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PAGE A18

## What the Attorney General Said

In our letters space on Sunday we printed a long and welcome communication from the Deputy Attorney General, Richard G. Kleindienst, correcting an erroneous quotation of the Attorney General that had appeared in *The Washington Post* the week before. The reasons for the letter's being both long and—to us—welcome should be self-evident: it takes some space to set these things straight once they have been confused, and—contrary to a certain line of thought that is being peddled up and down the land at the moment—we have no desire whatever to misquote, mistreat or misrepresent those members of this administration of whose actions we often strenuously disapprove in our editorial columns. So *The Post* acknowledges and regrets factual error. Our reporter misheard Mr. Mitchell to say that citizens who feel threatened by the current wave of violence in the country "might have to resort to vigilante tactics," when what in fact he said was that such citizens in time "might feel they would have to." There is all the difference in the world there, the difference between advocacy and observation—and a cautionary observation, at that.

If you read Mr. Kleindienst's letter, you will be aware of the degree of outrage that can be legitimately provoked by a misrepresentation of this kind, even when the error is inadvertent, since Mr. Mitchell's seeming espousal of vigilante tactics at once—and understandably—set the political commentators to raising merry hell. Now, hopefully, that has been set straight. But what Mr. Mitchell and his deputy should understand is that their own outrage may be worth a moment's pondering on their part and worth a moment's effort to understand the outrage of those who are deliberately (not inadvertently) put into this kind of position and who cannot count on having error acknowledged or the record made right.

For Mr. Mitchell's statement, correctly transcribed, was a good and valuable statement and—in the present atmosphere—a vulnerable one pre-

cisely because of that. The Attorney General, that is, undertook one of the riskiest feats in domestic politics today: he tried to explain what was driving a group of citizens to possibly violent action and what was required of our institutions to keep them from taking this step. He deplored the possibility but warned that it *was* a possibility because of the way people were feeling and because of the manner in which their institutions might let them down. Such analysis is as dangerous as it is necessary these days—necessary to any shred of understanding that is to be preserved between the distraught and warring segments of our society, and dangerous because there is always someone ready to pick up such statements and transform them from efforts at explaining into war cries, or into evidence of sympathy with the behavior at issue, or into "permissiveness" toward some unacceptable acts.

Four years ago, Hubert Humphrey tried to tell an audience in Louisiana what the impulse was behind urban black violence that summer, what was required of us as a political community to prevent its recurrence, what his own position was on the violence itself ("I don't want to be misunderstood . . . I not only deplore violence, I say it cannot be condoned."). But, minus the last of these points, his statement is still being flung around by Republican spokesmen as evidence of his advocacy of the very thing he was hoping to explain and warn against. He is not alone among those politicians and public officials who this year are being devilled on this count. Mr. Humphrey's statement was lavish (in his style); Mr. Mitchell's statement was spare (in his style); both—and a host of others in a similar vein—deserved to be taken straight and without malice or mischief. Given the strained and terrible state of our political discourse at the moment, the misquoting and/or misconstruing game is one we want no part of and for which we have only contempt. That is why we so genuinely regret that we became—even briefly and inadvertently—part of it at all.



**“Dear, Did He Say Which Candidates Are FOR  
Bombing, Burning, Rioting And Mugging?”**

