's or newspaper's particular standard of political "purity." For my own part I do not regard myself as a fitting or even interesting subject for priestly exorcism. If my career is judged worthy of review by journalists or historians, I very much hope that it will be for what I contributed or failed to contribute to my country and my state. The purity or lack of it in my motives is an issue strictly between me and my Maker.

I cannot stress too strongly that my criticism of the press in this regard is not especially personal. Looking back over my long career — to my many speeches on foreign policy, to the hearings, legislation, and other activities of the Foreign Relations Committee during my chairmanship — I am bound to conclude that I have been treated by the press with overall fairness and generosity. It is the general practice of moralizing to which I object, rather than the moralizing which has been directed toward me, most of which has been generous, some of which indeed has been flattering.

I have been more distressed personally by what has often seemed to me an arbitrary and prejudiced standard of "newsworthiness" in the national press, particularly as applied to the Middle East. I have noted repeatedly, for example, the quantitative disparity between the press coverage of Palestinian guerilla attacks within Israel and of Israeli attacks upon South Lebanon, although the loss of civilian life in the latter has almost certainly been greater. I even made a statement on the subject in the Senate in August 1974, but the statement itself was ignored, consigned to entombment in the Congressional Record.

Another instance of dubious "newsworthiness" arose following my final major speech as a senator, a discussion of the Middle East at Westminster College in Missouri. The New York Times reported the main theme — which was the danger of a world crisis arising out of the Arab-Israeli conflict — with reasonable accuracy, although the headline — FULBRIGHT, AT FULTON, GLOOMY ON WORLD — suggested that the gloom lay not so much upon the world as on the speaker. The Washington Post — not for the first time involving a statement critical of Israel — did not report the speech at all, although it was otherwise widely reported around the country. Some months later, by contrast, the Post found prominent place, including a picture, for an article recalling adverse comments I had made on black voting in the Arkansas Democratic primary back in 1944.

Still another instance of dubious "newsworthiness" in my experience occurred in April 1971 upon the occasion of a lecture I delivered at Yale University, again concerning the Middle East. On that occasion too I was critical of Israeli policy. The New York Times and other newspapers provided fair and accurate coverage. The Washington Post did not report the speech at all, but on the following day carried an article on the Israeli reaction to my speech, headlined ISRAELI PRESS LASHES OUT AT FULBRIGHT. Later
vituperation to my unreported speech. Recently, the Post may have had a change of heart as they did publish on the op-ed page of July 7, 1975 a statement of my views concerning the appropriate settlement of the conflict in the Middle East.

The ultimate test of the press’s fairness is its coverage of opinions of which the writers and editorialists do not approve. In my own experience as a critic not of Israel itself, but of the Israeli lobby and of what has seemed to me the excessive responsiveness of the United States government to demands made upon it by the government of Israel, the press has frequently failed to meet the test of fairness and objectivity, tending both to an arbitrary standard of newsworthiness and to a shifting of attention from the event to its author, from statement to motive, from song to singer. I have in recent years been called “cranky,” “churlish,” and “obsessive” about Israel and the Middle East — by contrast, it is sometimes lamented, with my “courageous” or “inspiring” leadership on Vietnam. All this signals to me is that the writer does not sympathize with my views and has devised an excuse to avoid reporting them. To my knowledge the reporters who have made these personal charges have neither general psychiatric qualifications nor specific familiarity with my state of mind. If indeed I have been “churlish” about the Middle East, it is not Israel which has brought me to that state but journalists who have thwarted my efforts to communicate views which could, I readily concede, be judged mistaken under dispassionate examination, but which I myself have long believed and still believe to be rational, at least arguable, and pertinent to the national interest.

I have always had a good deal of admiration for Washington’s overshadowed evening newspaper. The Star suffers from the ignominy of having achieved few if any received them.

In addition to The Washington Star and the press in general in my home state of Arkansas, I have always felt a special regard for the smaller, regional newspapers around the country. The steady decline in their numbers and variety is a substantial loss to the country. Few of them have scored any great scoops of investigative journalism, but many of them combine a genuine regard for objectivity in the news with a good deal of common sense and sound judgment in their editorials. Their principal failing in my opinion has been an excess of deference to the large, national newspapers.

The special strength of the writers for the smaller newspapers is journalistic “distance” — a virtue much celebrated but rarely practiced by their more famous Washington-based colleagues. The latter tend to express “distance” through vituperation, but more commonly cultivate all possible intimacy with the high officials whose activities they report. The officials in turn usually find it advantageous to respond, with the result that some of the elite of the Washington press corps have effectively made the transition from observers to participants in the making of public policy. Free as their writers are from such temptations and aspirations, the smaller newspapers seem to me, by and large, to come closer to fulfilling their journalistic obligations to report the news accurately and interpret it with personal detachment. They often seem better able, as the historian Bernard A. Weisberger expressed it, “to see men and events in whole and human perspective — that is, always fallible, and not always the masters of their own destiny. Or, in short, historically.”

I commend to the press, in conclusion, a renewed awareness of its great power and commensurate responsibility — a responsibility which is all the greater for the fact that there is no one to restrain the press except the press itself, nor should there be. After a long era of divisiveness and acrimony in our national life, we are in need of a reaffirmation of the social contract among people, government, and the media. The essence of that contract is a measure of voluntary restraint, an implicit agreement among the major groups and interests in our society that none will apply their powers to the fullest. For all the ingenuity of our system of checks and balances, our ultimate protection against tyranny is the fact that we are a people who have not wished to tyrannize one another. “The republican form of government,” wrote Herbert Spencer in 1891, “is the highest form of government: but because of this it requires the highest type of human nature — a type nowhere at present existing.” We have shown in times of adversity in the past that we are capable of this “highest type of human nature.” We would do well, if we can, to call it into existence once again. It has never been needed more.

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Watergate scoops, but over the years it has demonstrated certain less flamboyant virtues, such as confining its opinions to its editorial page. The Star has rarely been friendly to me or my positions on foreign policy in its editorials; at the same time it has usually given fair and objective treatment to my statements and to the proceedings of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. The Star even published a favorable review of my 1972 book, The Crippled Giant, although the paper’s editorial writers could hardly have approved its main thrust, while the Post sought out as its reviewer an obscure controversialist from Pine Bluff, Arkansas, who had little to say about my book but a great deal to say about my signing of the “Southern Manifesto.”