

President Exudes Self-Confident Air

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The reporters from the press politely asked their questions and the President answered each of them with a smile, cheerful as a mongoose surrounded by cobras.

"Questions of that sort I do not resent at all," the President assured the journalist who asked about the Nixon personal properties in Florida and California.

But the presidential resentment was so pungent in the East Room of the White House yesterday that Mr. Nixon's smiling disclaimers were ignored. He resents with a tight smile, a sideways wisecrack, a fighting stance that turns their questions into insults and his answers into combat.

Of course, the presidency has been damaged, Mr. Nixon conceded. What else would you expect after four months of prime-time attacks by the TV boys? "By innuendo, by leak, by frankly leers and sneers of commentators," as the President described them, sneering slightly himself.

As for newspapers, there was the rhubarb over his property in San Clemente. "The audit gave the lie," Mr. Nixon said proudly "to the reports that were carried, usually in eight-column heads, in most of the papers of this country. And, incidentally, the retraction ended back up with the corset ads, for the most part."

He began with the same shakiness and tight breathing that was so obvious at his press conference two weeks ago, and occasional quaver, a slur of words. But, on the whole, the performance was smooth and deliberately tough.

The President directed a lot of those little barbs and arrows yesterday at his friends of the working press, but the general feeling in the East Room was that he was talking over heads—to the general public via TV. Next to maybe Congress, the press is the

White House's favorite goat, to be blamed for the Watergate malaise that still afflicts the national government.

If he gave the reporters an occasional hard elbow, Mr. Nixon also gave them a lot of news person-to-person, a practice that usually diverts newsmen from other obsessions. The President will veto the minimum-wage bill. The President will send a second State of the Union message to Congress. The President had his own income taxes audited by the IRS. Newsy items like that might wean the press and video away from Watergate.

Well, not quite. Of 14 questions, six were about Watergate, particularly the secret

tapes that Mr. Nixon has refused to turn over to the courts. Still, from the President's standpoint, that's a big improvement over the Aug. 22 go-round when virtually every question raised a nasty subject.

If he proceeds with regular press conferences, as his staff has predicted, he can expect additional intrusions on the big issues which he

considers the proper business of press conferences. Nobody, for instance, asked him yesterday about his former top assistant, John D. Ehrlichman, a man in whom Mr. Nixon has expressed full faith and whom a Los Angeles grand jury indicted the other day for burglary and perjury.

As the issue of the White House tapes works its way through the courts, Mr. Nixon will doubtless be asked about that again, even if he declines to discuss the ultimate confrontation, as he did yesterday. The subject touched off another little muttered exchange between the President and Dan Rather, the CBS correspondent. When Rather followed up a question about the tapes asked by the ABC correspondent, Mr. Nixon

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jabbed lightly with a crack about the two networks "working together."

"No, not always, Mr. President," Rather rejoined.

"Thank heavens you are competitive," said the Chief Executive icily.

What Mr. Nixon conveyed yesterday, however, was a quality that was not so clear at his public foray two weeks ago—self-confidence. He expressed in words and manner a sense that he is happy to do battle now, convinced that the more the news reporters dwell on Watergate, the more sympathy will gather in the only audience that counts.

How is confidence restored in the President?

"Well," he said, "It's restored by the President not allowing his own confidence to be destroyed. That's to begin. And, second, it's restored by doing something."

So the President was busy doing things, hopeful that the press would report them, that the actions would restore the nation's faith.

"What the President says will not restore it," Mr. Nixon conceded. With a cold edge of sarcasm, he added: "And what you ladies and gentlemen say will certainly not restore it."