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President and Public

No one should question President Nixon's right to call in nine of his favorite newspaper columnists and use them to advance his contention that the election results last week add up to an Administration victory. What does need questioning on several grounds, however, is the wisdom of substituting that cozy procedure for the give-and-take of the public Presidential press conference.

Mr. Nixon has not subjected himself to general interview by the White House press corps since July 30. He has held briefings for select groups — most of them sympathetic — during that fifteen-week hiatus, but not under conditions that required him to give a broad-ranging account and defense of Administration policies. He had occasional exchanges with newsmen in the course of his campaign travels but these tended to be cursory; he allowed no public probing even about his political thoughts, tactics and aspirations.

At its best, the White House press conference is a poor substitute, so far as public accounting is concerned, for the Prime Minister's twice-weekly question periods in Britain's House of Commons, with which it is sometimes compared. It is no substitute at all when the President refuses to schedule a press conference for weeks and months. There is danger for both the country and the President in the complete absence of these public sessions, however distasteful he may find the adversary aspects to be.

It is difficult enough for any President to overcome the isolation from the public imposed by White House security, the crushing burdens of the office and the tendency of aides to try to shield him from unpleasant news, criticism and challenge. But with the example of President Johnson fresh in memory, the dangers of such isolation are apparent enough.

Neither the country nor its Chief Executive benefits when he tends increasingly to see only those — newsmen and others — who will tell him what he wants to hear.