

Afterthoughts on Nixon Television Interview

By Robert B. Semple Jr.
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San Clemente

The main item of conversation among the men who occupy the White House and those who cover it is not President Nixon's meeting here with Japanese Prime Minister Eisaku Sato (summits are getting to be a bit old hat these days) but his interview on the Columbia Broadcasting System the other night.

Mr. Nixon has not held a news conference in more than seven weeks, and therefore Sunday's one-hour show, and what it revealed of Mr. Nixon and the techniques of television, continue to provoke lively discussion.

What Mr. Nixon said and did before and after the show intrigued the CBS personnel concerned with the affair almost as much as the interview itself. An old hand at the perils of television, he spent all Sunday afternoon "wargaming" possible questions in his hideaway office in the executive office building, and was so preoccupied with the coming encounter (according to an account he gave the man who interviewed him, Dan Rather) that he failed to watch either of the championship football games that afternoon.

Later, minutes before the interview, Mr. Nixon exhibited a lively and knowledgeable interest in the technical arrangements, commenting on the placement of the cameras and rejecting (because it might have proved too cumbersome) a CBS suggestion that the interview begin with one or two informal questions in front of the office fireplace.

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Analysis

When a makeup artist appeared to improve Rather's cheekbones, Mr. Nixon immediately and approvingly identified the cosmetic as "7-N" — a light pancake especially concocted for swarthy types like Mr. Nixon and, for that matter, his interviewer.

But Mr. Nixon was not the only impresario around the White House that evening. In its own interest (and, as it turned out, the President's)

CBS had persuaded the White House to make a number of fundamental changes in its customary technical arrangements in order to meet a problem that Mr. Nixon's aides spend an immense amount of time fretting about: His tendency to persevere on camera.

CBS advisers and White House television consultants (Mark Goode, a former American Broadcasting Co. official, and Bill Carruthers) agreed to "refrigerate" the oval office.

The White House engineer closed all the warm air ducts, and by air time the temperature had dropped to 35 degrees. After the television lights were turned on, the thermometer rose 20 degrees, and by the end of the show it was up to a comfortable 65 degrees.

The network also recommended a lighter pancake makeup for the President (to open the pores), recommended subdued lighting (to create an atmosphere of intimacy, and lessen the heat), and dissuaded White House aides from igniting Mr. Nixon's woodburning fireplace.

What did the show accomplish, for both parties? Substantively, Mr. Nixon revealed a desire to run again, loyalty to Vice President Spiro Agnew, a deep reluctance to criticize Governor George C. Wallace of Alabama, a

campaign strategy that will emphasize positive initiatives in foreign affairs while explaining setbacks on the domestic front (e.g., the present high rate of unemployment) as an unfortunate but inevitable consequence of his efforts to wind down the war.

Network officials reported Tuesday that most viewers (two out of every three calling the network's Washington office, a higher percentage in New York) approved the tone and content of the questioning, which was at once gentlemanly but firm, and that many also had kind words for the President. The White House had asked that an "anchor man" such as Walter Cronkite conduct the interview instead of a correspondent, but Bill Small, the network's Washington bureau chief, had selected Rather and refused to budge.

The President seemed pleased with the outcome. After the show, he chatted easily with the technicians around him. When an aide, Carruthers, rushed up and congratulated him on his handling of hard questions, he said: "I don't want the soft ones."

Rather expressed regret at not having questioned Mr. Nixon on his attitudes on the India-Pakistan war; Mr. Nixon conceded he had been unprepared for the final question on women's liberation. But there will be other chances, since Mr. Nixon clearly likes the format.

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See NYTimes version for three paragraphs omitted. NYTimes 5 Jan 72, filed Nixon.