

## Loose talk from an old lawyer

One night in the privacy of the Oval Office John Kennedy was asked how come he called the big steel men who had raised their prices SOB's. Wasn't that kind of angry candor a luxury that Presidents could not allow themselves?

"Yes," said Kennedy, getting that far-away look. "It was not very wise. But it felt so good."

Somewhat the same emotion probably possessed Richard Nixon in Denver last week when he said quite clearly and bluntly that Charles Manson was guilty, directly or indirectly, of eight murders. It was a statement that bubbled to the surface from deep down inside the man, not a particularly wise thing to say just then but perhaps understandable for one who had spent nine days in southern California and been

assaulted every morning with a larger-than-life account of Charlie Manson's singular family.

At least as disturbing as the President's verbal carelessness was the anguished effort by Press Secretary Ron Ziegler to change the public record without confessing that Nixon had made a simple misstatement. The effect of the President's blunder was, of course, direct and immediate because of the delicate legal situation, and his embarrassment acute, particularly since he stood among law-and-order officials to make his pronouncement. But how much better a brief correction would have been than Ziegler's contorted prose and Nixon's subsequent midnight support of his press secretary, composed while his airplane circled Washington. All the old problems of credibility loomed again.

It is odd how similarly the men who occupy the White House handle their anger. Something begins to gnaw at them and their first instinct is one of caution. They raise their irritation first with a few trusted aides. If nobody protests too much they bring it nearer the surface, trying it on the next level of friends and staff. Then, if it still survives, they start talking about it in public. Both Kennedy and Johnson escalated their rhetoric in this fashion. Looking back now there were hints around the San Clemente White House that the men were disturbed about the stories of the Manson trial, a reflection of what was eating their boss.

The Denver incident demonstrated with far more force than ever before the double edge of electronic communication. Nixon has used controlled television with great success. But in this case, just as if it had been planned and edited and cleared, his mistake was instantly immortalized on tape and film and flashed 2,000 miles before anybody realized what happened. In the old days a correction (or clarification, as Ziegler painfully insisted it be called) could have been conveyed with considerable effect to the pencil reporters long before the original remark reached print. But not now, not in front of the unforgiving eye.

Certain levels of this Administration have been displaying a contempt for language for some time now. The Nixon speechwriters, to be sure, have pleaded quite the opposite and some of the experienced hands have

urged care and artistry in public declarations. But among the newer men, those fresh from the business world or from college and including sometimes Nixon himself, who is uniquely under their spell, there is a tendency to dismiss words as another of the meaningless playgrounds of the Eastern effete snobbery. Several years ago Nixon did say "politics is poetry," and some of his own carefully constructed speeches have approached that ideal. The Denver incident and others which preceded it, however, suggest an indifference to language. The President's remark that he would not be affected by the Vietnam moratorium marchers probably caused more harm than it was worth just then. Likewise, his reference to campus "bums," while profoundly honest, might have caused less stress and still conveyed his anger if slightly rephrased.

What happened in Denver gave unfortunate currency to John Mitchell's earlier advice to pay attention to what the Administration does and not what it says, although almost any student of world events could have pointed out that this isn't always easy. Even before the latest problem the more astute men around the White House, such as John Ehrlichman, were admitting the difficulty. One day while relaxing on the Western White House terrace with its view of the ocean, Ehrlichman confessed to columnist Nick Thimmesch that he had learned that what the Administration said was proving to be almost as important as what it did. These men could have saved themselves a lot of pain had they gone straight to Nixon's own 20th Century ideal, Winston Churchill, who operated on the theory that words very often were deeds.

Once again it was John Kennedy, who had a unique understanding of communications in this era, who put it into perspective. He could, he once declared, understand a President's power to dispatch nuclear weapons or to order troops into combat or to collect taxes. But he could not fully comprehend or anticipate the power of suggestion possessed by a President, the effect of words hurled electronically around the globe. A few sentences could change the tone or outlook of an entire people. That, said Kennedy, was his greatest power—and challenge. It is even more so today.

