

A Presidential Primer on How to Use the TV Medium

By LES BROWN

President Nixon's present campaign to win public support through television, as exemplified by his two most recent news conferences only five days apart, is being de-

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Analysis

effective use of the

medium

with almost unlimited access to it. They pointed out that both appearances were before groups whose sympathies the President were assured in advance—the Executives Club in Chicago last Friday and the National Association of Broadcasters in Houston on Tuesday—and their appreciation of the President, indicated by their exuberant applause of most emphatic statements, may well have impressed television viewers that Mr. Nixon was scoring telling points on every issue.

It was a venerable show-business principle that playing to a friendly house helps to insure a good performance; the principle is still employed in the theater, where opening nights are frequently "baped with family and other well-wishers.

Mr. Nixon started strong before the broadcast organization on Tuesday night and grew

manifestly stronger as the hour progressed, largely on the vigorous support from what might be called his studio audience. Only badge-wearing guests were admitted into the Jesse Jones Hall (several youths with forged badges were apprehended).

On the stage, members of the board of directors of the National Association of Broadcasters were highly demonstrative in their approval of Mr. Nixon's remarks, and since they were seated among the newsmen who were questioning the President, it may have seemed to the 3,600 others in television audience, that the reporters themselves were cheering and clapping.

Mr. Nixon's aides were not gambling on a sympathetic audience when they arranged, on March 1, for his news conference to be held before the N.A.B. A number of owners and managers of the large station chains consider themselves personal friends of Mr. Nixon and had worked openly for his re-election. Some had accompanied him to the Soviet Union and China.

On at least one occasion during his first Administration Mr. Nixon invited a group of representative broadcasters to the White House to discuss their business problems, a gesture

that was appreciated throughout the industry. When he ran for re-election in 1972, a number of industry leaders made substantial contributions to his campaign.

Mr. Nixon had been invited to the broadcasters' conventions every year since he took office but had always declined. In the belief that he would again, the organization this year asked the White House for Vice President Ford, Secretary of State Kissinger or William Simon, head of the Federal Energy office, as a newsmaker. Instead, they were offered the President.

Purely in television terms, Mr. Nixon, in Houston, was the star of a television show, a kind of game show in which the adversary press assumed the role of antagonist. The more difficult or embarrassing the questions, the more courageous the President appeared to many in the audience for fielding them, a fact underscored by the applause for his answers.

The news-conference format—which in the Houston context seemed to pit a lone man against a battalion seeking to draw blood—thus lends itself well to what Mr. Nixon apparently is trying to achieve in his latest round of television appearances, namely, a reversal

of his declining popularity and credibility with the public.

Not only does it permit him to speak informally on a range of issues, but it also represents the President as accessible, candid and at times witty, which are important counters to his reputation as a loner.

More important, the news conference makes for a better television show than an address to the nation. All content aside, the format has elements of drama, suspense and occasionally comedy—and such things matter when a mass audience of more than 70 million people, conditioned to entertainment, is before the set.

Since similar issues were bound to be raised in the Chicago and Houston news conference, the broadcasts were arranged for different hours, and therefore different television audiences.

Mr. Nixon's Friday appearance was at 2 P.M., reaching an audience predominating in women at home, which made it possible for the President to use prime time on Tuesday, where the audience components are widely varied. At 8 on Tuesday nights, the three networks normally reach close to 80 million viewers; at 2 in the afternoons, their average total audience comes to around 23 million viewers.