

'Backgrounders': Disputed Anonymity

By FRANK LYNN

Ronald L. Ziegler, the White House press secretary, brought a guest briefer along with him last Tuesday for Mr. Ziegler's daily 4 P.M. briefing of newsmen on President Nixon's activities.

The guest was Henry A. Kissinger, the President's assistant for national-security affairs, but that was not publicly known until yesterday when Senator Barry Goldwater, Republican of Arizona, identified Mr. Kissinger and inserted his briefing in The Congressional Record.

Like a visiting lecturer, Mr. Kissinger had stepped behind the podium in the mortuary-like West Wing briefing room and told 40 reporters that the United States had been working on a political settlement of the India-Pakistan conflict when India attacked Pakistan.

Mr. Kissinger, one of the most active aides on the briefing circuit, spent an hour detailing the varied diplomatic and military maneuvers in the crisis and responding to the newsmen's questions.

Unidentified Aides Cited

Within hours, radio, television and newspapers were telling the nation how unidentified "White House officials" viewed the conflict on the Asian subcontinent.

They were operating under an agreement with Mr. Ziegler that the information elicited at the "background" briefing could be used but that the briefer could not be identified or directly quoted.

Four days earlier, operating under similar ground rules at a briefing, Joseph J. Sisco, an Assistant Secretary of State, had criticized India for expanding the India-Pakistan conflict but was identified only as a State Department official in news stories and broadcasts reporting his verbal attack on India.

A Growing Controversy

The incidents pointed up a growing controversy over the use of "backgrounders" by officials at all levels of government. The background sessions are used even more by governments in countries where the press is less independent than in this country.

The backgrounders are in effect full-blown news conference, with one major difference. The official conducting the news conference cannot be identified and thus is not directly responsible for what he said.

The controversy does not involve the relationship between individual reporters and government sources in which the informants risk their jobs by providing information that is often adverse to the administration in power. These contacts are generally initiated by reporters.

Bradlee Asks Boycott

Benjamin C. Bradlee, executive editor of The Washington Post, in a recent talk at Yale University, called for a boycott of backgrounders. He contended that "by accepting unattributed information, we are allowing ourselves to be used by the government."

Noting that the sessions cannot be kept secret in government, diplomatic and media circles, because they involve so many newsmen, Mr. Bradlee said that only the reader was kept in the dark.

In an interview, A. M. Rosenthal, managing editor of The New York Times, was also critical of the background sessions. He said such sessions were justifiable at times, but added that "the press had allowed this to go much too far."

"The backgrounder has become a way of life and often becomes an obstacle in the way of the flow of full information," Mr. Rosenthal said.

Used for Officials' Ends

Mr. Bradlee and other newsmen noted that such sessions were sometimes used for Administration propaganda, to float policy trial balloons and even to inform Government officials indirectly that they were in disfavor and should resign before being dismissed.

Defenders of the backgrounders, including Herbert G. Klein, the Nixon Administration's Director of Communications, and some newsmen, contend that officials are less inhibited and more likely to be frank in such sessions.

"Reporters can get more information on an informal basis," said Mr. Klein in a telephone interview. "The more important thing is to get the people the information. They don't care about who is giving the information."

The rationale for the back-

grounders on the India-Pakistan crisis was that direct criticism of India by President Nixon or Secretary of State William P. Rogers would have prompted a caustic reply by Indian leaders and increased tensions between the two countries.

In diplomatic circles, backgrounders dealing with foreign affairs are viewed as primarily intended for domestic use and not to be considered an official communication between governments.

By comparison, background briefings are considerably less frequent in New York. Governor Rockefeller first revealed his intention to crack down on rising welfare costs in a rare non-budget background session earlier this year in which he explained some of his plans.

City Hall Backgrounders

In addition, the Governor's budget is explained at a background session in the Executive Mansion's living room every year to give reporters an opportunity to question the Governor and other state officials freely on the long, complex document.

Similarly, the Lindsay administration conducts a briefing, such as one this week, hours before release of the capital budget. However, there have been no other backgrounders that City Hall reporters can recall.

Some corporations also conduct press briefings, but they are infrequent and considerably less important than Federal Government briefings.

Despite the controversy and the varied views, Washington's background sessions have proliferated in recent years to the point where even reporters now sponsor them.

Attribution Level Varies

There are at least five groups of reporters in Washington who regularly invite politicians and Government officials to breakfast, luncheon or dinner, depending on the group.

The principal course is an informal discussion that is sometimes completely off the record and thus cannot be printed. At other times, it may be for use but with no identification of the informant, and occasionally it may be completely on the record.

At one of these sessions, for example, the late Robert F. Kennedy first indicated that he was considering running for President in 1968.

Ousted by a Briefing

At another, James Keogh, who was leaving his post as a Presidential aide, told reporters that three Cabinet members would be leaving the Administration. It took nearly a year for the prophesy to be fulfilled, but Walter J. Hickel, David M. Kennedy and Clifford M. Hardin eventually left their Cabinet posts.

Reporters at the session were convinced that Mr. Keogh was speaking with Administration knowledge and approval and that by letting the Cabinet members read about their impending departures, he was, in effect, dismissing them.

Despite the use of these reporter-sponsored sessions for such political infighting, the major controversy has been over the Government backgrounders that are initiated and controlled by the Administration, not reporters.

Kennedy Christmas Talk

A year ago, President Nixon asked eight conservative columnists to his office. Within days, their columns were filled with unimpeachable intelligence that the President intended to name a Southerner to the Supreme Court and that liberal Republicans who opposed the Administration should pay heed to the defeat of Senator Charles E. Goodell in New York.

The late President Kennedy conducted an annual Christmas-time backgrounder with reporters as he vacationed in Florida. Mr. Kennedy gave a rundown on his Administration's accomplishments during the year. Reporters, of course, were free to accept or reject all or part of the President's accounting of his own stewardship.

The invitation lists for these sessions vary. Sometimes it is reporters or columnists who have been kind to the administration; at other times, newsmen for the major newspapers and networks are invited, and, occasionally, the audience is merely those who happen to be present in a press room when a briefing is scheduled.

One exclusive invitation by Vice President Agnew backfired at a governor's conference earlier this year. A group of reporters were invited to Mr. Agnew's suite for a drink

record views on many subjects, including his misgivings about the growing rapprochement between Communist China and the United States.

The reporters attended the session were proscribed from printing Mr. Agnew's remarks, but when reports of his views began to circulate, other reporters—not in attendance and therefore not proscribed—printed the story.