

The President and the Press

By WILLIAM H. LAWRENCE

WASHINGTON—From what I have been hearing and reading recently, it appears to me that the Presidential news conference is in deep trouble, endangered both by its *alleged* friends and its *known* enemies.

It is, I think, an important forum for informing the citizens not only of the United States but of the world as well, and we must not let it fall into disrepute from disuse, neglect, perversion or controversy.

Nobody I know who has ever been to one or conducted one of them holds it to be perfect; indeed, it may be, to paraphrase Winston Churchill's celebrated remark about democracy "the worst form . . . except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time."

As a long questioner of Presidents dating back to Franklin D. Roosevelt's second term at the beginning of 1938, I think the success of the news conference depends entirely upon the *quality* both of the President then in office, and the *qualifications* of the reporters assembled to question him.

Some critics have acted as if the only reason for the decline and imminent fall of the news conference as an informative institution has been the bright lights and the gleaming red eye of the television cameras taking it to the nation live as it is being held. Others have placed the blame squarely on the President exclusively. No one of these reasons tells the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

As the White House correspondent at that time for The New York Times, I opposed, in 1961, the intention of President Kennedy to inaugurate live television broadcasting of the news

Good Give-and-Take Is a Responsibility That Goes Two Ways

conference. It would, I felt, open the door for the press corps "hams" to make a show of themselves and it to please their employers or to seek an even larger audience. There was also, and more importantly, the danger that a President, speaking informally and in response to a tough question on foreign affairs that had not been anticipated, might inadvertently reply incorrectly with damaging consequences for at least amity among nations if not the graver cause of peace on earth.

I enjoyed the easy informality, the breeziness of FDR's days with an occasional and genuine off-the-record confidence, but as the press corps grew and became more international in character those days passed and live broadcasting did not create all the problems I feared in advance. Indeed, not all conferences are broadcast live now, and I do not see any great difference in their generally poor quality whether on camera or off.

Both the President and the reporters are to blame, in my opinion.

President Nixon, who perspires heavily under questioning even by a friendly hand-picked panel, simply doesn't like the news conference, on or off camera, and no amount of protestation that he does can change the fact. In the twelve months of 1970, Mr. Nixon held four news conferences, on and off camera. Compare that, if

you will, with Franklin Roosevelt's record of more than 80 per year for the 12 long years he occupied the White House in peace and war.

Mr. Nixon simply doesn't like to level. He prefers to dance around a question. Occasionally you get a direct, to the point answer to a direct question; but it is news when you do. And if a President has decided, in advance, to evade nearly all the questions he may be asked, the news conference is not worth his time or that of the reporters attending it.

If Mr. Nixon doesn't like to answer direct questions, many reporters apparently lack the ability to ask a direct question. Some feel the need for a long preface not necessarily of facts but often including the reporter's opinion before he gets around to posing the question itself. I have felt not infrequently that any President might respond by asking a long-winded questioner whether he wanted an answer to his opinion or to his question.

Too many reporters arrive with their question already prepared—some even written out—and they stick to this one question with single-minded devotion, paying no attention to other questions that are asked—the answers to which deserve, indeed often cry out for follow-up questions that might clarify the issue. Beyond doubt there is far too little pursuit. This often is blamed on the large number of reporters at a regular White House news conference, but this gap was not filled noticeably when the President talked for an hour just to four network correspondents recently. Sometimes I feel as if the art of questioning and the art of listening both have disappeared.

In brief, this President and the reporters need a drastic change in course. The news conference is far from perfect, but right now it is not only the *best* but it is the *only* direct approach to finding out what a President may be thinking.

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