

# The White House and the Media

For the future of representative government let me say at the outset that no relationship is more important than that between the White House and the media. This is true both as symbol, example, and in the actual education of the public in the processes of government and the issues of the day.

The revolution that has occurred since 1945 has been so sweeping, so pervasive in its thrust, as to seem to destroy all past restraints. The great upward sweep of America's capacity to build and produce that went along with far flung military might gave the United States a power undreamed of in the isolationist era that ended in 1941. Regardless of the party or the President in office, that power has been progressively concentrated in the chief executive. And increasingly that power has been exercised in secrecy if not in actual concealment. Seldom if ever have so many been told so little about matters directly affecting not only their daily lives but their longer future in a world in which the nuclear arms race goes on only slightly abated.

The revolution in communications has been equally far reaching. Television, the satellite bringing an instant view of far distant events, was likewise pervasive in its consequences.

When President Truman first admitted the red-eyed cameras into the Indian Treaty Room in the old State Department building he began the transformation. The tapes were to be reviewed before release and that was fortunate since in this dangerous experiment a new man on the job made so many boobos. Truman's successor, Dwight Eisenhower, wrestled not only with his syntax but with the hazards of live television. His facial expressions when harassed by a bristly question from Sarah McClendon were wondrous to behold.

The quantum jump came with President John F. Kennedy. He was a master performer. The Kennedy performances in the auditorium of the new State Department building were enlivened by wit, irony, clever riposte to questions considered impertinent, and now and then by serious and even solemn declarations of policy. With apparent impartiality he signaled to one reporter after another around the auditorium. Here was television, whether as news or as "show," or an amalgam of both, at its best.

Kennedy's immediate successor, Lyndon Baines Johnson, was intimidated by the Kennedy example. He tried several full dress conferences that came off with nothing like the verve and vitality of his predecessor. For the most part after his early ventures he limited his encounters with the media to the mini conference called on short notice and confined largely to the White House regulars. He had a total of 125 press conferences with 23 in 1967 and 19 in 1968.

President Nixon in his far fewer conferences has followed much the same pattern. He held seven press conferences in 1972, seven in 1973. The total to date for his five years in the presidency is 35.

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ca's vastly increased power and its centralization in the president is evident in the number of representatives both from abroad and at home eligible to attend press conferences.

The full-scale Nixon press conference is a television spectacular. The White House regulars have assigned seats in the front rows. Their chances of recognition are far better than for the several hundred correspondents in the rear rows. Theirs are familiar names and faces and the President often calls them by name. These men and women spend most of their working hours in and around the White House or traveling with the President.

*The following is excerpted from a speech columnist Marquis Childs made at the Frank R. Kent Symposium at Johns Hopkins University.*

Their access not only to the chief executive but to his visitors has been severely limited under the Nixon administration.

The White House beat involves a large component of boredom. The power of reward and punishment rests with the chief executive. Before the energy crisis a reporter could take his wife and children on the press charter for a flat \$100 round trip. That often meant a family vacation at Laguna Beach where the press is quartered with only occasional interruptions for working reporters to go the 14 miles to San Clemente to produce a Western White House dateline. As for punishment, it seems to have meant little to individuals. While White House resent-

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ment of Dan Rather was widely advertised, if anything it enhanced his reputation.

But at a higher level the White House was convinced that the tactics of intimidation had succeeded. The ineffable Charles Colson reported with glee how network executives had positively cringed before White House demands. A particular issue was the so-called instant analysis after presidential speeches. This was part of the administration's insistence on the message undiluted to the million on television. The analysis were in fact not so much commentaries involving opinion of the commentator as they were a summing up of the points that were made and those that might have been relevant which the President did not touch on. As such they seemed to me a legitimate and useful function of a free press. Yet one executive, William Paley of CBS, issued a cease and desist order barring such analysis. This was later revoked.

The question I raise is this: Do the media have a right to interrogate the chief executive? Is the confrontation an inherent right or is it the privilege of the man who occupies the office to use it to his own ends, to diminish it or perhaps to let it fall entirely into disuse. In my opinion it is a fundamental right. Under the American system of divided powers there is no question period during which the executive can be called on for an accounting. Limited as it is the press conference is the only medium of exchange between the public and the President whose powers have been so greatly enhanced. This becomes all the more important as the claims of executive privilege and national security have narrowed the response of the executive to Congress.

I would like to suggest ways in which the institution of the White House press conference can be less dependent on the wishes, the objectives, of the individual who happens to occupy the office. A candidate for President should be called on to say that if elected he will hold a certain number of press conferences, say 25 in any given year. To deal in generalities, promising to be free and open to the media, will not be enough since such promises are freely given and as freely ignored. The pledge I propose could cover a variety of conferences, the full-scale televised conference and the in-

formal conference in the President's office. Suggestions have been made for limiting the size of the televised conference with reporters in part of the alphabet at one conference and those at the other end at a following conference. This would give wider opportunity for questioning. Consideration should be given to extending the time to at least an hour even though the networks carried live only a half hour. A presidential candidate who had pledged to hold a certain number of press conferences could be made to account if he fell short. There is no reason why the platforms of the major parties should not contain a similar pledge. Accessibility and openness at the top would surely set the pattern for the entire administration.

Can there be any doubt at this point of the terrible cost of secrecy and concealment as the avenues of information and access have contracted? When President Kennedy ordered the first 10,000 armed American ground troops into South Vietnam the public was never made aware of what that commitment meant. For failing to explore this beginning of the Vietnam involvement the media bears a sizable share of the responsibility. Then came the buildup under Lyndon Johnson to more than half a million ground troops. That buildup was carried out with every effort to lull the public into believing that with another hundred thousand troops victory would be at hand. Reporters such as David Halberstam who persisted in trying to tell the true story found every obstacle put in their way including pressure on editors and publishers. As the full measure of the American tragedy became known the country was torn apart. The President was compelled by the power of the peace forces to surrender the office.

The example of President Nixon is so new as to need little documentation. From the secret bombing of Cambodia to Watergate and all its dire consequences secrecy has exacted a heavy price. Much has been made by critics of the media of the barbed—the loaded—some would say—questions put to the President in that press conference on Aug. 22 on the lawn at San Clemente. Here said the critics, the Nixon loyalists, was proof that the press was out to get the President. These were the adversaries, the enemies, bearing down on a man they were determined to destroy. But in so far as the questions reflected hostility I believe this came in no small part from a long pent-up frustration. So much had been withheld, so much denied that was later shown to be true. The pertinent the relevant questions had so long been deferred. The relationship between President and press had been poisoned during many months of frustration and hostility.

A President has many avenues to the public as Nixon has shown through his repeated resort to network television. He may bitterly resent the hair shirt of the working press as did to take an earlier example, Herbert Hoover. But unless the right of the media to interrogate the chief executive at frequent intervals is recognized as a right and not a privilege conferred by an imperial presidency, the capacity of the American people for self-government, for comprehension and understanding of the world we live in, will continue steadily to deteriorate.

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