

Presidents and

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THE QUESTION HAS been repeatedly asked whether a press secretary trained as a newspaperman rather than as an advertising executive would have been able to alert President Nixon to the tragedy-in-the-making before Watergate engulfed the administration. The question can never be answered with certainty, but a major lesson of Watergate is that the ballyhoo and image-making tactics employed in recent years served the President badly. When frankness was needed it was least in evidence.

It would be a mistake, however, to place too much blame for the administration's public relations errors on Ronald Ziegler. It is the President who must bear the heaviest burden of responsibility. He and his closest aides told Ziegler what to say, how to say it, and when to say it. He brushed aside Ziegler's recommendations for more presidential news conferences. Nevertheless, a stronger, more experienced man than Ziegler might have recognized the gathering storm sooner and warned the President more insistently.

Ziegler's directive was to be a salesman and to act as the President's go-between with the public, opening the White House curtain only in the most limited way. Ziegler was shrewd enough to recognize that his responsibilities ran beyond that, but it is doubtful that the men he took orders from, including H. R. Haldeman, John D. Ehrlichman and the President himself, saw Ziegler's role in the proper context.

As Henry Steele Commager argued in *The Washington Post* in May, the Nixon administration viewed the government as a "giant public relations enterprise." Commager said that the administration assumed that "policies are to be argued not on principle but on the merits of their packaging, as it were; that everyone and everything can be manipulated, never mind what methods are used, never mind how the products turn out."

THE PRESIDENT'S approach, as well as Ziegler's, was conditioned by a long suspicion of the press and by

the conviction that much of the press would question the President's motives regardless of what he said or did. John Connally told a press conference in the White House this summer that if the President flew to the moon the press would not credit him with bravery but charge that he was trying to escape. That comment indicates the extent of the hostility that has developed with the Watergate crisis; at times the administration has all but broken relations with the Washington press corps.

What the Nixon men have never fully accepted is that other Presidents have been subjected to abuse and to intemperate criticism from Congress and the press. It is part of the adversary process, and it is often taken much too far. Lincoln was pictured as a baboon, Hoover was said to delight in seeing babies starve, FDR was depicted in cartoons of his day as little short of a lunatic, and Eisenhower was portrayed as a simpleton. None of those extravagances can be defended, of course. But they are part of American history, which the advertising men in the White House seem never to have learned in their high school courses.

Rather, when the Nixon men find themselves in difficulty they tend to withdraw further away from the press. Thus Gerald L. Warren, a former newspaperman, has now been named chief spokesman, a title Mr. Nixon originally had planned to give Ziegler after the 1968 election. At a time when the job should be strengthened, the Nixon men seem to have decided to reduce its importance. A President who does not relish the job of communicating with the people himself needs a vigorous and commanding spokesman.

THE TEST OF A press secretary, of course, is how well he reflects the man he serves. Pierre Salinger was an excellent reflection of John Kennedy. Bill Moyers was not the perfect reflection of Lyndon Johnson, and he was dropped in favor of George Christian, who was. Ziegler, the most criticized of them all, has been a true reflection of the President. He reflected the image the President wanted to put forth. Indeed, Mr. Nixon expressed his satisfac-

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tion with Ziegler in a tribute at the annual dinner of the White House Correspondents' Association on April 14, just before the Watergate crisis exploded and Ziegler declared that past Watergate statements were "inoperative."

The President said then that he believed Ziegler had served both the President and the press "with equal loyalty and devotion." Praising Ziegler further, Mr. Nixon said: "I believe that Ron Ziegler, with great poise, with great patience, with great courtesy, has met that dual responsibility. He has been loyal to the President and loyal to the press, and I am glad to pay tribute to him tonight." But, the President went on, "I must say you have really worked him over."

True, the press did work Ziegler over. But the main reason was that he was the only handy target when the press believed that much information the public had a right to know was being suppressed. Mr. Nixon has held fewer news conferences than any President in 40 years. The questions newsmen would like to put to him have been put instead to Ziegler. Ziegler has urged more presidential news conferences, partly because he thought they would serve the President's interest and partly because they would make his job easier. But Mr. Nixon has refused to appreciate that the press conference is a useful tool for him, a safety valve for any political figure, and now a necessary part of the democratic process in this country.

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IN THE INTRODUCTION to a recent collection of Franklin D. Roosevelt's press conferences, Jonathan Daniels, who served briefly as FDR's press secretary and also as Harry Truman's, wrote that it is in the regular press conference that the modern President speaks "most certainly as himself." Speeches, messages and other statements often represent the labor of many minds. But the press conference displays "the man unique and the man alone," Daniels said.

In 1941, after years of buffeting by the press, FDR said at a White House Correspondents' Association dinner: "For eight years, you and I have been

helping each other. I have been trying to keep you informed of the news of Washington from the point of view of the presidency. You, more than you realize, have been giving me a great deal of information about what the people of this country are thinking."

And shortly before President Truman left the White House, a reporter asked if he thought the presidential news conference helped in the proper functioning of government. "Yes, I really do," Truman replied. "It is one way the President has to get his ideas over in the way that people can understand. I have had just about as much fun out of them as you have had."

Obviously, "fun" is not a word Mr. Nixon would use about a press conference. Yet he is highly competent in the give-and-take of a press conference, and most of those he has held have done him more good than harm. Yet they are clearly a burden if not a serious nuisance to him; the one he held last week was his first since March 15.

Just two months before President Kennedy was assassinated, he was asked about proposals for reform of the press conference, such as limiting a conference to a single subject or requiring that questions be submitted in writing. He did not favor the proposed changes. "It seems to me," Kennedy said, "that it (the press conference) serves its purpose, which is to have the President in the bull's eye. And I suppose that is in some ways revealing."

President Nixon has preferred to put his press secretary in the bull's eye. And one day recently, Ziegler, who has tired of being in the bull's eye, said plaintively to a group of reporters: "You guys will never believe me when I tell you I was telling the truth as I knew it about Watergate."

The problem is not one that involves only the press and the White House. It involves the government and the public, for the press is merely an imperfect instrument connecting the two and attempting to reflect an accurate picture. Trust is the absolutely essential ingredient all around. And that trust has been shattered. Perhaps everyone shares in the responsibility to some degree, but it is above all the President who can repair the damage.