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Suharto mugs the free press

One useful side effect of presidential foreign travel is the education it imparts to a watchful world about people and places normally obscure to them, such as Indonesia, the first major stop on President Reagan's tour of the Far East. One might expect a nation's government to put its best foot forward in such a sudden global spotlight, but Indonesian President Suharto instead showed the world an all-too-characteristic jackboot. He welcomed the leader of the free world by mugging the free press.

Indonesian authorities removed two Washington-based Australian reporters from the White House press plane on Tuesday and ordered them to leave the country moments before Mr. Suharto welcomed Mr. Reagan in a nearby airport ceremony. Australian journalists have not been allowed into Indonesia since April 10, when the Sydney Morning Herald reported that Indonesia's government is riddled with corruption and cronyism.

The article compared the Suhartos to Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos,

whose monumental corruption of the nearby Philippines stunned the world. The Morning Herald reported: "The President's wife, Madame Tien, has participated in so many questionable business deals that she has long been known as Madame Tien Percent." Judging by the Suharto regime's reaction, the article evidently hit a raw nerve. The two detained Australian journalists are based in Washington for the Australian Broadcasting Corp. and had nothing to do with the Morning Herald article.

Mr. Suharto also banned sale of Tuesday's editions of the International Herald Tribune in Jakarta. The English-language paper was allowed to be sold in Bali, but only after one article considered by the Suharto regime to be unflattering had been blacked out. In addition, an Asian-based correspondent for the New York Times was detained and expelled from Indonesia without explanation.

White House officials interceded with Indonesian authorities but were unable to prevent the ouster of the Australian journalists.

The official U.S. line on Mr. Suharto's regime, which has been given roughly \$2 billion in U.S. aid over the past 10 years, is that it is repressive but improving and still better than communism. That may be true, but Mr. Suharto has a record of oppression of basic human rights. His bullying of Western journalists Tuesday in the presence of America's President is indefensible. It speaks far more loudly to the world about Mr. Suharto than anything ever published in the Sydney Morning Herald.

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