

A Ringside Seat At a Round With the President's Men

By Bill Boyarsky
Los Angeles Times

Laguna Beach

WHEN President Nixon's attorney walked into the White House press headquarters that afternoon, it was the climax of a memorable day in the long, brutal battle between the President and the reporters who cover him.

The nation saw some of the event live on television a week and a half ago: the plump, bland attorney, James St. Clair, announcing that Mr. Nixon would comply with the Supreme Court's order to surrender the subpoenaed tapes.

What the nation did not see was the bitter, complex, sometimes bizarre, skirmishing that preceded the announcement as the reporters pressed to get news from a White House determined to tell them as little as possible.

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EACH DAY, the skirmishing took place in the briefings held for the 45

Rockefeller Was Silent

San Clemente

A FEW DAYS AGO, President Nixon met with business leaders to discuss the economy.

Reporters waited to speak with the businessmen after the meeting.

Some of the business leaders walked by the press, but none would say anything about the meeting. The reporters became snappish.

The lack of success prompted Marty Schramm of Newsday to ask a question that David Rockefeller, head of Chase Manhattan Bank, viewed as impertinent.

"I'm not sure I've heard you comment on this before," said Schramm, with a straight face, "but do you favor impeachment?"

Rockefeller walked away without a word.

"Mr. Rockefeller," Helen Thomas shouted after him, "The White House belongs to the American people."

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reporters who accompanied the President from Washington. Answering their questions were either Ron Ziegler, the President's long-time chief press aide, or Gerald Warren, who serves under Ziegler as the press secretary.

Some of the questions were impertinent, argumentative, or downright rude.

There was the day that Hunter Thompson, the eccentric, brilliant correspondent for Rolling Stone, inquired about the President's health.

"Jerry," he said to Warren, "I continue to worry about that God damn clot. I wonder: Earlier you were asked about the 14 holes of golf he played the other day. That is unusual. Here is a man who was a basket case or almost on the verge of being a basket case a week ago. Is it your position that there is no longer any reason to worry about the clot?"

"First let me subtly disassociate myself from your rather colorful question, Hunter," said Warren, who is a pleasant, often patient man who looks and talks like Dennis the Menace's father on the old television show.

"Secondly, it has been stated quite often that the matter of the phlebitis has resolved itself."

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AT A BRIEFING, one reporter complained: "We are sort of funnels on the outside looking in. Is there any way we could get access to the President?"

"There will be, certainly, access to the President and when scheduled items are set, we will let you know," said Warren.

But during Mr. Nixon's recent trip to San Clemente, the entire press corps saw him when he stepped off his plane upon arrival in California and when he gave his economic address. Neither time were the reporters allowed to talk to him.

On other occasions, a few representatives of the press corps — known as a pool — were allowed to see the President and once to accompany him to a dinner party. But again, they could not speak to him.

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THE PRESIDENT and his few aides stay at the Western White House compound in San Clemente, while the reporters stay in Laguna Beach, 15 miles away. Reporters are not allowed in the compound.

Interviews with key aides are scheduled through press representatives. But it



RON ZIEGLER AND JAMES ST. CLAIR ENTERED THE PRESS ROOM IN THE LAGUNA BEACH HOTEL. The nation saw and heard St. Clair's announcement, but the public didn't see the earlier skirmishes with reporters.

is up to Warren, and on more important occasions, to Ziegler, to provide continuing news of the presidency.

After one lengthy answer from Ziegler, White House CBS reporter Dan Rather said to him: "As is frequently the case, I have no idea of what you are talking about."

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EACH DAY, the reporters gathered in the hot, stuffy press room of the hotel in Laguna Beach for their briefings.

Most of them wore sport clothes and they looked like they were ready for a resort.

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THE WHITE HOUSE press corps has long been a subject of controversy within journalism and government.

President Nixon believes most of the reporters are unfair and hostile, a view shared by many of his predecessors, both Republican and Democratic. Federalist, too. Even George Washington complained he was getting a raw deal in the press, as did John Adams.

There are many reporters, on the other hand, who say the White House press corps is too soft on the President. They

point out that it took investigative reporters outside the White House to uncover the Watergate scandal.

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REPORTERS are frustrated by the mountain of physical inconveniences placed in their way by the White House. They say it is difficult to write the full, well-rounded stories they believe necessary.

On the day St. Clair announced the President's decision to surrender the tapes, all the reporters got were the bare essentials: the decision, a few notes about whom the President talked to during the day.

Was the President angry when he got the news?

His aides said he had always intended to obey the high court. If so, why was there an eight-hour wait before announcing his decision?

And, most important, how long would it take for the White House to turn over the tapes to Judge John Sirica?

The men and women who report the news of the White House believe it is their job to ask such questions and that the President and his aides have the obliga-

tion to answer them.

To them, the issue is how much the people should know about how decisions are made in the executive branch. Since the average citizen cannot ask questions, the reporters say they must make the inquiries.

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PRESIDENT NIXON'S feelings about the press came out clearly in an interview he had with a man who is not a journalist, Rabbi Baruch Korff, chairman of the National Citizens Committee for Fairness to the President.

"I know," the President said, "in the press room that my policies are generally disapproved of and there are some, putting it in the vernacular, who hate my guts with a passion. But I don't hate them, none of them . . ."

"They are consumed by this issue (Watergate) and I can see — not all, but I can see in the eyes of them, not only their hatred, but their frustration, and as a matter of fact I really feel sorry for them in a way because they should recognize that, to the extent they allow their own hatreds to consume them, they will lose the rationality which is the mark of a civilized man."