

...examination — and sen-
in has made the point that
mination is by all odds the
ns of testing "the credibility
less."
vised Presidential speech is
possible response; so is the
of a detailed written state-
th would lack the essential

THE NATION

President
impeach
charges or
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...cross-examination but both
in if accompanied by docu-
evidence. Either would still
to the charge of being a "con-
fessing not subject to direct
by Senators or lawyers.
he forthcoming testimony of
s. Haldeman and Ehrlichman,
sumably they will be cross-
by the Ervin committee, it
rly be as much in their own
s that of the President and
might not be convincing. If
is clear so far, it is that
the President knew about
and the subsequent cover-
ew it mostly through these
ial associates, who kept him
l from everyone else. To in-
eir own innocence, they are
and to insist on Mr. Nixon's,

Mr. Nixon's various efforts
himself have been—in the
many lawyers—blundering
teaching. From an original
of absolutely no knowledge,
ad to concede considerable
s, whether or not it was
wledge, and has had to plead
ns he took that might appear
of a cover-up were dictated
ial security" considerations
substantiated by anyone.
ne clumsy pattern was seen
written series of questions
White House failed to shake
testimony, and offered the
bsurd charge that Mr. Dean
as "the principal author of
al and constitutional crisis
rgate now epitomizes." Mr.
ckly disavowed this accusa-
ps influenced by the open
evoked in the hearing room.

By Jacques Ellul

BORDEAUX, France—The phenom-
enal development of the mass media
has revolutionized politics. Not simply
because propaganda and biased news
can be so simply and widely dissemi-
nated, but by the very fact of the
availability of so much information.
Every day, via radio, TV and print
the citizen is flooded with thousands
of messages. (We will not complicate
the argument by trying to figure out
the differences in the ways the three
media affect us.) Thus, we have to
realize that the individual retains only
a small proportion of these messages.
European analysts have found that
the average newspaper reader retains
about 10 per cent of the political news
he reads. That is probably fortunate;
if he remembered it all, he would go
mad.
This, of course, raises questions: If
the reader retains 10 per cent of the
political news, what is political news?
What is the filtering system by which
he retains certain parts of the news?
Why does he remember this rather
than that?
This is not a serious problem for
the average citizen. He remembers
what touches him closely: local news
will interest him more than interna-
tional news; news that directly relates
to his job, for example, the imposition
of new tariffs, interests him more
than a discussion of general economic
policy based on remote decisions made
long ago.
In addition, we know that the more
distant and general the issue is, so
much more will the average citizen's
viewpoint and opinions be based on
vague ideas, feelings, and impressions
rather than on facts and hard infor-
mation. Indeed, precise information
only nourishes and confirms his pre-
judgments. In general, the citizen
possesses adequate information about
matters that touch his interests and
concern him personally. He judges and
evaluates other issues by criteria that
have nothing to do with information.
His choices and, therefore, his reten-
tion of certain news items rest totally
on irrational ideas and feelings.
In each of us, then, these two mind-
sets operate on entirely different pat-
terns. (I am hypothesizing the best of
cases, namely, that the newspaper
performs its function well and really

"With a View Toward Assessing the Facts"

furnishes the reader honest informa-
tion without biased commentary.) This
condition is not very serious in the
case of the ordinary citizen who
exerts little influence over political
decision-making.
But there is another consideration
that is very important. In a democracy
a politician must put himself on the
voter's wave length. Otherwise, he
will not be re-elected. If we stick with
the traditional definition of politics—
the conquest and use of power—with-
out considering values, aims and ideal
objectives, we have to realize that the
politician's first questions about infor-
mation are: How has the citizen been
informed? What does he remember?
Which, among all the thousands of
economic, social, and international
events, has he understood and inter-
preted correctly? How can I put
myself into his point of view? How
can I put myself on his level, both
in order to get elected and in order
to express his desires and will in
political action?
If the politician is brave, he may
try to use power for change, bringing
the mass of citizens with him. In this
case, he becomes a model for the
collectivity. He changes its opinions
and orientation. But this raises the
problem of how rigorously we inter-
pret democracy. Do we always operate
democratically? What about a govern-
ment that, instead of following and
expressing the will of the majority,
seeks to change public opinion and
persuade the majority to follow it?
How could it be otherwise, with such
volumes of information available? We
don't even have to discuss secret
information that the politician may
possess. Such information is generally
much less important than is imagined.
A good newspaper provides all the
information needed for correct politi-
cal reflection and decision-making.
The difficulty lies elsewhere.
I believe we must distinguish three
levels of events about which political
decisions are made. The most superfi-
cial are day-to-day events—the acci-
dents which spark interest precisely
because they have just happened. On
a deeper level there are long-range
trends—economic facts, the structures
and phenomena of power and admin-
istrative growth. On the deepest level,
there is the course of major, world-
wide developments—demography, for
example.

One responds to each of these with
a different kind of opinion. On the
deepest level we find the ideologues,
utopians, the theoreticians. Public
opinion, formed (and deformed) by the
stimulus of the latest thing, operates
on the most superficial level. But the
politician normally must position him-
self between the two. He must formu-
late policy designed to last for an
extended period, whose content must
be open to thorough examination. It
must fit action to the structures of
society and not waver in the face of
accidental developments. This presents
him with two problems: first, he is
not going to be on the level of his
constituents' public opinion; second,
he must continually evaluate the
information he receives and distinguish
between what has decisive political
significance and what will be forgotten
tomorrow.
The hardest problem is exactly that
these day-to-day events tend to over-
whelm us. The journalist has a duty
to catalogue and transmit the greatest
possible number of them. But this
leads to psychological and intellectual
difficulties. Because we are constantly
observing what is going on here and
now, we become more and more
convinced that it is important; it is
increasingly difficult to detach our-
selves and reflect on the more endur-
ing and decisive problems. When we
succeed in doing so, we may feel that
we have retreated from reality,
whereas we are trying to see it from
a more profound vantage. We also
may miss a piece of important news.
Nevertheless, it is my constant obser-
vation that a correct frame of refer-
ence is a better basis for accurate
interpretation of reality than merely
following events day by day.
Let us take two specific examples.
During the cold war, while all Europe
was quaking with fear of being
invaded by the U.S.S.R., a few indi-
viduals calmly affirmed that this was
absolutely out of the question on the
basis of careful analysis of Stalin's
thinking and of his policies since 1934.
(The Soviet-German pact, on the other
hand, would have been predictable
on the basis of similar analysis.)
France in 1968 furnishes a second
example. While almost everyone was
declaring that the "Revolution of 1968"
had changed everything, and that
nothing would ever again be the same,
a few observers, not limiting them-
selves to the daily events or the daily

pronouncements of politicians and
revolutionary leaders, predicted (cor-
rectly, as it has turned out) that
nothing would change. Their judgment
was based on analysis of two realities:
first, the direction in which the
French Communist party and the
Confédération Générale du Travail
[the largest French labor organization,
led by Communists] had been evolving
over the previous ten years; and
second, the drive toward centraliza-
tion and executive control that is
characteristic of the French State.
These could only be accelerated, not
reversed, by what took place in 1968.
This is how it has turned out. But to
understand it one had to be detached
from what was working everybody up
and see what was going on in its real
context as part of a logical sequence
of events.
In short, undigested up-to-the-minute
information is not enough. We have
to know what to do with it and how
to utilize it. Above all, one must avoid
the passion and enthusiasm aroused
by passing events.
Here we must be very demanding
of our politicians. We must choose
those who can rise above the every-
day, who do not react without reflect-
ing, who can judge and interpret
events against the background of a
broad range of knowledge. They must
be strong enough to resist the imme-
diate pressures of public opinion,
which may very well change in a
month when another sensation comes
along. Failure to recognize this can
be tragic, because public opinion con-
siders what is most spectacular to be
most important, and views what has
just happened as fundamental, forget-
ting what happened a year, or ten
years, ago.
The very mechanism of the dissemi-
nation of news leads necessarily to a
gap between the political leader's
judgment and the impressions of the
average citizen and, by the same
token, between the whole political
apparatus and the body of the nation.
Here we are in the presence of the
most serious problem that faces a
democracy. It cannot be resolved by
institutions but only by a new
pedagogy.
Jacques Ellul is professor of social
history at the University of Bordeaux,
and author of "The Political Illusion."
Translation by Leonard Mayhew.

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