NYTimes AUG 23 1973

Meeting the Press

President Nixon has at long last confronted the nation in a televised press conference on the tough and deeply troubling questions of Watergate in particular and the abuse of Governmental powers in general. Mr. Nixon's mood, through the ordeal of fifty minutes of often harsh questioning, stood in marked contrast to the imperious burst of ill-temper with which he had ordered his press secretary to shield him from reporters only two days earlier. Indeed, the President conducted himself with such self-confident and conciliatory good humor that it is hard to understand why he had postponed for more than five months a televised interrogation for which the American people have clearly been waiting.

If Mr. Nixon wanted to show himself in command of his temper in what was clearly an uncomfortably adversary situation, he succeeded admirably. This is all the more remarkable because the sharpness of the questions —including outright reference to the possibility of impeachment and resignation—could not have failed to show how severely the scandals, their cover-up and the unresolved suspicions over the President's role in both have hurt the Presidency. No previous occupant of that office has had to face such harsh public questioning.

The aplomb with which Mr. Nixon acquitted himself before the cameras could not, however, obscure the fact that he added nothing of substance toward illuminating the issues or resolving existing conflicts. In the main, the President's answers seemed simply to echo the testimony of his two departed aides, John D. Ehrlichman and H. R. Haldeman.

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Mr. Nixon once again fell back on the now familiar line of defense that the rubric of "national security" sanctions virtually limitless use of Presidential powers for purposes of secret surveillance in domestic affairs. He justified everything he did by suggesting that the precedents had been set—often in even more exaggerated degrees—by his predecessors. Mr. Nixon insisted, for example, that the "capability" to tape White House conversations existed during the Johnson and Kennedy Administrations which, even if accurate, is different from the use—in Mr. Nixon's case, the total use—of those capabilities.

Indeed, it was on the matter of the tapes that Mr. Nixon's memory differed markedly from Mr. Haldeman's. The President said that "the only tape that has been referred to, that Mr. Haldeman has listened to, he listened to at my request. . . . That's all he listened to." Yet, Mr. Haldeman testified specifically that he listened to at least two tapes. One recorded a meeting other than the one Mr. Nixon cited, and included a discussion which Mr. Haldeman had not attended. He testified further that he had "several other tapes" of other meetings in his possession and had been allowed to take them home, even though he insisted that he had not listened to them.

These are not trivial discrepancies. They significantly affect the President's claim, reiterated with special force yesterday, of the inviolate nature of "the principle of confidentiality" with which he has surrounded the tapes.

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Mr. Nixon substituted joviality for responsiveness when asked whether the overtures on taking the F.B.I. directorship, made to the presiding judge during the Ellsberg trial, might not have seemed to contain the appearance of a bribe. And the President's memory turned cloudy as to whether acting F.B.I. director Patrick Gray had warned him that members of his staff were out to "mortally wound" him—a phrase one would not consider easy to forget under the circumstances. But he did remember receiving specific assurance from John Dean that there was "not a scintilla of evidence" linking members of the White House staff to the scandals.

Standing firm on his insistence that there was nothing wrong with the secret bombing of Cambodia, despite his public assurances that the United States has never violated that country's neutrality, Mr. Nixon said he thought "the American people are very thankful that the President ordered what was necessary to save the lives of their men. . . ." This response leaves unanswered why he nevertheless thought it necessary to deceive the American people and how he expects them to feel safe from a similarly highhanded use of power in their name in the future.

Asked how much personal blame he accepted for "the climate in the White House" that had led to the "abuses of Watergate," Mr. Nixon replied: "I accept it all." But if the climate in the White House has been responsible for the abuse of power, the President has not yet disclosed how he intends to change that climate.

To rely merely on the playback of public opinion and on other external pressures, the only constraints the President mentioned, is hardly a statement of principle. Rather, it sounds like a prescription for using as much power as the traffic will bear—precisely the theory that led up to the current shambles.

See Chrono, 31 Jul 73