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Who needs the daily press briefing?

Ending it would be good for everyone, except the president

by JOSHUA SPIVAK

After another rough news week, President Trump suggested last Friday that he may cancel the daily White House press briefing. Although the comment caused some uproar, this appears to be another off-the-cuff remark that will later be abandoned. But the public shouldn't be so quick to dismiss the idea. Ending the daily briefing would bring real benefits to the country, and the only person who would really lose is the president.

Every new administration complains that the daily briefing is a charade that allows the media to batter the White House's policy. Yet no matter how badly the press secretary is doing, no president has gone so far as to cancel it. The reason is that the briefing is a powerful weapon against the opposition and Congress.

Over the course of the past century, as the presidency has become more powerful, the White House has gained a strong hand in guiding the news to whatever subject the administration wants discussed. Official press conferences have always been tightly controlled. Jody Powell, President Jimmy Carter's press secretary in the days before the briefing was televised, once noted that he could break up a tense situation by calling on a reporter who would be guaranteed to change the subject.

That tactic no longer works so well now that the briefing has become a live TV event, but it remains a great tool. Every day the White House has a chance to monopolize the media's attention. Journalists mug for the cameras and try to ask tough questions. The public often assumes that whatever comes out of the press secretary's mouth is official policy.

Since Mr. Trump is willing to serve as his own unfiltered spokesman, giving interviews and pecking out late-night tweets, he doesn't need the briefing to inform the world about the ever-changing presidential agenda. But the briefing still offers the White House a chance to control the political conversation and play out its chosen narrative: that unfair reporters are trying to bully an administration they don't like.

What's in it for the press? Under Mr. Trump the briefings have become ratings dynamite, as journalists try to one-up each other and catch the White House in any contradiction. Still, there's no reason the media should make them such major events. The big stories aren't going to be broken in the briefing room, through an official statement or at a scheduled time. Instead of being stuck for an hour trying to ask a single pointed question to a harried and seemingly ill-informed spokesman, the White House press corps would be better off going out and looking for stories.

That, however, would be a much worse outcome for the administration. If Mr. Trump ended the daily briefing, the announcement would be followed by a storm of criticism about the White House's insularity and paranoia. But in reality the president would be shooting himself in the foot. Right now, the briefing serves red meat for political partisans and guarantees a high-profile story each day to crowd out newsworthy competitors.

For the country as a whole, ending the briefing would be a positive step. It would help break the public's presidential obsession and free the press corps to pursue other stories. Without the distraction of a daily performance by the press secretary, Americans might learn more about what's happening in Washington beyond the briefing room.

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