

Questioning the President

Mrs. Robert W. Young of Poughkeepsie, N.Y., wrote recently concerning her disappointment at the outcome of recent presidential news conferences. Essentially, Mrs. Young is frustrated by the lack of follow-up questions, as are a number of other viewers who have written to this column after recent televised meetings between President Nixon and the press.

"Why," Mrs. Young asks, "can you not all get together before a news conference and compose a series of specific questions that would not allow for evasion? Then you decide in which order you want the questions posed and have only one reporter stand up at a time..."

She goes on to suggest that reporters at presidential news conferences should be organized to the point where they agree beforehand that if a certain question is not answered to their satisfaction, it will be immediately pursued by the next questioner.

Because Mrs. Young's question is one that has come up repeatedly of late, I obtained her permission to circulate her letter among a group of White House correspondents. It seemed to me that they are in the best position to describe the problem and their thoughts on whether any solutions are possible.

"It would be impossible to get those who attend the conferences to agree on anything," writes John Herbers, White House correspondent of The New York Times. "The diversity is enormous. The group that normally covers the White House is only a part of the attendance... the bureau chiefs and columnists—the lordly journalists—reporters of all stripes come out of the woodwork."

That description of those attending the presidential press conference ran

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through practically all of the answers from the White House reporters. Diverse as they may be, they all agreed on that point, and some questioned whether pre-arrangement of questions would be proper.

Carroll Kilpatrick of The Washington Post stated it simply: "It would be a mistake for reporters to get together before a news conference and compose a series of specific questions for the President." His colleagues, Jules Witcover of The Post and James Deakin of The St. Louis Post-Dispatch concur.

If the press is to remain free, said Robert Pierpoint of CBS News, "it must also remain independent, including each of its component parts." He suggests, furthermore, that "no ornier group of cusses exists... than good reporters on the trail of a hot story. No one ever could get them to agree on a common course of action. In a democracy, that's as it should be."

Dan Rather of CBS News said that he, for one, doesn't "want anyone accusing us of being a journalistic Ku Klux Klan." He recalled, as did several others of the White House reporters, that they once tried to get together to discuss the common problem of how to question the President.

"The immediate result," said Rather, "is that the White House accused us of ganging up on the President." To Rather and the others, independence is crucial. "I would be reluctant to be perceived of as part of a group. It is precious to be perceived of as independent."

Peter Lisagor of the Chicago Daily News elaborates on the reason: "It may be false pride, and wholly unwarranted in this stage-managed, scripted, commercial culture we endure, but the fact is that reporters pride themselves on their independence. They're one of

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the few unrehearsed groups in town. They couldn't organize an orderly spin-the-bottle game."

Helen Thomas of United Press International thinks the times may be changing, and that it has to do with the previous performance of the White House press corps:

"There isn't a correspondent who doesn't kick himself over the questions that were not asked in 1972, when the President held a rare three news conferences during the entire span of the campaign. I do think there can be a conscious effort now on the part of each reporter to listen to the answers and to be trigger ready to forego his own pet, long thought up question (and) to follow up on the President's response to the previous question."

Herbers, Kilpatrick, Rather, Lisagor, Thomas, Pierpoint, Witcover and Deakin were among 12 White House reporters who responded to Mrs. Young's letter. The others were: Hugh Sidney and Hays Gorey of Time magazine, Tom Brokaw of NBC News, and Lou Cannon of The Post.

Lisagor contends that "most of the problems would vanish if the President held regular, frequent conferences, as in the past."

"The present system is bad," asserts Gorey; it "can be improved, but should not be junked."

Instead, several of the correspondents suggested various possible reforms of the present presidential news conference.

Lou Cannon of The Washington Post, who sees "very great danger" in a group of reporters appointing themselves to decide beforehand what questions should be asked of the President, recalled a practice from his days covering the governor of California.

"There is a custom," Cannon said of press conferences in Sacramento, "that reporters cannot proceed to another subject until one subject has been exhausted." He conceded that such a system makes possible "a silly question or two," but it made possible more "in-depth questioning."

Rather would be willing to see an experiment in which someone other than the President recognized the questioner—"the president of the White House Correspondents Association would be all right with me"—instead of having the President call on the person to interrogate him. He would even entertain "a system of signals" from those reporters who wished to follow up on the previous question.

Rather, who conceded that "we make an awful lot of mistakes" in the presidential news conference, would also be willing to try a system in which reporters would submit the questions in which they are most interested beforehand and have them sorted so that subjects can be grouped, which is somewhat of a variant on Cannon's suggestion about the Sacramento news conferences.

Either practice would eliminate something Sidey found to be commonplace, that White House reporters "rarely listen to or care about the preceding questions and answers (because) they are so focused on their bid for attention and the subject they wish to pursue."

Brokaw, the newest member of the White House press corps in our sampling, thinks all too many of his colleagues "walk into that room determined to ask only a question that they hope will provide tomorrow's headline or a paragraph in some future history book. We need bricklayers as well as architects."

In the end, Mrs. Young, that is the problem. President news conferences serve the public relations needs of the President or the individual needs of the reporter. It remains to be seen if they can be made to better serve the needs of the public.