

**ABROAD AT HOME** | Anthony Lewis *J*

# A Respectful Press?

**T**here are always Americans unhappy with our tradition of a free and aggressive press. The country could be run so much more effectively, they argue, if you in the press did not keep raising doubts about the Government. Why can't you show some respect?

The respect theory is being tested now in a case that engages the views of one of our vigorous press critics, Herbert Schmeitz. As the Mobil Corporation's vice president for public affairs, Mr. Schmeitz has campaigned to make it easier to sue the press for libel. Lately he has also written a column distributed by the Heritage Foundation.

In a column from Singapore last July Mr. Schmeitz looked approvingly at the way the press is disciplined in that country. He quoted with relish some harsh comments by S. Nathanamby Rajaratnam, a cabinet minister who was no doubt reflecting the view of Singapore's leader, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew.

Mr. Rajaratnam denounced what he called "James Bond journalists," Western reporters who thought they had "an 007 license to destroy the reputation of leaders and governments in Southeast Asia with impunity." He said the Singapore Government could accept constructive criticism — but not these reporters' implication that "cabinet officers, bureaucrats and businessmen here did not all know what they were doing."

At that time the Lee Government was putting through Parliament a law aimed at those disrespectful journalists. The act authorized restrictions on the circulation of any foreign publication found — by the Government — to be "engaging in the domestic politics of Singapore." Mr. Schmeitz noted the legislation without criticism.

"Quite obviously," Mr. Schmeitz said, "Singaporean leaders ... fear that unduly dramatic or exaggerated coverage of Singapore's present economic difficulties may seriously injure the trade and foreign investment upon which this tiny city-state depends."

Last week, using its new press law, Singapore ordered The Asian Wall Street Journal to cut its circulation there from 5,000 copies a day to 400. It did so after the editors refused to print an official's letter that they considered inaccurate and unfair.

The letter denounced an article in The Journal about a new second-tier Singapore stock market. The article said some people thought the Government would use the market "to unload state-controlled and government-backed companies." That was

indeed a widely held view in the financial community. But the Government said the statement amounted to a malicious insinuation that it planned "to cheat its own citizens."

This was the second punishment of a foreign publication under the new press law. Time magazine had its circulation in Singapore cut from 18,000 to 2,000 when it carried an article about the punishment of an opposition politician and then refused to print an official's letter about it. The local press has also felt the heat.

What is happening in Singapore is plain enough. Mr. Lee, who has achieved much over his 28 years in power, is growing increasingly sensitive as the economy turns sour — and increasingly intolerant of criticism.

Will the clampdown on the press produce better government in Singapore? That is the respect theory: Restrict the press to supportive comment, and a country's life will be calmer and better.

But experience and reason suggest that the opposite will happen. Faulty government policies, if they are not

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## A test case in Singapore.

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subject to real criticism, grow worse. Autocrats become more autocratic.

Can anyone really believe that repression of criticism leads to efficiency in a society, to new ideas? Look at the Soviet Union. Or look at Britain, which despite its democratic character has the most repressive press laws of any major Western country — and the worst record of failed government policy.

Mr. Schmeitz said Singapore leaders "won't accept the damage to their country that would result from being libeled" by journalists. He concluded: "That's an idea — a government protecting itself from the damage caused by libels about it — not dissimilar to the important issues raised by C.I.A. Director William Casey in his recent efforts to protect secrets affecting the national security." *A*

After Iran, no one needs to be told the real reason William Casey and others sought more secrecy. They wanted to be able to conceal disaster. Like officials in Singapore, they wanted to avoid criticism. They wanted to hobble the press so the American Government could exercise power without accountability. □