

Eye on Washington by Nicholas F. Benton

Everyone was here except Reagan

It was "Presidents Day" in the nation's capital Nov. 21. It was one of those rare occasions when every living President, past and future, was in front of the media on the same day in the same town. Everyone that is, but our current President, who was in California dedicating his new library.

First, President-elect George Bush held a press conference to announce three new appointments. Next, former Presidents Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter held a joint press conference to offer advice to the President-elect. Finally, former President Richard Nixon met with Dan Quayle to give his advice, pausing to have his picture taken outside the transition team offices.

Bush began the day with one of what became three hastily called, impromptu press conferences in less than a week, all held in the Old Executive Office Building adjacent the White House, to announce new appointments.

In each of the press conferences, Bush took questions from reporters. With the White House press corps excited that this kind of frequent, direct access might become the norm for the new President, Bush bragged about making decisions on key posts in his new administration faster than any President-elect in recent history.

On Nov. 21, one of the questions to Bush came from this reporter, who asked whether the new President would

find a proposal from Soviet leader Gorbachov to cut conventional forces in Europe a "way out" of his bind to trim the federal budget deficit without raising taxes. Speculation abounds, I noted to Bush, that Gorbachov will be coming to the U.S. in December feeling he can "make you an offer you can't refuse," given the pressure on the new administration to take swift action on the deficit.

"By proposing a reduction in conventional forces in Europe, Gorbachov may think he will permit you to cut the defense budget as a way of lowering the deficit without raising taxes," I pointed out.

Bush gave a lengthy response to my question, but failed to address its substance. He said only that there would be "no decisions on specifics" at the December meeting with Gorbachov. Specifics, he said, would not be considered until after Inauguration Day, Jan. 20, after he has had a chance to thoroughly review policy in arms control, and come up with his own ideas.

At his next press conference, however, Bush indicated that conventional arms reduction was "one of the first areas where progress in arms control might come." The comment was generally overlooked, but, ominously, it tended to confirm the speculation I alluded to in my question two days earlier.

Ironically, it was the kind of blasé attitude on arms control exhibited by Bush that Bush's newly announced National Security Adviser designate, Brent Scowcroft, told me last month would result in disaster.

Carter and Ford: a 'united front'

Former Presidents Ford and Carter made their appearance at the National

Press Club after they met with Bush. It was remarkable to see these two men, who contended against each other for the presidency in 1976, in such total agreement.

They formed themselves, so to speak, into a "united front" to help drive home the urgent necessity of swift action on lowering the federal budget deficit. They acted in total concert, coming to each other's aid to help answer tough questions. It was a rare experience.

Things have not exactly been rosy in the 1980s, but these two men put together were living relics of the nadir that U.S. politics had reached a decade ago. Now, they were bonded together by a common, if futile, effort to resist their inevitable obscurity, and to be rehabilitated just long enough to put forth just one more catalogue of policy proposals for the new administration.

They did nothing to redeem their role in history. If anything, they only revealed their common political pedigree that they tried to conceal, against the charges of others who ran against them both, in 1976. They both came across as pliable mouthpieces for those who have been loudly, and monotonously, pounding the drums to force Bush to change his tax policy since election day.

Like actors that have been out of work too long, Ford and Carter were like former stars now willing to do dog food commercials.

Nixon did not fare much better in his media appearance, a few blocks away at the transition team offices adjacent Lafayette Square. At least in his case, Nixon did not hold forth for the press, except to allow his picture to be taken greeting Quayle at the door. He sounded the same chord as Ford and Carter. "Don't be a captive of the conservatives," Nixon cautioned the Vice President-elect.