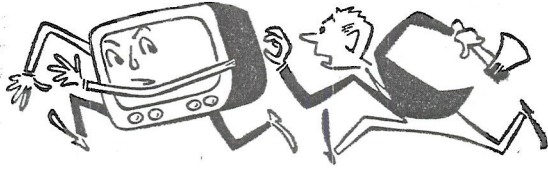


Terrence O'Flaherty



The Shallow Image

NO SIGHT on the television screen during 1973 was as fascinating as the spectacle of the President of the United States playing little games with himself and with us — pretending here, posing there, evading everywhere, and flashing that tiny smile as mechanically as a camera set at half-second exposure.



President Nixon

After an absence of several months, he was back at the old TV press conference routine this week. They were months during which Americans had matured rather quickly in the matter of presidential skullduggery. Today, viewers know more about the office of Chief Executive than at any time in our history. They learned it the hard way.

Viewers had a right to expect that the President had matured with equal speed in his understanding of the public. Alas, this was not the case. Rather than supplying the information to enlighten the public he was still manipulating the answers to protect himself. When it was over I wondered why he had gone to all that bother if it was merely to extend the shadows already cast over the national confidence.

★ ★ ★

I CANNOT RECALL a time when Richard Nixon made a statement on television that stood clearly

and cleanly by itself without the clarification provided by further questioning. Unfortunately the free-swinging interview techniques of the Washington press corps seldom tolerate follow-up questions. The President obviously believes this situation works in his favor.

I have a hunch, however, that the frustration of the press is far more acceptable to viewers than the false protection which Mr. Nixon receives from the situation. In either case the viewers are losers along with the President and the press.

If the President were open to suggestion, he might look into the press conference technique developed by Governor Ronald Reagan which allows the switch to a new subject only when reporters' questions on the present subject are exhausted.

★ ★ ★

BECAUSE of the oleaginous nature of Richard Nixon very few observers have been able to pin-point him. One of the exceptions is ABC's Harry Reasoner who observed:

"Mr. Nixon is the master of a technique known as the fallacy of the strawman. To use it, you say something ridiculous about the people who disagree with you — and then convincingly destroy it. An example: recently the President managed to say that Washington reporters believe America is hopelessly sick. Then he said: 'I certainly don't mean to be critical of them, but I don't believe that America is hopelessly sick.'

"Well, there you are.' On one side—Mr. Nixon with the flag in his lapel, honoring America—and on the other side all those Washington reporters. The strawman has been knocked down.

"The only trouble, of course, is that what Mr. Nixon said is pernicious nonsense. The flag belongs to all of us and honoring it and America is not necessarily synonymous with complete honoring of the Nixon Administration or any administration. The strawman charge — to quote the President — that 'reporters think bad news is news and good news is not news,' is not proven. Give us some good news—and see!"

★ ★ ★

TONIGHT'S television screen is awash with nostalgia: "Hello, Dolly!" with Barbra Streisand struggling to conceal a foolish plot (8 p.m., Channel 5) . . . "The Dentist" with W. C. Fields (8:15 p.m., Channel 9) . . . "The Great Radio Comedians" (8:45 p.m., Channel 9).