

# A 'Revealing Performance' of the Press

The President's San Clemente press conference has been analyzed, criticized, defended and commented upon in exhaustive detail. Why shouldn't the performance of the White House press corps, whose questions provoked the much-discussed answers, be evaluated too?

It was a revealing performance on both sides—perhaps more revealing of the state of mind of reporters who cover the White House than of the President who occupies it. He was for the most part repeating and elaborating what he had said before or what had been said before on his behalf. The reporters were being exposed to public view as they had not been for a long time.

What showed through some of the questioning, though not all of it or even most of it, was a degree of hostility unprecedented in the give and take between the working press and successive presidents. Most of this can be attributed, no doubt, to the unprecedented character of the Watergate scandals. But not all of it.

The result must have seemed to the national television audience, or to a considerable part of it, a vivid dramatization of the 1972 Agnew thesis that the press is so biased against the President and his administration that it could not be fair to them if it tried, which it doesn't.

Such an impression would be unjust to the press as a whole but a few of its representatives at San Clemente asked for it. Their questions were fair enough in substance but the manner of their asking, in some cases, was less than civil. The First Amendment doesn't impose an obligation on the free press to be needlessly offensive in its dealings with elected officials.

There was, for example, the questioner who prefaced his inquiry with the comment that he respected the office of the presidency, the implication being that he did not respect the present holder of that office. This, however it was intended, appeared snide and gratuitous, not to say pompous. A reporter's attitude toward the presidency is not a matter of intense interest to the nation—not in prime time anyway.

Then there were questions as to whether the President didn't think he owed an apology to the American people for his covert bombing of Cambodia, whether he hadn't made a subtle attempt to bribe a federal judge by offering him the directorship of the FBI, whether he hadn't considered resigning, whether in 1970 he hadn't approved a plan to break laws against burglary, mail tampering, etc.

These were all legitimate areas of in-

quiry. But the way the questions were asked suggested that the object of the questioners was to display their own censorious opinions rather than to elicit information or explore the President's attitudes. It would seem that the reporter's function either has been changed by television or that it is misunderstood by some of the trade's current practitioners.

Nobody asked the question: "Why don't you commit political hara-kiri in expiation of your obvious sins?" But the purport of the most brutally put questions was not very different from that. Even a president is entitled under our system to the presumption of innocence until proved guilty.

If the purpose of these questions was to humiliate a chief executive already humiliated by Watergate, the

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method was self-defeating. The effect was of a president beset by fierce enemies. The performance could not but have gained him sympathy. Future polls will almost certainly reflect this.

The fact is that the press conference format has been useful to presidents in the past and can be again. It casts the president as one against many; he is in a sense the underdog even when gently handled. Why President Nixon has waited until now to exploit this advantage is puzzling. By using it earlier and oftener he might have come far closer to realizing his ambition to get Watergate behind him.

The harsher the questioning the better a president fares in press conferences. The irony of the San Clemente performance was that the press, or the most hostile part of it, played into its villain's hands. The rough question couldn't have been better for Mr. Nixon had he written them himself. They were sympathy-getters of the most effective kind.

Most of the reporters at San Clemente were White House regulars—permanently assigned to cover the presidency. They are in a sense an elite corps, the White House being in these times a choice beat. It was not always so. Up to the Hoover administration it was a training ground for the young and inexperienced. Since Roosevelt it has been a hunting ground for seasoned journalists.

The regulars constitute a relatively small, self-contained group. The White House press room since the advent of the Nixon administration has not been a happy place. The camaraderie the press enjoyed with President Kennedy and his circle is no more. Information is hard to come by.

Frustrations have been taken out on the press secretary at daily briefings. These sessions have become downright ugly at times—on both sides. The querulous few seem to vie with each other to see who can be toughest. It is a situation in which the good opinion of one's peers is not commanded by moderation. Yet some of Washington's best and most judicious reporters are White House regulars.

The consensus among reporters is that had blood between Nixon administration functionaries and the press derives from the President's penchant for secrecy and withdrawal, which filters down through his command. But on the other side of White House partitions the complaint is that the reporters are implacable—that nothing Mr. Nixon could do would win him much favor in the press room.

A return to something like normal civility in relations between the President, who, like it or not, apparently will be around until 1976, and the White House press might be mutually beneficial. But it is not likely.

More restraint on the part of the press is needed, not to spare the President's feelings, but to spare the press a reputation for immoderate bias. Its standing with the public is probably not much better, if any better, than Mr. Nixon's, Watergate and all. The press has gained public confidence from the excellent job it has done on Watergate but not enough to coast on.

The President might shake off some of his feeling of persecution if the White House atmosphere were cooled off. And the press might still fulfill its obligations, retaining the watchdog's bite while curbing its Pavlovian bark.