



Don Oberdorfer

Covering the President

RON ZIEGLER gave the word and led the way, and the reporters trooped out of the press room, past a guard and down the corridor, past more guards and Secret Service agents, and into the Oval Office. There had been no advance warning. As they took their places standing in semi-circle around the big desk, they hastily scanned their mental lists of questions crying out to be asked.

The door opened, and the President walked in, wearing a blue suit and blue tie. He stood behind the desk and spoke for several minutes about plans to aid Pakistan.

He paused and nodded. The questioning began.

It was Richard M. Nixon's first question and answer session with the White House press corps since June 1. So much had happened in nine weeks: the publication of the Pentagon papers and the government's attempt to suppress them; the Vietcong peace offer; the presidential review of the economy and decision to make no change in policy; Henry Kissinger's secret trip to China and the announcement of the forthcoming presidential journey; the announcement of the second highest U.S. budgetary deficit since World War II; the President's public repudiation of his Department of Health, Education and Welfare in a school segregation case; the buggy ride on the moon of the astronauts—and much more.

The first questions were about the China trip, the most sensational diplomatic development in many years. Mr. Nixon replied at length, yet the discussion barely scratched the surface. Nobody asked about the reversal of the U.S. position regarding China's admission to the United Nations. Nobody asked about the sudden developments' impact in Japan or elsewhere in Asia, or about the continuing Chinese denunciation of the United States.

The President was cautious, much different in his tone from the dramatic announcement of July 15. "A journey for peace . . . not just for our generation but for future generations," he called it then—but now he warned against expecting too much. One let the contradiction pass; too many other questions needed to be asked.

The President dropped a tantalizing hint of a summit meeting to come with the

Russians. On Vietnam, he spoke with feeling about his secret pursuit of a negotiated settlement, and declared that the record — when it all comes out — will answer the critics. One thought of Lyndon Johnson, planning his trip to Russia that never came — and declaring to the end that the secret record on Vietnam would someday bear

him out. Could this man succeed where the other failed? One wondered. It was a half-formed thought; no time to think it through and no way to ask.

THE LAST HALF of the press conference dwelt on the economy, now the administration's greatest source of worry. The President seemed to be opening the door a crack to a stronger wage-price policy, yet clearly it was still distasteful to him. Was this the first tentative move toward a new policy? The reporters tried to pin him down, but failed.

Nobody mentioned politics, partly because the President refused to answer a question on the topic at his June press conference. Yet political planning meetings continue in the White House. A fence-mending conference with Conservative Sen. James Buckley, a presidential reception for his "early bird" supporters — such items are simply omitted from the schedules which are made public. Politics abounds — but the topic is verboten. No chance to ask why this should be so.

Henry Kissinger, Robert Haldeman, Herbert Klein came quietly into the back of the room when the conference began, listening intently. Reporters' pencils flew, notebooks filled with frantic scratchings. After 14 questions, the senior correspondent announced, "Thank you."

The session lasted 49 minutes, one of the longest since Mr. Nixon came to the White House. It was his 18th press conference as President, and the sixth in the Oval Office. Without cameras, klieg lights or a television audience, it is more of a serious exchange and less a spectator sport than the East Room variety.

Outside the Oval Office, past the guards and a few steps down the corridor is the splendid isolation of the press center which Mr. Nixon built above the old White House swimming pool. The reporters compared notes on the trip back to their cocoon and wondered how many weeks — and how many great events — would transpire before they would return to see the man.