In the Bull's-Eye

John Kennedy once said that the news conference puts "the President in the bull's-eye." Richard Nixon so thoroughly agrees that he has held fewer news sessions than any of his recent predecessors. Now when he is close to the nadir of his popularity as President, Nixon is not only braving the arrows but deftly turning news conferences to his advantage.

The process is hardly painless. At San Clemente three weeks ago, when he faced newsmen for the first time in five months, the President was visibly tense as he underwent unusually harsh questioning (TIME, Sept. 3). But Nixon and his aides felt that the televised session had on balance conveyed so favorable an impression to the public that they decided to try another one last week. This time, from Nixon's viewpoint, the results were even better. He skillfully evaded some of the tougher questions, gave informative answers when it suited him, and showed a certain pleasure in once more having the press to kick around.

Together, the two bristling encounters demonstrated how easily a President can control such meetings. They also underscored once again the flaws of the format. Like many skilled public men, Nixon can turn a hostile question into an opportunity to score points. For instance, when he was asked last week why White House statements conflicted concerning expenditures on his homes in San Clemente and Key Biscayne, Nixon avoided a direct answer. Instead he turned the question around, arguing that Government expenditures on San Clemente really reduced the property's value because certain Secret Service facilities infringed on the view.

In an interview under less pressure, that kind of evasion would normally elicit a prompt follow-up question. In large press conferences, however, immediate follow-up is the exception rather than the rule. When Nixon was unresponsive to a question about the Agnew case, the next reporter changed the subject to oil and the Middle East. A second Agnew question doubtless would have brought out another version of a "No comment."

There has always been dissatisfaction about the zigzag quality of presidential press conferences. Recently some of the correspondents have tried to put more follow-up questions. Last week Dan Rather of CBS stuck to the subject that ABC's Tom Jarriel had raised about release of the Watergate tapes. Yet the second question produced no really fresh information; the President is an expert at avoiding the sharp point of a query.

In many cases, the only value of a follow-up after an evasive answer is to underscore the evasion. In 30 or 45 minutes, a press conference necessarily covers some ground superficially while omitting other important areas. In any event, no one knows whom the President will recognize next. Dozens of reporters might be eager to stick to one subject while the President's finger points to someone else. Rather acknowledges complaints that "questions are not put as logically in sequence as a prosecuting attorney would put them. But I've resisted any move to prearrange questions. I think reporters cherish their independence above all."

Long Lag. One solution would be to have some press conferences devoted to a single subject; last month's session at San Clemente was virtually that, but only because of Watergate and the long lag between meetings. Regularly scheduled sessions—say two a month—would also relieve the pressure to gallop to all points of the compass.

Of course, the President is unlikely to adopt any regularized arrangement. Still, the prospect now is for some increase in frequency, if only because Nixon seems to think that the time is ripe to challenge the press's credibility again. In both recent conferences, he repeatedly needled the news media, implying that journalists were to blame for some, if not all, of his troubles. His cracks have developed a pattern; he gets across the idea that journalists are beastly by saying that they are entitled to be so. Last week, when asked about public confidence in him, he put part of the blame on four months of prime-time "leers and sneers of commentators—which is their perfect right." How to rebuild confidence? By action, not words, he replied: "What the President says will not restore it. And what you ladies and gentlemen say will certainly not restore it." In something of an overstatement, he said that charges of impropriety in the financing of San Clemente were "carried, usually, in eight-column heads in most of the papers of this country," while the "retractions ended back up with the corset ads, for the most part."

Despite Nixon's anti-press thrusts and the imperfections of the format, the press conference is still of great value. Aside from the election campaign and the State of the Union message, nothing in the American system requires the President to report to the public directly. A press conference gives the electorate a chance to see how the Chief Executive responds to—or dodges—at least some of the moment's major issues. The fact that the President can and usually does exercise a great deal of control over these exchanges is hardly new. Calvin Coolidge, who insisted on getting written questions in advance, found one day that the reporters had all sent in the same tough query. He countered by making up a question to his liking and then answered it.

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THE VARIED FACES OF PRESIDENT RICHARD NIXON DURING HIS PRESS CONFERENCE AT THE WHITE HOUSE
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