

Sam Donaldson Offers Look at News Reporting

By Mike Zerbe

Sam Donaldson, "rude, insensitive, crude, debasing, autocratic, unfeeling, judgmental, condescending, superior and stubborn," so writes a woman from Waterford, Maine. Not so, says the man who has been the ABC News White House correspondent since 1977. "I understand criticism goes with my job," says Donaldson.

In, *Hold On, Mr. President*, both the title of his autobiography and a phrase Donaldson claims to have never actually said to either Presidents Jimmy Carter or Ronald Reagan, he presents the "story of how I got into the news business, got into the White House press room and under the skin of presidents and other public figures."

Much of what Donaldson says relates closely to the role and responsibilities of a journalist, both in print and on radio/television. In his position as ABC News White House correspondent, Donaldson states that he has but one goal, "to find out what's 'really' going on at the White House," not to report just what the President and his aides say, but to report what it all means. He feels to be effective, questions which reporters ask must be short and specific, not ones that will allow the president to talk around the question and restate his views on a particular topic.

He feels the main objective in questioning the president is to put him on the public record. When questioning a president, Donaldson says there are two things he tries to remember. "First, if you don't ask, you don't find out; and second, the questions don't do the damage. Only the answers do."

Donaldson feels Watergate was the most intense and most difficult story he ever covered. He felt convinced that President Nixon was guilty of criminal conspiracy to obstruct justice. As a good reporter, he knew he had to keep his personal views out of his reporting, which in retrospect, he doesn't feel he was always able to do. The intensive coverage by the media of the Watergate scandal, from the initial break-in, the Saturday night Massacre, the impeachment vote of the House

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Judiciary Committee to the final departure from Washington of Richard Nixon, is detailed by Donaldson, as an insider. In his role as a reporter speaking in retrospect on both the Watergate affair and the Vietnam war, Donaldson feels that the press in those early days wasn't skeptical enough of the government. He feels that lies and attempts to cover up the truth were accepted by the media because they came from the White House. Because of this, he now says, "I conclude that a reporter's role ought to be one of continuing,

unrelenting skepticism about government's actions, not hostility, but a continuing eyes-open look at what the establishment is doing."

Donaldson continues throughout his book to relate his experiences both before his White House days and during the days of the Carter and Reagan presidencies with stories too numerous to mention in this report, but ones which I feel compel me to recommend this book to others who have an interest in the politics and policies of Washington and the White House occupants over the past ten years.

As a final note, for all that he says about the responsibility of journalists to keep their personal

opinions out of the news, to not allow themselves to become insiders, swayed by those who make the news, and to always be accurate in the news they report, I found what I consider to be a flaw in Donaldson's book-- an inaccurate quote. When writing about Richard Nixon's famous "last" press conference after the California 1962 gubernatorial race, Donaldson quotes Nixon as saying, "you won't have Nixon to kick around anymore." As most of us know the true words spoken by Nixon that night were, "You won't have 'Dick' Nixon to kick around anymore." I must admit, a minor error, but come on Sam, that first rule of reporting is accuracy, especially when using quotes!!!

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