

PRESS & TELEVISION

by the news media, the American public was treated to little more than misleading stories that "misinterpreted public opinion polls, focused on the personal contest . . . between the President and Senate leaders, and culminated in pious warnings that the treaties were not all that significant after all. . . ." Moreover, the media failed to tell the public much of anything about Panama and why the Panamanians had struggled for years to obtain the treaties giving them *de jure* independence from U.S. colonial control.

The reporting on poll results failed to convey the fact that they showed most Americans cared little about who operated the canal so long as the United States had the right, in emergencies, to move its ships to the head of the line and to intervene militarily to keep the waterway open. Once these conditions were guaranteed by the amendments sponsored by the Senate leaders—Democrat Robert Byrd of West Virginia and Republican Howard J. Baker of Tennessee—no amount of anti-treaty propagandizing through the media made much difference.

LaFeber found "pathetic" most of the coverage of Panama's economic and political complexities, its military government, its views on the canal debate (which was being broadcast by National Public Radio to Panama, complete with insults to the country and its "maximum leader") or why Panamanians rioted even after the Senate ratified the first treaty (which guarantees the canal's permanent neutrality). Panamanian President Omar Torrijos' alleged involvement in narcotics traffic received more attention in the U.S. media than any other internal Panamanian issue, even though the charges had little to do with the treaties.

Thanks in part to TV and the press, what was to have been a great debate "turned out to be neither great nor much of a public debate over the substance of foreign policy."

A Plea for Press Restraint

"Our Right of Privacy Needs Protection from the Press" by Arthur R. Miller, in *Human Rights* (Spring 1978), 1155 E. 60th St., Chicago, Ill. 60637.

A free press is crucial to maintaining democracy and exposing government abuses—a truth the designers of our constitutional protections found sufficiently self-evident to enshrine in the Bill of Rights. But is the press too free? Sometimes, says Miller, a Harvard law professor, restraints on the press are appropriate, notably when press freedom conflicts with another fundamental freedom—an individual's right to privacy.

Americans are beginning to recognize that their right to privacy has been jeopardized by growing numbers of government, commercial, and institutional files and data banks containing information about their private lives. Watergate's exposure of overzealous surveillance activities by the FBI and CIA underscored this concern for privacy. Now,

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says Miller, "The constant pressure by the press for the expansion of its liberties and its right of inquisition surely contributes to the erosion of privacy and emphasizes the need for protection."

Miller applauds those statutes—opposed by newsmen—that protect individuals from unwarranted public attention (i.e., laws prohibiting the naming of rape victims and restricting the release of certain criminal records). He particularly objects to the zeal of gossip columnists and the revelation of private details of a person's life without cause (e.g., reporters' interest in the sexual preferences of Oliver Sipple, who thwarted an assassination attempt against President Ford on Sept. 22, 1975).

Miller sees a "disturbing situation" at present: Newspapers and magazines have become almost immune to libel suits, justify intrusive and even illegal *means* by touting "beneficial" *ends*, and assert the right to publish any "truth" no matter how private. What is needed is more press self-restraint, says Miller, and, failing that, court action to establish a better balance between press freedom and privacy.

Taxing TV Promos

"A Modest Proposal to Pay for Excellence" by Martin Mayer, in *American Film* (June 1978), P.O. Box 966, Farmingdale, N.Y. 11737.

Since it began in 1969, national public television programming in the United States has been funded by a mix of congressional appropriations, corporate and foundation contributions, and individual donations—an inadequate and uncertain financial base. (Approximately 45 percent of the current \$70-million annual budget comes from federal tax dollars.)

Congress rejected a variety of other financial support arrangements, including the annual license fee on each television set with which Britain funds the programs of the BBC. Mayer, an author and critic, suggests charging broadcasters in this country a fee for the air time they now use to promote themselves and their upcoming programs.

"If the stations and networks were made to pay one-tenth of what they would charge advertisers for this time," says Mayer, "the resulting fund would total \$175 million a year." If broadcasters decided to reduce their self-promotion rather than pay for it, there would be less money in the production fund for public television, but also less advertising "clutter" to annoy television viewers.

The proceeds from the charge on promotional air time, Mayer argues, should be allocated to programs that might otherwise be rejected by public television because of their high cost or limited audience appeal. Completed programs could be offered for sale to the networks or independent stations but provided without charge to public, noncommercial stations. Finances aside, the sooner that public television programming decisions can be insulated from the pressures that accompany congressional funding, says Mayer, the better.