

GUEST OPINION

Richard Nixon as news editor

By BILL GILL

THESE IS A distinct chill here in the White House. A feeling that one is sitting, unwelcomed, amidst those who regard his very presence as an unforgivable affront to their own righteous exercise of power.

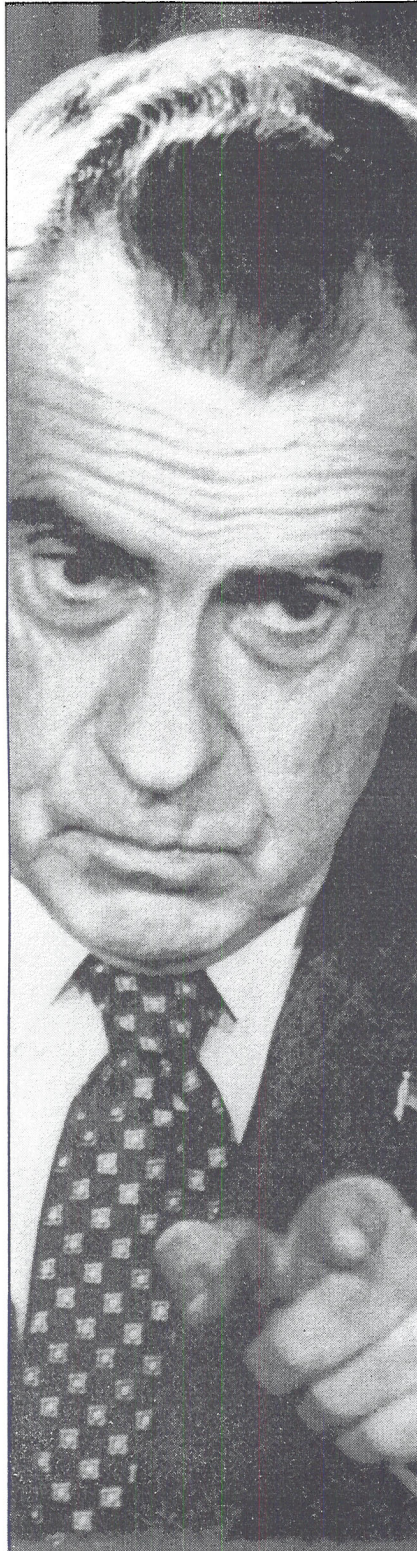
A respected colleague, with whom I once served as White House correspondent during the LBJ regime, recently described the current atmosphere. He said: "Reading the text of the President's news conference the other day is like stepping into a tub of cold water. There is first a sense of shock, followed by a prolonged period of chill."

Well, if ABC's Frank Reynolds were still here on day-to-day assignment, he could end up with a case of intellectual pneumonia. Here's why. Mr. Reynolds was appalled by the President's refusal to consider offering a "cease fire truce" to his critics in a show of wanting to bind up divisions caused by the Vietnam war. In his refusal to call for domestic unity, the President took another slap at the news media, saying: "I know that it gags some of you to write of peace with honor in Vietnam."

Well, I don't know of whom Mr. Nixon spoke. I don't recall anyone gagging. I joined about 100 other reporters in celebration of the war's end. I delighted in reporting all about Mr. Nixon's triumph at the Paris peace tables. As for honor, that can best be judged by historians, not news reporters — and therein, perhaps, lies the crux of our problems with the President.

Historians we ain't. News reporters we sometimes are. More often, we are simply a lazy flowing channel for whatever honorable, or dishonorable, information is handed out by the White House political guard. (Applause, Mr. Nader.)

Presidents are like that. They expect a free ride by an adoring, unchallenging press. Somehow, they assume that having been chosen as the lesser of two bad choices to run the country, they should command the allegiance



PRESIDENT NIXON at his Jan. 31 press conference. (AP Photo)

of newspapers, television, radio and even the barroom braggart. Anything else is intolerable to their sense of righteousness and majesty. It won't happen that way.

On those admirable occasions when a White House reporter is able to report what the President is doing, as opposed to what he says he is doing, the ensuing chill may become a downright freeze.

Our problem with this President stems from his insistence on changing the rules from merely the use of arguments to include pressures, intimidations and executive powers against the press.

With several news reporters jailed — and more destined to join them — it all has a decided effect on how we cover the news.

Accepting the President's determination to war with the news media, what defense have we to meet his attacks? Well, when covering the White House beat, this appears to be the shape of things past and future. The President, figuratively speaking, has many guns in his arsenal. All may be levelled in an instant and devastating barrage against the press, as they sometimes are, or they may be fired one at a time, as they usually are.

The first shot was taken by that remarkable marksman, Spiro Agnew, drawing blood with his famous Des Moines speech that brought the quivering networks nearly to their knees. Here was something new! Something with which we must cope, but with which we had no experience. A vice president had dared challenge the very integrity of television news reporting. Ah! it was too much to bear.

Network executives spent agonizing hours pondering the silliest question of all: "Does Agnew speak for himself alone, as White House Press Secretary Ronald Ziegler asserts, or does he also speak for the President?"

Now, anyone who has spent one full week covering news at the White House would know that a vice president doesn't belch until he is burped

in the oval office. Clearly, the President was delighted to join the battle against his oldest enemy, the press. And equally clear, he had the psychological tools to do the job.

Agnew, as Nixon's surrogate, was imminently successful. He lambasted, insulted, criticized, wrongly analyzed the television networks. He became the nemesis of the broadcasters, and they buckled to his demands with awards of unlimited prime time. He did, indeed, influence and moderate the critical voices. With his easily won stature, Agnew switched his game to become the soft-spoken, reasoned and utterly dull administration spokesman.

How does Agnew view his three-year tilt with the press? I asked during the '72 campaign, and found Agnew to be candid enough. Said he: "You people are the thinnest skinned of all. You portrayed me as a bumbling boob . . . So, I was fighting for my political life. When I spoke on the issues, you ignored me. When I kicked you in the pants, I gained your attention, fear and respect. I like it better that way."

Was the Agnew antimedia campaign more than a successful, publicity-grabbing political bluff? I think not. But, given government's power over TV licensing, that bluff was enough to soften broadcasters' criticisms, and to send the print reporters and editors into a fit of soul-searching self-analysis. It was a bluff that worked for Agnew and for the President's benefit.

Seeing the possibilities, the White House sought to push its advantage, frequently hinting that government's regulatory powers could be brought to bear in what the White House discerns to be "the public interest." It all had the desired effect. Reporters and their bosses became cautious, then overly cautious.

Finally, with the realization that the news media could be intimidated with relative ease, news reporters were personally targeted. A Supreme Court decision that appeared to be victory for the media in the squabble over the famed Pentagon Papers eventually proved to be the first defeat for a meaningful free press.

That history is well known. Encouraged by the possibilities, local and state juries and courts began to jail reporters, demanding that we become part of the police system by turning over notes and film clips. Now

the threat was no longer one of words but one of outright assault upon any concept of a free and independent news media.

Again, the success of political intimidation whetted the administration's thirst for assault against its critics. The White House sent forth its little-known director of telecommunications, Clay Whitehead. With his warmed over style of "Agnewism," Whitehead recommended legislation placing responsibility for network news material, as he called it, "ideological plugola," upon the local television affiliate. An impractical proposal that would deny sane administration.

One may honestly suspect Mr. Whitehead's motives. Such balderdash smacks, once again, of Agnew's tactics: intimidate with outlandish threats, reap the publicity, inspire the local stations to suspect their network benefits, and thereby bluff the timid into less critical examination of the legitimate questions on administration policy. Sure enough, it is working again.

The White House seems to have found its most rewarding attack strategy: mix real assault with blustering threat and achieve acquiescence. Again, it seems to work.

An even greater threat lies in a little criticized strategy designed to shut off the reporters' access to news sources.

Promising a severe cutback in the White House staff membership, Mr. Nixon has quietly shifted many former aides into positions as p.r. spokesmen in every department of government. These super-loyalists can be relied upon to hand out only that information approved by the supreme White House coordinator, Press Secretary Ronald Ziegler. The ultimate goal may soon be achieved: a single, unified voice of government, speaking in near choral harmony to spread the administration's party line — and — no questions, please!

These same super-loyalists are most effective in drying up news sources within their own departments. Watchful and well-trained to detect any official who may show friendliness toward a news reporter, they flash word to the White House that so-and-so was seen lunching with a reporter and such-and-such story later appeared on the evening television news. That sort of indictment in the Nixon era is

worth a man's career. People are talking to newsmen less and less.

The lots are indeed cast. There will be no truce between Nixon and the press. He will have none of it. His goal is not to debate but to silence his critics.

It is not an unbearable burden upon the newsman. Granted, there is the all too human temptation to inject personal pique in his news copy. There is the greater need, and hopefully a desire, to be fair but unflinchingly critical when warranted. It is a good time to be a news reporter, not a self-proclaimed oracle. To report what is happening in the White House, not what the President says is happening.

Let the President complain and gripe to his heart's content with the result. We are not his apologists, though he would like us to be. Should Mr. Nixon abandon his adopted role as national news editor and resume his role as President, there may yet be a chance for burying the hatchet between us. This President has accomplished much good in foreign affairs. He may even accomplish something domestically if the spirit of compromise doesn't prove too repulsive to his egotism.

The fault for our predicament is not entirely one-way. Newspapers and broadcasters alike have shown all the courage of scared rabbits when served a dish of their own cuisine. May we now cease the hand-wringing self-pity and simply go back to work?

We should be reporting the personalities and their motives in the White House war on the press, not bemoaning the existence of the war itself. We have been fighting that battle since 1773. Given the good sense of readers and viewers, the ultimate reasonableness of the people who really count, we will not lose the argument if our integrity is as pure as our protests proclaim.

There is, indeed, a chill here in the White House. There is nothing so effective in chasing it away as running down a hot new lead story. Anything else is ephemeral, esoteric and a waste of the reporter's time. Nixon's threats, I am convinced, will disappear with Nixon in four more years. We shall be here much longer. ■

Bill Gill is White House correspondent for ABC News.