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Mr. Nixon and the Press

President Nixon's news conference last evening was the first he has held in four months.

In holding news conferences so infrequently, Mr. Nixon has departed from the practice of all his recent predecessors. Franklin D. Roosevelt, the progenitor of the White House news conference in its contemporary form, usually met with reporters twice a week. Subsequent Presidents held these conferences much less often, but they still averaged two or three a month.

Beginning in his second year in office, however, Mr. Nixon has spaced out his meetings with reporters at ever longer intervals. In the past year since the furies of Watergate began to rage, he has held them rarely.

The ostensible reasons that the President has offered for this self-imposed isolation from the press are hardly plausible when contrasted to the performance of his predecessors. The exigencies of war, foreign crises, or domestic economic troubles never prevented Mr. Roosevelt from seeing reporters during the Depression and World War II or Mr. Truman from seeing them during the Korean war.

It hardly matters what the real reasons are, whether they be Mr. Nixon's innate distrust of reporters or his admiration for Gen. Charles de Gaulle's remote, neo-imperial style of governing. What does matter is that he has done a serious disservice to the nation and to himself by refusing to make himself available to reporters on a frequent and regular basis.

In this era of big Government and increasingly impersonal institutions, the Presidential news conference is one of the few and very necessary means of dialogue between ordinary citizens and their President. This is not to suggest that the questions asked are always a perfect mirror of the public's interests and worries; but over a span of time the conference questions cumulatively do give Presidents a good if imprecise measure of public thinking. At the same time, a President's answers provide the citizenry with a window on his mind.

It is astonishing that Mr. Nixon regards news conferences with such distrust since he usually conducts them with considerable skill and fluency. If Mr. Nixon had met the press once a week for the past year, his Watergate troubles could not be worse and they might well have been somewhat diminished. Watergate aside, the public in this time of troubles has a right to know what the head of Government thinks about gasoline shortages, higher food prices, increasing unemployment, and other problems.

By cutting himself off from the press, Mr. Nixon has created an impression of drift and indifference and thereby contributed to a diffuse sense of public malaise that makes each of the particular problems seem worse and harder to solve. It is a malaise that he can begin to remedy if he makes his news conference a regular, rather than a special event.