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Seeking Answers From Presidents

ONE OF THE MOST SERIOUS faults exposed by the Watergate scandal has gotten very little attention in all the uproar over individuals. That fault is the lack in our governmental system of any really effective method of forcing the White House to answer unwelcome questions quickly, publicly, regularly and with the maximum of frankness possible.

Congress, of course, can react to executive silence in matters of clear public interest by conducting hearings to dig up the facts. But this is a cumbersome, irregular and slow process which may come too late and furthermore be hampered by conflicting claims of authority or privilege — as happened earlier in the Watergate mess.

THE PRESS FACES equally tough problems. Only the most persistent, difficult probing often can provide answers to questions brushed aside in formal confrontations with the chief executive. The President, furthermore, calls press conferences only when he wants to and cross-examination is virtually impossible. He winds up saying exactly what he wants to say, and nothing else.

James G. Driscoll, writing in *The National Observer*, reminds us that not all heads of democratic governments enjoy the same relative freedom as our president to communicate with the people and their elected representatives only when he feels like it. The Prime Minister of Great Britain is a notable example.

In England, as Driscoll points out, there is an institution in the House of Commons called the Question Hour. Twice a week, for about 20 minutes each session, the Prime Minister must respond in person to queries by the lawmakers. His cabinet members, furthermore, must appear in rotation for similar questioning at hour-long sessions held four times a week. Nearly 25,000 questions are asked during each term of the House of Commons.

SOME SIMILAR SYSTEM, adapted to our own use, could be immensely beneficial. So would be mandatory, frequent and regularly-scheduled press conferences so constituted as to permit cross-examination of presidential responses. Evasion still would be possible — as it frequently is in England — but it would be far more difficult.

The big advantage would be that the American people would have something they now lack — a continuous, open, timely, personal probing and discussion of executive attitudes on all matters of public concern.

Under such a system no president could ever have claimed ignorance of the true extent of Watergate for nearly 10 months. A system of up-to-the-minute public accountability, in fact, would long ago have exposed the whole scandal and long ago forced the executive clean-up action which only now is being taken — far too late.