



Virtuoso Nixon Overwhelms Smith, Chancellor, Sevareid

WASHINGTON—There they were—Howard K. Smith of ABC, John Chancellor of NBC and Eric Sevareid of CBS—three cross-examiners with the American people for a client, and they behaved toward Richard Nixon like three small-town mill owners gathered in the living room of the local banker who held all their mortgages.

The President played the part of the banker perfectly. He was polite but firm with his visitors. He explained, thoughtfully, why he might be needing more collateral and trusted his guests to explain to their employes why this would mean no Christmas bonus.

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It was a virtuoso performance. Mr. Nixon had the confidence to face live cameras, which neither Lyndon Johnson nor John Kennedy risked under similar circumstances, but the nation must be wondering whether it made any difference. If this is the best the networks can come up with by way of questioning a national policy which has divided the country as it has not been divided since the Civil War, then Spiro Agnew might just as well be awarded permanent possession of the Intimidation Trophy now.

It must be said on behalf of Smith, Chancellor and Sevareid, that it is difficult — and often damaging to the stern, detached image they have spent many years cultivating — to challenge a President. They were necessarily at pains to be polite. But that is no excuse for not asking so much as one hard question or for not following up any of the opportunities and inconsistencies afforded them.

1 — For example, Smith — who felt obliged more than once to demonstrate to Agnew how objective he was by stating full agreement with our war policy — drew from the President a classic statement of the "domino theory." There were all the dominoes — Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Burma, India, Pakistan — and Mr. Nixon recited them and told us how they see our struggle in Vietnam as their own. He was, in short, looting the collected works of Dean Rusk.

But neither Smith nor his colleagues saw fit to ask why, if these Asian nations

share our concern for Vietnam, had none committed so much as a soldier or a dollar to the cause. Or why the leaders of the only Asian nations in the struggle — Thailand, the Philippines and Korea — had to be bribed to do so. Or, for that matter, the significance of the fact that the biggest domino of all — China — fell 20 years ago and the others are still standing.

2 — The President talked again of the "massacres," of the Catholics who fled the north and who would be victims if we were to leave South Vietnam now. No one asked what had happened to the hundreds of thousands of Catholics who remained in North Vietnam and remain to this day. "My Lai" crossed no one's list — one does not, apparently, talk about bankruptcy in the board room of the Central.

3—One day before the Great Confrontation, the President went to great pains to urge negotiations on Hanoi.

"We recognize that a fair political solution should reflect the existing relationship of political forces," he said. Here, perhaps, was a clear signal that we are no longer wedded to the Thieu-Ky regime and would accept some other arrangement.

But when Mr. Nixon shot down a coalition government with the same tired rhetoric he had used before, no one asked about the "existing relationship of political forces." And for this we had to miss Gomer Pyle?

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