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Approved For Release 2004/09/28 : CIA-RDP88-01314R000300380044-4

Countering [MORE] Than a Convention

By Judy Barhrach

NEW YORK—In the midst of the Friday night swirl, Daniel Ellsberg stood, relaxed, his jacket flung over his shoulder, surrounded as he would be for the rest of the weekend by a gaggle of deferential reporters. One of their number asked if he had bought the Nixon transcripts. He replied that he had.

"And they're pretty cheap," Ellsberg added. "Only about a penny a page. Why I remember when I was Xeroxing (the Pentagon Papers) it cost me 9 cents a page. And nobody I gave them to paid me a penny. Well, yes, one"—he amended. "After I'd sent my last batch of papers to the Fulbright Committee, an aide called and asked me if I wished to be reimbursed. And I said, 'Yes. That last batch will cost \$450.' And the aide said, 'We can't afford that. We meant we'd pay your postage.' And I said, 'Oh, keep it.'"

He sighed and looked out over the [More] convention gathering, where scores of reporters were cramming close to the bar at the Hotel Roosevelt for aid and comfort.

"I spent my entire life savings on those Xeroxes," Ellsberg said. The reporters nodded sympathetically.

For the third time in as many years [More], a New York journalism review that takes its name, brackets and all, from the reporter's traditional bottom-of-the-page notation, was holding its A. J. Liebling Counter-Convention. The journalists (the men in slacks dressed just a tad neater than the women, also in slacks) came from all over, a vast majority of them from the elite centers. There were of course cliques: The New York Magazine clique; the Rolling Stone clique; the out-of-work television clique and the out-of-work newspaper clique. These last called themselves freelancers; all

had shilled out \$15 to get in.

It was easy to forget it was a counter-convention because, unlike years past, the [More] fiesta wasn't running counter to anything; not counter to editors, or to publishers or to the excesses of journalists.

It was also at time easy to forget that it was a journalists' convention because the real stars of the show this year were Daniel Ellsberg, Alger Hiss, Morton Halperin and, yes, Woody Allen. Something has happened to reporters in recent times. They are no longer on the outside, looking in. Or if they are, they have the comfort of knowing they are not alone in this posture. Even the administration is now on the outside, looking in.

At a time when the Nixon administration was experiencing a most crucial hour, 2,000 reporters were celebrating the men who felt they had been abused by the President.

When Mike Wallace of CBS announced Saturday night that Dan Rather of CBS couldn't make that evening's panel because he had to preside over "the death watch," a ballroom full of people burst into applause over Wallace's terminology.

Seymour Hersh of The New York Times talked about the possibility of "plea bargaining" at the White House.

And The Times' Anthony Lewis replied when pressed, that yes, he thought that Richard Nixon was "a war criminal."

There was a good deal of breast-beating about the way the press had allowed itself to be used by the administration. But in a curious way, a discomfiting way, it seemed that entire [More] convention was being orchestrated by Richard Nixon.

Alger Hiss, who once went to jail after being investigated by Richard Nixon, would not reply when asked to have come neither to bury nor praise Caesar," he said as he walked away.

In fact, however, Hiss had come to participate in Saturday's morning panel on national security—along with Morton Halperin, Seymour Hersh and Paul Warnke, a former Assistant Secretary of Defense, and Jeffrey St. John, a conservative commentator, who launched a full-scale attack on Henry Kissinger and his coverage by the press.

"There is," said St. John, "a protection racket of high political officials. Especially the deed and conduct of Henry Kissinger. Since joining the Nixon administration, he has managed to manipulate the press to the point where they've become nothing more than his shoe-shine boys."

To which Morton Halperin, who used to work for Kissinger, added, "Well since he (Kissinger) was responsible for the FBI listening to all my phone conversations, I'm not really unbiased. I would conclude that there is an indictable offense of perjury here."

There was more. Everyone—especially Warnke and Halperin—agreed that part of our problems stemmed from secrecy. That there was a need for a more open government, a more demanding press.

Then, at the end of the panel, someone asked Halperin if the President had ordered an attack on North Korea in April of 1969 and was talked out of it by Kissinger.

Halperin refused to answer. "I don't feel an obligation to report everything I know about everything," he said.

One had a choice on where to be most bored on Saturday afternoon. Most people (including New York Post publisher Dorothy Schiff) showed up at a panel on the editorial page, where they could hear former columnist Murray Kempton say, "Pomposity is the name of the game."

Whereupon New York Times editorial page editor John Oakes snapped, "There are also, God knows, pompous columnists."

There was a simultaneous panel on homosexuals called "The Hidden Minority." Here one could listen to author Merle Miller describe the fortuitously absent movie critic Pauline Kael as "The New Yorker's answer to Lucrezia Borgia." And attend a simultaneous panel on crime coverage where a reporter named Willie Hamilton belabored his audience with a 20-minute recital of how he was beaten up by the police. And later yet another panel on kidnaping.

"Wasn't it boring," sighed Alger Hiss as he was released from the editorial page room.

"Yes it was damn bloody boring wasn't it?" admitted Alexander Cockburn, media critic of the Village Voice, after his stint on the kidnaping panel.

"I'm telling you," said Kempton on his way out, "I'm never going to one of these things again. I guess I really don't like John Oakes. Journalists are so pompous."

Well, of course that was one of the problems. And it was discussed, too, at various panels at various junctures: Everyone said journalists should not be smug, should not be pompous just because a few people had worked on a story that shattered a nation's complacency.

But at the party Friday night, J. Anthony Lukas, a senior editor at (MORE) said, "I for one am delighted that Robert Redford is playing one of us." Redford intends to portray The Washington Post's Bob Woodward in the Watergate movie. "And," Lukas continued, "I would like to be played by Omar Shariff."

"God," cried Dick Pollak, editor of (MORE), "you're cutting your own throat."

"I'm sure," replied Lukas, indicating the reporter, "she will report exactly how I said that."

Lukas said that with a smile. But there was an unmistakable gleam in his eye. The phrase "star reporter" suddenly assumed all sorts of new meaning.

On Saturday night three awards were presented. One, a student award, went to Richard Wechsler of Richmond College for press criticism. Another, the A.J. Liebling award, went to The Washington Post's Morton all for being his own man." The third was a tribute to Eugene Smith, a

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photographer, who was severely beaten in Japan and he documented with pictures the effects of mercury poisoning emitted by a chemical company in Minimata.

Smith, who wore dark glasses since he is still in the process of regaining his sight and his health, showed slides of the mothers cradling deformed children, hands twisted from mercury poisoning, and company officials confronting the patients.

At last year's counter-convention, there was a counter-counter convention, held by women who felt they weren't being adequately represented. This year there were two panels devoted to women's questions. "Can you imagine that?" asked Nora Ephron of New York magazine, who was part of last year's counter-counter and the moderator this year. "Last year when I complained about the lack of women on panels, the (MORE) people said, 'But Nora, we already asked Mary McGrory and she couldn't come.'"

There were very few blacks either on or off the panel at this year's convention. (MORE) people when asked about this, said that blacks never came to [MORE] conventions in large numbers.

There in vociferous fashion were members of the National Caucus of Labor Committees, a new New Left left-wing group. Before a number of panels some of their number formed the habit of whipping through, babbling words unintelligibly and then leaving. One of them presented something that looked like a subpoena to Seymour Hersh and Warnke who was, he said, going to be tried by an international tribunal "For their complicity in providing a spectacular whitewash of CIA complicity in the Pentagon Papers."

In the last hour of the last day, Sunday, Woody Allen slumped into the convention, his eyes half hidden by a khaki hat, his right flank protected by Louise Lasser, one of his ex-wives. Woody

Allen - like Marshall Efron of TV's late "American Dream Machine" and television reporter Joel Siegel and some other successful people, was going to speak to the assembled about failure.

Unfortunately, as the comic and satirical film director stated, he "hadn't really thought about it a lot. You know," he said, covering his mouth with his hands, "you know, I'm always being asked if my success in my work affects my private life, and it really is true. As I become more well-known, I strike out with a better class of women."

And so it went. When a vote was taken, a majority of the reporters present decided they did not want to continue listening to that beyond the appointed time. Maybe it was because the subject struck too close to home.

The reporters were high on their own successes. When it came to self-criticism, they brought in Woody Allen.