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THE PRESIDENT HAS SEEN..j.

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

March 20, 1975

Mr. President:

The attached is for your reading in case you didn't see it. I think it is generally a fair assessment.



Ron Nessen

G.R. 9
2 copies.

Attachment

Wash. Star - News
3/16/75

NEWSLESS PRESS CONFERENCES

You Can't Learn Where Ford Plans to Move Next

By Norman Kempster

Washington Star Staff Writer

President Ford has retrieved the White House press conference from the disuse of the Nixon years but his recent exchanges with reporters have been so devoid of real news as to raise questions about the value of the whole idea.

A typical Ford press conference is a predictable series of restatements of the President's already well-known positions, interspersed occasionally with the dismissal of a whole subject as "inappropriate" for comment.

Ford has held ten press conferences in just over seven months in office. Former President Richard M. Nixon conducted 37 in his entire five and one-half years in the White House, by far the lowest frequency of any president since Franklin D. Roosevelt popularized the idea.

Roosevelt held 998 press conferences, an average of about three every two weeks.

During the Nixon years, professors such as Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. were fond of decrying the demise of the presidential press conference as

Norman Kempster covers the White House for The Washington Star.

another example of the isolation of the White House.

"Nixon shut himself off from the press, and from the country," Schlesinger wrote in *The Imperial Presidency*. "If he had, for example, been exposed to constant questioning by the press over the long months after agents for the Committee for the Re-election of the President were discovered in the Democratic headquarters at the Watergate, he could hardly

have remained in his professed state of invincible ignorance over the misdeeds (of his aides)."

Almost a decade earlier, Professor James McGregor Burns had written in *Presidential Government*: "The press conference is as much a White House fixture as the cabinet meetings."

But like the cabinet meeting and so many of the other trappings of the White House, the press conference takes on the shape that the president chooses to give it.

Herbert Hoover required that all questions be submitted in advance. He answered the ones he liked and reporters were prohibited from even mentioning the questions that were left unanswered.

Although the press conference virtually atrophied during the Nixon presidency, Nixon used it skillfully when he chose. Early in his administration he sometimes sent cryptic diplomatic messages through his responses to reporters' questions.

Sometimes the answers were so subtle that they went unnoticed in the United States, but were read carefully in Peking, Hanoi and other capitals.

Later on, as the Watergate scandal spread through his White House, Nixon used press conferences as a sort of theatre of confrontation. He hoped the public would dismiss the scandal as the product of unfair news coverage and he reasoned that the sight of reporters snarling at him would produce just such a reaction. Many reporters played unintentional supporting roles in that drama.

With Ford in the White House the tension is gone from the press conference. The President brings civility and good humor to the rostrum and greets even hostile questions with a smile. But he says just what he intended to say and no more.

It has been fashionable to say that when a presidential press conference

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PRESS

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produces no useful information the fault is with the reporters. If they had asked the right questions they would have discovered some nuance of administration policy and the public would have been that much better informed.

The criticism of the reporters is often valid. But at a Ford press conference, even when a reporter asks a particularly relevant question, he often gets little more than a review of existing administration policy on the subject.

In a press conference Feb. 26 in Hollywood, Fla., Ford was asked if he was "in the process of reevaluating the government's position" toward Fidel Castro's Cuba.

It is now clear that the question was precisely on the mark. A reevaluation was in progress.

But Ford replied, "the policy today is the same as it has been, which is that if Cuba will reevaluate and give us some indication of a change of its policy toward the U.S., then we certainly will take another look, but thus far there is no sign of Mr. Castro's change of heart, and we think it is in our best interests to continue the policies that are in effect at the present time."

Three days later, apparently without an intervening sign from Havana, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger signaled a turn toward detente.

Ford probably did not care to beat Kissinger to the announcement. But there seems to be little purpose in the President inviting questions if he does not plan to respond fully to those he finds inconvenient.

Most questions that Ford chooses to brush aside fail to frame the issue as succinctly as the one in Hollywood, so the President can answer truthfully if not fully without imparting any information he wishes to withhold.

Usually when the President does not want to discuss a subject, he simply says it would not be appropriate to answer and lets it go at that.

The President was asked March 6 in Washington to relate what Central Intelligence Agency head William S. Colby had told him about possible CIA involvement in the assassination of foreign leaders.

"I am not in a position to give you any factual account," the President said.

It may be difficult to argue that a president should make public the reports that he receives from his chief



spy, though the issue of possible CIA misconduct is currently a hot topic of national debate.

Ford also declined to commit himself when asked if he could support the tax-cut bill that has been passed by the House and is awaiting action in the Senate. That would seem to be a subject on which he could share his thinking with the public.

While he seldom takes the public into his confidence concerning future steps his administration will take, Ford uses his press conferences to reiterate current policy. Presumably, attentive readers and listeners can discover where Ford stands on the issues of the day even if they cannot learn where he plans to go next. Ford's two-a-month schedule of press conferences keeps those current positions from getting too far out of date.

Actual changes in policy — and there have been plenty of them during Ford's seven-month tenure — are usually announced outside of the press conference format.

The present situation is decidedly to the President's political advantage. His press conferences usually command live coverage by all three commercial television networks. Newspapers usually give top display to a presidential press conference even when nothing new is revealed.

By contrast, Ford's critics must scramble for newspaper and television coverage.

The advantage the President enjoys relative to live television coverage may be on the verge of crumbling. The commercial television networks declined to broadcast nationwide the four press conferences Ford has held away from Washington. So far, they have aired all of the available Washington press conferences but it is an open secret that some network executives are beginning to ask if the shows are worth the time it takes to broadcast them.

There is no real consensus about just what a press conference should be. In an ideal world, presumably, the president would answer all questions fully and completely, taking the public totally into his confidence. But there has never been such an ideal time.

In the real world, it can be assumed that presidents will continue to shape their press conferences to suit their own personalities.

There is
Nothing
Wrong
with
Talking
about TODAY,
NOT
TOMORROW.

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

March 21, 1975

MEMORANDUM FOR:

RON NESSEN

FROM:

JERRY JONES 

The President has reviewed your note of March 20 and the attached Norman Kempster article and has made the following notation:

-- I agree

cc: Don Rumsfeld