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EDITOR'S NOTES

• Aug. 22 won't be remembered by a lot of people, but it did have significant meaning for all of us, press and public alike. On that day President Nixon held a news conference.

It was the first time he had met the press since the beginning of intensive investigation of the Watergate scandal.

It was his first press conference of any kind since March 15.

It was his first televised press conference in more than a year.

It was also a bitter occasion for the President, clearly one of his least favorite public appearances.

One columnist somewhat boldly predicted that films of this last meeting with the press "will be shown for years and years, and they will be no less remarkable in the year 2000 than they were on a summer afternoon in 1973." What I saw was a different President Nixon than I had known before. He looked older, sullen, and was more visibly shaken than I can ever remember (in responding to some questions about Watergate). Occasional attempts at wit and jibes fell pitifully flat. Even the reporters looked as if they felt uncomfortable for him. Those strange 46 minutes or so may have gone far to explain why months can go by between press conferences. The President was like a man who had been putting off an appointment with his dentist for much too long. The pain was now unbearable. He had to get it over with.

The pain was obvious back a few days before when he blew his stack, to use his own words, at a startled Ron Ziegler, the White House press secretary. It happened in New Orleans as the President was about to enter the back door of an auditorium where he was to give a speech. Suddenly he

turned to the trailing Ziegler, grabbed him by the shoulders, spun him around and briskly shoved him back toward a crowd of reporters and other onlookers — all in plain view of three television cameras and, later that night, of millions of TV viewers.

"I don't want any press with me," the President was heard to say to Ziegler. "You take care of it." The look on the press secretary's face said he would prefer to crawl under a rock somewhere rather than carry out the presidential order, but he later dismissed the incident, saying, "It looked different than the situation was." Meanwhile, members of the news media simply used other entrances and covered the event as usual.

It was unfortunate for Ziegler, because the President ostensibly was venting his feelings toward the press. They boiled up again at the Aug. 22 press conference in off-hand remarks coated with sarcasm in response to questions from Dan Rather of CBS and a couple of other newsmen. Nixon also said a variety of people, including members of the press, are trying to exploit Watergate to keep him from doing his job.

"There are a great number of people in this country that didn't accept the mandate of 1972," he said. "I know that most of the press corps weren't enthusiastic, and I understand that, about either my election in '68 or '72. That isn't unusual."

It was a day of desperation more than anything else. A hoped-for, healthy give-and-take between adversaries as in former administrations was just not to be. This President on this day seemed to be fighting to hold back years of animosity.

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