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ESSAY

Us
Against
Them

By William Safire

WASHINGTON, Oct. 29 — The same vicious virus that infected the Nixon White House and caused its ruin is now raging through the Reagan Administration.

"The press is the enemy," Mr. Nixon used to say. That contempt and hatred for an unelected elite led to the bunker mentality of "Us against Them," and then to an obsession with leaks and the excesses of Watergate. The same baleful mood permeates the White House and the Pentagon today.

But this President skillfully masks his animosity toward reporters; he limits to private counsels his denunciation of his earliest journalistic supporters as "hostile." Not merely "critical" — the word the President uses is "hostile": they have crossed over to the enemy, to "Them."

To defeat "Them," he has directed a campaign now reaching crescendo:

1. *Lie Detectors.* To frighten Government officials away from reporters, Mr. Reagan signed an order making it possible for a bureaucrat to demand that his employees take polygraph tests whether or not leaks have taken place or the employees are under suspicion. Asked if the Administration would administer these random tests, Attorney General William French Smith replied, "Why on earth would it do that?" But while the head of the Justice Department professed ignorance, Deputy Assistant Attorney General Richard Willard, 35, the John Dean of the Reagan Administration, carried favor in the Oval Office by testifying to the contrary.

2. *Memoir Censorship.* Mr. Reagan has ordered that all Government officials be required to sign lifetime agreements to submit future writings for Government clearance. This attempted rape of the First Amendment would force all outgoing officeholders to plead with their replacements to allow the publication of memoirs or informed criticism of the new administration's policies. Under this rule, if President Reagan did not like President Carter's book, he could have suppressed it. The White House counsel stands inexcusably mute.

3. *Control of Questioning.* In seeking to gut the Freedom of Information Act, in requiring all White House officials to report to a central authority before returning calls from reporters, and in undermining the tradition of regular press conferences, this President has made a policy of avoiding questions that might show him out of touch. Not since Watergate in 1974 has a healthy President avoided reporters for as long as Mr. Reagan did this fall.

4. *Blackout of War News.* Fearful of television pictures of casualties and impressed by Mrs. Thatcher's management of a supine British press during what I will now call the Malvinas war, the President dictated that coverage of his Grenada invasion would be handled exclusively by Pentagon press agents. He not only barred the traditional access, but in effect kidnapped and whisked away the American reporters on the scene.

The excuses given for this communications power grab were false. Caspar Weinberger, with an inarticulate martinet at his side, pretended that reporting was denied because of concern for journalists' safety, which is absurd: The Reagan Administration would hail the obliteration of the press corps. Another reason advanced — that the military was too busy to provide the press with tender, loving care — is an insult calculated to enrage journalists.

The nastiest reason, bruited about within the Reagan bunker, is that even a small press pool would have blabbed and cost American lives. Not only is this below the belt, but beside the point: We know that the Cubans knew of the invasion plans at least a day in advance. In fact, the absence of U.S.

war correspondents has curtailed criticism that the Pentagon miscalculated and sent in a dangerously small initial invasion force. The C.I.A. should have had a team with a radio on that island a week before the landing.

What has caused the Reagan men to invite a war with the press in the midst of two military campaigns? I should be writing today of the strategic importance of this timely invasion, which I favor and applaud; and here I am looking at my old friend Cap Weinberger with dismay. He is an intelligent human being, a good man, a patriot; and now he is declaring a willingness to obstruct military justice by ruling out a court-martial in Lebanon; professing his abdication of control of the military on press coverage, which is a matter of public policy, and — in my sorrowful opinion — lying through tight lips about why he barred the press from the battlefield in Grenada.

Perhaps Cap is driven by a desire to reaffirm membership in Mr. Reagan's Us. Since the press hates Us, he can indulge in the politically popular hatred and harassment of Them.

Count me among Them. I wish my former colleagues now in the bunker would remember Mr. Nixon's words in his farewell: "Those who hate you don't win unless you hate them — and then you destroy yourself."