

Questioning the President

It would have been an unusual event regardless of where and when it had occurred, but President Nixon's encounter with the nation's managing editors Saturday evening was touched from the outset by the surreal, set as it was in the heart of Walt Disney World and held on the very eve of the 45th anniversary of the creation of Mickey Mouse.

It is not, after all, every day that American citizens sit in a room and watch the President of the United States look over their heads and into the eye of the television camera to declare, "I am not a crook."

No sooner had Mr. Nixon left the assembled editors with that remarkable statement rattling through their minds than the evening took yet another bizarre turn. As the Hawaiian hula dancers were wriggling the editors' attention away from Watergate, the lake surrounding the Magic Kingdom came suddenly ablaze with neon hues of red, white and blue. A huge American flag floated across the lake, so luminant as to suggest no energy shortage existed anywhere on earth, let alone here.

If such a setting seemed bizarre for a productive discussion of the most serious crisis the presidency has undergone in a century, it was only one of many problems the editors faced.

The most serious of these is a problem all of those who have attempted to question Mr. Nixon about the many facets of Watergate have faced: If he is in control of the forum—as he certainly was Saturday night—you will hear only what he wants to tell, irrespective of what you ask him.

And at that, the editors proved themselves no more adept at weaving tight questions that blocked the rhetorical exists than their Washington correspondents have been.

At times, it appeared as though Mr. Nixon was engaged in self-interrogation, as when he demanded of an editor, "Why don't you ask me about the milk" scandal. The editor allowed as how he didn't "know anything about milk" and declined. Another editor promptly rose to oblige the President, but by then Mr. Nixon had launched into a discussion of his version of the milk affair without benefit of any question from anyone.

The problem of what questions to put to Mr. Nixon and how to put them has been one of the news business' most frustrating problems from the start of the sordid business of Watergate.

It has gone in cycles. In the summer of 1972, when the scandal was young and with an uncertain future, reporters were reluctant to ask about it at all. As it grew and its awesome potential began to show its outlines, Mr. Nixon made himself scarcer than any President in living memory had been from the direct questions of the press.

Since August and the Watergate hearings, the President has ventured forth to meet the press, but the results have been more rhetorical than informational on both sides. Many in the White House press corps have contented themselves with the notion that a really tough question is, "When are you going to resign?" Or, "Haven't you been covering up high crimes and misdemeanors?"

For his part, Mr. Nixon has moved from forum to forum restating his standard defense, adding little to the known record and occasionally stating a historical inaccuracy.

The Associated Press Managing Editors invited the President for "some straight talk" about Watergate. Only a little was added to what is known or to what Mr. Nixon has already said. He did confirm the substance of the Providence Journal story that he paid a little more than \$1,500 on \$400,000 income for 1970 and 1971. And more firmly than before he insisted on reshaping the facts of what President Jefferson did in the Aaron Burr case, claiming again that the third President provided the court with a "summary" of a letter, when he in fact provided the letter in its entirety. He went a step further and made this misstatement of the historical record "the Jefferson rule."

The press has been ensnared in these encounters with Mr. Nixon into a

The News Business

web of his making and ours. For Mr. Nixon's part, he invites questions in large auditoriums, such as the one at Disney World or the East Room of the White House. Follow-up is impossible because each questioner is bent on asking his own question, irrespective of the question and response that have gone before. The questions become launch pads for speeches that go where Mr. Nixon wants them to go, no place else.

For the press' part, reporters and editors alike are caught in what is best described as the Baker syndrome: "What did the President know and when did he know it" is the way Sen. Howard Baker (R-Tenn.) first posed the question to John Dean in late June.

The press has been wheel-spinning with that question ever since and getting no closer to the answer than Senator Baker got when he asked it of Dean.

Meanwhile, a whole range of other questions have gone unasked, and these relate to the responsibility of a leader for what happens in his domain. Mr. Nixon has been asked over and over again about what happened to the tapes, what happened to Archibald Cox, and what happened between John Mitchell and him. Hardly anyone has

"If Mr. Nixon is in control of the press forum—as he certainly was Saturday night—you will hear only what he wants to tell, irrespective of what you ask him."

asked him what in the name of heaven happened to his administration:

"Mr. President," I have been waiting to hear someone ask, "a little more than a month ago, the man you twice chose to stand a heartbeat from the presidency resigned and pleaded guilty to a tax charge; your Justice Department said there was much more to its case than just a tax charge.

"Six months before that, sir, the man you chose as your first attorney general was indicted in the federal court in New York.

"On the same day and in the same case, the man you chose as Secretary of Commerce was also indicted. The chief of your Domestic Council is under indictment for perjury in the Ellsberg case and your chief of staff for most of your administration is the target of at least one grand jury investigation, as is the former deputy director of your last campaign, your special counsel and several other of your highest level assistants. Your former counsel has pleaded guilty to perjury and has been disbarred.

"And the charges are not frivolous ones, Mr. President. They include, for example: conspiracy to obstruct justice, wiretapping, subornation of perjury, misprison of felony, conspiracy to destroy evidence, conspiracy to commit burglary and interference with the administration of the Internal Revenue Code, to name just a few.

"The question, Mr. President, is how all of this was possible in an administration elected on a pledge of restoring law and order?"

The questions Saturday night in Orlando were excellent in some cases and atrocious in others. Mr. Nixon was eager to get his version of the milk scandal on the record, and could have been asked some pointed questions on that subject. Instead, he wound up interrogating himself on milk, while fielding a marshmallow about what he planned for his retirement.

It was at moments such as that one when a visitor to Disney World was reminded of the famous figure around which it was built. Happy Birthday, Mickey Mouse.