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COVER: Sailing on the White Nile, by Giles M. Kelly
THE PRESS DEMANDS COMPLETE CANDOR FROM A PUBLIC OFFICIAL ON EVERY SUBJECT—EXCEPT ONE—NAMELY WHAT HE THINKS ABOUT THE PRESS," FORMER SECRETARY OF STATE DEAN RUSK SAID.

"BECAUSE IT IS PART OF THE CONVENTIONAL WISDOM, A PUBLIC OFFICIAL IS SUPPOSED TO APPROACH THE PRESS AND THE NEWS MEDIA AS THOUGH HE WERE APPROACHING THE EMPRESS Dowager of China—with three kowtows, with a bag full of goodies and with a hope that he won't have his head cut off.

"Indeed, I think it's fair to say the press can dish it out, but it doesn't like to take it."

Rusk, now secure in academia as the occupant of the Samuel H. Sibley chair of international law at the sedate University of Georgia, obviously takes delight in telling members of the press what he thinks of the second oldest profession.

After eight years of enduring the grilling of newsmen, Rusk still enjoys the attention journalists afford him and while he has their ear he now openly comments on what he was reluctant to say while in office.

In recent talks before such groups as Sigma Delta Chi, the Georgia Press Association and Georgia Association of Broadcasters he includes some candid insights on persistent problems between press and government.

At 63, the former Rhodes Scholar regards himself as "pretty close to being a fanatic on the issue of free speech and free press—nothing is more important in a democratic society or to a humane existence.

"I am concerned, for example, that the Congress seems to be moving in more and more to assert controls over the contents of radio and television programs because of the accident of physical laws that requires the allocation of broadcast frequencies to avoid chaos on the airways.

"I would prefer to see the Congress ban cigarettes as a health hazard than to have the FCC ban cigarette advertising from television. Some day we may be forced to ration wood pulp for ecological reasons; would the Congress then move to assert similar controls over the written press? I think this trend has to be watched with great care.

"Free speech and free press are not based on the notion that everyone is going to tell the truth. From John Milton through Thomas Jefferson, and up to the present time, the right of free speech and free press is based upon the notion that if everyone is free to say and write what he pleases, then the truth has a better chance to emerge than if these processes were subject to some sort of external control, particularly control by government.

"I'm so concerned about these freedoms that I'm dubious myself about the desirability of establishing a code of conduct or ethics among the news media. I think it would be very unfortunate if, within the organization of the press and news media, there should develop pressures or procedures which would tend to limit the freedom of expression of our news media, or indeed of private citizens."

Rusk acknowledges that news media and public officials share a common goal of informing the populace, but he is aware members of the two institutions have different responsibilities and motivations.

From his perspective as a loyal company man in a corporate-style government, Rusk also recognizes the problems the press presents both to public officials seeking to utilize the media and to the public which needs complete information of government activities.

"The public official is faced with the fact that his principal channel of communication with the public is through the news media," Rusk said. "Therefore, he may not have an opportunity to say what he would like to say because the news media may not carry it or deal with it. For example, in October 1968 I made the opening speech for the United States in the general debate of the United Nations General Assembly. This was just after the Russian assertion of the so-called Brezhnev doctrine justifying their occupation of Czechoslovakia."

"In that statement I addressed a series of penetrating and probing questions to Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko who was sitting just in front of me. It was, all things considered, a pretty important speech. Was that what the television carried? No."

"Instead they carried a few inane sentences at the very opening of my remarks because at that moment six young people up in the gallery decided to stand up and make a fuss. Some anonymous managers of the news back in the studios apparently decided that what was dramatic should be shown rather than what was important. This is one problem we run into all the time.

"Let me illustrate the point further," Rusk said. "I can tell you today that the overwhelming majority of international frontiers are peaceful. The overwhelming majority of treaties are complied with.

"...
expression, it has to do with the answer to the question 'What is news?'; because normality, habit, agreement, serenity are not news compared with the abnormal, the unusual, the controversial, or the violent.

"One problem, then, in getting information to the American people about the total context of our foreign relations is that there is a vast mass of normal, regular, habitual cooperation among the governments of the world which never comes to view—not because it's secret, but because it is not newsworthy. Only about one percent of our foreign affairs matters are secret; most news in this area is not secret and not used."

Illustrating his generalizations with specific current examples, Rusk is quick to cite several recent international developments that have received little press attention.

His list included the Big Four agreement on Berlin, talks between North and South Korea, the objectives of Round II of the SALT talks in Geneva, the significance of the forthcoming Law of the Sea conference and a followup on the Stockholm conference on the environment.

"These are important areas of cooperation to resolve conflict but complex matters that may be boring to an audience," he added.

"I made a count one year of some 600 multilateral intergovernmental conferences in which the United States took part, ranging in subject matter from the control of nuclear weapons to the control of hog cholera. Only 125 of those meetings were even mentioned anywhere in the press. The rest of them were lost without a trace."

"I tried to get one of the leading newspapers to give just four column inches in its Sunday edition—a Sunday edition which is so large you can barely lift it—just to list the international meetings which were coming up the next week, so that professors and students and others would have some point of reference to which they could go and find out what was going on in the world. No luck whatever.

"So, we have a serious matter of extraction, of limitation on the news because of the very nature of the news. I'm not blaming the news media on this particularly because they have to make tough choices on what they report in the time and space available to them. But citizens should know that there is a problem there, that a lot is going on to which the public has no access. It is difficult, therefore, for the average citizen to get a view of reality from the media, especially of the news of government. The selection of the news is forced both by the economics of publishing or broadcasting and by the limited time the audience is willing to spend on such matters."

AFTER YEARS as an adversary, Rusk praised the capital correspondents he regularly encountered.

"The press corps that covers Washington, D.C., is the most effective, intelligent, sophisticated, best informed press corps one can find anywhere in the world. And I do believe the American people are better served by the totality of their news media than are the people in any other country I have visited—and I have visited a great many of them.

"The press has a duty to get the news. There are times when public officials have a duty to keep their mouths shut. This creates a built-in tension between press and officials, which in my view is wholesome and must never be eliminated either by law or by some sort of treaty between the press and public officials.

"Because if the press were not there constantly probing to get the news, there would be even greater abuses of secrecy by the bureaucracy and it would be possible for public officials to manipulate public opinion far beyond the point that would be safe for a democracy.

"Let me add there is often much more fun in giving and taking between the press and government than sometimes appears," he acknowledged.

"I have the greatest respect for the nearly 600 talented men and women in the Washington press corps. Through their devotion to duty, they have developed expertise in all areas of government—international law, diplomacy and finance.

"And over time they have de-
developed some extraordinarily subtle and effective techniques for getting the news. They understand that public officials are human beings with their feet of clay, that they are subject to human frailty, and therefore they become highly expert in knowing how to get a story on a particular subject. They know, for example:

- **"The big shot syndrome."** It's very difficult to find an official in government who is willing simply to say, 'I don't know,' because he feels some sort of compulsion to stand forward as a fellow who is in the know. Reporters know this and can use it to considerable advantage.

- **"The bedside manner.** The reporter will come in to see the Secretary of State and he will say, 'Gee, Mr. Secretary, I just don't see how you do it! You work 16 hours a day, seven days a week, and you've got the senators badgering you on one side and these foreigners badgering you on the other, and there's never a chance for any private life....' By that time there's a lump in your throat and you say to him, 'Scotty, you don't know half the story. Let me give you the rest of it.' And he's got his story!

- **"The hand grenade technique.** This reporter will come through your door a little breathless and scowling and he'll say, 'Mr. Secretary, how can the government of the United States be so stupid? Any schoolboy should have known that what you did yesterday made no sense whatever!' As he goes along with that taek, the bristles begin to rise on the back of your neck until you blurt, 'Joe, don't be an idiot. You don't know what you're talking about. Now let me straighten you out.' And then he's got his story.

- **"The Hercule Poirot (Agatha Christie's famed detective) method.** A reporter is in the State Department basement getting his car to go home at the end of the day and he happens to notice that the Soviet ambassador is coming out of the Secretary of State's private elevator. So he says to himself, 'Aha! They would not have taken those precautions unless there is a good story there.'

- **"So he goes back upstairs to his own office and he figures out that the Soviet ambassador probably brought in a message about Southeast Asia or the Middle East, or Berlin, or the SALT talks.**

- **"By the way, time to give the machinery a chance to work, he calls his friend over at the disarmament agency, and says, 'I understand the Soviet ambassador has brought you a message about the SALT talks.' And the man will say, 'Look, somebody has given you the wrong steer, there's nothing in that at all.'**

- **"So he calls a friend over in the East Asian bureau and says, 'I understand the Soviet ambassador came in with a message about Southeast Asia.' 'There's not a thing in it. You're just on the wrong track. Drop it,' is that reply.**

- **"Then he'll call the fellow on Berlin. And the fellow on Berlin, among others, has been told never to lie directly to the press; and so this reporter will say, 'John, I understand that the Soviet ambassador has just come in with a message on Berlin.' So the man says, 'Sorry, I can't say a thing about it. Can't help you on that at all.' Ah! He's got it. In the absence of an absolute denial, he's on the track.**

- **"And so he figures out what the Berlin problem looks like and then he goes to the telephone and calls a friend over at the Soviet embassy. And he says, 'By the way, what's the attitude of the Soviet Union on this particular point with respect to Berlin?' And he listens for a few moments, then he publishes his story the next morning on the message that the Soviet ambassador brought in about Berlin.**

- **"The chances are that the President will call the Secretary of State and ask, 'Who in the hell has been leaking news over at the Department of State?'**

- **"The cock-fight technique. While this tactic is ill advised, it does happen that a newspaperman will try to get one public official against another. The reporter calls up Mr. So-and-So and tries to sic him onto a colleague whom he is known to disagree with. In other words, the newspaperman tries to build up a disagreement into an indirect fight waged before the public in the press.**

- **"Now this is a game that experienced people in the business ought to understand. I don't mind an inquiring reporter boring in on his story with any technique short of bribery or theft."**

**Despite his praise for the straightforward efforts of most Washington journalists, Rusk is wary of covert reporting methods. "One of the most secret operations in Washington is the press. There is no democratic process in the media. The people do not choose the reporters or columnists. The press's newsgathering process is secret, but one wonders if that process ought not to be disclosed."**

Rusk also criticizes the New York Times for its secret handling and sensational release of the Pentagon Papers documents. "The New York Times's editors didn't call together the Washington press corps and say 'Here's some material the people have a right to know,' and then make it available to all the press. No. They postponed the people's right to know for three months in order to insure that the New York Times would give it to them as a scoop."

During that time of secluded reporting, Rusk said that not one of the Times's reporters ever called him to ask him if any of the thoughts or statements attributed to him were true. This neglect of verifying information before it's published is a major annoyance with Rusk.

And, former Timesman David Halberstam's book, "The Best and the Brightest," drew special criticism for its rather hostile profile. "Halberstam never interviewed me or some of the other principals. He used secondary sources and many quotations in the book are printed without attribution," Rusk noted.

He also hinted he wanted to write an article refuting some of Halberstam's reportage and correcting history. In his first year out of office, Rusk put his recollections of his Washington years on tape for the Kennedy and Johnson libraries which he says will not be made public for another 20 years.

Some changes in the press in the last 20 years do affect the open relationship between reporters and public officials, Rusk began.

"There has been a multiplication of by-lined specialty writers or columnists who are in competition with each other either to extend their syndication to more newspapers or to compete for space on
One can sympathize with frustrated liberals, conservatives and independents when they are confronted with media that ignore what seem to them to be legitimate applications for a chance to express themselves. But if they think governmental intervention will help their cause, they had better remember the words of the late Zechariah Chafee, the leading legal scholar of press freedom for many decades:

Whenever anybody is inclined to look to the government for help in making the mass media do what we desire of them, he had better ask himself one antiseptic question: "Am I envisaging myself as the official who is going to administer the policy which seems to me so good?" . . . You and I are not going to be on the committee which is charged with making newspapers or radio scripts better written and more accurate and impartial . . . We must be prepared to take our chances with the kind of politicians we particularly dislike, because that is what we may get.

—Ben Bagdikian,
"First Amendment Revisionism,"
COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW, May/June, 1974

The fellows who report on foreign policy decisions in hindsight have a chance to look at them from a different point of view than those who made the decisions in the first place," Rusk went on.

"On this business of credibility, I suggest the world is filled with advocates. Presidents and prime ministers, secretaries of state and foreign ministers, senators and congressmen, editorial writers, some reporters, most columnists, most TV commentators, business and labor leaders, ministers of the gospel . . . people who are putting forward a point of view.

"And I suggest citizens need to understand the role of advocacy, including the press, in society. Citizens must always have a little flag of caution in the back of their minds about whether or not the facts being presented are indeed a fair representation of the facts and whether more information is needed before one can come to a final and conclusive judgment.

"Now who should vet this matter of credibility? Generally public officials are about the only group in the country who are rigorously vetted and held to a high standard of credibility. I don't object to this because I think it's very important that be the experience of public officials.

"Not as a constitutional matter, but as a political matter under our system, I think public officials have a duty to tell the truth as best they can under the circumstances and to the extent they know the truth and sometimes they don't even know the truth.

"But who vets the press? The press does not vet itself.

"In the 19th century the press vigorously debated itself. In the early history of journalism, newspapers battled each other in all sorts of ways. Now the profession seems to be too much of a gentlemanly private club. Only rarely do some members of the press directly engage another member of the press in debate or dispute about either his facts or his point of view. I would be glad to see the press directly involved in not only vetting public officials but also vetting itself."

Another source of friction is the press's stipulation that public officials give short, simple answers that can be easily reported in the media.

"If I appeared on one of the quiz programs like 'Meet the press,' 'Face the Nation,' or 'Issues and Answers,' invariably the participants would get me before the show—they wouldn't talk about what the questions are because that's forbidden, but they would say, 'For heavens' sake, make your answers short so we can have as many questions as possible,'" Rusk said.

"The object of those programs is not just to explain government policy but to draw attention to the show itself and have it reflected in the written press that Mr. So-and-So said such-and-such yesterday on a particular program. So they want something that will be interpreted as spot news.

"Or in a press conference if the Secretary of State spends more than a minute answering a question, the reporters start shuffling their feet and will criticize you afterwards for having filibustered and pre-empted additional questions."

Rusk also gets perturbed with

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the editorial criteria used in news selection as well as its inherent incompleteness. "To pick out those things which are going to be the lead story on the press conference, the standards by which you can be accurate in judging are not the standards which have to do with importance or significance but what is eye-catching, stimulating, unusual or just new," he charged.

"About five per cent of what I said in press conferences was used in the press," Rusk said. He also noted public officials use a briefing book to bone up for press conferences. Various bureaus in the State Department offered questions expected from newsmen along with recommended answers, facts and policy. Rusk commented that less than one-third of the questions in the briefing book were actually asked, but rarely did a question that wasn't anticipated get asked.

Rusk believes both the press and public officials would be better served if two kinds of press conferences were instituted: a formal type for television with short, pithy responses and perhaps visual illustrations of points and a more informal type that goes into more detail and interpretation for the written press.

Rusk noted a few rules he tried to follow in dealing with the press: never impose off-the-record comments unless reporters themselves ask for it, never give a story to one newspaperman that you wouldn't give to another if he asked the same question, and never lie to newsmen.

"There are times when a public official ought to be silent or even when the public would prefer not to know the whole brutal truth. The press has a right to know the whole story but in times that it sees fit. So why be sanctimonious about it?"

He observed that small town newspapers give a more realistic picture of life in their communities than the large metropolitan papers do in theirs.

He reads the ATLANTA CONSTITUTION and JOURNAL for state and regional coverage and the WASHINGTON POST and the NEW YORK TIMES for national and foreign reporting.

In his law school office Rusk daily is busy reading, grading papers and preparing lecture notes. He is not writing articles or memoirs, although he still often appears in the news.

Rusk did write an article pleading for public support of a strong United Nations last fall when China was admitted and his prose appeared simultaneously in the WASHINGTON POST and the Sunday ATHENS BANNER-HERALD and the DAILY NEWS.

Despite his criticism of the press, when Rusk appeared before a House Foreign Affairs subcommittee last June urging Congress to maintain a firm defense posture, he was, not surprisingly, described by one witness as "looking relaxed and pleased with the attention given him by the press and photographers at the hearing."

Nonetheless, one gets the impression that former public officials addicted to the public spotlight will always find it difficult to ignore the media, however imperfect.