

Mr. Nixon on Debates

While President Nixon continues to spurn the face-to-face national television debates that he once strongly advocated for Presidential rivals, the White House has come up with a new TV campaign tactic: trying to plant leading questions to be asked of Senator George McGovern and Sargent Shriver by television interviewers.

C.B.S. News wisely rejected this crude attempt at news management and manipulation by the Committee for the Re-election of the President, in respect to an interview with Mr. Shriver. A.B.C. interviewers candidly disclosed the direct White House origin of some loaded questions before asking Mr. McGovern to answer them.

If the White House is so anxious to put Senator McGovern in the TV dock for what it considers the excesses of his campaign rhetoric, why use the surreptitious back-door approach? The direct TV confrontation, of which Mr. Nixon was once an advocate, is still available, and Mr. McGovern has offered to pay for it.

"I believe the strongest argument for debates is that they make the candidates put on a better campaign, with the result that the man who wins becomes a better President," wrote Richard M. Nixon in a 1964 article entitled, "L.B.J. Should Debate on TV." He agreed then with columnist Roscoe Drummond, who wrote that President Johnson would be doing "a great disservice to the cause of bringing the campaign closer to millions of voters if he stands out against the debates."

Again in 1968, candidate Nixon reiterated his belief that nationally televised debates would serve the public interest. "I seem always anxious to debate," he said. "I'll be glad to take on anybody." But this year, national TV debates evidently come under the heading of those campaign "spectaculars" which Mr. Nixon says he is shunning in order to stay on his job.

The public is the loser from his decision. Underhanded attempts to insinuate questions into network interviews with his opponents are a shoddy substitute for direct confrontation before the voters.