

Terrence O'Flaherty



Honk for Television

THERE MAY BE a few people who still believe the President's charges that television is responsible for "outrageous, vicious and distorted reporting" but no reporter could distort what all America could see for itself on television last Friday. It was right in front of us — the sad and fascinating sight of a man breaking into pieces.



David Brinkley

be forced to endanger the integrity of the governmental process; and, last Friday, the sight of President Nixon playing out his hand of cards in a manner which raises grave doubts about the end of the game.

On many occasions during this Republican administration, I have observed in print that most network newscasters are Democrats but I have never witnessed — or heard of — an instance when one of them chose to distort the facts as they were known to him. Even in the absence of their personal integrity, the competitive element among the nation's four networks would make such distortion impossible.

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No wonder the dramas of the new television season are attracting little interest. It is impossible for them to equal the dramatic impact of the televised news of the past two weeks which have shown us a vice president bow out in disgrace; the nation's highest law enforcement officer resign rather than

THE IMMEDIATE REACTION of network newsmen was more gentlemanly than the attack — as if they chose not to lower themselves to the level of reasoning set by the President. It is alarming to learn that he has fallen into the old trap of blaming the messengers for the messages they deliver.

Mr. Nixon is the most inaccessible President within memory. NBC's recent survey indicates that he is now also the least trusted. (Nine per cent trust him all the time; 45 per cent trust him some of the time; and 44 per cent don't trust him at all.) His major access to the public is through prepared speeches televised at a time of his choice and through televised press conferences.

Since Watergate, his speeches have been pathetically self-contradictive and politically disastrous. He has preferred press conferences because they are more manageable. Reporters are seldom allowed a follow-up question and the President can ignore those reporters he feels may seek more penetrating answers. After Friday's tragic encounter, all but the most naive viewers could see that he had even lost his hold on press conferences.



Clark Mollenhoff

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LAST JUNE, ABC'S Washington correspondent, Sam Donaldson, told me he thought that Mr. Nixon "simply does not know what to do" about his rapidly disintegrating administration. Television tells us that he still does not. His tactless comment about Brezhnev, his intemperate remarks to the press, and his hasty retreat in the face of questions from Clark Mollenhoff of the Des Moines Register-Tribune all indicate that the trick that he claims to have inherited from his midwest parents — "the tougher it gets, the cooler I get" — is not an accurate temperature reading.

NBC's David Brinkley observes: "The President backed down because he had to, Americans will put up with a lot, but they will not put up with anybody being above the law — not even the President."

The only thing that I can find in Mr. Nixon's favor in all these televised shenanigans is the thought that he cannot possibly be as much a villain as he appears to be, simply because no really evil man would allow himself to appear so consistently conniving.