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To: Time Press

Fm: Neil MacNeil Washington (98)

peccadillos of the famous

Before you proceed at all on passing judgment on how the press covers the unseemly escapades of famous public persons, you must define what of this sort of thing is newsworthy -- and definitions here are varied and contrary.

We know of a Newsweek congressional reporter -- Sam Shaffer -- who categorically refused to write anything about Bobby Baker when he got caught with his hands in the till, further refused to write anything about Dr. Snieg, Speaker McCormack's henchman, when he was tagged. Why?

It might hurt his hill sources. That, of course, was sheer venality by the reporter.

Our own definition -- one we think widely held here in town -- is that a prominent person's private-life peccadillos, such as womanizing and boozing, normally should be passed over by the press until and unless those actions somehow compromise his public actions and responsibilities.
This reporter has seen -- some years ago -- Senator Russell Long of Louisiana staggeringly drunk on the Senate floor, incapable of managing a bill before the Senate under his care, wildly shouting to the presiding officer, and finally dragged from the chamber by two fellow senators.

I reported that incident in full -- but TIME did not print it.

A Congressman who gets drunk at a party, or in his office, and gets quietly home goes scot free from the press. And why not? Who cares? If he's arrested for drunken driving on the way home, that's different -- and those incidents are all reported.

The fact of a police arrest is of critical importance. Not only can the incident not be ignored, but the reporters have something solid on which to base a solid story. Without that, or something similar by way of accepted authentication, the reporter is all but helpless to file such a story. He faces a flat contradiction from the principal -- and as Nixon said of John Dean's testimony, it's his word against the President's.
Years ago, in December, 1951, I received solid information, including direct quotes, that then President Truman had asked Herbert Hoover to head an anti-corruption investigation of the Truman administration, and further that Hoover had accepted subject to three specified conditions.

With the Truman administration running riot with corruption, this was the biggest thing that ever happened, and I wrote the story accordingly. That story was never printed — because Hoover issued a categorical denial of its truth, though my source had it direct from Hoover himself. Years later, after Hoover's death, I got a copy of his letter to HST confirming precisely the story he denied.

A reporter without solid confirmation on the record can't stand up to a flat denial — and solid information is simply not readily at hand, minus a police blotter or law suit or some such. Anonymous sources don't help much — particularly in a gossip-filled town like this one.

I know the name of the doll and the incidents in only one of John Kennedy's senatorial affairs, and I know that one only because the girl got talkative years later. Senators don't issue press releases on whom they're stabbing.

Nailing them for drunkenness -- if it's in a public place -- is not that difficult, but I don't know of many public figures here other than Tower and Capper who gave public shows of their female indiscretions. And I never saw either of them perform.

You cite the case of Wilbur Mills, and ask why his performance wasn't printed before it was printed. We think it was printed at just the correct time -- when he got tagged. He fact that he let his hair grow is not scandal. Neither was his talk of marijuana. His night-clubbing was not known. Sure someone saw him here one night. Someone else saw him there another night. They were all isolated incidents that only took on significance to the isolated observers in retrospect.

You're hearing a refrain of all kinds of people who knew all along -- friends, reporters, fellow congressmen. That's nonsense. They have convenient memories. The fact is that few noticed anything amiss with Mills all through this period. They knew after the fact. What was known was that he had been ill, that he was absent for many months from the hill, that when he returned
to Congress, he didn't show the old zest for his work -- didn't attend committee sessions to the end, and so on. He was ailing, not up to snuff: it was consistent with what was known. And it was reported. Moreover, reporters don't hang around nights at the Junkanoo and other girlie houses in town looking for indiscreet congressmen. It's not worth the watered booze.

The first flag I personally got on Mills going beyond the limits was about three months before the cops grabbed his car and the firecracker doused herself in the tidal basin. A hill reporter mentioned to us that he'd heard that a few nights previously Mills had been prancing around one of these houses with some him, and had been introduced by the M.C.: "We are honored to have with us tonight,..."

No one followed it up. That sort of stuff really isn't usable. Mills would have issued a categoric denial, said his wife was along, and that would have ended it. He did issue just such a categoric denial when he was caught by the police -- in fact two denials, the first that he wasn't even there.
Suppose the October incident took place exactly as it did -- except that the cops weren't there, and Mills and his pals got quietly home. The firecracker had two black eyes. Mills was drunk and bleeding. How do you find that out and in such a way that you can stand up to Mills's inevitable categoric denial?

It was the cops that put Mills in the soup. And then it was Mills himself. The cops made a report, and talked, and Mills was nailed. He was forced to retract his first denial and concoct another one -- and his second version was readily enough accepted on faith by his own people in Arkansas, from reports we've read from there.

The real problem in these areas is that the reporter can normally report nothing but gossip -- with few hard specifics. And editors, understandably, won't normally print gossip.

Even well-known drinkers escape. Charlie Halleck, for example. For years in his black period he was really an alcoholic -- yet in the cover story run by Time on him, only a passing reference was made: that for this period his best friend was a bottle of scotch. Even that by professional standards was considered rather daring.
Of course, a critical point is that few men in Washington really merit attention on their drinking and womanizing -- those of great name and prestige. Young, bachelor Kennedy's womanizing was an expected thing, of no consequence at the time. Mills, the "most powerful man in Congress," was something else -- and Mills was stopped by cops in an unhappy hour for him, something Kennedy avoided.

You cite the case of Mendel Rivers -- and this is about the tenth time I've had to correct that. Yes, Anderson reported it -- and Anderson was wrong. In the years before he was chairman of the armed services committee, Rivers used to go off on an occasional drunk -- usually in December, for the month of December, and then get dried out. When he became chairman he gave up the bottle.

Rivers's bouts with the bottle were not really important until he became chairman -- and then he quit. We're sure of this, not only from our own researches at the time, but because Rivers candidly laid it out to us at length.
You cite Ben Bradlee's supposed knowledge of Kennedy's activities — and that's a different problem. Bradlee was a Kennedy intimate, a personal friend, and he was compromised in telling all by that very friendship. It's the price of becoming personally intimate with men who are prominent or become so. To tell them, on the basis of the confidential relationship you've enjoyed til then, is simply ungentlemanly. And, of course, it means an instant breaking of that friendship, confidentiality, and confidence.

We know of a case of a reporter who printed details of a quarrel at Kennedy's dinner table who thereafter was treated by the Kennedys as outcaste. You don't spit in the wine of your host.

The problem in this area is that some Washington reporters like to consider themselves the personal intimates of the top officials in Washington — and abandon the essential adversary relationship that should underpin all press-officialdom relationships.
Only the really intimate ones do find out, in fact, the private activities of prominent public personages, and even then not often. To print these confidences is to destroy the news source so long in cultivation.

Our own feeling is that the Press should not always be vigilant to report if this or that official had one too many at the Christmas party, or pinched some secretary on the behind. The press, however, should be ready to tag any official who gets out of line in his public responsibilities — by dough, bims, or booze, or whatever. And they should print only what's solidly established, not the gossip. That's not easy by the very nature of the subject — and the reporters have no subpoena power.

We think the Mills's story was handled correctly all the way — and we're sure you've noted the reluctance and hesitancy by many elements of the press, with proof in hand, to go ahead full steam. The incident took place late on Sunday night — and didn't get heavily reported until the following Wednesday.
Even so, a lot of the Mills's story has not been printed and won't be -- we're referring to all the racy and crude jokes going around about him, like the one about him being arrested for assault with a dead weapon.

By the way, did you get the bulletin on Mills's condition from Bethesda naval hospital: "The chairman spent a quiet evening. He screwed two nurses and made a grab at a corpsman."

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