

Candor Toward the Press

By ERIC SEVAREID

WASHINGTON — Tension between the Washington press corps and the President of the United States is chronic though it varies in degree from time to time and President to President. It is as necessary and creative a tension as that between President and Congress or Congress and Supreme Court. We are constantly told that a President has no obligation to hold news conferences. He has an inescapable obligation to do so, since he cannot be summoned by either Congress or the Court, and can, in this age of electronics, argue his own case uninterrupted to the whole nation directly, and at times and under circumstances of his own choosing.

The Agnew imputations notwithstanding, it is the power of government that has grown in this last generation, more than the power of the press, and within government, the power of the Presidency.

So that "press corps"—swollen in size, anarchic in form, containing in about Congressional proportions its share of modest scholars and noisy amateurs—must do what it can to put questions to the President and—this is the hard part—get candid and illuminating replies within the limits of national security. The news conference transaction rarely works to anybody's full satisfaction. It has been working badly under Mr. Nixon for a lot of reasons.

In the first place, his is a thin-ice Administration. It came into power by a popular vote of only 42 per cent.

The matter is worsened further by the fact that while most White House crowds develop a degree of paranoia about the press in time, this crowd began that way. The reasons for Mr. Nixon's dislike and distrust of so much of the press go back twenty years and already fill volumes. It is also unfortunately true that a few writers in the press will give this President no benefit of any doubt.

But it was not out of spite that Mr. Nixon loosed the Vice President upon the press in the autumn of 1969, a time, incidentally, when the Administration was faring well in the press. He had carefully studied the Johnson "credibility gap," knew how fatal such a gap might prove for himself as he tried the exceedingly delicate operations of quitting a war without defeat and checking inflation without a depression. Dangers and setbacks were inevitable. What better way to avoid or postpone your own credibility gap than to impugn in advance the credibility of those who report and interpret your actions?

The over-all strategy was threefold: Create public doubt that the reporters are treating you fairly; avoid direct meetings with them as far as

Perhaps an editor might . . . divide his paper into four chapters, heading the first, truths; second, probabilities; third, possibilities; fourth, lies.

—THOMAS JEFFERSON.

With customary newspaper exaggeration of army news we may be sure that in tomorrow's prints . . . all the little Colt revolvers will have grown into horse-pistols.

—ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

The more I see of the Czar, the Kaiser, and the Mikado, the better I am content with democracy, even if we have to include the American newspapers as one of its assets—liability would be a better term.

—THEODORE ROOSEVELT.

I . . . will die for the freedom of the press, even for the freedom of newspapers that call me everything that is a good deal less than . . . a gentleman.

—DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER.

possible; use television prime time as often as possible for unimpeded presentation of your case to the people. This couldn't last. The Washington press as well as the Democratic National Committee blew up, and with the President's sudden loss of statesmanlike dignity in the election campaign, everything has now reverted to square one.

The President and his staff are making a real college try at devising formats that will satisfy the press reasonably well and protect the President's interests reasonably well. He has promised more frequent general news conferences.

In the meantime, the President has tried the second of what is apparently to be a well-spaced series of "conversations" with three of four network reporters. These affairs are lengthier, more revealing of the man's mind, both in what he says and avoids saying, but they are certainly not "conversations," because the audience wants the President's views, not those of the reporters, and for the same reason they cannot be debates, which various critics in the press seem to think they should be. The anti-Nixon critics suffer the nonsensical notion that there is some secret question or line of questions that will crumble Mr. Nixon to dust in full view of the nation.

What is necessary is that the questions be substantive, concerning matters on the public mind, and not whether they are "hard" or "soft." Most of them were very substantive, therefore rather easily anticipated by the President's briefers. The trouble is that too many answers were soft—diffuse, deliberately time consuming, and sometimes off the point.

One change in format might be tried. It was, in fact, suggested by someone in the White House in advance of the

Jan. 4 "conversation." That was to let each of the four reporters engage the President directly and exclusively on one area of special interest for ten minutes, with the last twenty minutes a free for all.

Providing that the President did not resort to lengthy replies, this might have made for closer follow-up interrogation. I was quite willing to try this and my impression was that at least two of the other three reporters were equally willing. But Mr. Nixon was not.

With all of its imperfections, this miniature news conference did make news—on taxes, controls, etc.—and it did provide insights into the President's mind, method and purposes on a variety of issues. Were this not so, the most serious of our newspapers would not have spent a full week repeating and analyzing the President's responses.

I have taken part in Presidential news conferences since the days of Roosevelt. Whatever the format, whatever the cast of characters, they are generally productive of information and understanding in one degree or another. The precise degree depends almost entirely upon the temperament and self-confidence of the man in the White House. The more confidence he has, the more often he will schedule these transactions. After two years in office, said Mr. Nixon on Jan. 4, "I know more. I am more experienced." It would be good to think this is one reason he plans on additional news conferences this year. A bearing of friendliness and candor toward the press will not endanger him or his policies. In the long run it will re-insure both.

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