

Nixon Critics Complain Of Rejected Telegrams

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Several people complained to The New York Times this week that Western Union operators refused to accept telegrams addressed to President Nixon that were sharply critical of his Cambodian policy.

One man said he got three words into his message—which began, “Your bum lies . . .”—when the operator cut in and said, “I am sorry sir, you can’t say that. If you have constructive criticism to offer, okay. But why not send a letter instead?” He persisted, and after the operator consulted her supervisor, the telegram was accepted.

A spokesman for Western Union said the company had rules and regulations regarding profanity and obscenity in telegrams, in compliance with regulations of the Federal Communications Commission. But he added that operators were instructed not to accept libelous or slanderous language. Words are accepted, he said, according to “prevailing language standards.”

Judgment Is Personal

Each operator must exercise personal judgment in these matters, the spokesman said, “but what seems obscene, profane or slanderous to one person might be quite acceptable to another.”

An official reached by telephone at the F.C.C. said that the regulatory agency was not aware of any recent complaints against Western Union for refusing strongly worded telegrams to the President. “What is obscene these days, anyway?” he said. “Western Union plays it by ear.”

Another caller to this paper, who identified himself as a rabbi, charged that Western Union operators had been instructed not to accept certain

words in telegrams to the White House, such as “lie.” The company and the F.C.C. both denied this, saying that there has never been a glossary of taboo words in company history.

The Western Union rule book states that messages on controversial issues addressed to public figures may be vituperative without being defamatory under the law, and “sound judgment and circumspection should be exercised in passing on the acceptance of such messages.”

Another Is Accepted

If in doubt, the rule book says, “refer the matter to your supervisor for instructions.” There are 1,007 Western Union employees in New York City who deal directly with the public in accepting telegrams.

The telegram that was not at first accepted read, “Your bum lies about Cambodia murdered Kent four. End war now.” A similar telegram was sent by a friend of the man who complained. It read, “Your perverted and obscene lying will lead us all to slaughter. End war now.” It was accepted without demurral.

Less than two months ago thirteen members of the Rockaway Park chapter of the American Jewish Congress charged Western Union with “deliberate deception” when individual telegrams sent to Albany supporting repeal of abortion laws were changed to urge defeat of the reform. Western Union apologized, saying it was “apparently an honest mistake.”

The White House has not released any exact figures on the number of telegrams, pro and con, concerning the Cambodian issue. It has stated, however, that more telegrams were favorable than not.