

In the White House Pressroom:

By Sally Quinn

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"The air was fraught with tension," dictated several reporters from the White House press room. "An atmosphere of gloom pervades." "One has the feeling of being in a cancer ward, waiting for a patient to die." "One has the feeling of watching sharks closing in on a victim." "One has the feeling of waiting for the guillotine to fall." "One has the feeling . . ."

The air was fraught with clichés.

The same story with variations on the metaphors was being dictated in French and German by foreign correspondents, up and down the banks of the phrase in the press room.

"And you can even get in Japanese if you go downstairs," said one reporter helpfully.

It was, several people said rather matter of factly, The Story of the century. But somehow, it was difficult to focus on the monumentality of it all through the long day.

By 9:30 the beige-and-white-decorated press room was already beginning to fill up with reporters who were to keep the day-long vigil waiting for President Nixon's resignation.

The air really was quite tense. At first, people were jumpy, somehow exhilarated from anticipation and nervous from not knowing. It was not a happy crowd, yet the environment lent itself to a certain black humor which, whenever anyone made a macabre remark, evoked more laughter than was due.

Around 10:30 the place was getting crowded. The White House regulars were beginning to drift in, their red and white passes on chains around their necks, saying hello to each other and making their way back to their cubicles in the backroom.

"Anybody seen Gerry Warren?" people started to ask, and they would wander

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Tension, Rumors, Cliches

were the deadlines, could they get the story in by their first editions, would he give the evening papers or morning papers a break, would he do it on prime time, could the foreign reporters make their final editions?

Many were what is known in the business as "one-shot artists," just in for the big story, not the regulars. Some were the big guns of their papers or networks who had come to supplement the regulars. Many of those had to call days in advance to get visitors' guest passes for the day in order to pass the unusually tight security.

In fact, at one point early in the evening the press was locked inside the pressroom and barred from the White House gate for 23 minutes with no explanation.

Later, Warren explained that the president had walked alone from the Executive Office Building to the White House and did not want to be disturbed. Warren apologized for the doors being locked, saying he was not aware of it. However, some speculated that perhaps Mr. Nixon had wanted a final walk around the grounds and asked that the press not be in evidence.

Many reporters had been on vacation since the impeachment hearings and had not expected to be back until Aug. 19 for the impeachment proceedings in the House.

The television reporters had been barred from going live from the White House lawns where they normally do their taped "stand-uppers" for the evening news programs. So they had set up a bank of cameras across the street in Lafayette Park

back through the press room to the offices and check to see if deputy press secretary Gerald L. Warren had arrived.

Reporters were testing each other for that day's rumor quotient, comparing rumors, discounting them, occasionally encouraging them, and by doing so they began to create an atmosphere of hysteria. Would Nixon resign, yes, no, what

which drew more crowds than the White House did.

Early in the morning Robert Pierpoint of CBS appeared at the park to do his first stand-upper, then NBC's Tom Brokaw arrived in a limousine for his.

Staffs were so large that reporters from the same newspapers and networks sometimes ended up interviewing each other for tidbits and rumors as the hours went by.

Shortly before 11 Warren appeared in a pinstriped suit and blue buttoned-down shirt, looking very much the nice young clean-cut White House staffer. He moved through the room, acknowledging the members of the press, smiling here, "How are you?" there, "Haven't seen you in a while," almost as if he were a distant relative trying to make things easier for the family at a wake. He was so cordial and accommodating at first that it almost seemed as though he were going to offer everyone a drink.

At 11 Warren gave his first briefing. He announced that the President was meeting with the Vice President and there would be more information in an hour.

That as all anyone needed. There was a stampede for the tiny narrow hallway that led to the press cubicles and the telephones. People dictated wildly: "There seems no doubt that the President is discussing his resignation with Ford. . . ."

As the reporters raced for the cubicles, the photographers raced for the doors of the offices through which a corridor leads to the Oval

Office. There was a terrible crunch, and a lot of pushing and shoving. "Can we get pictures of Ford and Nixon, Jerry?" they cried.

"No," he said.

They pushed harder and other reporters, not on their regular beats, pushed to get in too, not even knowing what they were pushing about.

"They always say no," explained one photographer. "And then they crack at the last minute."

They didn't crack and everybody finally settled down they would finally find out what was happening.

"There's nothing going on," shouted one reporter to

the others disgustedly. "God, these people are all hysterical. It's like a god-damned zoo."

"It's enough to turn your brain to mush," said another.

There were some who lounged on the chairs and slept on the sofas, others who walked up and down outside, or sprawled on the floors. But as the crowd grew to several hundred in the press room which is really the size of a very large living room, there wasn't even enough room to sit on the floor.

Conversation and speculation were rampant. So was depression.

"Covering the White House these days," said one veteran White House correspondent, "is beginning to be like covering an abortion clinic. First Kennedy is killed, then Johnson gets driven out, and now Nixon is literally being thrown out. It really makes one wonder about the state of the country. And this job. This used to be a fun job."

Another well-known reporter wore a black suit to the White House. "I just feel funeral," he said.

"I'll be glad when Watergate's over," said a reporter. "There's been too much levity here. It'll be a relief when we can stop talking about this and maybe tell a dirty joke for a change."

"Wonder where the second White House will be under Ford," someone mused.

"Vail, Colorado, I hope," piped up someone else. "Wouldn't that be terrific. I love to ski."

"I've tried to tell Ron Ziegler that this hasn't been fun for us any more than it has for them," said another, changing the subject. "But they won't believe us. They seem to think that this is what we've wanted all along."

Reporters seemed to want to explain how they were not gleeful and gloating about Nixon's potential resignation, how they were Americans first and report-



By Frank Johnston—The Washington Post

Newsmen crowd the White House press room awaiting word of President Nixon's resignation.

ers second today and they didn't like what was happening any more than anyone else.

Yet one reporter, remorseful about the President, was

desperately pursuing rumor after rumor. "Sure, I am," he said. "I smell blood. The vultures are out and I guess I really am a reporter first."

Noon was nearing. Time

for The Big Announcement. "Will they tell us anything?" a novice wanted to know.

"If they tell Jerry he'll tell us," said a veteran. "But

they haven't been telling Jerry very much recently."

The heat was intolerable and the room was filled beyond legal capacity. The hallway was crowded and

someone shouted, "I've warned people if they don't get out of the aisles they'll get crushed."

"I've tried to complain to Warren's office but I can't get through the room to tell them about the mobs," said someone else. "I finally had to call them on the phone from one side of the room to the other."

The crunch began close to the microphones at one end of the room. The word was out that Ziegler, this time, would give the briefing. A murmur went up. This had to be it. It was announced that everyone had to back off. The cameras began pushing reporters out of the way. "Wouldn't you know that if the world were coming to an end," said one annoyed reporter, "someboddam cameraman would say, 'down with your head.'"

The suspense was building. The lights went on. A stenotypist appeared. A hush came over the room. "He's probably going to announce the new Ambassador to Iceland," said someone and there was hysterical laughter.

It died down immediately

when Ziegler appeared. He looked stricken.

He was sweating when he stepped up on the podium, his hands were shaking and he moved them rapidly from his pocket to his papers to his chest, a muscle in his cheek was twitching and his voice cracked as he spoke. He announced simply that the President of the United States would speak at 9 p.m. Then he disappeared.

The photographer chased after him but they turned back. Suddenly they turned and formed a spontaneous circle, taking pictures of each other, out of frustration.

But Ziegler's announcement had told the press what they wanted to know. The President was going to resign. They stampeded back to the cubicles with the news.

But shortly after the announcement, someone walked back into Warren's office with a puzzled look on his face.

"Jerry," he asked, "which President of the United States will speak tonight. The 37th or the 38th?"