

## Presidential News Conferences Quietly Dying of Nixon Disuse

By MAX FRANKEL

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, June 18—

The Presidential news conference is dying, without ceremony or explanation, and reporters who moan about it are being put down by the Nixon staff as self-serving whiners who merely miss the chance to kick the President around or to bask in his glory in public.

The reporters are not much more generous in speculating about Mr. Nixon's motives,

so there is a lot of ugly talk about a subject that might just be worth some serious discussion, especially in an election year.

In all of 1971, President Nixon faced ad hoc questioning by the White House press on nine occasions, compared with an annual average of 24 to 36 by Presidents over the last 25 years. There have been two news conferences in 1972, the last one 12 weeks ago, compared with President Eisenhower's 13 and President Johnson's 15 in the years they sought re-election, 1956 and 1964. The last formally scheduled news conference, which allows the preparation of questions in advance and provides radio and television as well as press coverage, occurred on June 1, 1971.

But statistics alone reveal nothing about the flavor of news conferences. When held weekly, or even fortnightly, they invariably provide at least a question or two, and an answer or two in the President wishes, on virtually every major topic of current public concern. When they occur every three months, great events and enormous issues are ignored. The reporter seeking to make up for lost time, or having lost the habit of direct and decisive interrogation, winds up lobbing puff balls or pomposities, or both in one pitch.

An impromptu quickie, with the available reporters summoned to the President's desk once every 90 days, and a duly scheduled gathering once a year is, indeed, often worse than nothing.

### Worse Than Nothing

There hasn't been a chance to question President Nixon about the long-forgotten war between India and Pakistan or about the release of Jimmy Hoffa from prison or about his budget deficits or taxes or welfare or the crime rate or the environment or population growth or the bombing and mining in Vietnam or the new F.B.I. or Taiwan or the sleeping accommodations in the Kremlin. There have been only negligible opportunities to ask about the new China policy or meat prices or the war or antitrust policy or the rotating Cabinet or campaign costs and contributors.

Mr. Nixon has not been shy about public appearances. He has had record-breaking hours of free television from Peking and Moscow and in between, with carefully timed and phrased public pronouncements. His staff contends that these appearances are more suitable and also more popular, although in candid moments it is conceded that the real motive is to avoid the allegedly "hostile" Washington reporters and to appeal "over their heads to the people."

The irony in all this is that, when Mr. Nixon began in 1969 on a policy of fortnightly or at least monthly television news conferences, he was judged by those reporters to be a deft fielder and effective performer. But that, of course, was before there was much of a Nixon record to be defended, or asked about.

### Equal Time Problem

There is a problem now about televised sessions, because the Federal Communications Commission has reaffirmed its ruling that a Presidential news conference would require the granting of equal time to Republican candidates for President before the party's national convention in August and to a Democratic rival thereafter. And incumbents do not normally believe in sharing the limelight with their challengers.

But there are more profound problems raised by the absence of news conferences. Without them, a President avoids not only public examination on some difficult is-

sues but even the private briefings by which he prepares himself for the worst. If he faces no risk of an embarrassing question, then his staff and the vast bureaucracy of the Federal Government need never really bring to him its most embarrassing dossiers of policy or performance. (Did that general bomb North Vietnam without authorization, or did he not?)

There is also no record of spontaneous Presidential reaction to the parade of issues, no chance to measure his changes of view or mood and no chance to remind him of what he said or did a year ago. It is not just the event that is lapsing, but a whole process of communication and, indeed, government.

Articles such as this often produce a quick news conference, but that is not the point. One of Mr. Nixon's close aides recently complained about the flabbiness of reporters' queries, so even if the President demurs perhaps the reporters owe it to him and their readers to reveal the questions that are lingering in their notebooks.

### Some Sample Questions

Here is a sample, culled from those of one newspaper's Washington staff.

Mr. President:

Are you still confident of ending the war in your first term and pulling the rug out from under the Democrats on this issue? Why will the peace terms you could get this year be better than those you might have obtained three years ago? What constitutional authority do you now possess for bombing North

Vietnam and mining its harbors?

If the numbers of nuclear missiles does not matter too much in the new arms agreements, why did the Russians agree to a freeze only after they were assured a larger number in each category than the United States?

How much will it cost you to run for re-election and do you have a moral as well as legal obligation to reveal who is paying your costs?

Do you agree with a recent bipartisan study that tax increases are inevitable early in the next President's term? Could you pay for your proposed domestic programs and still reduce property taxes without raising other taxes considerably? Why are your political agents stressing the pledge of no taxes "this year?"

Will you sign what amounts to Congress' moratorium on public school busing without insisting on the other half of your proposal for compensatory financial aid to poor schools?

Why have you avoided a major public campaign to drum up support in Congress for your public assistance and welfare expansion program? Will you veto Social Security increases beyond that 5 per cent you recommended?

Is the economy having the very good year you promised for 1972 despite the high unemployment rate? Looking back in your first term, could you have done better in the fight against inflation?

Do you really think the press is hostile for harboring such questions?