

Columnist's Reply on Phone Bugs

By Jack Anderson

I have received a number of letters from editors about my recent column about the governors' "bugged" telephones. Although most comments were favorable, editors may be interested in the critical analysis of the Washington Post's Richard Harwood. Here are the excerpts relating to the column, followed by my response:

"... Back on the comic page last Tuesday (Nov. 17) the Washington Post carried a column by Jack Anderson under a headline that read: 'Most of Governors' Offices Bugged.' The column reported that all governors have 'hot-line' phones that enable them and federal civil defense authorities to communicate in times of national crisis, that 'most' of these phones are 'bugged,' and that the alleged culprit may be either the CIA or the FBI. The column seemed to be based on information supplied by Governor Marvin Mandel of Maryland.

"It caused something of a stir in the newsrooms of The Post and The Baltimore Sun and led to lengthy stories, some of them on Page 1. As it turned out, no evidence came to light that any governor's phone was 'bugged,' Mandel's included.

"On that evidence one can only conclude that the Anderson column made much out of little or nothing, that it then became the subject of a great

volume of 'news,' that the implication that the federal government was eavesdropping on 'most American governors' (or on any of them) was false, and that the newspapers in this case constructed a larger view than the facts at hand would support. . . ."

Anderson's Rejoinder

Here is my response to The Washington Post:

"Richard Harwood's critiques of the press, pointing out the errors of our ways, have been a worthwhile contribution to good journalism.

"He said newsmen often rush into print half-cocked. He cited various examples, including my story about the governors' 'bugged' telephones.

"The column seemed to be based," he wrote, on information supplied by Governor Marvin Mandel of Maryland. The suggestion that I spoke only to Governor Mandel is wrong.

"Harwood concluded that, although six governors' phones had been 'wired improperly,' none of the phones apparently had been bugged. He may be right. He may also be wrong.

"The best way to avoid errors, I have found, is to talk to people before writing about them. I would have been pleased to discuss my reporting of the telephone story with Harwood if he had cared to check with me.

"The column in question il-

lustrates how difficult it is to break sensitive stories. Much of the information, which now provides Harwood with such excellent hindsight, was withheld from me by the same sources who later made the information public.

"I spent about three weeks checking the story. I talked to three electronic experts familiar with eavesdropping techniques. I called upon Governor Mandel who, at my request, permitted me to listen for myself to conversations picked up by the emergency phone in his office.

"The telephone company spokesman refused any comment, but declared all information would have to come from the customers.

"After my column reached the desks of more than 600 editors, the telephone company began issuing statements all over the country. In Delaware, for example, a spokesman said Governor Russell Peterson's emergency phone had been checked and nothing amiss had been found. This statement was quietly retracted after the company learned that Peterson's phone had been checked by an independent expert who had found it was transmitting every word spoken in the governor's office.

"Governor Mandel told me a telephone company representative had advised him that the emergency phones in 48 governors' offices were all wired identically. The White House,

in response to my inquiries, said only 30 governors were linked by the emergency system.

"After my column hit the headlines, telephone officials apologized for refusing to comment earlier and invited me to their offices for a 90 minute briefing. They presented a persuasive case that the conversations picked up by the mis-wired phones couldn't have gone beyond the state houses.

"Yet an independent expert still insists that the conversations could have been intercepted anywhere on the network; also that anyone familiar enough with the technology to wire a telephone could not have turned the governors' phones into transmitters by mistake.

"Meanwhile, the telephone company conducted its own inspection of the governors' emergency phones. With all respect, this was a bit like the fox inspecting the chicken coop. It is noteworthy, at least, that the only two phones checked by outside experts were found to be mis-wired. The telephone company, in acknowledging that six governors had mis-wired phones, also confessed to a startlingly high rate of error.

"Of course, Harwood is entitled to accept the telephone company's version, just as I should be entitled to be suspicious."