

Mandel's back! Mandel's back! Big deal!



By BYRON ROBERTS

In the end, Marvin Mandel won. He had the last laugh.

The battle wasn't much, as battles go. And Marvin Mandel's real war is far from over. But for four days Marvin Mandel proved that as a manipulator of the media, he has no peer in Maryland.

If ever there was an example of being hoist by one's own petard, the media were so hoisted during the Alfonse-and-Gaston charade over the governor's chair, a show ably masterminded by Mr. Mandel, to his great delight and that of a few disinterested observers.

Ever since Mr. Mandel was charged with political corruption he has been waging open war on the legal front and guerrilla campaigns in the journalistic trench-

Byron Roberts was once a media person himself.

es. At times his scorn for the media boiled into the open, volleyed and thundered, then subsided. But it was never completely forgotten.

It was the appeals court reversal and subsequent musical chairs caper with Blair Lee 3d that drew Marvin Mandel into the latest skirmish with his media opponents. It was while Mr. Mandel was pondering his decision that the media made its own: It decided that Marvin's decision was a story. In so doing it betrayed its own code of journalistic professionalism.

In retrospect, it is obvious that Marvin Mandel sensed what the media should have known, sensed it and then allowed, even encouraged, the media to force a secondary story into a media event of almost distressing proportions.

For four days the public was exposed to booming headlines, Instant Eye cut-ins, live news updates, analyses, television film of Marvin's favorite booth in an Annapolis delicatessen, pictures of Mr. Mandel's "kitchen cabinet."

There was the account of Mr. Mandel and his wife pulling over to the side of a dark Anne Arundel county secondary road while a caravan of speeding news cars zoomed past en route to the Mandel home.

And then there was the reporter asking Governor-elect Hughes what he thought Mr. Mandel was going to do, and whether Mr. Hughes had invited Mr. Mandel to the inauguration.

I recall television's Don Scott, who should have known better, standing outside the Mandel home, shivering in below-freezing temperatures, interviewing the state policeman on guard and finally asking the policeman if he knew what Mr. Mandel's decision was going to be.

Even a creative twinkle on the part of a *News American* headline writer was poor disguise for the fact there was no real story. That paper's banner headline read, "Mandel: I'm Thinking, I'm Thinking."

And while Mr. Mandel thought, the media were frantically scrambling for stories to support a non-story.

About the only angle the media missed, and for that omission there must be some gratitude, was interviewing Bootsie Mandel. But, on second thought, maybe Bootsie, with her marvelous Northwest Baltimore candor, would have spelled out the facts of the situation and saved the media much embarrassment.

Maybe Bootsie would have said, "Who cares?"

Had she, she would have been right. Even after Mr. Mandel made his decision to take over the governmental reins there was that empty feeling, that nagging question of "So what?"

By now it must be as painfully apparent to those anonymous editors as a cocklebur on their Brooks Brothers socks that it didn't make any difference whether Marvin Mandel or Blair Lee was running the state during the final days before Harry Hughes took office.

And, it must be equally as painful, by now, for those same editors to realize that the average citizen of the state had long ago lost interest in the Mandel saga, that he had become lost in the legal legerdemain shrouding the whole affair.

The public had been interested in the verdict. But a verdict—either guilty or not guilty—is understandable, clear. There is no gray.

But through the convolutions of appeals time dragged on and interest in Mr. Mandel's fate waned. Blair Lee was doing the job. Harry Hughes had been elected. He would take over. There was a pervading feeling of let's get on with it.

Then came a blizzard of stories about the case's verdict being vacated, followed by the bizarre five-day War of the Roses between the House of Mandel and the House of Lee. But it was too remote, too meaningless, for the average citizen. It was interesting only to those who didn't think of themselves as average citizens—politicians and news editors included.

Yes, politicians and news editors included. They are members in good standing of what one top-level state bureaucrat once referred to, in a tongue-in-cheek memo, as the "upper echelon rank and file."