

New Controversy With Some in Press Stirred by Nixon 'Tap,' Slap' or 'Pat'

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MIAMI, Nov. 19—President Nixon slapped or patted a man on the face Saturday night, it was disclosed today, stirring a new controversy between the White House and some segments of the press.

Mr. Nixon was saying good-bye to a small group of well-wishers at McCoy Air Base near Orlando, Fla., after his question-and-answer session with a group of newspaper executives, when the incident occurred. It was dismissed as inconsequential by the pool reporters who witnessed it.

But word of the incident circulated through the White House press corps last night. While most reporters considered the incident too trivial or the description of it too ambiguous to report, correspondents of The Wall Street Journal, The St. Louis Post-Dispatch and The Daily News of New York wrote about it.

When White House officials learned of their dispatches this morning, they were enraged, describing the articles privately as an attempt to give a false picture of Mr. Nixon's mental health.

'Rumor and Gossip'

After a day in which a fairly complete account of the episode was pieced together, the White House this evening issued the following statement:

"Some members of the White House press corps, solely on the basis of rumor and gossip, distorted a friendly gesture, in which the President patted a man on the face, into a 'slap-in incident.'"

"The White House feels compelled to condemn this unethical and unprofessional reporting. This is an example of irresponsible and twisted accounts which have been circulated in recent months, without adequate substantiation and which create false impressions concerning the President of the United States.

"The motives of those who

generated the rumors and those who wrote these stories can only be explained by the reporters involved."

Pool Reporters' Account

William J. Eaton of The Chicago Daily News and Matthew Cooney of the Westinghouse Broadcasting Corporation, two of the pool reporters representing their colleagues at the time of the incident, gave the following account of it:

Mr. Nixon approached a short, baldish man—Air Force M. Sgt. Edward Kleizo, 50 years old—who was standing beside a fence with his son, John, 7. With the bright floodlights in his eyes, the President's vision was apparently obscured.

In any event, he asked Sergeant Kleizo whether he was the boy's mother or grandmother.

No Anger Reported

"Neither," the sergeant replied. The President craned his neck for another look and then said, "Of course not" and delivered what Mr. Eaton and Mr. Cooney, standing about five feet away, described as "a light slap" to sergeant Kleizo's face. They clearly heard the noise, and said that the "slap" had the velocity that a man might use in vigorously applying after-shave lotion to his own face.

According to the reporters, Mr. Nixon appeared slightly flustered by his mistake, but not angry or disturbed. The President went on down the line of spectators and a few moments later posed for pictures with a baby, then boarded his jet aircraft.

Because of the rush, the re-

porters did not get the man's name. By the time he was identified this afternoon and tracked down, the details of the episode were somewhat hazy in the sergeant's mind, but he was sure the President meant him no harm.

Sergeant Kleizo, a staunch Nixon supporter, said by telephone that "It was a friendly gesture." He compared it with "a pat on the back you give a basketball player who made a basket."

'The Greatest Honor'

Like thousands of other people who have been touched by their heroes, the sergeant said he was not going to wash the spot where the President had touched him. Talking to Mr. Eaton on Saturday night, he had used the word "slapped," but today he insisted that "tapped" was more accurate.

Sergeant Kleizo, who was originally from Maspeth, Queens, said he had not been briefed or coached by Air Force or White House officials. Asked repeatedly whether there had been any anger in Mr. Nixon's face, he answered:

"Oh, no, at no time whatsoever, no way, impossible."

He said that merely to shake hands with Mr. Nixon would have been a great honor but that the "tap" on the face from Mr. Nixon constituted "the greatest honor that I've ever had."

Gerald L. Warren, the White House deputy press secretary, said that Mr. Nixon's action had been "just an affectionate gesture, maybe a little embarrassed, like a tap on the arm or perhaps a chuck under the chin."



Associated Press

M. Sgt. Edward Kleizo of the Air Force posing with Marjorie Franklin, 7 months, and President Nixon Saturday night at McCoy Air Force Base in Orlando, Fla. Mr. Nixon held the baby just after he slapped or patted Sergeant Kleizo.