

Bashing The Media

By Robert E. Segal

Criticism of media coverage of the TWA Flight 847 hijacking has been bitter, sometimes justified, and often employed for political advantage. Overall, it reflects the enduring truth of the time-worn observation that when a messenger brings bad news to the king, he may be shot.

Newspapers, magazines, radio, and television are business ventures. They must show profits and satisfy shareholders. Operating in an arena of fierce competition, managers, newsgatherers, and photographers are aware of what the public wants and supply it feverishly. Often, they overstep the boundaries of propriety. Some interviews are not only inept but slanted; editorial positions stir the bile of folks with opposing views. In the mad rush to get on the hijack drama first with the most, media people naturally detonated thunder blasts of anger.

Errors of omission are especially damaging. Constant scolding of Israel for holding Shiites rounded up during Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon amounts to a revealing case history. Had journalists taken the trouble to consult Emeritus Professor Leo Gross of the Fletcher School of Diplomacy, the damage to Israel could have been avoided. An outstanding authority on international law, Professor Gross in a letter to The New York Times nailed the lie, widely circulated, that those detained by Israel had been imprisoned in contravention of the Fourth Geneva Convention. Quoting from Article 49, of the compact, he proved that Israel's right to proceed as it did was clearly spelled out.

That legal counsel for both the UN and President Reagan failed to advise accurately helps indicate why serious reporting mistakes are made in the rush to instantaneous coverage of dramatic events.

Where the media did provide a fine service was by presenting views of such well-informed hostages as Peter Hill, the travel agent, who pointed out that most of the hostages themselves, along with millions of Americans, couldn't find Lebanon on the map three weeks prior to the hijacking. Other hostages, notably Richard P. Herzberg, Robert Trautman, and Professor Arthur W. Toga, helped with the aid of the media, to make it clear that they had no sympathy for the hijackers. These views contrasted sharply with other hostages frequently quoted.

So those who continue to bash the media have every right to do so; but they might want to keep in mind the real damage is done by the state-controlled media of nations cursed with dictators. By contrast, we should all be grateful for our Constitution's guarantee of a free press, a blessing that is not only a privilege but a necessity in a great society.

The larger issue, then, is whether America's media will be able to withstand the harm done by some newspaper chains that swallow up other newspaper chains and by folks like Senator Jesse Helms and Ted Turner. Messrs. Helms and Turner want to grab control of CBS in order to jettison Dan Rather. Cable TV Mogul Turner is on record thus: "The networks are the greatest enemies that America has ever had, posing a greater threat than Nazi Germany or Tojo's Japan."

Or reflect for a moment of the injustice done to Pope Paul II by the media cartel headed by Rupert Murdoch. On one day, the Murdoch organization reported the Pope would be coming along with a weekly column; a day or two later the Vatican exploded that claim as something out of a fairy tale world.

Technology has increased the speed of gathering and disseminating news a thousand-

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fold. The tempo of change raises the margin for error. Yet for every carping critic of so much the media provides, there is fortunately, an army of understanding consumers certain to continue thankful for free press despite its lapses.

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