

Poster

The Information War

A Commentary

By Nicholas von Hoffman

So what's to say?

Nothing.

Friday night, Mr. Nixon had a press conference. Outside the White House fence, numberless praying, moaning, writhing people, holding candles up in the darkness of the late spring night. Inside the grounds, Pat Moy-nihan strolling with his head cocked back, succulating on an arrogant cigar.

Even before the conference began, the newspeople's morale was low. It is a gullible profession; more than most Americans, it wants to believe, but the events of the past days had broken even that strong faith. The next hour of presidential bullbleep would destroy the White House news conference as a useful or reliable means for mass communication.

Some hundreds of people are packed into a room, only a fraction of whom will be recognized for a question. Some of the ablest men, the ones who know, are passed over in favor of administration shills. And, when rarely a sharp and hostile critic is allowed to pose a question, the answer can be evasive, misleading or dishonest because you're not allowed a second question. It's one to the favored customer, and even if you get lucky and are called on and you get one of those double-talky answers, you can't get the floor again to say, "Mr. President, you didn't answer the question."

This is why he can get away with telling whoppers like, "We will pursue the path of peace at the negotiating table there (Paris) and a number of other forums that we are presently working on." Nobody called him on it, not because there weren't men and women in the room who have expert knowledge and would, but because they have no chance of getting the floor.

Mr. Nixon and whoever they are, those nameless ones in the American Kremlin that he listens to, learn with the slow imperfection of a blind child mastering Braille. With half a nation screaming that a flotilla of tugs should be sent to sea to rope the White House and drag it back to the continental shelf, they still think all they have on their hands is a propaganda problem. "Communications" is what they call it.

As a result, nobody is safe. Even the tramps sleeping sweetly in the parks are in immediate danger of being roused by a White House aide and asked to give an opinion. In times past, they'd grab students, cut their hair, bathe them, powder them with DDT and rush them into the throne room for a royal seance, but now the

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Nixon's Information War

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President himself is out in the early dawn—his best hour for public appearances—unzipping sleeping bags to confront young people who look back at him with incredulous, partially unstuck eyes.

If Mr. Nixon and his buddies are learning anything, you can't tell it from their official acts, but everybody else is learning a lot about Mr. Nixon and the fellow travelers in his administration. Already, a school of thought has arisen which holds we were better off when we were ignorant.

One of the victims of Operation Total Talk is Todd Everett, a young Washington, DC., elementary school teacher, who was graduated from Yale last year. He and three others found themselves late Saturday afternoon in deep conversation with James Farmer, assistant secretary of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. Almost immediately after the hour-long meeting was over, Todd in a state of gloom, gave this report:

"We talked to him about how bad education was in the District and how his program wasn't reaching anybody. Farmer responded that he knew things were that way, but what can you do? He gradually admitted that things were pretty dismal, but he said he didn't sit in on Cabinet-level meetings. . . . He said he was afraid to speak out because he would lose his effectiveness. He told us he went to Nixon and threatened to quit if Mississippi Headstart didn't get its money but that he couldn't do this very often."

"He was dispirited because there are good people in HEW who are leaving, and he said, once that happens, there will be no one to respond. . . . We walked out of his office and said to ourselves, 'My God! There is no way that things are going to change.'"

Another one of the young persons at the meeting reported that Farmer had all but told them that Secretary Finch was also shut out of the White House without any influence. "Farmer had no hopes. There he was, a high government official, on the cover of Time magazine, and he was powerless."

The great demonstration around the White House re-

flected the same spirit of futility. In the past, people at demonstrations were always coming up to you and asking, "Do you think it'll do any good?" On Saturday, you never heard the question. There were very few signs, the funny, sarcastic slogans that have been so typical of this movement; the music was almost nil, although Phil Ochs played his "I'm Not Marching Anymore," which simply caused people to make wry reflections about how many demonstrations he'd sung it at. The war, after all, is in its eighth year, only two short of the Siege of Troy.

The brightest part of the weekend was the District of Columbia Police Department. While there were perhaps some examples of excessive force and indiscriminate gassing at George Washington University, the general opinion was that the coppers showed New York and Chicago how to do these things. Everywhere, they were pleasant, friendly and polite, enforcing the law but also sharing their food with the demonstrators and being helpful. Everybody had a story to tell of cops doing a kindness, like the two fellows seen on H Street, crawling along the pavement looking for a woman's contact lens.

Perhaps because many Washington cops are against the war or perhaps because it still is possible for some bureaucracies to straighten themselves out and do what they're supposed to do, the police work was so good, one young out-of-town visitor was overheard in a drugstore saying, "These D.C. pigs are outtasight, heavy, heavy cats."

The other plus coming out of this weekend was that people have built up an immunity to the snow job. A couple of years ago, if LBJ had done what Mr. Nixon did this weekend, he would have won himself six months more grace to bomb the bejabbers out of Vietnam and six more months of American casualties, but the last few days show that fewer and fewer people can be horsebleeped and bullbleeped into saying, "Give 'em another chance."

They know they came here and got nothing; they left reconfirmed in the belief they will have to do much, much more to end the war. They'll do it, so, what's to say?

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