

By Stuart H. Loory

"We have had our differences in the past, and I hope you give me hell every time you think I'm wrong. I hope I'm worthy of your trust," President Nixon told a few members of the White House press corps after he concluded his Watergate speech. The remark was widely reported and some thought it signaled a change in the ugly relationship between the White House and the Washington press corps.

It would be a comfort to believe this. Had the President been holding regular and frequent press conferences during his first four years in office, Watergate might never have occurred. Had he really wanted the press to give him hell, the storm warnings any politician must heed to save his skin would have been waving vigorously week after week.

Regularly scheduled press conferences would have held the President and his whole Administration accountable for its actions to the American people. Such accountability, abandoned by the Nixon Administration, is a fundamental requirement for the survival of democracy. The conferences, however, serve another important purpose which Mr. Nixon did not understand. They indirectly help keep the President informed. The press corps operates as a vital component of the system of checks and balances in the United States.

Can the President believe all of the reports he is receiving from his subordinates about the operation of the executive branch? The answer is no. Washington is a city in which yes-men thrive. The easiest road to success in the Federal bureaucracy is to give the boss the good news he wants to hear.

Only constant questioning and checking of the underlings can give a resident—or any other supervisor in the bureaucracy—assurance that his underlings are telling the truth. Tough questions at a press conference act as a strong incentive to a President to search for truthful answers from his subordinates.

Certainly it is not easy for a President to stand before several hundred reporters and answer questions. But no one has ever accused a President of seeking a sinecure. News conferences can keep both the President and the public informed if held regularly and frequently.

Regularly means on a rigorous schedule that is violated only in cases of extreme need just as, for example, Mr. Nixon's regular morning meeting with Henry A. Kissinger is canceled only in the most extreme circumstances. Frequently means often enough so that both reporters and the President accept the sessions in a reasonably relaxed manner, as part of a regular season's schedule.

Regularity and frequency would allow reporters to follow up questions probing a subject deeply to extract all of the information possible. It would allow more reporters to question the Chief Executive about a broad range of topics. It would allow both reporters and the President to return to the same subject week after week until ambiguities were cleared up.

Certainly there would be times when the President could not, in the interest of national security or to maintain his options, respond to questions. The public would understand occasional refusals to answer—and so would the reporters.

In December, 1970, a group of White House correspondents held a meeting fully revealed to their colleagues and to the White House to discuss ways of making Presidential press conferences more meaningful. Several days later, Herbert G. Klein, the Administration's communications director, attacked the group as a cabal against the President.

Mr. Klein's view was typical of the sinister motives the Administration has imputed to the press. Somehow Mr. Nixon and his Administration have come to view reporters as personal enemies.

That's too bad. For it is the President's job to lead with integrity, newsmen's job to seek and publish the truth.

By the White House count, Mr. Nixon has held 31 news conferences during his 222 weeks in office. That's one in every seven weeks. The previous three Presidents averaged a press conference every two and a half weeks. President Harry S. Truman held a news conference almost every week and Franklin D. Roosevelt held more than one news conference a week.

One hopes Mr. Nixon will make himself more accessible, but one must be skeptical.

On May 8, 1971, Mr. Nixon told the White House Correspondents Association: "Don't give me a friendly question. Only a hard, tough question gets an answer—you may not like it—but it is the only one that tests the man. And it is the responsibility of the press to test the man, whoever he is. You have done that. You have met that responsibility."

In the two years since that remark, Mr. Nixon has given the press corps only twelve opportunities to ask any questions at all—let alone tough ones. For a man who fancies himself the leader of the world's number one democracy, that is an appalling record. It is a record that proves the earlier remark disingenuous.

We do not, Mr. President, want to give you hell. We only want to arrive at the truth.

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