

# A harsh encounter with the media

## ANALYSIS

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WASHINGTON — President Nixon wanted to show the nation that, far from being "shell-shocked" by the events of the past week, he is the type of leader who remains cool under stress.

"The tougher it gets," he told reporters at a White House press conference, "the cooler I get."

Whether he demonstrated calmness and self-control in his televised clash with the press remains for the nation to decide. The encounter, which produced probably the harshest language ever uttered in public by a President in describing his attitude toward the news media, was, from any angle, lacking in decorum.

Speaking about television commentators' remarks on the Watergate scandals and the President's firing of Special Watergate Prosecutor Archibald Cox, Nixon said: "I have never heard or seen such outrageous, vicious, distorted reporting in 27 years of public life."

Nixon tried to steer the press conference toward the Middle East situation with a lengthy appraisal of the cease-fire and an account of his decision to put American forces on alert.

Only reluctantly, it seemed, did he approach Watergate and the public furor over his firing of Cox.

Although he announced that he was re-establishing the special Watergate prosecution, he made it clear that it was a decision forced on him by Congress, the public and the press. He seemed in tone and statement to blame mostly the press for his current difficulties.

Several times during the 40-minute session, Nixon attacked what he called the "electronic media" for "frantic, hysterical" reporting.

CBS correspondent Robert Pierpoint mentioned to Nixon that, although he denies getting angry at the press, he was leaving the opposite impression. With an edge in his voice, the President reiterated that he was indeed not angry, and then hit reporters broadside with this statement: "Don't get the impression that you make me angry; one can only be angry with those he respects."

The President's statement touched off near-pandemonium in the East Room, as many of the 200 reporters

jumped to their feet, shouting for recognition. Clark Mollenhoff of the Des Moines Register, seated on the front row to Nixon's right, was in near-rage. A former special White House counsel in the Nixon Administration,

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Mollenhoff has become one of Nixon's bitterest critics and a pesky questioner at press conferences.

Nixon almost immediately realized he had blundered; he had for a moment forgotten his television audience, and had said something not in keeping with the impression he was attempting to convey. "I don't want to leave the impression I don't respect the reporters," he said, adding that it is the TV "commentators," who "distort the news" and report news "they know to be false," that he does not respect.

But the damage was done, and he knew it. The anger and resentment that had been building throughout the broadcast had broken through in one quick flash.

By holding a televised press conference at this time of strain and high public criticism in lieu of a televised speech, which he canceled Wednesday, Nixon probably was making too much of a demand on his physical and mental resources.

The strain of the Cox firing and the subsequent rising demand for his impeachment, coupled with the separate but not less agonizing confrontation with the Soviet Union, had been tremendous. On Capitol Hill and elsewhere, there were rumors that the pressure was getting to him! With the press conference the President had hoped to demonstrate clearly the falseness of those rumors.

He compared his current ordeal with those he had faced earlier as President — especially the harsh public and press reaction to his decisions to bomb Cambodia in 1971 and to resume massive

bombing of North Vietnam in December 1972. "But I stuck it out," he added.

"As far as what goes through my mind," he said, "I would simply say that I intend to continue to carry out, to the best of my ability, the responsibilities I was elected to carry out last November."

Noting that "some" thought this week's face-down with Russia over the Middle East cease-fire "was simply a blown-up exercise," he said it was "a real crisis," which brought to the test his foreign policy achievements as well as his own resolve to stand up to international challenge. "It was the most difficult crisis we have had," he said, "since the Cuban confrontation of 1962."