The original documents are located in Box 12, folder "Fourth Estate and Chief Executive (3)" of the Ron Nessen Papers at the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library.

television, the reporters would not have felt any urgent need to "make" news themselves.

Televising this conference would also have served to diminish, rather than increase, public apprehension. The world would have seen the President making his calm, dignified statement. Had some reporters persisted in digging a story out of the statement, the world would have seen them hammer away at the President. The public would have noted that the actual phrase "active consideration" was first employed, not by the President, but by a reporter. They would have seen the President describe the bomb as a terrible weapon which he did not want to see used. As often happens when an event transpires bereft of introductory and following analyses, they probably would not have realized that they were supposed to be apprehensive--until the stark afternoon headlines told them so.[119]

Embarrassing gaffes can also happen in domestic affairs, as Richard Nixon painfully learned. Although trained in law, he proved himself on many occasions to be ignorant of the basic tenets of jurisprudence. Once, he even did it in public.

Nixon, lobbying for Congressional action on his anticrime bill, was rambling on about John Wayne, Western movies, and the "simple code of justice" of the old frontier, when his talk turned to press coverage of Charles Manson, the hippie cultist then on trial for the murders of Sharon Tate and a number of her house guests. The United States Court Building in Denver, Colorado, suddenly came alive as he assailed the apparent "glorification of a man who was guilty, directly or indirectly, of eight murders without reason." Few newsmen paid much attention to the remaining few minutes of his discourse--their main concern was to reach telephones--fast.[120]

"MANSON GUILTY, NIXON DECLARES" screemed the front page of the Los Angeles Times, which went to press soon after Nixon's remarks. The defendant held the paper aloft in court the next day, in hopes of getting a mistrial declared. The judge was satisfied that the jury had not been prejudiced by the demonstration, and allowed the trial to proceed. Manson was eventually convicted, and sentenced to a life behind bars.

The New York Times was less flamboyant, but very disturbed by Mr. Nixon's "scant contribution to the elucidation of the serious issue" of press responsibility and domestic tranquility. They editorially cited the President for approaching most public issues "not with the sensitivity to the nuances of language and the habitual concern of an experienced lawyer," but rather with the "breezy metaphors and attention-getting if inexact analogies of the politician." Nixon's "political intent was clear enough," the Times said, but "discernment and discrimination are everything" in discussing these issues; "loose talk (is) worse than nothing."[121]

Times Vice-President James Reston also devoted a column that day to "Making Things Worse Than They Are." Protecting the President from "unintended and potentially damaging blunders during extemporaneous news conferences" has long been a pet topic of Reston's, and this incident enabled him to raise the question anew. Although finding it odd that the President, trained in law, should have "violated the elemental presumption of innocence," Reston was even more puzzled by the subsequent failure of his staff to protect him in time to "keep the blunder from going out on national television."[122]

The Denver conference was being taped for later broadcast, and the blunder could "easily have been corrected before the damage was done." Why, then, was Nixon's staff not "alert and confident enough" to tell the President what had happened? Why were they "still trifling with it four hours

after the incident?"

It was not until Air Force One landed in Washington at 11 p.m. that night that a five paragraph "clarification" was issued to reporters, in which Nixon attempted to "set the record straight." While not admitting his mistake, Nixon conceded a lack of Presidential omniscience:"I do not know and did not intend to speculate as to whether the Tate defendants are in fact guilty." As all the facts had not yet been presented, the defendants should be "presumed to be innocent at this state in the trial." As Ron Ziegler later reconstructed the scene, the President was startle by reports that his comments had created a stir. "I said charged," Ziegler quoted the "evidently surprised" Nixon as remarking.[123]

A tape recording proved that the President's recollection was faulty.

Although it was too late to erase this gaffe, Nixon had within his power the ability to negate such misshaps. Nixon frequently exercised his control over the Government Printing Office to doctor the official transcripts of his press conferences. By this method he could correct faulty syntax and improper grammar."As for meeting with South Vietnamese leaders are concerned" was printed with the appropriate,singular form of the verb "to be."[124] His reference to New York's"Senator Goodwell,er,Senator Goodell,"[125] was published minus the initial fluff. When these,and other discrepancies were brought to his attention, Press Secretary Ziegler characterized the reporter's interest as "nitpicking,foolish and unacceptable to me as criticism."[126]

There were other,more substantive alterations. Describing the controversial incursion into Cambodia, Nixon proclaimed that it had resulted in the capture of "rockets by the thousands and small arms by the millions."[127]

That was not true. According to Ziegler, Nixon meant to say "small

arms ammunition"; it was a minor slip of the memory bank. Accordingly, the official transcript reads "small arms[ammunition]by the millions." But the American public, wondering whether the military operation was worthwhile, distinctly heard the President say that millions of small arms had been captured. And they were impressed.

"I totally disagree," Ziegler claimed, "that the transcript is for any other purpose than the purpose of clarity and to be factual."[128] Thus, if the facts of Nixon's words conflicted with clarity, they were edited. If his words conflicted with reality--such as the time he said American forces would be out of Vietnam by May 8,[129] when he really meant Laos; or the time he gave Laos a two-thousand mile border on the war zone, when the Laotians thought they only had one thousand[130]--his words were changed.

But the most significant aspect was that the censorship was secret--the G.P.O. printed the doctored transcript without mentioning that it was not an "as delivered." That's sneaky.

As President Kennedy used to say,"That's a great thing, that right of clearance."[131]

Although Harry Truman refrained from using the press conference as a way to exert strong leadership, he did realize the importance they held fore Presidential communication with the people. "I think it adds to the information of the public as to what goes on," he said at the end of his term."And I think they are entitled to know what is in the President's mind," he added.[132] So he permitted limited technological growth--after taking certain precautions.

Truman began having his press conferences recorded by the Signal Corps in January 1951, to aid the reporters in checking their notes. In late May of that year,Press Secretary Joseph Short recalls, the President "authorized direct quotation of certain remarks...and,upon request,we authorized broadcast of that portion of the recording."[133] The practice was to release only a few sentances;the remainder of the President's remarks at the press conference had to be reported in indirect discourse.

James C. Hagerty, President Eisenhower's press secretary, was aware of the benefits the press conference held for Presidential image building. Truman's failure to shape a clearer and better public image was due in part to his avoidance of the broadcast press conference. Hagerty was determined that his boss would not make the same mistake. But the press thought he might.

Press and President got a double object lesson in the primacy of Presidential prerogatives and the power of popular pressure in the weeks prior to Eisenhower's inauguration. "Concern is Felt Over Reports That Eisenhower May Alter Conferences," the New York Times reported on January 17,1953. Based on a "casual remark that the General might not have regular press conferences," wrote James Reston, "and sustained by the fact that he

has not actually had (one) since September 8," the assumption was that "he intends to abandon the weekly White House conference or change it substantially."

Disturbed by the implications, Reston declared that "this is a question that goes well beyond the world of newspapering."Themodern White House press conference, he wrote, "is the only direct and regular contact between the people and their President." Not only does it "enable him to make announcements," but it is also a "means by which reporters can bring questions direct from the people to the President."[134]

Equally alarmed, other reporters turned to Harry Truman for a testimonial to the practice's usefulness. At his final meeting he obliged, urging his successor to "never cut the direct line of communication" between 1600 Pennslyvania Avenue and Main Street,U.S.A."I have been reading speculation in the press that the press conference is going to be discontinued," Truman noted. "It's hard to find out what's going on, and that's the best way."[135] The amateur historian had earlier offered this advice to the professional soldier:

> I think they are a good thing. I think it's one institution in this country that is entirely different from all other countries in the world, and I am sure he will continue them.[136]

Presidential lobbying apparently was successful,for the following week Eisenhower's press secretary James Hagerty announced that Ike would "definitely" hold press conferences,perhaps at the rate of once a week. Hagerty, who was to win wide acclaim for his competance and integrity was grossly erroneous in this forecast;1953 saw only 23 Presidential press conferences. He was also wrong in his assumption that "live radio and television would eventually be included."[137]

Hagerty also told reporters that he was "disturbed by the deluge of

rumor stories and speculation" on the new administration's press policies. "Never was any thought of abandoning the Roosevelt-Truman practice of mass meetings with the press entertained," Hagerty asserted. He accounted for his rash of "no comments" on that subject prior to the inauguration by saying he "had to remain consistant with the President-elect's position of saying nothing official until we take over in Washington."[138]

Despite these assurances, there was "some grumbling"[139] in the press about the administration's slowness in getting the press conferences underway.[Ike did not meet the press until February 1] Still,commentary was for the most part optimistic. Grateful for his decision to meet with them, reporters were not about to alienate Mr. Eisenhower. Some even tried to cheer him up, painting rosy pictures of the success they assured him he would be. Shortly before his first conference, veteran analyst Ernest K. Lindley praised Ike for his "sound decision" in holding spontaneous news conferences."Eisenhower is unusually well-fitted to conduct that type of conference," Lindley wrote. "He handles himself superbly."[140]

With advance notices like that, Eisenhower couldn't help but speak kindly of the press, when the time finally came for them to get together:

> First of all[the President said]I want to assure the ladies and gentlemen present that I welcome this opportunity to meet with representatives of the radio and press,many of you old friends of mine, and to continue the kind of relationship that I have had had in the past with you. I look forward to many of these meetings during the ensuing four years.
> Now,one of the topics that made an interesting subject for speculation during the last few months was a thought that I had developed a good deal of antagonism to the press. I wouldn't know why. I feel there is no individual who has been treated more fairly and squarely by the press over the past many years than I have.[141]

That was certainly true.For most of his tenure, Ike was not confronted with questioning even remotely hostile. Reporters, aware of the position Eisenhower held in the affections of the American people, were "disinclined

to court disfavor by saying harsh things about him." This popular support, plus the heavily Republican sympathies of publishers, "made the White House press conference a farce for the first two years under Eisenhower."[142][143]

At the start of those two years, an immediate improvement was wrought by Press Secretary Hagerty; he allowed newsmen to hire a professional stenographic firm to produce accurate transcriptions with a few hours after the close of a conference. These transcripts, with the questions quoted directly and the President's response still in the third person, were then printed in full in a few newspapers--the start of a new venture in publishing.[144] But Hagerty and the General had an even greater advancement in store; they would bequeath it as "a Christmas present."

Christmas came slightly early to the press room, arriving on December 16,1953. Hagerty, in a watershed stroke he termed only the "first step toward broadening the coverage" of Eisenhower's press conferences, released the full recording of that day's press conference to radio and television networks. A slightly trimmed version was broadcast on all major radio chains, while two television newsshows used exerpts against a backdrop of silent film from an earlier conference.[145]

Naturally, this obviated any justification for the President to be quoted in indirect discourse, and the newspapers were permitted toquote Eisenhower directly, without any limitation. This was not yet set as a constant policy; the new procedure was to be employed only at intervals, based on Hagerty's judgment after each session's close. Newsweek assumed that when a conference was "wholly informative, it will be released in full." Otherwise, only that part of the proceedings will be released when the President "has a very important announcement to make to thepublic." As

they explained it, this "keep-them-guessing"attitude on Hagerty's part was to insure that reporters don't "ask a lot of questions just to get on the air."[146]

As Time magazine pointed out,this post-conference decision posed problems for the wire services. Their initial stories paraphrasing the President would have to be revised into direct quotes "if Hagerty decides to allow broadcasts of the conference," a judgment they presume Hagerty would make after deciding "if direct quotation is advisable." As he is "convinced the administration should make better use of radio and TV," Hagerty is "likely to give permission often," in the considered opinion of Time.[147]

The new policy was greeted favorably,especially by electronic journalists. The most eminent of their number, Edward R. Murrow, said the innovation "draws the President and the people closer together and increases interest inpublic affairs." But casting his eye nervously toward the future, he wondered "if tape recordings of press conferences are going to be broadcast often, are they not going to force the President to put a curb on himself?"[148]

The New York Times was also thinking ahead. While commending the administration for seeking the "widest distribution of the news (which) is all to the good," they warned of the "danger that the participants will become mere actors in a gigantic show." That warning was delivered "both for newspapermen...and the President."[149]

Thirteen months later Hagerty was to make another landmark innovation--the authorization of television and newsreel cameramen to make sound movies. This was done, he said, so the "people of our country can not only read the reports of the conferences but can hear the discussions the President has with you gentlemen."[150] To old newspaper hands who complained that television

would transmute the proceedings into a performance, Hagerty had a briefer rejoinder: "We are in the 20th Century--the second part."[151]

One Hagerty provision, however, was as old as government itself--the exertion of influence to keep itself from looking foolish. The press secretary reserved the right to edit the film before it was released, a move he denied was tantamount to censorship. "It's not censorship at all," he said, "we want the White House to remain in control of the spoken word of the President."[152]

Although Time magazine noted that "more reporters than usual wore television-blue shirts and eager looks," the cameras "did not seem to be a disturbing influence."[153] Eisenhower had expressed a fear that that might not be the case, but CBS correspondent Eric Sevareid assured him that the operation was a success. "The experiment went well," Sevareid commented later, and "there seems no real reason why it cannot continue to go well."[154] But if everybody was satisfied with the reporters' performances, there remained disagreement over the role of Hagerty as film and sound tape editor.

The Fair Dealing New York Post blasted the production as a "GOP propaganda project rather than a recording of history," thanks to Hagerty's "censorship." The careful editing had "nothing to do with national security," but was "governed by consideration of Republican security." After considerable deletions--Hagerty found eleven of the twenty-seven Presidential responses unfit for home consumption--the electronic media were allowed to broadcast only a "deftly-selected fragment" of the press conference, a situation the networks "supinely accepted."[155]

CBS Bureau Chief Sevareid found these arguments that journalists were being used in official propagansa to be "stretching journalistic Calvinism a bit too far." It would be "too much to expect" the President's press

secretary to release those "segments of Presidential speech in which the Chief Executive does not perform at his best," but there is a safety mechanism:journalists viewing the delayed broadcasts will feel perfectly free to "make news of the fact that other portions are held back when that seems a newsworthy point." Although the telecasting will give the public a "more intimate understanding of what goes on," it will not "by any means provide a complete understanding." Still, the first experience augers well for the encounters being "a benefit, on balance, to both the President and the American people."[156]

Arthur Krock, pundit-in-residence for the New York Times, was less concerned about benefits accruing to the public or censorship infringing on the press than he was about the political implications. He discussed the "philosophic calm" with which Democratic Party leaders viewed this "legitimate extension of the publication of news conference transcripts," which inevitably resulted in "party propaganda." Aware that this method of public communication is a "legitimate advantage of White House incumbency," they are nonetheless equally cognizant of the hazards of the new medium,which could cause Eisenhower to "make an unfavorable appearance before the court of public opinion."[157] Such a negative finding on the President's first performance was nowhere to be found;Ike had come over so well that one Democratic Party leader quipped,"We demand equal time."[158]

All these problems weighed heavily on the mind of Richard Strout,then in his thirtieth year of attendance at White House press conferences. That "vital part of the American governmental system" requires a procedure which is "dignified,responsible and as flexible as possible." Releasing the full transcript and airing the tape recording is "a serious mistake," he wrote in The New Republic, for it turns the press conference into a

"theatrical performance, a show." What once was an "extremely handy,carefully evolved semi-official and unique contrivance" has been perverted into a "self-conscious hald-hour broadcast."[159]

The decision to broadcast the conference is likely to "freeze and formalize the whole affair," destroying the "collective,informal mood that frequently characterized press conferences at their best." The President will "no longer be able to discuss delicate subjects with the freedom of the past," and reporters will always be uneasy knowing that the world at large is listening "to what he is about to say."

Strout, who attended his first press conference during the Coolidge administration, is clearly partial to his accustomed ways;the old system was fine as it was, with the "regular tradition...of direct quotation of limited portions" of the President's remarks. If the Chief Executive happened to "throw off a vigorous phrase," a reporter usually asked if direct quotation were possible."More often than not," thatpermission was granted--after reflection by the speaker. When paraphrased, the President is "not held to the strict letter of what he has informally thrown off."

Another innovation which Strout objects to is the self-identification with which reporters preface their questions."Perhaps it helps block irresponsible questioners," he concedes,"but it is a step toward breaking down the more comfortable,informal old relationships,where delicate matters could be discussed easily."

[Contrariwise,media critic and former Washington bureau chief for Providence Daily Register Ben Bagdikian saw just the opposite effect from the rule under which reporters identified themselves.[160] Pierre Salinger's "new rules of non-identification of the questioners," he said, resulted in the "smaller number of foolish questions." Salinger notes that there was

"general unanimity" on doing away with the identification rules;the result, he claimed, was "very successful (in doing) away with a great deal of the rambling type question which was prevalent in prior press conferences."[161] Russell Baker saw another benefit,one which accrued totally to the President. Kennedy was "clearly established as the star of the show" thanks to Salinger's "brilliant stroke" of abolishing the identification rule. It was a "rending blow to theatrical types" in the press corps who learned to their dismay that they would be appearing anonymously on the national stage.[162]

Strout,who now author's The New Republic's TRB column, feared that the President's "own self-protection" would necessitate the deletion of certain passages, or even some entire broadcasts. Paraphrasing had served to correct Eisenhower's syntactical lapses:direct quotation would produce a jarring effect, Strout feared.[163]

That fear proved to be groundless. Although Eisenhower was often lampooned for his grammatical and syntactical lapses--the New York Times expressed bewilderment at "sentances and paragraphs which just don't parse"[164]-- the public reaction was extremely enthusiastic. Sincerity, which Ike could not help but exude, is a political virtue in the eyes of the electorate, and the broadcasts helped add to Eisenhower's already sizeable font of public trust."Although his sentances at press conferences wandered across the landscape without consideration for syntax," wrote Walter Johnson,"what did come through was the fact that the President was a warm, kindly,decent human being who said simple,friendly things." Ike could "communicate a belief in homely virtues," Johnson said, "and to the public, at least during the first term,this seemed more important than penetrating analyses or the development of far-seeing policies."[165]

John F. Kennedy was elected with one of the last definitive mandates in the history of American Presidential elections; he outpolled Richard Nixon by less than 120,000 votes. Seventy per-cent of those newspapers editorially supporting a candidate announced for the Republican Vice President. Now Kennedy would have to govern in the face of their opposition, which was expected to be especially vociferous; his economic and civil rights programs were certain to arouse the powerful opposition of the predominantly Republican press. To counteract the attacks, the President-elect's press secretary, Pierre Salinger, proposed that Kennedy modernize the "fireside chats" which President Roosevelt had so skillfully employed in similar circumstances, and hold his press conferences on live television.[166]

"This is the right thing," Kennedy agreed. "We should be able to go around the newspapers."[167] That decision, made in Palm Beach on December 27, 1960, changed the course of Presidential press conferences--perhaps to the detriment of all.

The traditionalists in the Washington press corps immediately howled their disapproval. New York Timesman William H. Lawrence told Salinger he was "plunging deeper and deeper into matters about which you know absolutely nothing." Veteran Washington Post reporter Edward T. Folliard accused the press secretary of "turning the Presidential press conference into a sideshow."[168] James Reston went public with his criticism, describing the proposal as "the goofiest idea since the hula-hoop."[169] Robert A. Hartman, who would later be Vice-President Gerald Ford's chief of staff, had opposed even the permission given by James Hagerty to quote President Eisenhower directly. "Direct quotes," he explained, "have made the reporter shirk his

duty to explain what the President has on his mind. When the President said something vague, Hartmann charged, "the easy and almost universal solution is to pass your confusion along to the reader by feeding direct quotes and letting them wonder what he meant." The new system, he figured, would only add to the already existing confusion.[170] Arthur Krock was even more pronounced in his opposition."Live televised press conferences are an irresponsible way to conduct the Presidency," he harrumphed. "The consequences...can be very serious."[171]

Of course, there were those who favored the move."Kennedy is liberalizing the press conference in the right direction," said Robert A. Donovan.[172] "The live conference is worth trying," agreed Raymond "Pete" Brandt.[173]

Reaction from around the country was also mixed. A Rhode Island editor thought prime time press conferences would provide a "valuable service that would inform and educate the public." Contrariwise, an editor from upstate New York bemoaned the "further mutilation of the press conference and the substitution of more theatrics for the serious business of probing the President's mind for the enlightenment of the public." Although the Pough keepsie Journal's editor feared the "grave harm to the national interest" that could result from this "electronic misadventure," a California editor scoffed at the "overstated arguments that television would greatly increase the dangers...of a slip of the tongue."[174]

Kennedy's performances were widely praised. The press conferences themselves got mixed reviews.

Russel Baker saw in the President a "new star with tremendous national appeal and the skill of a consummate showman." He was, said the Times correspondent, "a study in bronze skin and sandy hair (who) handled some exceedingly difficult questions with the controlled poise of a man who knew

his brief, and who graciously finessed an argumentative question." Baker's 175
Times colleague, William Lawrence, agreed: "I thought the first one went very
well. Kennedy was on top of his facts and figures." 176 Across town, New York
News reporter Ted Lewis said that "Kennedy did a masterful job." 177 Reviewing
the conference in its "TV and Radio" section, the Saturday Review said
that "The President...met the heroic requirements. He triumphed commendably." 178
The New Yorker noted that "the President's Wednesday-night performance on
all major networks has been admired by just about everyone just about
everywhere." The President, said the journal, was "adroit, lucid, diplomatic
and frequently informative." 179

Despite his well-deserved reputation for charming artistry, however,
Kennedy's performances were not always flawless. At his first conference
his tongue slipped as he discussed the Geneva negotiations for an atomic
test ban. After announcing that he would request a postponement of the
talks, he said a panel of experts had been named to recommend "what our
position would be in late March when he hope the tests will resume." Of
course, he meant "talks." There were no noticeable international repercussions. 180

Twenty-six months later, the President made a slip of a much more
trivial nature. Asked about a compromise tariff negotiation formula reached
at Geneva, the President said, "I think we have a long road to hoe." To
some of his listeners, reported the New York Times, the "h' was distinct." 181
Further along, Kennedy got on the road: "Coming down to final negotiations,
we will have a long road, but one that I think we can travel and should
travel and must travel." 182

Having witnessed the weekly slaughter of syntax and grammar during the Eisenhower years, Manchester Guardian correspondent Max Freedman found the Harvard-educated Kennedy a blessing."I rejoice," he said,"that the noble structure of the English sentance is no longer left as a dishonored casualty."[183]

Still,Kennedy was not without his problems in this very regard. Asked whether the United States would forgo any further atmospheric tests of nuclear devices, in order to sign a formal treaty with the Soviet Union, the President replied:

> Well, I've stated that our concern would be--we stated it before, since,and, as I said, afterwards--that we would sign an agreement which provided for adequate inspection system--that's correct. But adequate inspection in regards to preparations, as well as testing.[184]

Just as Kennedy's personal attractiveness was not always transerrable into political strength, so his popular appeal at press conferences was not concommitant with mass reportorial approval for the conference format. There was, Time magazine noted just two months into the endeavor, "an increasing sense of dissatisfaction,"[185] primarily with the conference."Mr. Kennedy has robbed the Presidential press conference of much of its best flavor," wrote Robert Donovan--who just a few months prior was praising the liberalized structure."The intimacy between the President and the press has been diluted by distance."[186] Held in the State Department Auditorium(capacity:800), the press conferences were, in James Reston's words,"like making love in Grand Central Station."[187] The new arena,said Peter Lisagor, "is making hog callers out of us."[188] Actually, these perceptions were somewhat jaundiced.Sliding partitions were used to halve the rooms size, and Kennedy rarely called on anyone seated beyong the third row. This,notes

Professor Cornwell, "meant that the mass quality of the affair was more apparent than real. The actual participants represented a relatively limited and manageable group."[189]

Walter Lippmann found fault with function, not form. Kennedy's penchant for announcements and the reporters' questing for scoops, he said, had "demonstrated a false conception of why it is worthwhile to have the President submit himself to questions from the press. The real use of the Presidential press conference," the eminent analyst explained, "is to enable the President to explain his policies and, if necessary, to compel him to explain them. President Kennedy," the columnist concluded, "with all his political genius, is not yet in full effective communication with the people."[190]

The New Yorker worried that Kennedy was too effective in his communications. It was understandable, the magazine said, that the President would "judge an institution like the press conference by the value it has for him." Thus, there is "no reason why he should not seek to modify it in ways designed to serve his ends."

Neither is there reason, the journal continued, "why anyone should accept at face value his assertion that 'more direct communication' is advantageous." Then this implied condemnation and prophetic warning:

> A meeting in which the President attempts direct communication with several million onlookers through the medium of the press corps cannot possibly have the same value and meaning for anyone as a meeting in which the members of the press examine him on behalf of the millions, to whom the findings are presented in print or orally. Indeed, the whole press conference form that has developed over the years is inappropriate to the function that President Kennedy proposes to make it serve.[191]

Still, Walter Lippmann was concerned less about Presidential Television than he was about television's paraphernalia. "The whole format of the press conference as it has developed," he said that first winter, "with the TV,

the lights and the tremendous crowds--needs to be re-examined. It's not satisfactory," he said."There is no use pretending it is. It isn't."[192] Time magazine agreed:"The press conference simply ain't what it used to be. It is now show biz."[193]

But it was a peculiar form of show-biz--public affairs programming bereft of commercial sponsorship.[194] The possibility for holding a press conference during the prime evening viewing hours was still in the future; Kennedy generally scheduled his on Wednesdays,alternating between 11 a.m. and 3:30 p.m. Some regional syndicates re-broadcast the conference, but at a very late hour. WNEW-TV carried the conference tape at either 11:40 p.m. that night or 12:40 a.m. the next morning;WOR-TV generally showed it at midnight.[195] Both stations are in New York City. Thus, one either had to stay up quite late, or arrange to view the conference during the working day if one wanted to see the President.

Like any good citizen with a grievance, Pierre Salinger knew where to go--Congress. Meeting privately at the Capitol in February,1962, he suggested to a group of Democratic legislative press aides that they could help encourage fuller television coverage of the conferences.Referring to the many letters he said he was sure they were receiving asking why the conferences were not being carried by local stations, he recommended that the complaining citizens be told to write in protest to the networks and local outlets.[196]

Salinger found an even more potent way of pressuring the networks and local stations--the New York Times. "It is unfortunate," wrote Jack Gould a fortnight after Salinger's appeal on the Hill, "that the text of the President's remarks are hardly ever carried in video's better evening time." The conferences had become "excellent TV in their own right," but

the medium itself had "not adequately fulfilled (its) assignment." In not carrying the full conferences "at an hour of greater convenience for the large majority of TV viewers," Gould contended, the medium had "underestimated the extent of public interest in his incumbency."[147]

The nature of the public interest, and the extent to which it was being stymied by the media, was evident in a survey taken a few months later. Ninety-five per-cent of those polled by the Young and Rubicam researchers found the conferences " a worthwhile experience,"--but over sixty per-cent were unaware that a conference had been held during the day on which they were interviewed. Almost ninety per-cent of the sampling said they had seen or heard at least part of a conference, while only fifty-five per-cent said they had tuned in to a full coverage broadcast. Ten per-cent said they had seen or heard more than ten of Kennedy's thirty five conferences. Of those who watched, the attributes most often cited were the informative content of the conference,the sense of participating in a democracy, and the President himself. In speaking of Mr. Kennedy, viewers noted his skill in expressing himself, his sense of humor, his fund of information, his sincerity, and the fact that he gave all reporters a fair chance at asking questions.[148]

The New York Times thought he was being too fair in recognizing reporters. His press conferences,the paper said, "sometimes give the impression that the President of the United States is in the dock, defending himself against political crimes." Taking the "badgering with better nature than some of his predecessors," Kennedy usually answered "barbed,needling,disagreeable questions good-naturedly";he was,the Times editorialized,"more courteous to the press than some gentlemen and,particularly,some ladies, are to him."[149]

Warning the correspondents that "a question is not just a question," the Times wondered if they had "caught up with the technological advances that television represent(ed)." The give-and-take of the press conference was no longer confined to a small room and reduced to cold type, the Times reminded reporters; "the emotional, sometimes accusatory tone of many questions is now broadcast throughout the country and the world." There is, all the difference, they pointed out, "between asking a pointed question impersonally and asking it in the manner of a prosecuting attorney--especially when the addressee is the President of the United States. What the press conferences need," the Times concluded, "are better questions and less emotion." [Plus ca change.]

To which Victor Lasky replied: "I suggest that what they really need is better answers." [200]

The ten years between 1953-1963 saw tremendous technological growth of the press conference. Opponents of electronic media coverage warned that these advances would irrevocably damage the press conference. Although certain ills did result, the damage was neither permanent nor crippling.

Instead, the most serious deterioration came during the next decade, a period of relatively minor technological development. Johnson's extreme informality and Nixon's persistent avoidance wrought more havoc on the once-proud institution than any battery of cameras could ever cause. But their conquests of the conference were indeed Pyrrhic victories.

By the time Kennedy came to office, reporters had grown accustomed to meeting with the president two or three times a month. When JFK fell off that schedule, they reacted negatively. "I think the President is hurting his own cause," surmised Robert Donovan, at a time when Kennedy had gone one month without meeting the press. [201] Kennedy's successors could have learned something about the political necessity of frequent press conferences--but they pointedly ignored the lesson.

Most of Lyndon Johnson's press perversions affected private dealings; leaks, pique and the rest were outgrowths of his personality which bore most heavily on the labyrinthine maze of sub-rosa Presidential-press relations. But he also attempted to nullify a quasi-constitutional public relationship which had been developed by eight Presidents over a span of fifty years; he tried to destroy the press conference. In a way, he succeeded.

President Kennedy had been criticized for some of the changes television wrought in the press conference. Although most of the active sins were committed by the reporters (chaotic conditions, incoherent questioning, et cetera), Kennedy was blamed for having brought the live camera into the State Department Auditorium, a shift in locale some of the more nostalgic reporters also lamented. Still, his press conferences were dramatic displays of sparkling wit, and occasionally political courage; Kennedy brought press conferences to their most developed state.

"The only law which obliges the President to hold news conferences," Arthur Krock wrote three weeks after Johnson's ascension, "is the political law of self-preservation." 202- Like all laws, this one was broken at the transgressor's peril--and to the detriment of us all.

Krock reported that "it is understood" that Johnson would soon hold news conferences, scheduled in advance and available for delayed broadcast. Up until the writing of Krock's column, Johnson's chosen format was a modernization of the format first used by Woodrow Wilson, a reversion to limiting the attendees to reporters permanently assigned to White House duty. The modernizing aspects included partial silent film coverage; reportorial freedom to quote the President directly and to ask questions without prior

submission;the issuance of transcripts;and the summoning of the group without advance notice.[203]

It was that final point--no advance notice--which was to cause so much dissatisfaction among newsmen. "There is no time for the preparation which is required of well-stated questions," Krock noted. The intimacy of the setting--the President's private office--acts "as a restraint on inquiries about subjects in which he has a personal relationship yet are within the legitimate bounds of essential public interest"(e.g.the Senate investigation of Robert G. Baker). Finally, the selective method "excludes the large majority of Washington correspondents," because it is available only to the wire services and those newspapers which maintain a permanent White House staff. Thus, experts in foreign policy,fiscal matters, military programs,et cetera, are unable to attend;this "precludes informed questioning of the President on some of the most important actions of Government."[204]

Johnson had held two press conferences up to that point in time,both of them impromptu affairs. On Saturday, December 7,1963, reporters were suddenly whisked through Press Secretary Pierre Salinger's back door;they found themselves face to face with the President of the United States,officiating at the coffee urn. "I told Pierre a little earlier in the morning I was going to buy some coffee later in the day,"Johnson began his first Presidential press conference,"and I didn't really know how much coffee I was going to buy.He has more friends than I had anticipated."[205]

"More people work on Saturday than you think," a reporter replied."It is a new administration,too," another chimed in.

"If there is anything you would like to ask me I would be glad to answer," the President offerred.

Eleven days later, the procedure was much the same. When the reporters

assembled for what they assumed would be the normal Wednesday morning briefing, they were suddenly led into the Oval Office,where President Johnson stood behind the desk. "You mean I have that many friends out there that I have been missing all these days?,"he asked with a smile. He proceeded to answer seventeen questions ,sometimes at length and once or twice off-the-record.[207]

Two days hence, the Associated Press sent these cutlines:

> President Johnson points out details of the Lincoln bedroom to reporters.The tour originated when several reporters covering the signing of a treaty with Mexico began chatting with the President about the White House. He then invited them to come on a tour thattook in the private quarters.[208]

On Christmas Eve four women reporters were given a warm reception at the White House. President Johnson led them on "another of his impromptu goodwill tours," telling them along the way about his life as Chief Executive, and discussing for the first time a longhand memorandum from former President Eisenhower shortly after President Kennedy's death. Johnson told the quartet that he thought women covering the White House were as good as the men reporters and sometimes better;he wanted their bosses to know it. As the group was leaving(the session lasted two-and-a-half hours) he gave them autographed pictures of the Johnson family.[209]

The First Family was back at the LBJ Ranch for Christmas,giving the President another chance to entertain newsmen. Much to the First Lady's dismay, he called a news conference and took the contingent of more than fifty reporters through every room in the ranch house. Entering the study, the President called out to photographers:"There are secret documents there so don't take pictures of the table."[210]

Johnson still had not held a formal news conference after more than two months in the White House, andreporters were beginning to grumble.At

an impromptu gathering, the President showed he was bitter:

> Don't run out of here if you have any questions. Ask them. I will answer them. This is not a quickie news conference. I don't know what you call a formal news conference. I guess I ought to wear a white tie. I came to work this morning and I didn't think it was formal. I just thought I was supposed to be here, and if you are all here, I will give you anything I know at any time. Some of you, I think, feel that I don't see enough of you individually. I will be glad to do that. I have seen thirty or forty reporters who have asked to come in on special things they wanted to do. Some wanted to write about Cousin Oriole. Some wanted to write about my wife. Some of them want to tell their editor that they saw me and here is what they think will happen in the wild blue yonder.
> I try to see all of them that I can with my schedule and I am very happy with them. I never enjoy anything more than polite, courteous, fair and judicious reporters, and I think you all qualify.
> I am through, and if there are any questions you want to ask, I will be glad to try to answer them. 211

Less than a week later, Johnson held a news conference for which "reporters were given for the first time a two-hour warning." About one-hundred thirty newsmen and cameramen--Johnson's largest audience to date--packed the ninety seat White House theater; lines formed at the East Gate about an hour before the conference began. It lasted twenty-six minutes.[212]

"President Is Brining Individual Style to the News Conference," was the title of Tom Wicker's analysis the second Sunday in February. The New York Times White House correspondent found the President and the press "still circling each other warily, each apparently willing to make friends but not quite sure the other is sincere about it."[213]

Wicker said President Johnson had been "able to alter sharply" the Kennedy and Eisenhower pattern of formal news conferences because "nothing except custom and public pressure" required a President to submit to questioning by the press; furthermore, "nothing dictates to him the manner in which he has to undergo the ordeal." But this very combination--not unlike Krock's "political law of self-preservation"--was enabling television networks to "urge upon him (with creeping success) that he return to a

news conference that they like, rather than one he likes."

Already, their lobbying had had some effect. Notice was given for the February 1 conference "partly because of pressure from reporters and the networks for regularly announced and televised" news conferences. Wicker relayed the word from "White House sources" that Johnson would "sooner or later" appear before live cameras. The"primary reason he has not done so," these unnamed sources contended," is not that he is particularly afraid of a fluff." Rather, it was because he "wishes to avoid situations in which he can be directly compared to President Kennedy.And there was no situation in which Mr. Kennedy appeared to better advantage than his news conferences." As Wicker noted,"Mr. Johnson was uncomfortable before the cameras and therefore liable to error and slipshod performance."

Finally, more than three months after assuming the Presidency, Johnson held his first live televised press conference. James Reston reported that he "achieved his major objective...he survived." Johnson was a "talker rather than a performer," more natural and impressive in smaller rooms. Knowing he was "out of his element today," Johnson "approached this ordeal like a man going to the gallows."[214]

Stalling for time, Johnson read a series of appointments and made a few announcements "in a drone as if he were determined to be slow and casual about the whole affair." Knowing that "the more you talk in these journalistic inquisitions, the fewer questions you have to answer,he took his time."[215]

It was the same with his answers,Reston observed.When a man's name was mentioned,"he gave you the fellow's biography.He didn't exactly filibuster,but he managed to give a maximum of background and a minimum of news."

Johnson appeared "patient,courteous,cautious and verbose." Although he "concentrated on what everybody knew, he made a better impression on the reporters in the room than he apparently did on those who saw him on television."

Now that the "ordeal he dread" is over, Reston assumed,Johnson can "return to his small spontaneous conferences, where he usually is more effective."

Towards the end of the press conference, a reporter asked Johnson how he planned to explain administration policy to the country. In a lengthy statement of his press policy in general, Johnson answered,in part:

> I go along with the view expressed by Jefferson that the collective judgment of the many is much to be preferred to the selective decisions of the few.
> I shall have my press secretary...make avaiable all information that can be available to the press.From time to time I will see individual members of the press about press business, and I may see some of my old-time friends socially,occasionally, and I hope without too much criticism.
> And,at other times,I'll have them in my office,too--if I have any announcements that I think are worthy of their attention and of taking their time.
> Other times, I'll have a meeting like this to reach the folks who the press may not be able to reach through the ordinary newspaper or magazine media, so that we can have radio and television coverage.
> I know of nothing in the President's job that's more important than being held accountable to the people,explaining to the people the reasons for his actions, and telling the people something about the problems they confront him,because they are a very understanding group,once they have the facts.[italics added] 216

A week later, two historical developments occured. March 7 was the date of the first press conference ever held in the East Room;it was also President Johnson's first successful foray into live television.

"A friendlier and more relaxed atmosphere prevailed today," New York Timesman Henry Raymont reported. Reacting to criticism of the previous week's effort,Johnson changed his performance as well as the setting, producing his "best news conference thus far.From a stylistic point of view,

that is." At the State Department the week before, Johnson had "remained seated and looked uncomfortable";this time he stood behind a lectern. He now"spoke more rapidly than usual inclipped sentances that curbed his Texas drawl and made for a livlier meeting," in contrast to his earlier "generally long and apathetic answers." To forestall criticism that the President "might be deliberately taking up time with prepared statements"(he recited a long list of appointments and read a report on the economy for the first nine minutes), Press Secretary Salinger announced that the conference could go on well past the usual half-hour. Reston had said Johnson "almost slipped into the operating chamber"; this time he "entered at a brisk pace." One thing remained unchanged,however;at this, his seventh news conference," "there was little advance notice,as with most of the others." Salinger had announced at 12:15p.m. that the meeting would begin at 3:15p.m.[217]

Raymont concluded his analysis by quoting unnamed White House aides as saying that the President's news conferences were "still in the experimental stage...he might test other rooms before he settles on a permanent home for the meetings." This was certainly true;yet Douglas Kiker thought he discerned a basic leitmotif to the Johnson gatherings:"Are President Johnson's press conferences all alike?" he asked in a report from Austin. "His ninth one,held late and unexpectedly Saturday afternoon at the LBJ Ranch,seems to offer some confirmation of this conclusion. It was devoted to old,comfortable subjects."[218]

For Lyndon Johnson, April of 1964 was a manic depressive month.

Back in Washington after having spent the Easter holiday down on the ranch, Johnson and his staff were stunned by the April 6 issue of Time. Entitled ,"Mr. President, You're Fun," the lead article began:

> A cream-colored Lincoln Continental driven by the President of the United States flashed up a long Texas hill, swung into the left lane to pass two cars poking along under 85 m.p.h., and thundered on over the crest of the hill--squarely into the parth of an oncoming car. The President charged on, his paper cup of Pearl beer within easy sipping distance. The other motorist veered off the paved surface to safety on the road's shoulder. Groaned a passenger in the President's car when the ride was over:"That's the closest John McCormack has come to the White House yet." 219

The President was outraged by the account, which inspired moralizing editorials around the country deploring the Texan's high-powered drinking and driving. The image of LBJ as a Texas joyrider combined with his reputation as a wheeler-dealer. Still in its transition phase, Johnson's presidency was emperiled.

Two days later, railroad unions struck the Illinois Central. It was a god-send for Lyndon Johnson. Donning the cap of the nation's chief labor negotiator for the first time, he pressured and cajoled each side into making concessions. By mid-month, Johnson had already scored major victories; now his prestige was climbing almost apace with his optimism. 220

Now,he felt, it was time to challenge Kennedy on the late President's own turf--a televised press conference in the State Department Auditorium. Imbued with self-confidence,"Johnson was magnificent." He even started off with a few Kennedy-style quips:"I did not drive myself over here," he said in reference to the Texas joyride brouhaha,"but I did have to cancel an informal meeting with some tourists at the White House gate." 221 [Earlier that week Johnson had twice met with large and enthusiastic groups of tourists]

But having demonstrated to the nation--and to the press corps--that he could successfully conduct the Kennedy-style press conference, LBJ abandoned the format.

Johnson's success that April was definitely not the norm. Although Bill Moyers claimed the President preferred television for communicating to the people, Johnson was a failure in his televised press conferences. "He misuses the medium," Douglas Kiker wrote."There is an argumentative undertone to all these appearances--an aggressive defensiveness...a prevailing sarcasm."[222] Indeed,agreed James Reston."He seems to regard questioners as challengers and inquiries as thrusts to be parried," the Timesman wrote.Furthermore, Johnson was "seldom directly responsive to questions," and had gone far toward "removing the most essential element of the news conference--news."[223]

Johnson thus faced a Hobson's choice;his television appearances were disasters, but he was equally damned if he neglected the medium. Applying the "let us reason together" maxim to his problem, Johnson held a "double-header news conference," on June 18,1967.

As Newsweek reported, LBJ's varied meetings with the press had "never satisfied all his critics"[note use of value-laden term, implying that to be dissatisfied with Johnson's press policies made one a critic of Johnson]. Newspaper reporters were said to "complain that his impromptu deskside conferences,called without advance notice,give them no time to prepare good, searching questions." Since only seventeen of LBJ's conferences had been announced far enough in advance to accomodate live television coverage, "electronic journalists maintain they have been frozen out."[224]

To restore tranquility in his house--and to please himself-- Johnson met with reporters in two shifts on the 18th. After getting two hours

notice, newsmen were brought into the President's office, where he fielded twenty questions;cameras were barred. Then,bowing to the wishes of the three networks, LBJ appeared in the White House basement theater;there he faced the cameras and "repeated his views on the three news conference subjects network newsmen adjudged the most important."

According to Newsweek, "the double-header experiment left some newsmen still unsatisfied." William Small,CBS's Washington Bureau chief, was quoted as saying,"This is no substitute for a fully televised news conference." Deputy Press Secretary Robert Fleming agreed, saying,"We're still studying alternatives."

Other technological modifications were employed to improve the Johnson style. The most beneficial was the lavaliere microphone he wore in January, 1967. Freed from the podium microphone,Johnson moved about forcefully, often gesticulating as he strode. Exhibiting the energy largely missing from his earlier conferences, Johnson scored a success with this technique. But it was too little, too late.[225]

A failure at twentieth century mass media, Johnson tried to go back to Nature. His walking news conferences were good exercise--but not for Presidential press relations.

On May 4,1964, the AP's Sterling F. Green filed this dispatch:

> President Johnson held a seven-lap news conference today, with 20 reporters trailing him 'round and 'round the White House grounds. He discussed golf,politics,poverty,dogs,family,news coverage and the President's safety--part of it off the record.[226]

Less than a year later, the novelty had worn off--and some of the flaws were becoming apparent."President Johnson is the greatest walking President since Harry Truman," the New York Times reported.

> Fellow walkers have lost count by now on how many times the President has taken them around and around the White House circular drive.One press association reporter thinks 17 laps--500 yards each,or a total

> of five miles--is the most Mr. Johnson ever made. Another remembers a recent walk on which just sevenreporters were invited that lasted almost two and one-half hours.
> Virtually all of these walking conferences--during which the reporters ask questions and Johnson answers or evades at length--are off-the-record by Presidential decree. Sometimes he embarks on long,rambling monologues about everything from the state of hishealth or his father's stand against the Ku Klux Klan to the war in Vietnam.[227]

Peter Lisagor, who smashed his forehead on a metal lamppost while trying to keep pace with the softspoken President, takes a less tolerant view of the ambulatory press conference."I was agains those in particular," he told me. Then he told me why:

> Because you never knew where we stood, we never knew what was fact and what was fiction. It's a little bit like a somewhat captive press. I think of it in terms of the phrase I use about the people with Kissinger, and I use it more frivilously than seriously. We felt like journalistic groupies,racing behind this powerful man, jotting down everything he said,much of it nonesense,much of it trivia,much of it wouldn't even make a footnote in our memoirs, much less history. And there we were, being herded and shepherded around that South Lawn--I had a feeling it was Johnson's perverse way of putting us down, making us clamor and scramble. I think he just felt,"I'll show those bastards,I'll make them act like a bunch of goddam cub reporters." Sometimes I wonder if Johnson didn't get the last word on us,leading us around like that. Showing what kind of cravem--well,craven's the wrong word--showing us what kind of ravenous people we were,hangin on every burp and belch. But we did it. Because he was the President.[228]

The accuracy of Lisagor's sentiment was demonstrated one spring day back in the Great Society. The lovely Mary McGrory plaintively asked the President,"Where are we going?" Mr. Johnson benigly replied,"Wherever I go." The President then asked the Boston columnist if she knew the Baptist hymn,"Where he leads I will follow." In an off-key voice, he began singing the song softly,almost to himself. He sang it several times, the reporters following him all the while;he was still singing when he reached to door to his office.[229]

"The President," Johnson said in 1965," should have some leeway when he determines to have press conferences.I plan to have at least once a

But the President will determine when they are held, where they are held, and what subjects he discusses."[230] A week later, Johnson dropped the third person facade. "How and where I do that[make information available] is a decision that I reserve for myself and shall continue to reserve for myself," LBJ declared. "I will continue seeing the press at different times, different places and in different ways of my own choosing."[231] Not only was that policy faulty--it was also fatal.

"Johnson," one national correspondent stated in 1966," has destroyed the intent and purpose of the Presidential press conference and has become a master at manipulating and controlling the news to his own advantage."[232]

But for all his manipulation, Johnson himself was the ultimate loser. Political scientists and media analysts had warned that tampering with the press conference was an enterprise fraught with hazards. They were right.

It was clear, wrote William McGaffin, that "Johnson's downgrading of the press conference has helped to bring on...the Credibility Gap."[233]

Assessing the situation from his vantage point of forty years experience, Richard Strout urged Johnson to "accept the normal discipline of a formal press conference." It was, he said, " a perfect tool for him to fill the credibility gap, if he wereprepared to use it."[234]

He wasn't. It didn't.

Richard Nixon continued the subversion of the press conference begun by Lyndon Johnson. During the 1968 post-election interregnum, Nixon's chief press aides had promised "frequent but not regular" meetings[235]--but this was not to be. Richard Nixon held only 31 press conferences in his first four years, fewer than any other President in the modern era; only 16 times did he face questioning on television.

"It isn't that I'm afraid to do it," the President once declared. "I have to determine the best way to communicate....Every President has got to make a decision when he enters office about his relations with the press."[236] But Nixon had made up his mind about the press long beforehe finally reached the Oval Office. He might have momentarily reconsidered, but his judgment was firm:"The press is the enemy." Subverting the press conference was one of the many tactics Nixon used to frustrate and humiliate the media;but it meant abandoning a powerful forum in which he clearly held the upper hand. To destroy the press, Nixon sacrificed himself.

"The press is armed and waiting," conservative columnist Crosby Noyes warned Nixon shortly before the inauguration. Noyes further explained that the press, having assumed the "God-given right to destroy our national leaders,"[237] had singlehandedly caused Lyndon Johnson's retirement(Vietnam, domestic rioting, and the other ephemeral issues had nothing to do with the ruination of the Texan's reputation--it was the Eastern Liberal Press). Nixon was advised to avoid the mistakes of his predecessor, advice he only took to a limited extent.

Had Nixon strenuously sought to avoid creating his own credibility gap; had he refrained from the zealous advertising of Plastic Man as carried on

by his public relations advisers; had he allowed the machinery of government to operate in full view of the people to whom it belonged--had he done these things, the tale of his press relations might have been different. Had he tackled these major problems of the Johnson style, Nixon's record might have been a successful one. But instead he only tinkered with some superficial changes, reaping immediate gains of a passing sort, sowing the seeds for his eventual, final downfall.

Everything Nixon did as his early press conferences was designed to provide contrast to his immediate predecessor. Johnson had waited four months after assuming office before he held a live televised press conference;Nixon opened six days after his inauguration.[Kennedy still holds the record for promptness:five days. Given Nixon's well-known desire to better all Kennedy deeds, it is somewhat surprising that this easy opportunity was passed over] Whereas Johnson had belabored the patriarchal plural, Nixon spoke in the first person singular. The seat that had always been reserved for Lady Bird was there, but vacant.

A change of a more substantial nature was the removal of the large podium that had been standard fare for his two immediate predecessors. Instead, Nixon's "prop of informality," a single, unadorned microphone was installed. This was to highlight the fact that Nixon spoke without notes, and had few announcements to make. Tom Wicker noted that the removal of the lectern made Nixon's "every movement and attitude singularly visible.. ..it emphasized that he was working without notes or props." Perhaps Nixon realized that with visibility came vulnerability, for he"kept his hands clutched together at the waist....in order that the Presidential demeanor should not lapse into the candidate's assortment of campaign gestures." Nixon loosened this "iron control of himself only on the final query,"

when he was "relaxed and obviously in the homestretch," allowing himself the "luxury of some vigorous pounding of the fist." 238 To prove Justice Frankfurter's maxim about six men in a room telling six different stories, Timesman Max Frankel places Nixon's hands behind his back, not clutched at his waist. He also differs from his brother Wicker in that he records Nixon's hands coming free mid-way through the half-hour session, about the same time his smile relaxed. 239

The disastrous television images of the 1960 Nixon still in the national psyche, Wicker congratulates (in an off-handed way) Nixon for having "managed a cosmetic triumph over his celebrated case of five-o'clock shadow." The visual image of the President was "marred only on the long shots, when his eyes became dark sockets."

Like Wicker, Frankel also discerned some nervousness on Nixon's part, which gradually faded as the conference wore on. Due to a "special tension (which) reporters seem to rouse in Mr. Nixon"--an obvious reality which aides would unsuccessfully attempt to refute--the President "began nervously, his hands locked...his voice cracking."

Yet it soon became clear that this conference was at best (or worst) a "deferential inquisition" in which Nixon would "make virtually all the points" he wished. At one point, Nixon "even joined happily in the laughter"--over the memory of Lyndon Johnson's "lights-off" economy drive. All in all, wrote Frankel, it was a "sufficient" Presidential appearance.

Although the New York Times asserts a distinct separation between editorial and reportorial staffs, functions and policies, its lead editorial mirrored the themes enunciated by the correspondents. Mr. Nixon spoke "crisply and clearly"(Frankel:"responsive...brief but never curt...clearly and coherently"), at times interjecting a "touch of humor." Though reali-

zing that it was "unlikely that all his interrogators would be fully satisfied with his replies," the Times commended him for giving "every evidence he was well informed on current developments," and the understanding he displayed "without notes." Granting that Nixon did not yet have a fully developed program to explain, and could not be pressed hard on sensitive matters, the Times concluded that he "met the challenges well (and) passed the first test competantly." Certainly not effusive praise, but complimentary nonetheless.[240]

Apparently the Nixonites were pleased with the way their man was received and reviewed. Herbert G. Klein, Director of Communications for the Executive Branch, breakfasted with reporters the morning after the Times editorial and analyses. He told them that Mr Nixon's"air of confidence" and calmness" had reassured the American people. Those qualities, he averred had been displayed in the "tone of his Inaugural and the command he had over things at his press conference."[241]

Because he was"satisfied with Monday's initial effort," Klein said the President "plans to hold news conferences every week or two," interspersing the televised affairs (held in the East Room) with smaller, informal sessions in the Oval Office.

The Times editorialized that "The President will be well advised to use this important means of communication often in the days to come."[242] More pointedly, the dispatch on Klein concluded with the reminder that both of Nixon's predecessors had "been criticized for long lapses between news conferences."[243] Whether in the form of an urging or a warning, it was advice that Mr. Nixon would disregard--to his ultimate peril.

For a while, things continued to go smoothly. Frankel's piece on the first conference was headlined "A Deferential Inquisition--Nixon, After A Nervous Start, Is Clear / and Responsive at News Conference"; the second analysis was called "Nixon In Charge: A 'New Boy' In Town No Longer." As Robert B. Semple viewed the scene, the "occasionally nervous, vaguely deferential new-boy-in-town" who met the press a fortnight hence had been replaced by a "genuinely assured and assertive" Nixon. Where there had previously been mere competance, there now emerged a "sense of apparent authority....not only in the carefully controlled syntax and brisk responses ...but in the substance as well."[244]

Although the President apparently made two minor fluffs, and disappointed some newshawks with his lack of specificity ("some of his answer recalled the cautious rhetoric of the campaign"), overall it was a "smooth performance."

Assuming that General Eisenhower was again reading only the Sunday sections, Semple repeated the favorable review of his former VP in "The Week in Review." Mr. Nixon was described as "syntactically precise, brisk but not brusque, deferential but not obsequious...a man (who) is capable of self-criticism and self-analysis." He "may not know all the answers," Semple said, "but (he) is at least well informed about the questions." Frankel's earlier assessment of the news conference as "competant theatre" was upgraded to "good theatre (that has) done much to establish the image he clearly wants." As the headline proclaimed, "A good Start on His New Image."[245]

The dual theme of Nixon the isolated, mechanical man emerged in Walter Rugaber's account of the President's pre-conference preparations. "Alone, he pores over the measured opinions in his briefing books," Rugaber wrote on April 18, 1969, referring to large notebooks filled with information

culled from the various Executive Departments. When Nixon finally appears before the cameras he is "typically precise and organized," the New York Timesman noted. "The listener can almost see him ticking off the points on a big yellow legal pad in his brain."[246]

Although more than a month had passed since Nixon's last press conference(on March 14)--"presumably to avoid questions on domestic points that had not jelled"--unnamed sources said the President "generally likes his encounters with the press, despite his apparent nervousness." Rugaber reported that Nixon had rejected a proposal to present that week's budget changes in a situation unencumbered by reporters. Again quoting unnamed sources, Rugaber relayed the feeling that "He (Nixon) does his best if he has a feeling of being close to the people he's talking to."

The President next felt like getting close to reporters on May 22, when he held an informal and non-quotable briefing in his office to explain his choice of Warren E. Burger for the Supreme Court. He next answered question's from the nation's press on July 26, when he held another informal non-quotable gathering on Guam to discuss his new Asian policy. His only televised press conference during the entire summer was on June 19.

Nixon's avoidance of the press conference was as mystifying as it was frustrating. "What is odd about this," wrote Max Frankel at a time (September 24) when Nixon hadn't met the press for three months, "is that Mr. Nixon's early news conferences were widely regarded as successful, useful and politically profitable."performances."[247]

The President's friends made note of his preference for being judged on his deeds rather than his words; but "many people around here are confused" by his actions, Frankel averred. "And out of this confusion arise the growing demands for a public exchange with the President. The real

victim of Mr. Nixon's mystifying inaccessibility," hypothesized Frankel, "may be the President himself." Nixon's critics were at the time complaining that he was drifting and postponing issues. "A public exchange might not dispel the doubts," Frankel said, "but the absence of such an exchange may well be contributing to them."

Frankel returned to his theme of how Nixon was damaging his case by shunning the press. He wrote in late October that Nixon was not providing guidance on "how to interpret the incredibly contradictory tales that emerge from the many mouths" of his advisers. More frequent access would not merely serve the press, Frankel suggests. "The point is that it would serve the President, whose attempts to lead the country have not been served, in the view of some of his critics, by his aloofness."[248]

Nixon took an even longer hiatus in 1970, thereby opening himself to further charges of deliberately avoiding public questioning. His use of the press conference, said the Freedom of Information Committee of the Society of Professional Journalists, "provides little to inspire confidence that he actually believes in full and free accountability to the public."[249] The ever-helpful New York Times urged him to seek refuge from the "crushing burden" of the Presidency in open press conferences. "It is difficult enough for any President to overcome the isolation from the public...and the tendency of aides to try to shield him from unpleasant news, criticism and challenge," the Times editorialized , "but with the example of President Johnson fresh in memory, the dangers of such isolation are apparent enough." When the President "tends increasingly to see only those...who will tell him what he wants to hear," the Times concluded, "neither (he) nor the country benefits."[250]

Senator Jacob Javits (R-NY) stressed the same themes, urging Nixon to

hold more press conferences to "put him in closer touch with what the people are saying and what the people want." The lesson to be learned from the 1970 elections, said the liberal Republican, "is that the President must be on guard against those who would isolate him to use the Presidency not for projecting moral leadership," but for "pursuing partisan goals." Nixon, "he said, "runs the risk of being too closely insulated from the country, with his reading material screened, and with his personal meetings limited."[251]

The reason for outspoken comments on Nixon's isolation was his extraordinary five month gap between press conferences. After meeting with reporters in Los Angeles on June 30, he allowed 19 weeks to pass before his next conference, on December 11. Not since Eisenhower had a President gone so long without public interrogation; it was a full 20 weeks between Washington press conferences. "This interval might seem less significant in a more tranquil period," Newsweek noted, "but the last four months have been anything but that for the President. Indeed," the magazine said, "the Administration has been struggling though a troubled mid-passage punctuated by a series of setbacks and controversies."[252] Among them: the firing of Interior Secretary Walter Hickel, the controversial Son Tay raid, a misguided attempt to forcibly free POW's, a ballooning budget deficit, rising unemployment and inflation, the bombing of North Vietnam, the GOP's mid-term election defeats, the arrival of a Marxist Government in Chile, suspected Soviet military buildups in the Middle East, a potentially crippling railroad strike. The accumulation of these issues, plus an unusual pre-press conference meeting by reporters, combined to make the President's seventeenth press conference "an unusual psychic event." There was an "uncommon electricity in the air and an even more uncommon bite to some of the

reporter's questions; some, in fact, were as audacious as any put to a President in recent years." Nixon, the newsweekly reported , "seemed unusually tense at first and in general conducted himself with a kind of clenched forebearance." To the viewers at home, however, "he probably came off as well as he ever had. He handled most questions deftly, and sometimes put himself on the record with flat, unequivocal replies."

Robert Semple speculated in late November, 1970, that "Mr. Nixon will begin to meet with newsmen more regularly when the memories of the bitter campaign have faded."[253] Although the number of Nixon's televised press conferences dropped even further in 1971--only three were broadcast, one fewer than in the previous year--he did raise his total to nine(up from six). The big increase, though, came in exclusive personal interviews that the President granted to a number of reporters.

Noting that Nixon had been quite reticent for two years, Max Frankel assumed that his series of interviews was an "interesting clue to his mood." He suggested that this"new willingness to divulge some of his inner feelings bespeaks either a sense of confidence--or of political vulnerability." Whatever Nixon's motives, Frankel was satisfied that he was "moving out in front of the carefully honed policy declarations and inviting the country to see him and debate him as he is."[254]

William Safire, who would eventually be Frankel's colleague at the New York Times, was also pleased that the "dam happily burst." Safire was one of the proponents of greater accessibility by the President, and he interpreted the spate of private interviews as a "happy augury for a more open administration and a less-isolated President."[255] He was soon disabused of that notion.

"It's not true," snapped the President when Safire mentioned 'the new

openness.' "Don't get in that trap. They only want to show how isolated we were before. It is not true that we're any more 'open' now." H.R."Bob" Haldeman produced evidence to prove that claim to Safire, a twenty-page report entitled "The President and the Media." It was, says Safire, "one of those asinine documents prepared to enable the President to justify his feelings of being picked on...that showed he was not 'isolated'" but had in fact "wasted a lot of valuable time with an unappreciative press."

Safire analyzed the data, and reported back to Haldeman that there was indeed a new openness:

Press Conferences:	1969--12	1970--7	1971 --2(2 months)
Phone Calls:	20	23	7
Appointments:	21	18	8

Haldeman agreed with Safire's findings that the President had tripled his accessibility. He reported this to the President, who reacted by promptly cancelling his next press conference. "He was prepared to be more accessible if it did not seem as if he were being more accesible," Safire explains, "and if it did not admit that he had been less accessible before." Nixon was, says his long-time associate, "extraordinarily sensitive to the charge that his new openness was 'image-making,' and, sure enough, when the press started calling it that, he clammed up as never before." The anti-accessibility crowd could not have been pleased by the New York Times dispatch referring to Nixon's "quantum jump in public exposure (being) designed to smooth the edges of the Nixon image...." 256

The election year of 1972 opened with another attack on Nixon's news policies--or lack of them. He had, charged a committee of the Associated Press Managing Editors Association, "come closer to killing off the Presidential press conference as a public institution during his term of office." Noting that Nixon had held only nine conferences the previous year, while recent Presidents averaged 24 to 36 yearly, the Washington Committee said, "it is obvious that the President's relations with the press are more restricted than those of any modern-day President."[257]

Max Frankel renewed this theme early that summer. "The Presidential press conference is dying, without ceremony," he wrote, "and reporters who moan about it are being put-down by the Nixon staff as self-serving whiners who merely miss the chance to kick the President around or to bask in his glory." Nixon's statistics certainly were bleak: three months since a conference of any type, over a year since a formally scheduled one. But, as Frankel hopefully notes, "articles such as this often produce a quick news conference."[258]

The President took the hint, and invited the press in to the Oval Office four days later, on June 23, 1972. In an opening statement, Nixon said he had noted several commentators indicate that not enough time was given to domestic matters. This conference, therefore, was to be limited solely to that area. The first question concerned crime in the District of Columbia--specifically, a recent third-rate burglary.

All Presidents enjoy the upperhand at press conferences, simply by virtue of their office. "Here," said Daniel P. Moynihan, "as in most essential encounters between the President and the press, the advantage is

with the former." Press conferences, one reporter told me, "are conceived for and dedicated to one purpose--the preservation of Presidential power."[269]

The President can humiliate reporters(the two Roosevelts were masters at this), finesse their way out of sticky situations with a quip(as JFK often did), filibuster instead of answer(LBJ's press conferences were "grandstand[261], with non-answers"). They enjoy the power to carefully select their interrogators, having a good idea where the least antagonistic questions will come from;reporters who ask probing questions may be blackballed and never recognized again. As Pierre Salinger says,"The President is in control."[262]

Finally,there is the simple magistry of the office."He's the President of the United States," one veteran correspondent reminded me."It's not easy to be aggressive to the President--whoever he is."[263] Even the Washington Post agrees:"There is little the press can do about the President's behavior," lamented Howard Simons,its Managing Editor."He has had, he now has, and will have the high ground."[264]

Nixon enjoyed all these advantages, and more. His long career in politics had prepared him well for what he fraternally liked to call "Q-and-A." There was "no politician more experienced than Mr. Nixon," wrote biographer Jules Witcover,"in handling the press conference."[265] Clark Mollenhoff, the prize-winning investigative reporter who briefly worked in the Nixon White House, agrees:"I think he handles the press conferences extremely well."[266] Edwar P. Morgan is even more explicit:"Nixon is so good," he said,"he is the master of the news conference."[267]

Some reporters complained that Nixon had merely mastered his well-researched answers, and didn't really address himself to the question at hand."Nixon is excellent--he doesn't answer the questions that are put

to him," said Laurence T. O'Rourke."He listens to questions for certain key words and automatically rattles off an answer whether it actually addresses itself to the particular question."[268] As one wire service reporter told me,"Spout the key words and the President's off and running."[269]

Why, then, did Nixon hold so few press conferences? He and his aides gave varying, and in some cases conflicting, reasons for his deliberate avoidance. Although Nixon and his assorted rationales are gone, a larger question remains:To whom does the press conference belong?

Nixon insisted he was not afraid of meeting the press; the record clearly indicates he was very wary. Two White House aides said it was because he felt the exercise wasn't fruitful, or challening enough. As one staffer told Jules Witcover, the President "would prefer sharper questions, because they elicit his best answers."[270] John Ehrlichman expressed the same dissatisfaction when he accused the press of asking "a lot of flabby and fairly dumb questions."

Nixon explained one extensive hiatus--thirteen months without a televised conference--in a conflicting manner. Again facing cameras on June 29,1972, he said:

> I concluded that in the verysensitive period leading up to the Peking trip and the period thereafter, and in the even more sensitive period, as it turned out to be, leading up to the Moscow trip and the period thereafter, that the press conference, even no-commenting questions, was not a useful thing for the President of the United States to engage in.[271]

The obvious implication is that the questions were too astute and incisive, not that they were dumb and flabby. But thirteen months--even in a "very sensitive period"-- is far too long for the leader of a democracy to go unquestioned in view of the people. To postpone an examination of the President's views on pressing domestic matters because of two international campaign trips is inexcusable;at the very least Nixon should

have been expected to discuss the economy, unemployment, civil rights. A simple agreement from reporters that they would ask no foreign policy questions would have removed the thin cloak of respectability in which Nixon's explanation was garbed.

If news conferences were regarded as an interpellative device, like the Question Period to which it was once compared, it would still be part of the President's regular schedule. But a noxious impression persists that the conference belongs, not to the people or the press, but to the President. The raw power to subvert the conference has always been in the President's hands; this notion appears to give him the right.

Nixon dealt with this issue on June 29,1972. His answer contained one trivial lie and one momentous misperception.

> The President:The other point that I should make is that Iknow that many members of the press have been discussing the press conference and they feel that perhaps the President,this President, is tempted to downgrade the press or to downgrade the press conference.
> I am not trying to do that.[272]

Of course he wasn't trying to downgrade the press conference. He already had done so. As William Safire, a long-time associate of Nixon's explains it, "press" conferences were once again called "news" conferences because "Nixon wanted to leave the impression that the conference was the President's to make news and not the press's conference with the President."[273]

> The President:It isn't that I'm afraid to do it. I have to determine the best way of communication and also--and this will sound self-serving and it's intended to be--I have to use the press conference. I don't mean use the reporters, but use the press conference when I believe that it is the best way to communicate or to inform the people.[274]

He then enumerated the ways this could be done.Press conferences, television interviews and speeches, he said, are "all useful ways to inform the American people." But in only one--the press conference--is he held accountable.

Because Presidents are under no obligation to hold press conferences, the press's only recourse is to stimulate public outcry, in hopes that the President will bend to popular demand. But even that traditional avenue--taking the case to the people--is under attack both from without and within the press.

Here, Nixon's debasement of the press conference was more offensive than Johnson's. The Texan at least met with the press, albeit under considerably stacked conditions. Nixon not only sedulously avoided the press--he challenged their right to object.

Following Nixon's press conference of December 11,1971, Herb Klein charges, reporters "spun out 'news' stories...in which they voiced their own professional grievances about the infrequency of their meetings with the President." This, says the former administration's communications director, raises "an interesting question or ethics and public practice. Should the newsmen," he asks, "be using their positions in the communications media to advance their personal complaints that they are not getting enough shots at the President? [italics added] 275

THAT IS NOT THE POINT, MR. KLEIN. The reporters did not want to take "shots" at Mr. Nixon. They only wanted to ask the President of the United States about dissension in his Cabinet, failed commando raids in Vietnam, Soviet military build-ups, a falling economy--all petty,personal matters on which he had been silent for four months. Reporters calling for more press conferences weren't registering selfish, egocentric complaints. They were concerned citizens protesting against their Government-in-hiding.

It was just this Klein article that Peter Lisagor was referring to when he declared,"I resent when the Nixon people say the conference serves the press. I resent this separation of the press from the public," he told

me."If we don't serve the public, we have no function." 276

But does the public care how its business is being transacted? Perhaps not."The public as a whole isn't very particularly interested in the number of news conferences,"said Edward P. Morgan."Only a thoughtful fringe care." 277 But even though they might not be actively interested, the public does have a tremendous stake in the Presidential press conference.

Oddly, even reporters who profess to be engaged in serving the public find this one question that is out of bounds. "Has the press done its job in keeping the public alerted to the decline of the press conference," Don Bacon asked Lisagor. "I think the public is very dimly interested in our problems," Lisagor replied."I don't think we should foist our problems off on them." 278

That is the crucial issue: is it the press's problem, or is it a public problem. The pressmen miss an oportunity to interrogate the President of the United States. The People of the United States miss the answers. It is a problem for both--and we are all the loser.

As might be expected, certain legal scholars agree with the Nixon thesis. "I think the President is going to remain in control and, as a constitutional matter, it ought to be that way," said Yale Law Professor Charles Black. "The office was meant to have that edge.The greates power of the Presidential office," he contended, "is the power of having the initiative of when to speak,whether to speak, and how to lead.How the President communicates with the people has to be...in his control and power." 279

But the late professor ignores the critical distinction between communication and accountability. The press conference, said Bill Moyers, is a "means of achieving some measure of accountability short of the four-year electoral process." 280 In today's fast-paced world,that occasional and

intermittent accountability is important; as Peter Lisagor said, "we're too close to the brink to wait four years." 281 But even Lisagor shies from confrontation:"I agree with Herb Klein that the President's right to choose his own format is indisputable.There's no constitutional obligation or imposition for him to have press conferences," he told me."He has them because he thinks they will serve his own interest."

I disagree with Messrs. Lisagor,Klein,Black,Nixon,Krock, et al--that is not the way it ought to be. The press conference must not be allowed to blend into the vast bag of Presidential communications; it must regain its vitality as a public forum in which the President is questioned on his words and deeds, and on the actions of the government which he heads. It must become a time for the President to explain his policies, not in the secluded safety of the Oval Office, but surrounded by well-prepared reporters who can explore the implications and inconsistencies of his argument. We can no longer permit the "political law of self-preservation" to be the only motivating factor compelling the President to face the nation and to meet the press.

It is our government, not his.

~~INTRODUCTION~~

Conclusion

"There is," saith the Preacher, "no new thing under the sun." In the recent history of Presidential press relations, this is certainly the case.

It was John F. Kennedy whom James Reston described as being "psychopathically concerned" with his image;and it was John F. Kennedy, not Richard Nixon, who was the first President to suggest to a publisher that he fire a critical columnist. It was Pierre Salinger whom a Baltimore Sun correspondent compared to Goebbels;and it was Pierre Salinger who called for a study of press responsibility while Ronald Ziegler was still piloting the Jungle Cruise Boat at Disney World.

When Walter Jenkins was arrested for sodomy in the bathroom of the downtown YMCA, it was Lyndon Johnson who enlisted Abe Fortas and Clark Clifford to pressure newspapers into ignoring the matter. The newspapers complied with the President's wishes.

Richard Nixon was not an aberration, but a culmination. Repression and suppression were first attempted by his Democratic predecessors. One got away with it because he was a charming Bostonian. The other failed miserably because he was a coarse Texan. While Nixon was supreme, his policies transcended his personality. Under savage assault from the opinion-makers, he proclaimed them out of touch with the people.He called forth the demon--and the demon came. Its name was Silent Majority. The media's assaults were strong, but they did not still his spirit.Nor did they repulse his attacks. While Nixon was on the mountaintop,his aggressions against the press were all too successful, as the media's defenses buckled beneath the force of his multi-pronged incursion. He pressured CBS into dropping analyses of his speeches,and established a precedent for prior restraint of newspapers.

He wiretapped newsmen, and had their taxes audited. He met the enemy--and it was us.

And the greates tragedy of all was that it was all unnecessary. When Nixon's policies were popular, he dneedn't have worried about press reports. A President respected and trusted by the people has nothing to fear from 'negative' media coverage;his particular prestige, and that of the presidency as an ideal, are far more powerful in commanding the people's attention and loyalty than any group of reporters could ever dream of being.

Furthermore, the press is just that--groups of individual reporters. The notion that there exists a monolithic "Press" capable of directing its energies in a unified direction is totally without factual basis.*"I hate that word,'press,'" Peter Lisagor told me," because it lumps everybody in the same bag.And we're talking about specific elements." To be used correctly, the term "the press" should only refer to the entire class of constitutionally protected private enterprise engaged in the commercial sale of contemporary information. As such, it encompasses all shades of belief and disbelief, and any notion that "it" can act in a unified fashion must crumble.

*[Although it is true that the Easter seaboard is physical and intellectual home for the major print and electronic news media, there are over 1700 newspapers not centered in that area. Interestingly, it is among these non-Establishment newspapers that a monolithic interpretation has at least a statistical plausability--a monolith solidly behind Richard Nixon.Of all dailies endorsing presidential candidates, 84% endoresed Nixon in 1960;80% did the same in 1968. By 1972, that figure had grown to 93%]

Although the press controls the means of production in the marketplace of current events, the President controls the events. In terms of defining the Presidential image, it is That Man in the White House who holds the upper hand.

The press did not create Camelot--John F. Kennedy did. The press merely spread the glad tidings.

The press did not force Lyndon Johnson's abdication--the War did. The press merely published the casualty figures.

The press did not destroy Richard Nixon--Richard Milhous Nixon did. The press merely informed America that its President was a crook.

An accurate understanding of the relative strengths of the press and President was expressed by Dwight Eisenhower at his final news conference. Asked whether he felt that reporters had "been fair in their questions," the President replied:"Well, when you come down to it, I don't see what a reporter could do much to a President, do you?" Although the reporters laughed, the fact remains--the President was right.

Yet however powerless reporters may be before the emotive force of executive action, it is a foolish President who totally disregards the press. I shall return to this matter shortly, after a brief analysis of the impact of electronic media coverage upon the press conference.

What have been the effects of fifteen years of television? Apparently, some of the early fears and warnings were justified. "You're turning the Presidential press conference into a sidewhow," Eddie Folliard told Pierre Salinger in 1960.[282] "Press conferences have become extravaganzas in the East Room, show business," Hugh Sidey told me fifteen years later. "It became totally distorted...because of television....there are hugh lights...everything is timed to the cameras."[283]

Sig Mickelson helped Salinger arrange that first televised conference from the State Department Auditorium. Looking back, he ruefully admits, "I ...succeeded in killing the press conference as a viable institution. The fact that the conference went on television has effectively killed it."[284]

Clearly, television has caused some of the major problems of the modern press conference. Expert testimony has been offered to the chaotic conditions it inspired, and the cautious nervousness it induced.

And yet, I strongly disagree with those who advocate banning television from the press conference. Cures to the problems of 1975 cannot be found by reverting to the conditions of 1955. Rather, technology--which got us into this mess in the first place--must become more advanced, until a system is developed which does away with distracting lights and cameras. Such a system is already being tested, and will soon be in common use. A photo cell contained in a small box transmits pictures electronically, and does not require cables. It can also do away with extensive lighting, needing candlepower of only 100 watts--the same as a well-lit living room.[285] By removing lights and cameras, attention can once again be placed solely on the action.

Also, I find the contention that switching back and forth between topics necessarily entails incomplete inquiry to be somewhat spurious. Certainly the questioning in unrehearsed and somewhat tense situations is less ordered than that which a prosecutor would present--but reporters are not supposed to be prosecutors. Furthermore, a related question does not lose its effectiveness just because it does not immediately follow the original evasive answer.

The cure to reporters' lack of responsiveness can come only from the press itself. Now that the venomous atmosphere of the Nixon era has dissipated, perhaps it is time to reconvene the Washington Hotel meeting. Surely there is nothing wrong with the pressmen agreeing amongst themselves that certain crucial topics will be broached early in the conference, and that evasive answers will be vigorously pursued. Close attention and cooperation are not the signs of a conspiracy--they are rules taught in basic reporting class.

Surprisingly, studies show that the level of follow-ups actually increased when television was introduced. The percentage of related questions during 1953 and 1954 was about 23%[286]; after January 19,1955 it jumped to 34%[287]. Even during the Nixon administration, 53% of the questions posed at televised press conferences were related to questions that had already been asked.[288]

President Ford has recently relinquished most of the power of cutting off his answer and recognizing another reporter. Thanks to the system suggessted by Press Secretary Ron Nessen, reporters may now remain standing while Mr. Ford answers their questions. If they are unsatisfied with the response, they are permitted to follow-up with another question. Although this practice does occasionally come in for some abuse--reporters asking

two-part questions, or using the follow-up to go well beyond the scope of their original inquiry--it has been a valuable throwback to the days when a reporter assumed that such determined inquiry was his natural right.

Still, it is no match for the atmosphere that prevailed in the era before live television. My examination of Eisenhower press conference transcripts revealed how commonplace it was for a reporter to ask more than one question. One colloquy between the President and Raymond Brandt featured eleven successive questions by that reporter. Also, it was not unusual for a reporter to be recognized two separate times in one conference. But now there are over 1400 reporters accredited to the White House, of whom roughly 400 jam into a press conference. The press corps has doubled since the Eisenhower era, and those days of casual individualism are gone forever.

There is no justifiable reason for discontinuing telecasts, and there are several good reasons for expanding them. Press conferences are held for the benefit of the people;the system which provides for the fullest communication to the most people is the most valuable. As Marshall McLuhan noted a decade ago, that system is no longer the linear media;to be truly mass,media must now be electronic. Finally, a television reporter is just as much a professional as a newspaperman; to exclude him and his equipment from the conference is to say he is a second-class journalist.

One possiblecure for the hectic conditions that arise when fifty or so reporters seek the President's attention would be to pre-determine the order of questioners. This would also serve totake some of the initiative away from the President; he could no longer seek refuge in the question of a friendly newsman.

There are a number of ways this list could be chosen. Reporters could submit their questions in advance, identified by number only, to a jury of senior correspondents, who could then engage in coordinated questioning on a few topics. The second half of the conference could then be thrown open. Or, a lottery drawing could be held, with each news organization limited to one questioner. Here too the conference could be split between ordered and not.

Currently, the biggest stumbling block is set up by the reporters themselves. Proud in their independence, they appreciate the press conference for its spontaneity--even if those two qualities result in drastic cuts in the value of the endeavor. "Any discipline that the press has must be with the individual reporter," Clark Mollenhoff declared. "It cannot be on the basis of any kind of group meeting. Any effort to institutionalize the press conference would be thoroughly destructive to the present uncontrolled questioning by individual reporters." Mollenhoff, a lone wold never very popular with the rest of the press corps, continued his attack: " I don't want any panel sitting up there and deciding who can ask what question. I would look with a great deal of alarm," he said,"on the creation of any group of reporters with the authority to screen questions to be submitted."

Peter Lisagor, White House Correspondents Association President-emeritus, would be one of the logical "jurors" charged with selecting questioners--but he doesn't want the job. "I would refuse to play the role," he flatly states.

There was a recent demonstration of the press corps's unwillingness to experiment with new forms--an instance when the White House was more innovative than the reporters. President Ford has held a number of regional

press conferences, often inconnection with his tours to promote the administration's energy program. To insure an equal distribution between local reporters and those travelling with the President, a lottery system was worked out. Nessen selects the White House list, picking numbers out of a hat while being watched by eager reporters. The regional list is chosen by the host state's press association. The system has provided for calm and dignified proceedings, although it has not measurably improved the level of questions or answers.

At one of Nessen's daily briefings a few months ago, someone suggested that the same system be tried at a Washington press conference. Nessen promptly agreed--when voices from the room bade him to reconsider. "Just because there are no objections," one newsman said, "let's not just try it." Nessen bowed to this somewhat confusing show of disapproval, and the idea was dropped.

The press conference thus suffered some self-inflicted bruises from a press corps unable--or unwilling-- to adapt to technological advances. But the deepest wounds came from Presidential abuses. Refusing to accept the press conference as an autonomous, essential institution, Presidents Johnson and Nixon both sought to nullify its worthy heritage, and to villify those who dared to protest that perversion.

The press conference, as John F. Kennedy said, serves to "put the President in the bull's-eye." A number of things can happen once he is there, all of them valuable to a certain degree. But it is absolutely essential that he be there, to place his answers on the public record.

In this encounter, reporters act as the public's representatives, asking the President the questions they feel he has a duty to answer. "In effect," UPI's Helen Thomas told me," the American people are questioning

him"--and waiting for the answer. It really doesn't matter if the President speaks to the cameras instead of the reporters, Thomas said, because "the question is there. And the answer is the thing." Thus, face to face with independent newsmen motivated by a desire to protect the public interest, the President is called to account before the court of public opinion.*

For various historical and psychological reasons, Johnson and Nixon both decided to ignore the summons from the people. Johnson subverted the press's inquisitive nature by smothering it with a unique personal approach which was both overwhelming and overbearing. Nixon's perversion went to the other extreme of absolute avoidance, secure in his command of direct-access lines to his jurors.

In the end, both suffered from their conspicuous disregard for the press conference. Johnson might well have nipped the spreading credibility gap had he appeared for questioning before cameras. As Richard Strout noted, it was a golden opportunity--but he passed it by. Nixon's administration, long adrift on a sea of contradictory words and deeds, was forced to sail rudderless, bereft of public explanations by, and examinations of, the President. Its course uncharted, his government was finally, inevitably sucked into the eddies of Watergate, in which it sank.

"The essential purpose of the news conference is to transmit information from the President to the people," declared Herb Klein. "These conferences," Klein claimed," are only one of the many ways in which the President communicates to the people."

This is a perfidious doctrine, wholly lacking in redeeming social value.

Press conferences are for explanation. Information and communication are merely eupehemisms for propaganda--and there is no shortage of that. The President gets all the free television time he needs and wants; communication is no problem for him.

Accountability is--for us. The President is given a four-year, no-cut contract. Freed from frequent examinations of his administration, the President often forgets that the government itself belongs not to him, but to the people. Incisive inquiry into his handling of the public trust is essential for the national interest.

My elders tell me of a time, not long ago, when the President of the United States appeared each week to publicly answer questions. His name was Eisenhower, and he was the most admired human on earth. Although his answers were often somewhat garbled, the American People saw that he respected them so much that he met each week with their representatives, the press. The people appreciated that, as did the reporters. After the initial adjustment period, they asked incisive but not belligerent questions, placing the issues squarely before the people and their President. Then it was up to him, and he didn't let them down.

Perhaps the world has gotten too complicated, and the problems of governing have become too demanding to expect the President to return to weekly press conferences.

But it would be nice.

The President controls the press conference by might--not by right.

We must force him to be free.

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FOOTNOTES

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