

Nixon and the Press: The Rift Is Reopened

By JOHN HERBERS

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LAGUNA BEACH, Cal., Aug. 28—This afternoon, wire service reporters began staking out President Nixon's home in San Clemente to be on hand in the event the President should decide to go to the beach or take a drive on the Freeway, as he frequently does.

It marked the breakdown of an agreement under which the press office would advise the reporters, who are housed several miles away in Laguna Beach, any time the President left the privacy of his compound and ventured into public areas. Over the weekend, he went for drives and to the beach, apparently instructing his spokesmen not to inform reporters. This seemingly minor incident points up the embittered relationship between President Nixon and the press, a relationship that has grown progressively worse over recent weeks.

"Negotiations have broken down," said one of the reporters, on his way to San Clemente. "The President has declared war and the war is on."

At the same time, senior members of the White House staff have made themselves more available for interviews. Some even turned out Sunday night for a reception for reporters at the Presidential compound, something that would never have happened earlier in the year.

The Roots Are the Same

These contradictory trends have the same cause—a presidency embattled over Water-

gate, the troubled economy and a host of other problems. On the one hand, the President seems to have no choice but to make every effort to show that his Administration is moving ahead at full efficiency on various problems facing the country—thus the interviews; on the other hand, the President's personal bitterness at the press, as displayed at his news conference last Wednesday, seems to have increased—as reflected in his insistence on keeping reporters at a distance.

The extent of Mr. Nixon's continuing troubles can be pointed out in his efforts to stem criticism of the lavish expenditure of public and private money on his vacation homes here and in Key Biscayne, Fla. Yesterday, in a kind of bitter-end effort to resolve the controversy "once and for all," as his spokesmen put it, the President distributed a detailed audit by a public-accounting firm detailing all of the transactions and amounts of money involved in the President's purchase and maintenance of the homes.

No President, Gerald L. Warren, the Presidential spokesman, said, had ever gone so far in making public details about his private property. But this did not end the controversy. The flow of news, analysis and opinion out of this western seat of government continued to raise questions embarrassing to the President: Why did the President conceal for three months the fact that his good friend C.G. Rebozo teamed up with industrialist Robert H. Abplanalp to help bail the President out of buying part of the Nixon estate here? (The White House an-

swer: Mr. Rebozo was tired of publicity and the President did not want to embarrass him.)

How can a President who has little independent wealth expect to pay a note of \$226,000, more than his gross salary of \$200,000 a year, on his homes next July? And on and on the questions go. White House aides were angered that The New York Times published this morning, in its account of the auditing report, the fact that two former officials of Coopers & Lybrand, the auditing firm, were fined for mail fraud in 1968 and received Presidential pardons last December.

This fact was known when Cooper & Lybrand was picked on the advice of H. Chapman Rose of Cleveland and Kenneth W. Gemmill of Philadelphia, two highly regarded tax lawyers who came in to help the President on the matter. The White House explanation was that the fined auditors had long since left the firm and that it never occurred to anyone involved that it would make any difference or attract any attention.

Further, any time such information appears, some members of the White House immediately suspect that the information did not come from independent sources to the newspapers but was "leaked" by the office of Archibald Cox, the special prosecutor in the Watergate matters. The fear and dislike of the Cox operation in the White House is intense. This increases the antagonisms with the press.

Warren Tries to Heal Rift

The daily briefings have become more and more strained, despite the efforts of Mr. War-

ren, a low-keyed former newspaperman, to dispel some of the hostility. At today's briefing, he was bombarded by questions about rising prices, rising interest rates, the President's finances and his secret movements out of the Presidential compound. Mr. Warren attempted to depict a President with a tight grip on his job, and optimistic about the future, but in the kind of surrealistic atmosphere that characterizes Mr. Nixon's press relations, there was not much feeling that he had succeeded.

On the other hand, the senior White House staff that succeeded H. R. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman, who left April 30, are attempting to show that affairs of state are going on and that the people in charge are real human beings who are not obsessed with fears and neuroses. Some, like Alexander M. Haig, Mrs. Anne Armstrong and Melvin R. Laird are quite convincing.

There was a healthy open feeling, relatively speaking, about the reception at the compound the other night. For example, Earl L. Butz, the irreplaceable Secretary of Agriculture, was there saying how great it was that the department heads were now free of White House control.

But there is still the brooding President, secluded in his home and office but no one offers many answers as to what is really on his mind and whether his Administration can come to grips with the troubles that beset it. Out here, it is a strange little war in the cozy enclave called the Western White House.

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