

Post Misquoted Mitchell

The Washington Post misquoted Attorney General John N. Mitchell in his Indianapolis speech earlier this month. The misquotation produced a distortion of the Attorney General's comments on vigilantes.

In a front-page story Oct. 17, The Washington Post quoted the Attorney General as saying that citizens "might have to resort to vigilante tactics."

In a letter to The Post today, Deputy Attorney General Richard G. Kleindienst reports that an audio tape of the speech reveals Mitchell said things could reach a point where:

"... citizens outside of government might feel they would have to resort to vigilante tactics ..."

The Kleindienst letter is on Page B7.

The Washington Post regrets the error.

0/25/78

An Incorrect Quotation of the Attorney General

Of all the news media which reported the Attorney General's recent comments about vigilantes, only The Washington Post misquoted him, and it did so prominently on the front page. Thereafter, the incorrect quotation was repeated as the subject of a column by Nicholas von Hoffman, and the next day as the subject of a cartoon by Herblock. I seldom write a letter to the editor, but in view of this triple exposure of an erroneous report, I trust you will agree the record should be corrected publicly.

What the Attorney General said was that things could reach a point where:

"... citizens outside of government might feel they would have to resort to the vigilante tactics that have been in this country years and years ago. It is not recommended. We hope they will never come to that, but this is the only possible danger that I can see from the ongoing activities of these groups." (Italics mine).

These words were correctly carried by the Associated Press and are confirmed by the audio tape. However, The Washington Post reporter quoted the Attorney General as saying that citizens "might have to resort to vigilante tactics." (Italics mine).

For an Attorney General to acknowledge, or to believe, that there could be circumstances under which citizens "might have to resort to vigilante tactics" is, of course, unthinkable. He does not believe it, he would not say it, and he did not say it. On the other hand, the possibility that citizens might feel they have to resort to such tactics is a possibility which should concern all of us very deeply, particularly those who would condone lawlessness and violence.

I trust you will agree that the misquotation by your reporter seriously misrepresents the entire thrust and tone of what he said. In contrast to The Post's approach, for example, both the Indianapolis News and Star, which were on the scene, found the

correct quotation so innocuous that their headlines and lead paragraphs emphasized an entirely different aspect of the news conference. The New York Times gave the correct quotation only passing reference, and the UPI dispatch mentioned it only briefly.

It will be difficult for this letter to overcome the damage done by your report, particularly when compounded by the Post's one-two punch of von Hoffman and Herblock. Under the circumstances, I respectfully request that you print the full text of this letter, including the relevant questions and replies of the Attorney General, transcribed from the audio tape as follows:

Q: Some people in the more liberal side of the political spectrum are concerned about the growing emphasis on police powers, for instance, the new no-knock clause that has been talked about in Congress. Is there a danger of swinging too far in the direction of police action in this country?

A: Not in my opinion. There will not be the danger of swinging too far in governmental action because we have a Constitution and courts to control those activities. If there be any danger, it might be that the society itself might take it upon itself to defend itself against some of these attacks. That would be an area of danger that I do not see at the present time but could possibly come about.

Q: What would cause that to come about—just continuation of the bombings and hijackings and things like this?

A: Yes—to the point where the citizens outside of government might feel they would have to resort to vigilante tactics that have been in this country years and years ago. It is not recommended. We hope it will never come to that, but this is the only possible danger that I can see from the ongoing activities of these groups.

RICHARD G. KLEINDIENST,

Deputy Attorney General.

Washington.