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Mr. Nixon Meets the Press

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In 1962, when Richard Nixon lost decisively to Edmund G. Brown in their contest for the governorship of California, he held an emotional "farewell" membered as the occasion on which he said to the assembled reporters, "You won't have Dick Nixon to kick around anymore." But another statement Mr. Nixon made on that occasion is more pertinent now. He said:

"I think it's time that our great newspapers have at least the same objectivity, the same fullness of coverage that television has. And I can only thank God for television and radio for keeping the newspapers a little more honest."

Just 11 years later, last Friday evening in the East Room of the White House, President Nixon had a different assessment of electronic journalism:

"I have never heard or seen such outrageous, vicious, distorted reporting in 27 years of public life," he said of the electronic media. "When people are pounded night after night with that kind of frantic, hysterical reporting, it naturally shakes their confidence."

The shaken confidence of which he spoke was that of the American people in their government, and, as he and others in this administration had done in the past, the President laid much of the blame at the doorstep of the press. Although he chose on this particular occasion to cite the electronic media, the refrain was familiar to print and broadcast journalists alike.

Because the press and Mr. Nixon have played such vital roles in each other's affairs, it is improtant to examine at least some portion of the record of this relationship, particularly the remarkable East Room meeting of last Friday evening.

Richard Nixon is, it must be remembered, the most televised president, and — more important — the president who has been seen by more Americans more often than any other. In his first 18 months in office, for example, Mr. Nixon appeared on prime time television as many times as the combined appearances of Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson in the same period of time. These statistics appear in a new study, "Presidential Television," released coincidentally last week. Former Federal Communications Commission Newton Minow, John Bartlow Martin and Lee Mitchell are its authors and Twentieth Century Fund was the sponsor.

President Nixon, the new study also tells us, made 32 special prime time appearances in his first 40 months in office, compared with 24 by President Johnson in more than five years; 10 by President Kennedy in a little less than three years, and 23 by President Eisenhower in eight years.

Television provided Mr. Nixon with this extraordinary opportunity to send his message over the heads of the press and Congress to the American people, while he held remarkably few press conferences, especially when compared with those of his predecessors: Roosevelt, 998 in his three terms; Truman, 324 in two terms; Eisenhower, 193 in two terms, Kennedy 64 in three years; Johnson, 126 in six years, and Mr. Nixon, 28 in the four years of his first term — and he is behind that pace so far in his second term.

These statistics form the background for one problem that was evident on Friday evening — the shouting that caused one participant in the press conference to say later that some of his colleagues engaged in "unnecessary rudeness." Here was a room filled with 200 reporters, who have had perhaps a half dozen opportunities to question the President this year, all trying to be recognized at once. The result was the unseemly shouting, "Mr. President! Mr. President!"

One journalist referred to such presidential press conferences as "the East Room spectacle" and one of the President's aides called it the "Tijuana bull ring," without specifying who was the bull and who the torea-

dor. In theory, the presidential news conference is to serve as a substitute for a town meeting. The reporters, acting as surrogates, supposedly ask of their leaders what the people would ask if they could be present. In fact, it is so staged as to serve principally the interests of the president. For all of the complaints of this administration of unfair treatment by the press, Mr. Nixon is a media master. He chooses whom to recognize, and he does so with a pretty good idea of which reporters are likely to ask which questions.

That fact prompted one participant, Peter Lisagor of the Chicago Daily News, to call the reporters in the room "nothing but spear carriers" in the drama.

If indeed the reporters in such a press conference are spear carriers, a couple of them stepped out of passive character and took aim. But, far from the hostile blood-letting it was later characterized as being, the press conference was largely decorous in the actual questions.

One question challenged the White House's credibility in the matter of Bebe Rebozo's and Howard Hughes' $100,000, and another openly accused the administration of concealing the evidence of "high crimes and misdemeanors," that pungent constitutional phrase that spells impeachment.

Were it a very different kind of forum, Mr. Nixon could have expected a far more searching examination. Imagine the difference if, instead of 200 shouting reporters hungry to be heard, a panel of eight or 10 well-informed journalists had spent the same amount of time with Mr. Nixon to cover much the same ground.

Mr. Nixon responded to 16 questions in 38 minutes, more than a third of those having to do with his favorite subject of international affairs. Just consider the subjects on which follow-up was absolutely impossible:

The President gave a version of the Aaron Burr case that matched his posture with that of Thomas Jefferson and seemed to demonstrate a precedent for his position on the release of presidential documents. Mr. Nixon said that Jefferson provided a court with a "summary" of a key letter. In fact, Jefferson gave the U.S. Attorney and the courts the entire letter. The discrepancy went unchallenged.

The President said that the Middle East alert was the most serious "crisis" this government has had with the Soviet Union since the Cuban missile crisis. And then, in the next sentence, he said that it wasn't much of a crisis because detente worked so well. No follow up again.

The President said the reason Mr. Rebozo gave back the money to Hughes was that "the Hughes company . . . had an internal fight of massive proportions . . ." No one could ask what Mr. Rebozo was doing accepting a campaign contribution from a company. The setting works against that kind of careful follow-up.

Presidential press conferences suffer such defects under the best of conditions. When so many answers are called for, it becomes nearly impossible.

From the "Checkers" speech of 1952 up to last Friday, Mr. Nixon has proved himself over and over again a master of the electronic medium. The outstanding exception was the series of debates he held with John F. Kennedy in 1960.

After those debates, Mr. Nixon would comment in "Six Crises" that he "recognized the basic mistake I had made. I had concentrated too much on substance and not enough on appearance." He has diligently sought, and mostly succeeded, in avoiding that mistake since. Friday evening was no exception.