

How to watch Nixon on the tube

An old New Dealer who used to script Franklin Roosevelt's famous radio talks to the nation visited the White House not long ago, and reminisced about F.D.R.'s electronic manner and melodious tenor voice. He told the men who now prepare the President's speeches it was a good thing for Nixon that he had so early in his term found his proper medium—television.

The pace of Nixon's day is tuned to the tube. When he travels, the big events are carefully scheduled to be carried via satellite right to American TV sets. At home the televised press conference is the President's major conduit to the populace—the men of the printed word count, but only in a peripheral way.

The President prepares painstakingly for his TV appearances. He diets to keep from looking jowly. He dashes off to Florida or California so that his face is always sun-tanned—best for color productions. He has his suits tailored to show a man of quiet good taste. He eschews notes or reading texts for most of his appearances, feeling that to show knowledge about the major issues of the day is to build confidence. Thus this man who enters more American living rooms than any other figure does it with a certain cool competence that may not leap with inspiration but creates an aura of responsible craftsmanship. In the aftermath of the tumultuous and uncontrolled personality of Lyndon Johnson, it has a certain appeal.

The President uses a single sprig of a microphone and a plain backdrop so that he is clearly the focal point onstage. He lets his face carry most of the emotion, furrowing and unfurrowing, smiling and thin-lipping. His responses and gestures, which seem almost programed, give a clue to what he is trying to get across—and what he really has on his mind. He affects a touch of casualness by thrusting a hand

in a pocket. In the crescendos he sometimes unleashes his hands and the long fingers clasp and unclasp and wring and point and double. This is the moment of passion, carefully calculated. When it passes, the hands go back behind him or hang at the side.

"You may remember . . ." he sometimes says, and it is a safe bet that you are going to hear how Richard Nixon has been on top of the issue for several years. He just wants to remind you. When he tucks his chin down he is the teacher. His voice generally drops a few notches and he looks at the floor. The listener should get ready for a lot of statistics and facts. He has recorded them on his player-piano mind and they reel off flawlessly.

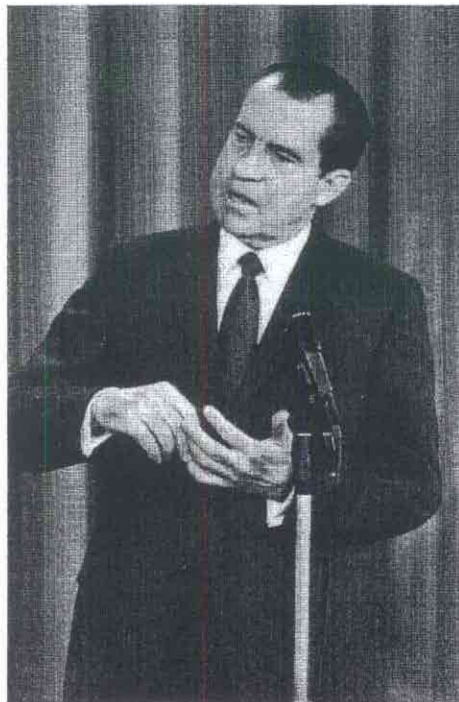
When he has no real answer he sets the tone of having one. The wags in the press audience swear that when the phrase "let me make one thing clear . . ." comes up, Nixon is about to obfuscate. The repetition of a thought, the deliberate repeating of a sentence, is a play for time—he needs a few seconds to think. When he leaps instantly into an answer with the shout, "the answer is . . ." he feels he has a splendid rejoinder—generally something to do with placing the blame on the

opposition or showing how he and his good Republican friends have tried through the years to convince the narrow-minded opposition of the virtue of the point the questioner has just made.

When he is making an intricate case for his argument, Nixon's hands come out and he uses the fingers as if he were playing the piano. The agitation increases until he reaches the climax: a Nixon theory or fragment of philosophy delivered with fists clenched as if it were the ultimate truth. The agitation subsides and he spreads his hands in a gesture of peace-across-the-seas and then he puts them away.

There is one thing to watch for. If he says, "I should distinguish . . ." with a long forefinger pointed at the questioner, it means that he doesn't like the question and is about to dodge it by the artful method of discrediting the stated direction and substituting his own.

The Nixon performance is so careful that it does seem somewhat contrived. And yet there is a certain honesty in that very approach. Nixon is not a naturally comfortable man in public and he works hard to perform well. A lot of people evidently appreciate the fact that he takes such pains to talk to them.



In command at a televised press conference, President Nixon uses his fingers to tick off the main points of his case.