

Ford and Truman Briefings on Budget: How a President Takes a Case to Public

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When President Ford conducted his press briefing yesterday on the new budget, he was the first President to do so since Harry S. Truman, and the event put into focus some changes that have occurred in 23 years.

The changes are not so much in what the Government and the President do, but rather in how they present and explain themselves to the American people.

Those who attended one or more of Mr. Truman's budget briefings as well as Mr. Ford's, perceived major similarities between the two events. Chief among them was the sense that both men conveyed of being on top of their jobs and enjoying it, displaying detailed knowledge of countless facets of the Government's activities and their costs.

The President's Case

Mr. Truman may have come closer to demonstrating that he knew literally everything about the Federal budget, but everything was a lot less than that it is now.

The big difference that was noted in the two sets of press briefings was thus not in the personalities or abilities of the two Presidents or even in their programs.

The big difference was in their perceptions of how the budget could and should be used as a vehicle for taking the President's case to the people.

In brief, Mr. Ford used

modern public relations techniques to put on an extravaganza for public viewing, with his Cabinet members lined up beside him for the television cameras and his aides passing out pounds of documents, in addition to the budget itself, aimed at explaining his programs and converting everyone to the belief that they were good programs.

Mr. Truman's budget briefings, in contrast, were matters of stark simplicity.

First, there was the locale and the audience. The Truman briefings were held in a place called the Indian Treat Room in the Old Executive Office Building. It would hold scarcely more than 200 persons. Except for the President, his Budget Director, his Secretary of the Treasury, and perhaps 10 experts from the Bureau of the Budget, there was no one in the room except members of the working press.

Nowadays, the working press fills no more than a third of the big State Department auditorium, and the rest of the seats are taken by officials from various agencies and some specially favored lobbyists.

Visitors Applaud

These visitors are not allowed to ask questions, but they can and do applaud, thus possibly creating the impression for radio and television audiences that it is the press that is applauding the President. Yesterday, it was Vice President Rockefeller who initiated the applause on the two occasions that it occurred.

Mr. Truman's Budget Director and staff were present for the briefings solely as backstops in the event that some question came up that the President could not handle. They were rarely needed.

Mr. Ford, on the other hand, called on many of his subordinates to supply, in their own words, the arguments for and the philosophy behind his programs. He had to turn to a lieutenant for a fact only a couple of times.

The change from the essentially factual content of the budget briefings of the early 1950's to the more public-relations oriented ones of today has been a gradual one, rather than something that Mr. Ford can be accused of starting.

In fact, Mr. Ford eliminated one aspect of the press-agentry that was an established part of the briefings in the Nixon years—a slide show of charts and graphs making whatever analytical points about budget trends that the Administration wanted to emphasize.

Just why the briefings have come to consist so largely of questions designed to elicit the

Administration's philosophy, rather than factual information, is not clear.

One explanation may be that as more and more information has been provided about the budget—separate books of special analyses, "fact sheets," chart books, separate presentations by every Government department and agency—members of the press corps find their answers in documents, rather than by questions a President or a budget chief.

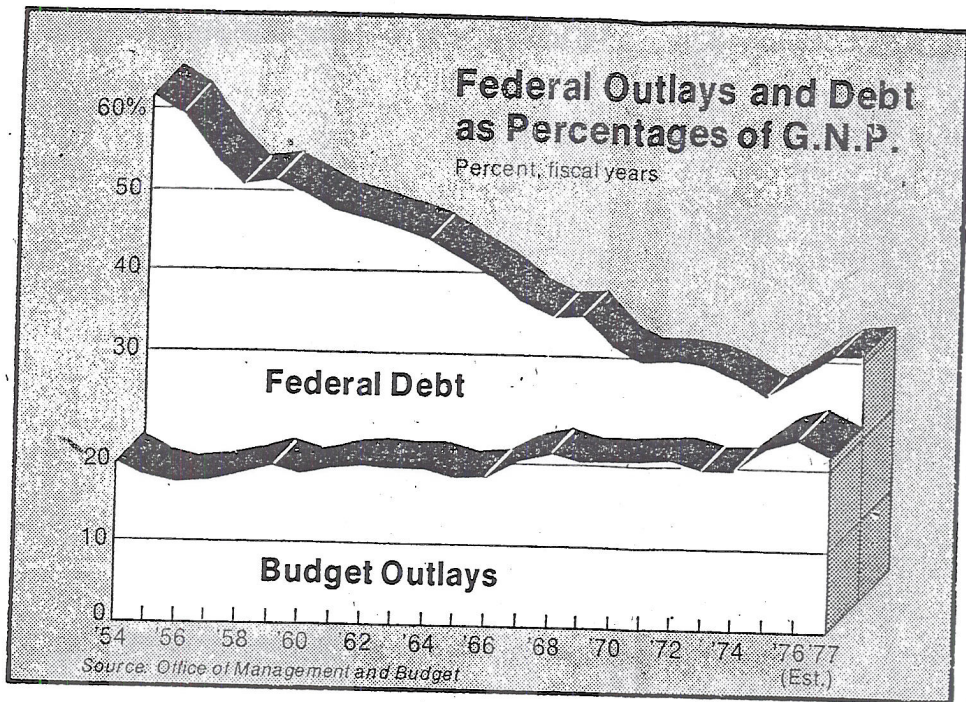
Other possible views are that the press has become so accustomed to receiving persuasive versions of the official Administration "word" that it accepts them without further inquiry.

Still another possibility is that the press is overwhelmed by the pounds of materials that flow from the White House, the Office of Management and Budget and all the other agencies and assumes that the factual answers are in there some place and to be found later, when needed.

Not that budgets or budget briefings were ever without their political side.

One of the main themes of Mr. Truman's last budget, which he presented in January 1953, just 11 days before Dwight D. Eisenhower took over the Presidency, was a discussion of all the liberal Democratic programs that the voters needed, but were not going to get, according to Mr. Truman, because they had elected a Republican President.

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