The original documents are located in Box 12, folder "Fourth Estate and Chief Executive (2)" of the Ron Nessen Papers at the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library.

future than his rudeness and lack of consideration towards journalists, his hypersensitivity or his passion for secrecy."[135]

The first crack in what was to develop into the Credibility Gap came less than a month after Johnson assumed office. Asked about the budget he would soon be sending to Congress, Johnson noted that John F. Kennedy's last budget came to $98.8 billion, and that he would have to allow for $3.5 billion to cover "built-in" governmental increases. A few days later, at a background briefing in Austin, Texas, reporters were led to believe "on the highest authority" that the President would be unable to submit a budget under $100 billion; they wrote their stories accordingly. When the first Johnson budget was finally revealed in January, 1964, it totaled $97.7 billion--a startling $3 billion lessthan what the President and his aides had advertised as the irreducible minimum. Richard Rovere describes LBJ as a man who "likes to say that the brook is far too broad for leaping and then leaps it." If a man can "define the miraculous as something he knows to be within his capabilities," Rovere points out, "he can perform miracles every day."[136]

Johnson simply could not tolerate speculation or premature disclosure. "To the President," observed Charles Roberts, "speculation is a dirty word. Apparently he thinks that the press should print the news in tape recorder fashion just as he dictates." The President wanted his news, Roberts said, "without any unauthorized explanation, interpretation, background or speculation." If Johnson's wish were ever fulfilled, Roberts noted," there would be no need for the Washington correspondent--the Federal Register will do."[137]

Richard Rovere called Johnson the "Alfred Hitchcock of politics--a master of suspense (which) is an essential element of the Johnson style."[138] Johnson feared that if details of his program leaked out, "suspense would

be lost," and there would be little interest in his Inaugural Address, State of the Union Address Message, and budget. "The idea is to keep it all behind a curtain which he will pull open next year, revealing splendid vistas...in their gorgeous entirety."

The "rewards of this foxiness" Rovere opined, "are few." A President who is as secretive as this one over matters of public policy," Rovere said, "denies himself and his programs the advantages of widespread public discussion, examination and criticism."

"The lid is on," wrote Rovere in December 1964. "It will be raised from time to time by the President himself...but rarely, if every byany lesser personage." To ensure secrecy, White House staffers "have been given to understand that the penalties will be swift and sever if they share any part of their knowledge."

Looking at the situation from the opposite political spectrum, Arthur Krock found matters equally discouraging. Four times in as many months in early 1965 he condemned Johnson for having "Lip Control as a Major Policy." [139]

Johnson's "annoyance at news disclosures is of historical proportions," Krock wrote shortly after the Inauguration; "his resentment (has resulted in) long postponements of action on decisions he has already taken, and even reversals of some decisions." This "high degree of annoyance over published forecasts of his acts before he can announce them has compounded" a normal problem of the press. Johnson was reported to have cancelled at least one appointment, to have deferred two others, and to have altered one major course of policy--all because of premature "speculation." To prevent reoccurrences, Johnson "caulked his ship of state with unequalled tightness against news leaks, large or small, harmless or troublesome. His assistants," Krock said, "will not venture to disclose the merest information without his explicit authority

if the information could"possibly be traced to them."[140]

Krock returned to his theme in March. "Nowhere," he wrote, "is the LBJ brand on all Government acts and policies more plaintly to be seen," than in those "lower-level executive quarters where the press has been accustomed to learn or moves before they are made, or the actual bases for decisions after theey have been announced." This "policy of lip control is the most difficult of enforcement...but Mr. Johnsnn has succeeded to a larger degree than any predecessor who has sought to impose so rigid a restraint."

There is a backlash,however. "The zeal that the President is using to that purpose," Krock warned, "is prone to the excesses that are too often the by-products of zeal.Excessive governmental control of access to and presentation of the facts"--facts by which the publican is able to differentiate between the partisan political interest and the national interest--"has been obscured in the public consciousness." Such confusion is most definitely not in the national interest at a time when the "fiercely aggressive Government of Communist China is moving toward the awesome point" of building nuclear weapons, and the "critical situations"in Southeast Asia and the Middle East grow more burdensome.[141]

As Krock noted in 1965, the Presidnet hated to be anticipated. Tragically, secrecy was carried to such an extent that it "sometimes interfer(ed) with the orderly process of government." To Charles Roberts, President Johnson was not an Alfred Hitchcock;rather, he "seemed to have an Alice in Wonderland concept of news." Like the Queen of Hearts, "nothing is so until he says it is so. And if anyone in government says something is so before Mr. Johnsnn says it, he risks the fate of the Queen's courtiers."

Of all the possible leaks, "nothing angers him more than to have the name of a prospective Presidential appointment appear in the press before

he makes the appointment." High-level appointees were "warned by the White House not to permit premature disclosure before the President decided to announce their appointment."[142] There were two outstanding examples of this "Government by Indirection," both concerning Ambassadorial appointments.

Johnson named Angier Biddle Duke, the State Department's Chief of Protocol, as Ambassador to Spain, and Duke's family so informed the Philadelphia Bulletin . When a soty appeared in early January, 1964, LBJ ordered Secretary of State Dean Ruck to withdraw Duke's name. Rusk protested that the Spanish government had already agreed to Duke;cancellation would be diplomatically improper. "Never mind the Spanish government," Johnson replied;he simply was not going to tolerate these premature announcements. At great length, Rusk finally persuaded the President not to withdraw Duke's name, but "Johnson warned that he would not be so amenable if it ever happened again."[143]

He certainly kept his word on that. When a complicated three way high-level shift, involving the United Nations and Commerce Department, leaked to the press, Johnson reacted swiftly. "Convinced without a shadow of proof that (the intended Under Secretary of Commerce) had dropped the word, Johnson cancelled the entier personnel shift."[144]

Johnson mellowed only slightly by the following March. At that time the Washington Post reported that U. Alexis Johnson was the President's choice for Ambassador to Japan. Upon reading the report Johnson(the President) interrupted a news conference being conducted by Agriculture Secretary Freeman to denounce it as "some kid's statement over at the State Department"(The sanitized transcript released by the White House quoted the President as referring to"someone's statement"[italics added]) Ambassador Johnson's future remained much indoubt for several months, until the Pres-

ident was sufficiently calmed to officially appoint him.[145]

Eventually the White House aides "adopted a policy of refusing to even discuss what kind of man the President might seek" for any government job. It became clear that publication of the name of a probably candidate would "scuttle for all time that man's chances of getting the job."

This policy was soon codified and procalimed as "The Oshkosh Rule." Lecturing newsmen on the evils of speculation, Johnson said inthe fall of 1966:

> When you see on the ticker that Oshkosh says that Bob Pierpoint(of CBS) may be named Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff,you don't necessarily give much credence to it, because the very fact that it is on there is the best indication that it is not likely to happen.[146]

Occasionally, this policy forced the President to commit outright lies. He flatly told reporters in November, 1964 that published reports that Marvin Watson, Texas Democratic State Chairman would join the White House had "misled" readers. Two months later, Watson was named White House Appointments Secretary.[147]

About the same time he was denying the reports about Watson, he accused the Washington Post of falsely stating that he would propose a $4billion cut in excise taxes. "The President," one background story said, "is described as feeling that the $4billion figure couldn't be further wrong." Press Secretary George Reedy said:"That figure bears no relationship to any decision that has been made." Johnson eventually proposed a cut in excise taxes of $3.964.[148]

Arthur Krock presented the problem facing newsmen in light of Johnson's mania for secrecy. "If prior publication will deprive Government of the service of the person determined to be the best-qualified, or cause the deferment of policy," he asked, "is publication a disservice to the national interest?" Yet is publication is "withheld for this reason, does not that

effect an indirect censorship and news management which is an even greater disservice to the national interest?"[149]

Krock concluded that "a responsible press is bound to answer the second question in the affirmative, and proceed accordingly." His judgment conforms with the consensus I found in interviews with today's most prominent White House correspondents, many of whom had covered Johnson. "I'd think about it for a moment," Carroll Kilpatrick of the Washington Post told me,"and then I'd publish."[150] Hugh Sidey seconded that judgment. "This is an open society," he said, "that's the way it's supposed to be. Johnson was at fault there."[151] The Boston Globe's Martin Nolan was even more expressive: "Tailor my writing just to please some crazy psychopathin the White House? You've got be kidding!"[152] Of the dozens of correspondents I talked to, only Peter Lisagor dissented, and then only in limited circumstances. "If the nominee were a personal friend of the reporter," he reflected, "and he had some personal stake in his getting the job.That might be true in some instances." Otherwise, said Lisagor; [illegible] important enough to report,

> If it was important enough to report, I don't believe any reporter would give it a second thought. I can't imagine any reporter saying to himself,"I'm not going to write this, because if I do the fellow might not get the job." I don't know reporters like that.[153]

Lyndon Johnson changed press secretaries like Richard Nixon changed Attorneys General.During their time in office, Presidents Roosevelt,Eisenhower, Kennedy and Nixon all had but one press secretary;Johnson employed four. The President was not, in Pierre Salinger's description of John Kennedy, "his own best press secretary." But that didn't keep him from trying. "Almost from the beginning," wrote author William McGaffin, "Johnson chose to be his own press secretary."[154]

When things were going well, Johnson personally dispensed the White

House news. In the more frequent periods of gloom, a "secretiveness descended...which no press secretary was able to pierce." In those periods when Johnson was under attack, he would cruelly vent his frustrations on the unlucky sole then employed.

George Reedy, who replaced Pierre Salinger in March, 1964, quickly realized what he had gotten in to; after his first day on the job he said to a friend, "I deserve condolences, not congratulations." A former UPI Senate reporter, the large (6'5", 260 lbs.) wavy-haired pipe-smoker had quit newspaperwork to join forces with Senator Lyndon Johnson;he explained to his colleagues,"I'm hitching my wagon to a star. Lyndon Johnson is a great man--someday he's going to be President."[155]

But Reedy's wagon got caught in the crossfire at Credibility Gap Gulch. The press secretary's job is a demanding one at all times; it requires physical stamina and verbal agility. Reedy was a quiet contemplative intellectual, more at home in the realm of ideas than in the fast-paced jousting of the daily breifings. Being neither agile not exceptionally articulate, Reedy gave rambling long-winded discourses rather than specific answers; he was themaster of obfuscation, but not information. Asked about the highly publicized reports that Johnson had gone on a high-speed beer-swilling drive around the LBJ Ranch, Reedy replied:

> Your question is assuming some conclusions based upon some facts of which I am unaware. As a casual newspaper reader I have some awareness of the stories to which you have alluded. As I can gather from these stories, I know of no particular occasion that could be identified from them on which I was present. Consequently, I cannot draw conclusions on a series of facts which are not known to me.[156]

Bill Don Moyers was having lunch in Austin, Texas, on November 22,1963. Fifteen minutes after the assassination of President Kennedy,he was on a plane for Dallas. Finding his approach to Air Force One blocked by a Secret Service agent, Moyers scribbled ,"I'm here if you need me," on a piece of notebook paper. Immediately the door swung open; the former seminarian entered the cabine in time to see his financial benefactor sworn in as President of the United States. Bill Moyers, age 29, a one-time tutor in Christian ethics, was now Special Assistant to the President.

The status and knowledge that Moyers gained as LBJ's "Vice-President in charge of everything" served him and the press very well when he replaced George Reedy in July, 1965. Moyers was at first reluctant to assume the press secretary's job. "I don't think I can do it," he told the President. "Well,I wan't you to do it," Johnson replied. After a pause, Moyers aquiesced: "Yes,Sir," he said. "Let's try it." Three months later Moyers was described as "the best press secretary in memory."[157]

Moyers had been prime "movers and shakers" in the LBJ White House;"of every ten ideas that cross LBJ's desk," one staffer said, "five must be Bill's." This intimate knowledge--plus the considerable leeway Johnson gave him--enabled Moyers to "provide a gusher of information where once there had been an erratic trickly." Some reporters even complained about the overly genersou portions of facts. Midway through one briefing, a reporter dropped his weary writing hand and asked in amazement:"Why are we getting so muchinformation?" The answer was in the carte blanche Johnson gave Moyers:"My desk," the President told him, "is your beat."[158]

Moyer's Christian serenity and Texan self-confidence were necessary protections against the Johnsonian temper, enabling him to "absorb a blis-

tering rebuke from Johnson with the clinical detachment of a volcanologist measuring an eruption." He could also defend himself with a deadpan needle; while quietly murmuring grace before a White House luncheon, Moyers heard Johnson bellow, "Speak up, Bill! Speak up!" Replied Moyers: "I wasn't addressing you, Mr. President."[159]

Although not as exuberant as Pierre Salinger, the owlish press secretary employed his humor to disarm the press. When his gambit of planting questions at the daily briefings was under mild attack, Moyers opened one conference saying, "I'll take the planted questions first."[160] Reflecting onthe widespread skepticism that greeted most White House announcements, Moyers commented, "It's gotten so bad, we can't even believe our own leaks."[161]

Toiling through some of the toughest periods of Johnson's press problems, Moyers expressed his personal credo for dealing with reporters: "Tell the truth if you can, and if you can't, don't tell a lie." With grudging admiration, a reporter conceded that Moyers had lived up to that maxim: "He can shave the truth until it is as thin as a razor blade. Nevertheless, it is the truth."[162]

Moyers's access to information ultimately proved to be his undoing. In an attempt to "say what he (Johnson) wanted to be said, but to tell what it all meant," Moyers began attending National Security Council meetings—an invitation Pierre Salinger had earlier refused. "That was my first mistake," Moyers reflected years later. Because he had been one of LBJ's chief domestic advisers, he "tried to make some points at those meetings. It got so that when I entered the room the President would say, 'Here comes Ban-the-Bomb-Bill'"[163] The man whom Johnson once spoke of as a son soon left the White House. He re-entered journalism, as publisher of Newsday.

At some indeterminate point in January, 1967, the duties of White House

Press Secretary devolved upon "Unflappable" George Christian, who had earlier held the same post under Governor John B. Connally of Texas. Christian was able to stay with Johnson for the remainder of the President's time in office because he was "really attuned to LBJ's personality," and partially because he was the first professional in that position since James Hagerty. "The essence of his success," wrote Max Frankel, " is a willingness to bury the ego, the willingness even to look foolish, if necessary, to carry out the President's wishes." [164]

Although equally informed as Moyers, Christian never embroidered public announcements with tidbits and sidelights. "Nobody was paying me by the word around there," Christian said later."It wasn't a space-rate deal. A Press Secretary can get the President in an awful lot of trouble by being loose-tongued." [165] Fellow Texan Dan Rather said he respected Christian " as a thorough professional.He would not deliberately mislead you," the CBS newscaster said, "but the President came first with him and he did his job according to what he felt was in the best interest of Johnson." [166]

Years later, Bill Moyers reflected on the natural conflict between press and President, and the special double-bind in which Johnson's press secretaries were placed."No man can serve two masters," he said. "You cannot try to be the press's reporter and at the same time be the President's press agent. Ultimately you are torn apart." [167]

The Nixon Presidency was in its final hours. The first Chief Executive to be named an un-indicted coconspirator was on stage in the East Room; his resignation was en route to the Secretary of State. In a rambling, at times incoherent monologue he spoke about his parents ("My father was a little man...my mother was a saint"), his country ("What we need is...more good plumbers") --and his attitudes towards the press:"Those who hate you don't win," he told his tearful audience,"unless you hate them. And then you destroy yourself."[168]

Broken and beaten, the man who said au revoir that day in August had been a fixture on the American political scene for a generation. For most of that time he harbored a suspicion that the press was hostile to him. He nurtured this distrust, cultivating it until it was a passionate hatred of the force he called "the enemy." When he finally attained the presidency, Richard Nixon set out to destroy the press. He destroyed himself instead. It was a lesson learned too late.

Then he was gone, never to return. Never again would he rise from the ashes of defeat and disgrace. Never again would he know the exhilaration of standing on the highest mountaintop. Never again would the press and Richard Nixon kick each other around.

The Presidential press conference suffered a serious decline during the Sixties and early Seventies. Writing in the halycon days of the Eisenhower administration, when the President held regular weekly meetings with reporters, Douglas Cater hailed the press conference as an interpellative institution somewhat similar to the Question Period in the House of Commons.[1] Looking back three administrations later, Cater sadly acknowledged, "It is no longer a useful institution;let us abolish it and search for an effective alternative."[2]

I believe it is not mere coincidence that the most expansive periods of what Arthur Schlesinger has termed the imperial presidency came during the steepest decline of the press conference. Frequent meetings with reporters informs the President as to the nation's mood, and forces him to continually explain and justify his policies. Isolated by his staff,the President must count on the representatives of the free press to bring him the view from beyond the White House gates. "Don't tell the country what Washington is thinking," Woodrow Wilson told reporters at his first press conference."Tell Washington what the country is thinking."[3] Reflecting on the press conference after he left the White House, Harry Truman said, "I felt I always learned more about what was on the minds of the people from the reporters' questions than they could possibly learn from me."[4] Even the General agreed with the political scientist and the amateur historian."I rather like to get the questions," Dwight Eisenhower said,"because frequently I think they reflect the kind of thinking that is going on."[5] If the President cuts himself off from reporters, he cuts himself off from the country. Press conferences might not have prevented Watergate, but they would have hastened its conclusion. Had Nixon been confronted with

the early revelations as they occurred, he could not have pretended his first inkling about the scandal came on March 21, 1973.

Periodic conferences also enable the President to lead an educated and aware country that feels bound by duty, not constrained by force."The President could not ask for a tool of leadership more perfectly designed to his ends," wrote Clinton Rossiter,"or for a pulpit more artfully constructed from which to preach sermons.to us and to the world." To relinquish this bully pulpit, Rossiter declared, would be "altogether imbecile.No President in his right mind would surrender gladly the power he draws from this unique institution which puts him, in a light he selects for himself, on the front page of every newspaper in the land and, as often as not, in the world."[6]

After two decades of weekly or bi-weekly press conferences, the assumption that the quasi-constitutional institution was indispensible grew into a conviction. "It would be almost impossible," wrote Louis Brownlow, "for any President now to change this pattern or to interfere in any material way with this institution...of prime importance in the political life of the American people."[7] Yet in 1972, Max Frankel wrote,"the presidential press conference is dying, without ceremony."[8]

What happened?

On the 43rd anniversary of the press conference, James Reston noted that ,"it is growing and developing. Unfortunately, it is developing faster than the Government's capacity to provide for it."[9]

Reston's analysis was correct in realizing that problems lay ahead, but he was needlessly exclusive when he assigned blame. Within a few years of that 1956 report, a government came to power that proved more than capable of staging--and dominating--the modern press conference. It was

the press which was unable to keep pace.

Then, after matters had gotten completely out of control, two new governments came to power--and they were committed to the further destruction of the press conference. The decline unknowingly begun by Eisenhower and Kennedy was accelerated tremendously and willingly by Johnson and Nixon.

Currently, there are still many problems, both in the institution as well as in the performance of Gerald Ford. Yet there is hope that the Presidential press conference has been revitalized, and is once again a viable forum.

Some problems have been solved, but large difficulties still remain. The limitations of the press conference are painfully obvious to anyone who observes them. Questioning is disorganized; conditions are chaotic; important issues go unexamined, either because the President holds the conferences too infrequently or the reporters are unprepared.

Reporters deserve much of the blame for the disintegration of the press conference; the rest lays at the door to the Oval Office. Likewise, some means of revitalization can be undertaken by the press; others must wait for Presidential initiative.

In this chapter I examine some of the major aspects of the modern Presidential press conference--its form and function, the actions and attitudes of some leading actors, and the impact of personality and technology on its decline.

Douglass Cater, the respected analyst of the "fourth branch of government," once wrote that when a President holds a press conference he "knows the moment of truth as well as any matador."[10] Cater coined that descriptive phrase before he left journalism to write speeches for Lyndon Johnson. After that service, he would have to admit that it is an incomplete assessment.

Premier bullfighters work on their own schedules, just as the President holds a news conference at his own convenience. They know which bull they will fight, just as the President knows which reporters he will recognize. But the bull is a totally independent animal, charging at its own will. The President, however, can exert certain pressures on correspondents, guiding the questioning where he wants it to go.

This "guidance" can be exerted directly or indirectly, in a subtle or crass way. As in every other aspect of the delicate press--Presidential relationship, the more blatant measures become, greater grow the chances for disaster.

Presidents can indirectly influence the line of questioning by making an opening statement. Pronouncements of policy often bring at least a question or two, even if it is merely a reiteration of an oft-stated position. Announcements of Presidential action always elicit numerous inquiries, especially if the move is unexpected, or otherwise newsworthy. For example, when Lyndon Johnson announced at a news conference the doubling of American forces in Vietnam, every question was centered on that issue.[11]

The cleverest statement is one which leaves vague certain details, on

which the newshawks are compelled to seek clarification. The President is then quizzed at length about a matter on which he is the authority, leaving little time for inquiries which would take him by surprise.

Opening statements have been used with greater frequency by recent Democratic Presidents. This is due both to the ramifications of technology and the vagaries of personality.

The Truman period, which saw the institutionalization and formalization of the press conference, also marked a subtle but significant shift from the Roosevelt model. FDR had remained one step removed from manipulation of public opinion, working his charms instead on the reporters assembled around his desk. Truman and his staff gradually realized the opportunities in the press conference of addressing the country directly.[12] When Truman and his staff were searching for the best way to address the country on the worsening situation in Korea, the problem was finally solved when one aide remarked that a "carefully prepared statement, which the President could read at his press conference...might help communicate to the public the seriousness of the situation.The others agreed."[13]

Eisenhower utilized prepared statements somewhat less often than Truman had, although at his first conference he implied an intention to use them frequently:"This morning, I have chosen four subjects that I think are of immediate interest...."[14] Despite the obvious implication that this guidance from Ike would be a regular occurrence, just over fifty per-cent of Eisenhower's press conferences began with a statement or two from the General. This percentage dropped markedly during his second term,when he read statements at only about twenty-five to thirty per-cent of the conferences.[15]

Considering the reception most newsmen gave Eisenhower's first opening statement, the General was well-advised to curtail the practice. Seeking to guide the questioning and cut into the newsmen's time, Eisenhower's ends were all right--but his means were way out of proportion.

Fully two-thirds of the alloted thirty minutes at that first conference was consumed by Eisenhower's recital of his statement, during which time he "made it clear that he expected questions to be directed to the several points he had made."[16] Those topics were:farm prices,secret agreements,the economy, and the atomic bomb.

Someone--surely James C. Hagerty, White House press secretary--had apparently advised Eisenhower to dominate the proceedings by "consuming most of the time, allowing little for controversial items to be raised." Reporters generally took umbrage at the endeavor;as one groused,"he filibustered for twenty minutes and gave us ten."[17] Only thirteen of their number were able to quiz the President on the already strictly limited topics.

The Washington Post's Edward T. Folliard reported that former war correspondents found the "new-style press conference" reminiscent of the briefings General Eisenhower had conducted during his years at the command of Allied armies. The trade publication Editor and Publisher also noted that similarity, and pronounced verdict:"It is clear that President Eisenhower cannot continue to 'brief' the correspondents, and must ultimately submit to incisive questioning." Then this hope:"That is certain to happen at his next session."[18]

It is interesting to note that Time magazine--published over a week after the Editor and Publisher issue quoted above--made no mention of this adverse reaction. The Luce publication, which a study demonstrated was

heavily biased in Eisenhower's favor throughout his political career, merely mentioned that the President had "explained something else." The "old technique of letting questions pop at random"[one could contend that "traditional practice of allowing spontaneous questions" presented the abandoned method in a more favorable light] was altered by the General,who first stated"his views on those topics he[italics theirs] felt to be of the greatest news value at the moment." As Eisenhower "obviously had hoped, the questions stuck generally close to getting details within the outline he had provided."[19] [A non pro-Eisenhower report might read,"within the strict limits he had set."]

The Editor and Publisher hope proved to be well-founded. A week later, Ike made only two brief announcements. He then "brought raised eyebrows and appreciative grins by throwing the conference open to questions...which got good answers."[20]

Once the decision had been made to allow live television coverage of his press conferences, President Kennedy realized that they could no longer be used for the semiconfidential briefings of the press that Roosevelt had employed. As they were now public spectacles, he decided to make a virtue of necessity. His press conferences were exuberant;his use of opening statements,uninhibited.

According to Special Counsel Theodore Sorenson, Kennedy "preferred to have from one to three opening statements or announcements of importance at each news conference." This was done, he says, "not to take time away from the questions"--which it naturally did--"but to provide some focus for them." Most importantly, it was to "make use of this rare opportunity and sizable audience."[21] As Kennedy himself remarked one evening while watching the re-

broadcast of the day's news conference,"We couldn't survive without TV." A master of public and press relations, Kennedy used this stratagem to produce banner headlines and influence public opinion.

United States Air Force RB-47 was shot down over Russian territory on July 1, 1960. Captain Freeman B. Olmstead and Captain John R. McKone, the only surviving members of the crew, had been detained by the Soviet authorities since that date. At his first news conference, held January 25,1961, President Kennedy said he was "happy to announce that (they)... have been released by the Soviet Government and are now en route to the United States."[23] The good news was heralded by the New York Times with a four column, thirty-six point type headline--very fine play indeed.[24]

However, there was much controversy behind the scenes. David Wise, then the White House correspondent for the New York Herald Tribune, and one of the most enterprising reporters in Washington, had unearthed the story the day before. A few hours before the presses would begin running in New York, hecalled Press Secretary Pierre Salinger and told him what he knew. Salinger confirmed the story--and begged him not to publish it. The Russians were insistent on simultaneous announcement, he said, and premature publication could "very well blow the whole deal sky-high." Wise relayed this report to his publisher, John Hay "Jock" Whitney, who agreed with Salinger. Wise's exclusive story of momentous importance was not carried in that morning's editions. In gratitude, Kennedy telegramed Whitney after the press conference, thanking him for his selfless act.[25] [As we have seen, this appreciation for the Herald Tribune did not last long]

Naturally, a belief spread among certain newsmen--Wise was not among them--that the article had been suppressed to keep Kennedy in the limelight of the good news. Although it would later be written that the "public re-

lations is coldly calculated...(Kennedy's) press conferences begin with a series of announcements carefully prepared to report good news or give the image of a man of action and good will,"[26] Salinger contends that it was not true that he "deliberately saved the most important news for the President to announce in the dramatic atmosphere of the press conference."[27]

Kennedy would later use this dramatic atmosphere in the tense showdown with Big Steel, when he successfully pressured them into rolling back a three-and-a-half per-cent price increase.

On April 10, 1962, Kennedy was surprised to find on his appointment calendar a 5:45p.m. meeting with Roger Blough, President of U.S.Steel.[28] The last major steel contracts had been signed that day, and everyone "breathed a sigh of relief that steel price increases were no longer a danger"[29] to President Kennedy's fight against inflation.

Roger Blough didn't breathe any such sigh as he handed the President a press release, which had already been delivered to the newspapers; Blough said this was an act of "courtesy." The mimeographed sheet announced a six dollar-a-ton price increase, four times the new labor settlement. The President felt "stunned...angry...mocked." Because Kennedy had used his powers and prestige to induce the Steelworkers to accept less from the companies in the interest of price stability, "the question of good faith was involved. He felt double-crossed."[30] And when the Kennedys felt double-crossed, James Reston observed, "brother, hand me down my stell shellilagh!"[31] In the best spirit of Boston politicians, Kennedy didn't get mad--he got even.

And he got even by getting mad. As Ted Sorenson recalls, the "primary hope was to create a climate that would discourage the other companies from joining in the increase and encourage U.S.Steel to rescing."[32] The ideal means of creating that climate had already been scheduled--the President's press

conference.

In a tone of "ice-cold anger,"[33] Kennedy read a long indictment against the steel companies(others had since joined U.S.Steel in raising their prices), charging them with "ruthless disregard" of their duty and of "irresponsible defiance" of the public interest.

"Some time ago I asked each American to consider what he could do for his country," Kennedy reminded his audience of about fifty-million,"and I asked the steel companies.In the last twenty-four hours we have their answer."[34] Sorenson, who was still re-working the statement in the limousine taking the Presidential party to the State Department Auditorium, "heard a gasp from the reporters" as the President spoke. Interestingly, the statement's most pointed lines had been "inserted spontaneously" as he spoke.[35]

Feeling his very Presidency at stake, Kennedy utilized every opportunity to hammer home his theme;he even invented some. Totally unrelated questions about service wives and Vietnam were answered against the backdop of the steel increase. Watching Kennedy in action,and reading the next day's papers, Sorenson knew that "from the moment of the press conference on,he had the initiative in the fight."[36] Professional media critic Ben Bagdikian agrees,saying Kennedy "deolished the opposition...(with his)five-minute opening statement of his live televised press conference." Before the 319 correspondents had even left the auditorium,Bagdikian notes, "the battle against steel was over." Quite rightly, he labels this press conference a "milestone in the presidential use of communications."[37] Forty-eight hours after Kennedy spoke, Big Steel rescinded the price hike.

Kennedy also took full advantage of the press conference in his dealings with Cnngress, as one representative example will suggest. The Trade Expansion Act of 1962 was designed to broaden the government's negotiating

authority in trade agreements and to develop bonds with the European Common Market, was one of his major policy inovations. Because trade policy had always been a sensitive issue, Kennedy faced a hard fight in getting Congressional approval. His victory was due largely to his uninhibited use of the press conference.[38]

At two press conferences held before Congress met, Kennedy gave "FDR-esque" talks on the then-unfinished program. "We are considering tha matter," he told reporters on November 8,1961, "and we will come to the Congress in January and make our recommendations." This he did;first in the State of the Union Message(January 11),followed by the Economic Report on January 22. The proposals formed the basis of a special message delivered on January 25. There were twenty-five Presidential press conferences held in the period between the State of the Union Message and final passage of the bill;at least ten found the President strongly advocating his program. Three times he urged passage in opening statements:"I want to emphasize once again how deeply I am convinced that the passage this year of the trade expansion bill, on which the House will vote tomorrow, is vital to the future of this country." Thanks to this determined public lobbying, the measure carried.[39]

As he did in so many other areas, Lyndon Johnson carried the practice of making opening statements to excess--far beyond the point of diminishing return. By his own admission, he regularly used the first fifteen minutes of each conference to make various announcements.[40] Occasionally these were of great importance.More often,however, the statements consisted of the expected Presidential reaction to domestic and international developments, exhortations to Congress to pass his legislation, and calls for unity against the Communist aggressor.Frequently he perverted the press conference

to the extreme by reading lengthy lists of sub-Cabinet appointments, a routine chore normally handled by the press secretary in his daily briefing.

Richard Nixon changed a number of things in the press conferences he inherited from Lyndon Johnson, ranging from the superficially cosmetic to the significantly structural. His attitude towards opening statements was one of the most significant departures, causing a noticeable change before the first conference even began.

Johnson had surrounded himself with extensive paraphernalia, which Nixon eliminated entirely. The Texan had stood behind a large, memoranda strewn podium, often facing dual teleprompters bearing texts of Presidential statements. Nixon had between him and the press only a single microphone stand. Even basically antagonistic analysts saw a definite improvement.

Tom Wicker was pleased that Nixon had no opening statement to making, noting the contrast to Kennedy's announcement of the release of the RB-47 fliers. Although this meant passing up an opportunity to dramatize anything the President might care to say, it was "well worth the sacrifice (because) it prevented any suspicion that Mr. Nixon was trying to shape or control the line of questioning."[41]

Aides reported that Nixon shunned carrying notes or reading anything before the cameras because it would "detract from the atmosphere of unrehearsed competance." It was said that he was also "eager to avoid the situation that developed" when Lyndon Johnson would start each news conference "with so many statements that there was little time left for questioning."[42]

But if Nixon ever did feel the need to deliver an occasional statement, he aimed to do so spectacularly. He succeeded.

Nixon's decision concerning the Sentinel anti-ballistics missile program

had been described in a 1500-word "Statement of the President," which was handed out to reporters before his press conference on March 13,1969. He then took the stage--still adorned with only a single microphone stand--and spoke extemporaneously for nine minutes on the same complicated subject. A comparison of the printed statement and the transcript of the President's remarks revealed a "striking similarity in structure,sequence, and substance." Nixon's remarks "by no means seemed memorized" but clearly indicated that he had "absorbed the matter thoroughly" in previous briefings. 43

A more direct--and more debated--attempt at Executive influence is the planted question. This act, generally performed by the press secretary, carries with it certain risks, which are realized in increasing frequency relative to the diminishing subtlety of that aide. The rate of incidence here seems dependent on the competance of the staff, and the President's desire for control.

FDR,unmatched in personal charm until JFK, had the gift of "bringing up the subject...if he has prepared himself to answer a question which reporters do not ask." Thus, in the opinion of one correspondent, "such overt actions"--planting questions to allow the President to 'spontaneously' answer--were"not necessary."[44]

There were some matters,however, on which FDR sought not to be the initiator of discussions. After a budgetary estimate had proved extremely low, FDR "had Steve Early plant a question about relief and in reply poo-pooed the report that he had settled on $500 million." Here the President apparently felt that responding to a question would make his reversal less embarrassing than had he made the point himself.[45]

Fascinating details of the process of question planting add another dimension to Roosevelt's legendary press conference style. A Presidential memorandum to Sumner Welles proposed that he publicly thank Mexico for supplying farm laborers in California;Welles countered with the suggestion that "a question be planted at a forthcoming news conference to give the President the chance to make the appropriate statement." FDR thought it a worthy idea, and memorialized his press secretary,"Sumner Welles suggests that I handle this at a press conference. Will you arrange it?"[46]

Arrangements could be made on a variety of levels, from the specific to the general. The Hyde Park files contain the proposed wording of a suggested plant: "Mr. President, did you notice the annual report yesterday of the American Civil Liberties Union? What has happened to the efforts of the Government to protect civil liberties?"[47] The more common practice, though, was for Press Secretary Steve Early to say casually that the President "had been giving a lot of thought to something and might be willing to talk about it if asked."[48]

Early's immediate successors as press secretaries--Charles Ross, Joe Short and Roger Tubby--were nowhere near as competant as he, and they did not seek to continue his practice of planting questions. Instead, they opted for the more controllable opening statement, using them between sixty-three and fifty-two per-cent of the time.[49] Roger Tubby, the last Truman press secretary, noted the infrequency of plants, and "stressed the importance of statements[50] and the relative unimportance of plants, as related matters."

This order of priorities was reversed in the following administration, when Eisenhower increased the use of plants, while placing somewhat less reliance on opening statements. It should be noted that James Hagerty possibly surpassed even Steve Early in professionalism and astuteness.

Hagerty insisted that he did not actually plant questions, but rather merely suggested topics. Thus, a "question" such as this was not uncommon at Eisenhower press conferences: "Mr. Hagerty indicated yesterday that you might have some comments that you would like to make about the labor bill which was passed by the Senate and is now going to the House. Would you care to, at this time?"[51] As Hagerty later recalled his method, it consisted of telling a reporter, "I think if you ask the President about this, you'll get a decent answer."[52] In addition, he would often host the wire

services,network and regularly assigned correspondents in his office the morning before the President delivered a prepared statement. Thus briefed. on background information, they would have the chance to prepare any further questions on the subject.

President Kennedy also utilized question plants, which either he or his press secretary,Pierre Salinger,arranged. Salinger apparently planted actual questions, a departure from Hagerty's method of merely "suggesting topics." Before the administration's first year was out, Time magazine (whose White House reporter,Hugh Sidey,was a Kennedy favorite),noting that Salinger occasionally tipped off reporters "to raise questions that the President wants to answer," reported that "last week,Salinger suggested to ABC's William H.Lawrence that a certain question might get an interesting response... Kennedy had a ready answer to that one...neatly organized on paper."[53]

Salinger readily admits to "planting infrequent questions myself tthat might result in banner headlines and radio and tv bulletins." He recounts that he would not request a reporter ask a certain question,"but simply... tell him that if he would...he would receive a most interesting answer."[54] He defends the practice on the dual grounds of newsworthiness and necessity. A Presidential announcement, he suggests, "often appears more newsworthy if the press draws it out of him than if he volunteers it himself." And because the "reporters don't do as much homework" for the sessions as the President, he would often come prepared to "answer a question of major significance,but no one would ask it." Substantiating the Time account with a blase assessment that smacks of "news management," 'Pluck' Pierre stresses that it was "important to us not only that he have the chance to express himself on such questions but that the form of the question would elicit the answer he had ready" [Italics added][47]

Given that candid account Salinger published after he left the White House, one must come to one of three conclusions about Salinger's handling of his press office. Either the situation he describes developed in the later part of the Kennedy administration; his assistants made false, self-serving declarations to the press; or he kept his assistants in the dark about the practice. For early in the first year, Assistant Press Secretary Andrew Hatcher told the New York Times that the President "had no desire to plant questions at his news conferences or to speak at great length" on administration projects. The President, Hatcher maintained, did "not want to change the free flow of questions and answers."[55]

President Lyndon Johnson was not a very subtle man. Thus, when he tried to emply the long accepted practice of question plants, he characteristically went over-board. He was imbued with the philosophy of overkill-- and found himself the victim. The fiercely independent press corps doesn't really mind being given a clue as to what question will produce a newsworthy response. Getting a big story out serves the public, as well as providing the inquiring reporter with an ego boost. But there are limits of propriety, which Johnson recklessly transgressed.

Question plants, which must be handled on a selective basis to be effective, became in Johnson's administration "a way of life."[56] The most notorious example occurred on August 25, 1965, when the normally sophisticated Bill Don Moyers, then Johnson's press secretary, openly solicited newsmen's compliance in posing certain questions. This endeavor had transitory success;

Johnson was allowed to castigate the House Republicans for criticizing his Vietnam policy, and give a lengthy discourse on the necessity for a steel contract settlement. But the exercise had a price. "Old timers in the White House press room can't remember anything like the activity immediately preceeding the August 25th conference," Johnson biographers Rowland Evans and Robert Novack wrote. The supposedly spontaneous question-and-answer session became "very nearly as carefully staged as a Broadway play." A press office insider also realized that things had gotten out of hand, that the usual practice--usual for Johnson--of planting about four questions at each conference had been abandoned. "Where Johnson went wrong," this source said, "was when he decided that if we were going to plant four, why not eight or more--why not control the entire press conference."[57]

Moyers, the self-defrocked Baptist teacher who has since become a fine television journalist, denied these charges of manipulation. Interviewed in January, 1966 on the Washington, D.C. educational outlet, he admitted that he had planted questions on only "two or three subjects." He defended the practice with the same reasoning that Salinger had used:

> I did suggest to some reporters that the President had on his mind certain problems, and that I was certain he was prepared to deal with those questions if they came up....But the purpose was to make sure that the news got out that day.[58]

Richard Nixon's press aides continued the practice. Herbert G. Klein, Director of Communications was interviewed in August, 1969, on the same WETA-TV series as Moyers. He was reminded that Moyers had "confessed that he sometimes did plant some questions," and was asked if he, too, engaged in the activity. With hair-splitting semantics that hark back to Hagerty, Klein attempted to draw a distinction between planting questions and planting topics:

Q: Do you and Mr. (Ronald L.) Ziegler (White House press secretary) plant

questions?
A:No,we do not.
Q:None at all?
A:No,Sir.
Q:Aren't you tempted at least to say to a reporter,"I think if you raise this subject you might get an interesting response"?
A:I think an occasion like that might arise,yes,and I wouldn't think it was wrong if we suggested to a reporter that if he wanted to ask on a particular topic it might make some news.[59]

Thus, if the press secretary tells a reporter,"Why don't you ask the President about the Consumer Protection Act?" he may comfort himself with the thought that he has suggested a topic--consumerism--but he has also planted a question.

This practice invariably produces slow,ninth-inning pitches that the President can knock out of the park. Shortly before President Nixon's press conference on July 30,1970--his first meeting with reporters in three months--the Washington Star's Garnett D. "Jack" Horner asked Ziegler,"What's on the President's mind?" The next day Ziegler told Horner that a question about Nixon's attempts at "bringing government to the people" might be worthwhile.[60]

Horner, one of the less aggressive reporters in the White House press corps, obligingly posed this incisive question that afternoon:

Horner:Mr. President,this press conference is sort of a climax to a series of activities that you have described as bringing government to the people....What benefits do you see to you and the country from such activity?
The President:Well, I hope there is benefit to the country.I believe there is benefit in bringing the White House to San Clemente or Fargo or Louisville....I think it is very important for the people of California to know the White House, to participate,for example,like this Presidential press conference....[61]

According to the Chicago Tribune, when Nixon learned of the planting practice, "he gave Ziegler a dressing down and forbade him to continue it."[62] Even though I read it, I don't believe it.

Presidents have always prepared extensively for their news conferences. Reports are solicited from the several departments, detailing the latest policy and personnel developments. Staff aides prepare thick booklets of expected questions and suggested answers, which the President generally studies the night before. A run-through is often conducted early in the day, with the press secretary acting as surrogate press corps. Breaking developments are brought to the President's attention up to the moment he mounts the platform. Even then, a wire service ticker stands near by. When he faces the reporters, the President is ready and able to answer questions on almost every area of government.

This preparation has been praised by all Presidents as an extremely valuable practice. It serves to give them a regular run-down of the acts of the various agencies and departments, keeping them on top of the course of events. "I think this is a wonderful institution," President Eisenhower said on the forty-third anniversary of the White House press conference. Noting the half-hourly review of the events of the week, he praised the conference for doing "a lot of things for me personally."[63] Comparing it to the challenge of writing speeches, President Nixon declared that the "preparation for the press conference helps to discipline my mind to talk about the issues."[64]

Such hard work far outweighs anything the average Washington newsman undergoes. "With relatively few exceptions," Jules Witcover wrote, most reporters merely "check their calendars--and little else--and go about their business."[65] John D. Ehrlichman's appraisal was even harsher, and more pungent: The President "goes in there for half an hour; he gets a lot of

flabby and fairly dumb questions, and it really doesn't elucidate much."

[Reporters asked Nixon if he concurred with the opinion of his chief domestic adviser. "You are not dumb and flabby," the President reassured them. Then, at a private session in his office, he said:

> But I have found that these smaller sessions do provide an opportunity opportunity for members of the regular White House press,who study these issues day by day and who know what is relevant and what is not relevant...I think that the possibility of dumb and flabby questions is much less.[67]

This answer is complimentary, but deceitful. White House regulars are by definition generalists;limiting attendance at press conferences to them automatically excludes the specialists in foreign policy,defense,the economy, and so on. Thus, the President is protected from pointed inquiry.]

A study of sixty newsmen selected at random from the six media groups represented at the White House indicated that a "lack of sufficient preparation by many reporters prior to a conference." If newsmen spent as much time in preparation as the President, the study concluded, "the scales of effectiveness might be tipped noticeably."[67]

Peter Lisagor was one of the few reporters I interviewed who dissented from this analysis. "I don't agree with that," he told me. "I think most reporters tend to be well prepared for their question."[68]

Another problem is the "jumping-jack" manner that the newsmen affect in seeking Presidential recognition, which invariably goes to the "spry limb rather than the sober brain."[69] Amidst raucus shouts of "Mr. President! Mr. President!," and the sea of upstretched arms, it is not always possible to discern which reporter has an intelligent query. Good reporters are often poor showmen.

Television has intensified this chaotic atmosphere, and produced what both government and press representatives feel is the press conference's

biggest flaw. "Let's face it," said Nixon Communications Director Herbert G. Klein, "three hundred reporters clamoring for their moment on camera" creates a scene in which it is impossible for the President to "reveal world policy to world powers or to explain it in depth to the nation."[70] Hugh Sidey also traced much of the deterioration back to the same root. "Correspondents are competing, they have to be on camera," he told me."Dan Rather's whole competance, his whole stature was based on the fact of him getting recognized by Nixon,by jumping up.That's not our business,that's all.That's something else."[71]

Television has affected the level of questioning in another way. A year before television cameras were introduced, Richard Strout warned that they would destroy the informal mood of the press conference by inducing stage fright. The easy atmosphere could not develop,Strout predicted, "if each reporter knows that his boss, the world and his wife will listen to what he is about to say."[72]

Twenty years later, reporters have attested to the inhibiting effects of television. "Reporters go armed with a question and are a little bit inflexible about it," Peter Lisagor told me. "There is a tendancy to be frozen in with your question--because television puts pressure on everybody, and its an intense, hectic half-hour." In order to get a question in, he sadi, "You've got to think of a question you're desparately interested in, and you take that to the press conference." He gave an absurdist example: "If the President said that the world were going to end next week, the next guy up would ask about some land reclamation project in west Texas."[73]

Jules Witcover agrees with Lisagor that television is a disturbing influence on reporters. He points to two meetings Nixon held in the summer of 1970. When reporters interviewed Nixon in his office on July 20, six

of seven questions in a row were aimed at getting clarification of Nixon's position on South Vietnamese President Theiu's views of a coalition government. At the televised press conference ten days later, only two in a row were related. "The press conferece procedure itself is part of the problem," Witcover cone wrote. Reporters have come prepared with a question,which they are "so intent on phrasing so it will be understood by the huge television audience" that they "give no thought to pursuing a colleague's line of interrogation that has not been satisfied."[74]

There is disagreement among reporters on how serious this flaw is."The most serious defect," said Max Ways,former senior editor at Time,"Has always been its fragmentation.The consumer is often switched from one topic to another before any one point has a chance to sink in."[75] Edward P. Morgan dissents:"I think we're making too much of an issue of fragmentation," he told a panel of fellow-journalists. "It's certainly frustrating for participants," he said, "trying to get in a question and then getting off on something else.But the reporters...unfragment it...in their stories...so that you don't get a complete mishmash, a Tower of Babel kind of thing."[76]

However helpful editors can be in presenting readers with a coherent analysis, the impression persists that the actual quality of questioning suffers as a result of fragmentation. This is a situation which can be corrected, either by reporters' initiative or Presidential directive. The basic problem is unorganized inquiry;the obvious solutions are rehearsal,or a limitation on the areas open to questioning.

A modified form of rehearsal was attempted four winters ago;the results were largely unsatisfactory. After an extended hiatus, President Nixon finally announced that he would meet thepress on December 11,1971. Jules Wticover and Stuart Loory, then both with the Los Angeles Times,decided to

organize a meeting of White House reporters to discuss ways of making the upcoming press conference, and future ones, more productive. Twenty-eight pressmen eventually met in the Washington Hotel;for over an hour they debated the issues,finally reaching a consensus on only two points:that a question to the President asking him if he planned to meet more frequently with reporters would be very welcome; and that it would also be refreshing if reporters were more diligent in following up their colleague's questioning.

The group had taken great pains to forestall any charges of "conspiracy." The meeting was well publicized, and it was chaired by one of the few reporters the Nixon White House respected, John Osborne of The New Republic.[27] Yet a few days later,Herbert G. Klein,Nixon's communications director,implied on the Op-Ed page of the New York Times that the reporters had been plotting nonetheless."Some of the reporters who were there,"wrote Klein,"took great pains to say they were not part of a cabal or conspiracy, and that in no way did they discuss either the order or the subject matter of the questions that would be asked" at the forthcoming conference. "Whether they did or not,"Klein declared,"the timing of the meeting did little to enhance press credibility."[28]

Allen Drury, the former New York Timesman become conservative novelist viewed the gathering even more ominously:"A group of major correspondents," he wrote in Courage and Hesitation,his authorized look at the Nixon administration, "fantastically has actually held a secret meeting,their ostensible purpose to arrange the sequence of questions, their real aim to get Dick Nixon."[29]

Reporters in California have found a solution to fragmentation, as Lou Cannon explained.The Washington Post White House correspondent remains partial to the system employed at gubernatorial press conferences in

Sacramento, under which "the reporters had a rule that you could not move to another topic until you had exhausted the one at hand." When attempts were made at every press conference to move on to a new subject, Cannon told me, "a number of us would call out, 'We're not done with this one.'" Although recognizing the disadvantages of getting "much more inane questions at the end of a subject," he asserts that any drawbacks are "totally outweighed by the benefit." The benefit, he said, was that you get a "much deeper penetration of subject matter than you normally get in a Presidential press conference. I don't see why it couldn't work on a national level."[80]

This practice relies on reporters' agreement; a variation can also come from Presidential directive. That is, the President declares that a certain press conference is to be limited to one specific subject. "That's all right," Clark Mollenhoff said, "if you have plenty of other conferences."[81] President Nixon occasionally used this device, once meeting in his office with reporters at a session devoted exclusively to the Supreme Court and the recent nomination of Warren Burger to be Chief Justice.[82] Peter Lisagor said one "thoroughly rewarding press conference" was a Nixon session devoted exclusively to the Middle East. "It permitted a thorough follow-up and a thorough probing of that subject," Lisagor said. "We came out of there knowing more about the President's policies on the Middle East than we've known about his policies on any other single subject before or since."[83]

Opening statements by the President can also serve to guide the questioning. President Kennedy tried refining the idea, often making additional statements during the actual question period. "I think these are all fine devices for separating things," Clark Mollenhoff said, "but I don't think you can really control the situation."[84]

As unfulfilled questioning is frustrating to the reporters, unexplored areas are annoying to the President. Having devoted so much time and energy to their preparation, Presidents who refrin from exerting either direct or indirect influence on the course of questioning are liable to find themselves prepared to answer questions that never get asked. This can be both personally frustrating and politically damaging. After one of Eisenhower's press conferences, an aide bitterly listed six major questions involving "events, policies and programs which had gone unasked...despite their prominence in the news."[86]

Although alleging that the initiative in questioning lay with the press, Eisenhower often did have topics which he felt were of prime importance for discussion. He once facetiously suggested to Press Secretary Hagerty that he erect a church hymnal display, on which would be posted the list of topics the White House considered most important.[87] Eisenhower's desire to talk on certain subjects was real, as was his gratitude when given the chance."Mr. Horner, I can't thank you enough for asking that question," he once said to the laughter of the reporters."I have gone back to my last two or three conferences and I said,'These people are conspiring to keep me from insisting that the country is hurting itself by too much spending.'"[88]

The record indicates,however,that this was a somewhat ingracious attitude for Ike to hold. For in the first eight months following the GOP defeat at the polls in 1958, he managed to refer to fiscal responsibility on twenty-two different occasions--an average of more than once per meeting.[89] Eisenhower announced this saturation campaign that November,stating:"For

the next two years, The Lord sparing me, I am going to fight this as hard as I know how."[90]

God moves in mysterious ways,however,sometimes frustrating even his good crusaders. A most motely collection of His agents--the White House press--often kept the General from speaking his mind on another issue close to his heart.

To paraphrase Churchill,Eisenhower was "passive in frustration." Despite his intense interest in the Defense Department reorganization bill--which was at that moment the subject of Capitol Hill debate--he allowed the forum of a news conference to pass ungraced by a Presidential statement. When once conference--held during the week of Hungarian executions,White House scandals,and Lebanese crises--ended, Eisenhower was recorded by the stenographer as complaining,"nobody gives me a chance to talk about defense."[91]

When the matter did arise,though, Eisenhower made the most of the opportunity. When his conference of April 2,1958 began with a question about the defense bill, he drew an appreciative laugh by prefacing his answer:"How long am I allowed for this talk?"[92] He then alloted himself time enough to fill two full pages in the official transcript.

President Kennedy was also occasionally frustrated by questions that were conspicuous by their absence. When the People's Republic of China was still Red China, he wanted to use the conference to reaffirm his opposition to their application for United Nations membership. The question was never asked, and the "answer"had to be "issued rather lamely as a White House statement the next day."[93]

President Gerald Ford recently underwent a similar experience. Appearing at the Sigma Delta Chi convention last December, he sought to announce his

intention to seek election at a gala press conference. Neither the students nor the professionals asked him about his 1976 plans,however, and the announcement was made the next day in a muted White House press release.

To tailor his acts to fit the press corps's whims was definitely not, however, the way of Richard Nixon. He would not, and did not, pass up the opportunity for a large audience his rare news conferences afforded him. Although Nixon shunned the opening statement,if there was something he wanted to say, he would say it--whether the question was posed, or not.

Because Nixon was so certain that he was at his best in the give-and-take of what he called the "Q-and-A," the New York Times reported, he was against any alteration of that format. This rigidity sometimes "forces him to volunteer information he is eager to get on the record," sometimes in response to a question "on another matter altogether." In the early days of his administration, he discussed Czechoslovakian turmoil in response to a question about North Korea. As the Times reporter noted, he could, "just as easily have opened the conference with a statement on Czechoslovakia, but he decided against it."[94]

Nixon's actions in 1969 were contrived;by 1973, they had become pathetic. Nixon brought Operation Candor to the fantasy land of Disney World, but he found it wouldn't play to cry over spoiled milkmoney.

1973 was not a very good year in the life of Richard Milhous Nixon. It was not a very good year in the life of the Republic.

Nixon's winter wasn't much worse than his spring and summer--and they were terrible.He was ordered to turn over to Judge John J. Sirica twenty-three subpoenaed tape recordings;he refused. His chief domestic adviser was indicted, with three other top aides, for conspiracy to violate someone's civil rights. He was ordered a second time to surrender the tapes.

His Vice President confessed to a felony,and resigned. He purged the Special Prosecutor in the "Saturday Night Massacre," losing two of the few respected and respectable people in his Cabinet in the wake. His impeachment was demanded by thousands of citizens. His order to drop the ITT anti-trust case was disclosed. His possible impeachment was being studied by the Committee on the Judiciary of the House of Representatives. His lawyers revealed that two of the tapes(which he had since decided to relinquish) did not exist.

To counter this somewhat disturbing trend, Nixon launched "Operation Candor," a desparate attempt at rebuilding popular support. This consisted of a whirlwhind of activity in Washington (meetings on the economy and energy, a televised press conference, et cetera) and a tour through the generally friednly South, with stops at the Associate Press Managing Editor's convention, a regional Governor's meeting, and the nintieth birthday celebration of retired Congressman Carl Vincon. But there was something disturbing about all of this;as Frank Makiewicz notes, what kind of presidency did we have "if a time of candor had to be part of an 'operation?'"[95]

Although he told lies to almost every group he met (he assured the Governors that there would be "no more Watergate bombshells";two days later the infamous eighteen minute gap on a key White House tape was revealed), the outstanding example of deception under fire came at his appearance on November 17 before the APME. Fittingly, it was stage at Disney World, the legacy of a man who understood fantasy. Mankiewicz was masterfully catalogued and analyzed Nixon's extensive deception at that conference;my focus is on but one small aspect of it.

Even before he began taking questions, it was clear that Nixon had

stacked the cards in his favor. The White House press corps, tradtionally generalists who by this time had become experts in the minutiae of Watergate, were excluded from the activities. With the questioning being conducted by the AP managing editors-- a competant but less than aggressive group, still reverential towards the presidency--it clearly "would not be a no-holds-bared grilling." Furthermore, despite claims of total openness, Nixon's aides "made it clear that he still did not feel he could speak with total candor," although they "continued to promise that he would do so at an unspecified time." Deputy Press Secretary Gerald Warren accounted for this lack of candor in the operation by a variety of means, including unidentified court orders from Judge Sirica, a desire to protect individual reputations, and "national security."[96]

According to some appraisals, Nixon "won points for the vigor of his defense and his willingness to address the issues." That willingness was certainly evident;as the account from Newsweek continued,"he almost begged for questions on points that hadn't been raised."[97] Clearly, one point was the allegation that he raised the 1971 mil-support level in return for a $200,000 campaign donation from the American Milk Producers,Incorporated. "I was hoping you'd ask me about the milk," the President told one editor towards the end of the hour-long session."Would you mind asking me about the milk?" Greeted with a nod of assention, Nixon responded,"You will?Fine. I'll answer this (a question about what he would do when he left the White House.Answer:"It depends on when I leave.") and then I'll go to the milk in the back."[98]

But Nixon's answer rambled so long, that by the time he said,"Now we'll go to the milk case," the convention's chairman was forced to intercede.

"Mr. President,APME would like to ask you about the milk case," he said."But out sixty-minute commitment of time has run out. APME appreciates your appearance before us this evening, and we thank you." He was in for a surprise, and was given a crash course in Presidential Television.

"I'll tell you the time," Nixon barked. Waving imperiously at the cameras, he said,"Television, keep me on just a minute yet." Gracelessly biting the network hand that was feeding him with free coverage, Nixon assured the television audience that "it's a lousy movie tonight,anyway."

He then launched into an unconvincing argument about 102 Representatives and 20 Senators "holding a gun to our head" in the form of a petition demanding a ninety per-cent parity rate. Thosse numbers are nowhere near nigh enough to pass legislation, much less override a Presidential veto. Nevertheless, Nixon contended that only by granting an eighty-five per-cent parity rate could he show his concern "for what the people pay for milk... That's why it was done. And that's the truth."

Having run over two minutes into the next television hour, Nixon shrugged and said,"I guess that's the end." 98

The brilliant maneuver of asking yourself questions you want to answer is a standard forensic practice, which champion debater Dick Nixon mastered in his youth.His first use of the trick in a national forum was his 1952 address in defense of his slush fund, the so-called "Checkers Speech." Nixon's big mistake,though, was in waiting so long to pose the question.* For, as the St.Louis Post-Dispatch editorialized, his command that the cameras keep rolling "demonstrates the absurdity of the claim that Mr. Nixon is a helpless victim of the networks." 99 This was a telling point,

*[It is ironic that in both the 1952 and 1974 appearances,Nixon ran out of his alloted time.The other notable similarity is that on both occasions he lied to the American people. Of course, this was nothing new for Mr. Nixon]

Nixon is a helpless victim of the networks." This was a telling point, coming only three weeks after Nixon's tirade against television's "outrageous, hysterical, vicious,...distorted,frantic reporting."[100]

In defense of the former President, it should be noted that he was not the first Chief Executive to question himself. Back in the days of written questions, Calvin Coolidge received twelve index cards, all bearing the same question:Would he be a candidate in 1928? He silently examined cards one through eleven,and put them aside without comment. He glanced at the twelfth card and said,"I have here a question on the condition of the children in Poland.The condition of the children in Poland is as follows...." After speaking for several minutes on that pressing matter, he said,"that's all the questions."[101]

Nor was Nixon the first President to tinker with the means of ending a press conference.

Merriman Smith, senior White House correspondent for United Press, had been dean of the press corps for a number of years."Crusty,sarcastic, devious,intelligent,honest,fair-minded,"[102] the man called "Smitty" was a fixture on the Presidential landscape for thirty years--and an unofficial indicator that Presidential happenings are afott. Spotting him at Hyannis Port the morning after his narrow victory in 1960, John F. Kennedy remarked, "Well,Smitty,if you're here I guess I really won."[103] Later he introduced him to Jaqueline, telling her:"This is Merriman Smith.He comes with the White House."[104]

Smith was not only respected by all; he had served on the White House beat longer than anyone else. Thus, he was accorded the dual rights of asking the first question at a press conference and also of signalling the close.

There is good sense in opening the press conference with the wires. Because their clientele is world-wide, they can be relied upon to pose the day's most important question, and in the concise style for which the wire services are noted.[106] The problems of provincialism (a reporter asking about an obscure Corps of Engineers dam, or a Federal judgeship in the hinterlands) or loquasiousness are not presented by these reporters.

The rationale for their right to end the conference appears to be grounded more in custom than logic. Clearly, someone has to call the affair to a halt;apparently, that function had fallen to the senior wire service reporter among those gathered around FDR. He and Truman both assiduously honored the custom. By 1953, the phrase "Thank You, Mr President" was recognized everywhere as the signal that another Presidential press conference had been concluded. Everywhere, that is , but in the Oval Office.

President Eisenhower(who always called Smith,"Miriman")[106] had mentioned in the course of his opening statement at his first press conference that he would have to leave after thirty minutes for another appointment.[The Washington Post's Eddie Folliard later reported that Ike's "important engagement" was with the Inaugural Committee,from whom he was to receive a medal.[107]] Precisely thirty-three minutes after Ike began his twenty minute talk, he"took care of Dean Merriman Smith's duties by simply saying a friendly good-bye and walking out."[108] Whether unwittingly or not--and it was most likely the former-- Ike had abrogated a cherished prerogative by ending the conference before the traditional call of "Thank You,Mr. President!" from Smith. To some, this "symbolized...infringements of rights to which they felt entitled."[109]

Oddly, Arthur Krock, a man locked into traditional ways, found that

the "only possible casualty of the self-terminating agreement will be wounded vanity."[110] This depracatory reference to Smith is doubly strange, for Krock once termed his right to end the press conference,"inviolable." One columnist, John O"Donnell of the New York News, went so far as to praise Eisenhower for opening and ending the conference on time.[111]

Smith was determined to capture his privilege, honored by both Roosevelt and Truman. During a lull in Eisenhower's next conference, he suddenly called out the familiar line, sending the reporters dashing for the phones. As they ran, the good-natured Ike's eyebrows "momentarily shot up in surprise and he threw back his head and laughed."[112] Smith was happy, Ike was happy, and all was well with the world.

John F. Kennedy was once Merriman Smith's colleague;[113] he certainly was well aware of the veteran newsman's attachment to his privilege. He was also aware that Smith had exercised his prerogative--and annoyed his colleagues--by ending a meeting in the early spring of 1962 after only twenty-five minutes. Thus, when "Smitty" arose exactly thirty minutes into the press conference of June 7,1962, shouted his thanks and bolted for the door(The AP's Whitney Shoemaker hot on his heels), Kennedy exercised his Presidential authority. His finger levelled at another reporter, JFK cooly informed Smith,"I have one more." Applause and laughter rand out as Smith and Shoemaker sheepishly returned to their seats--applause which quickly shifted focus. Asked a thorny question about a "serious disagreement" in New York City politics,Kennedy laughed and ruefully remarked,"Mr. Smith was right,as usual!" Again, laughter echoed from the chambers of the State Department auditorium.

Kennedy took no further chances. After answering the question, he ended the conference himself by "walking swiftly from the podium."[114]

Gerald Ford and the AP's Fran Lewine recently demonstrated the modern version of the Kennedy-Smith tango;it was more refined,but every bit as humorous. The wire service reporters no longer need dash madly to file their bulletins;the AP's Frank Cormier told me that live television enables the bureaus to transmit directly and almost instantaneously from the main office.[115] Thus, when Lewine sang out her thanks at the press conference of May 26,1975, she barely stirred in her chair--and watched as the President recognized another reporter. Again, she called out--but the reporter had a follow-up question(on the President's policy towards Federal Housing Authority loans). Laughter,that had greeted her two failed attempts, intensified as she proved that there's charm in triads. "Thank you very,very much" she said, rising gratefully from her front row seat.

"To add to the dignity of the conference," the New York Times declared in 1961, "its closing should be entirely under the President's control, not that of anyone in the audience."[116] That might be a worthy idea--if the President were pledged to remain for at least thirty minutes. Otherwise, it is an open invitation for extremely abbreviated sessions, as the President proves the power of running away from problems. Anyway, it's more fun the way it is.

By his nature and conduct, President Harry S Truman delayed the technological growth of the press conference. Truman's frankness, sincerity and possibly even his Army training "induced him to answer all questions very rapidly." Rather than pause even momentarily, Truman replied instantaneously; this quickness sometimes led him into trouble. As Professor A.L. Lorenz notes, "his quickness and his seeming inability to articulate his thoughts led him, on occasion, to put his foot in his mouth...(with) sever repercussions." Truman was assailed frequently for "speaking too impulsively, without sufficient reflection on the consequence of his words." 117

His reputation for rapidfire replies buttressed the arguments of those who warned against live broadcasts of Presidential press conferences. The strongest ofthose arguments was that the slip of a President's tongue could easily cause serious international reverberations. Truman often proved the validity of that claim by making serious blunders; opponents of live electronic media coverage contend that the harm from his bungles would have been magnified a hundredfold had they been beamed into the world's living rooms.

The most serious crisis ever engendered by a Presidential press conference was Truman's assertion that use of the atomic bomb in Korea was "always under consideration." Yet a careful analysis of the process by which the hair-raising headlines were produced indicates that the uproar would have been lessened, not intensified, by electronic media coverage. That news conference, minutely detailed by John Hersey, has often been cited as the prime example of why live television coverage is a risky affair. As I will explain later, I believe that judgment to be inaccurate.

Two days before President Truman's meeting with the press on November

30,1950, Chinese intervention in the Korean War became an undeniable fact. The National Security Council and Cabinet were both convened; a decision was made that the best way to address the situation was for the President to issue an opening statement at his Thursday news conference. It was drafted by Ambassador at Large Phillip C. Jessup, inconsultation with members of Truman's staff. At no time in the discussion or writing of the statement was use of the atomic bomb mentioned or considered.[18]

As read by the President, the statement pledged "concentrated action to halt this aggression" in Korea, as the United States and the United Nations "intensif(ied) (their_ efforts to help other free nations....(and to) increase our own strength." It was a restrained statement, lacking the rhetorical flourishes of a Churchill or Roosevelt call to battle;it also lacked much newsworthiness.

After some relatively unproductive inquiries(Truman voiced his support for General Douglas MacArthur, and gave no comment on whether United Nations troops might be allowed to bomb beyond the Manchurian border) and inconsequential banter(at a lull in the questioning Truman asked the whole room, "Well,what's the matter with you?"), the President said that the government would take whatever steps were necessary to meet the military situation.

New York Daily News reporter Jack Doherty inquired,"Will that include the atomic bomb?" The President said it would include every weapon the United States had. He was then pressed for clarification;did he mean there was "active consideration" of the use of the atomic bomb? As often happens in press conferences, Truman answered in the language of the questioner. Yes,he said,there has always been active consideration. A moment later UP's Merriman Smith asked if they could "retrace that reference to the atomic bomb." Did reporters understand him clearly that its use was "under active

consideration?" This time the President did not repeat the phraseology, but again used the crucial word of his previous answer--"always."

New York Timesman Anthony Leverio asked the President if his answers on this matter could be quoted directly;Truman unwisely said he didn't believe that was necessary. After a few more minutes of desultory questioning, the conference ended. Reporters dashed to their phones to dictate the stories that would alarm the world.

At 10:47a.m., just thirteen minutes after the start of the conference, United Press sent the following bulletin:

> wa10a Washington Nov. 30 (UP) -- President Truman said today that the United States has under consideration use of the atomic bomb in connection with the war in Korea.

A minute later, this bulleting moved on the Associated Press wire:

> a127wx Washington Nov.30 (AP)--President Truman said today active consideration is being given to use of the atomic bomb against the Chinese Communists if that step is necessary.

The explanation that the President's remarks were not included in his opening statement was not given until five minutes and seventeen sentances later. While Press Secretary Charles Ross was attempting to dissuade the White House correspondents from implying that atomic warfare was considered because of the Chinese intervention, an even more distressing message came over the AP ticker."Use of the atomic bomb in Korea has always been under consideration," the AP reported Truman as saying,and its use is "up to American military commanders in the field."

Afternoon newspapers emblazoned with scare headlines had begun to appear as Ross(who was to die at his desk of a coronary oclusion five days later) explained that the Atomic Energy Act of 1946 gave the President sole authority to order use of atomic devices. Furthermore,there was most certainly not any new consideration of such a directive. But the damage had been done,

and "every New York afternoon paper" carried "immense front page headlines" saying that Truman might use the A-Bomb--"as if it might happen at any moment."

News reached London about five o'clock that afternoon, while the House of Commons was in the midst of a two-hour debate on foreign policy. Whispers soon flew along the benches that "Truman had said MacArthur could use the atomic bomb any time he wanted to." A petition was quickly circulated, declaring that if Prime Minister Clement Atlee endorsed the President's action, the signatories would be unable to support his government. More than a hundred Members, including Labor Party Chairman Alice Bacon, signed the petition. "Then I shall have to go to Washington to see the President," Atlee said. His travel plans were unanimously approved at an eight minute emergency meeting a short while later. The announcement of his trip was cheered by the Commons. As the Parisian paper Franc-Tireur editorialized the next day, "Thus, a bad, false story has produced the best of true stories." But, as Hersey points out, "that was about all the good that came of it."

It was not notable at the time, but there was one other distinct boon from this episode, which accrued to those opponents of radio and television coverage of Presidential press conferences. This, they claim, is the ultimate demonstration of why live electronic media coverage should never be permitted. I find their case to be deficient on two grounds.

The President's opening statement "contained nothing that a hard-boiled city-desk man would consider news," noted professional newsman Hersey. "So when the President...told the reporters to ask questions, they got ready to do some news manufacturing." In live televised press conferences almost anything the President says is news; had this conference been on