

Nixon's Slip Follows Similar Ones

By Drew Pearson
and Jack Anderson

President Nixon, who prides himself on being more skillful at televised press conferences than any other President—and probably is—may have pulled a boo-boo comparable to Harry Truman's press conference mistake when HST said he might drop the atomic bomb in Korea.

This brought Prime Minister Clement Attlee flying across the Atlantic from London the next day. Likewise Nixon's staff has been rushing out statements ever since his press conference, denying that he meant what he said when he indicated that he'd developed a better approach to ending the war than his critics from the Johnson Administration, and that he hoped to bring American troops home faster than ex-Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford suggested.

All the President expressed was a "hope," Nixon's aides insist, not a promise of troop withdrawal.

However, the impact left on the public mind by the initial presidential statement is usually the one which lasts. And it's possible that this press conference will be a turning point for peace. In brief, Mr. Nixon is probably stuck with his remark in which he out-Clifforded Clark Clifford.

Specifically, here is what President Nixon said when asked about Clifford's sugges-

tion that 100,000 troops be pulled out of South Vietnam by the end of this year:

"I respect his judgment as a former Secretary of Defense. I would point out, however, that for five years in the Administration in which he was Secretary of Defense in the last part, we had a continued escalation of the war; we had 500,000 Americans in Vietnam; we had 35,000 killed; we had over 200,000 injured.

"And in addition to that, we found that in the year—the full year in which he was Secretary of Defense—our casualties were the highest of the whole five-year period. And as far as negotiations were concerned, all that had been accomplished—as I indicated earlier—was that we had agreed on the shape of the table.

"Now this is not to say that Mr. Clifford's present judgment is not to be considered because of the past record.

"It does indicate, however, that he did have a chance in this particular respect, and did not move on it then.

"I believe that we have changed that policy. We have started to withdraw forces. We will withdraw more. And another decision will be made in August. I will not indicate the number because the number will depend upon the extent of the training of the South Vietnamese, as well as developments in Paris, and the other factors that I have mentioned previously.

"As far as how many will be

withdrawn by the end of this year, by the end of next year, I would hope that we could beat Mr. Clifford's timetable, just as I think we've done a little better than he did when he was in charge of our national defense."

The immediate reaction to the President's statement was twofold:

1. His friends and aides gloated over the manner in which he had cut the ground out from under Clifford. They said it was such a neat piece of decapitation that the former Secretary of Defense wouldn't realize his head was cut off until he tried to turn it.

2. Every newspaper in the country the next day played up the President's expectation of bringing back more troops than Clifford proposed. The New York Times led with page one headlines, "President Hopes Pullout Will Top 200,000 Before '71."

It's learned from inside the White House that Mr. Nixon rehearsed his reply to Clark Clifford. He knew the question would be asked; in fact, White House aides had the question planted, and it was asked early in the press conference.

Therefore, it's obvious that Mr. Nixon deliberately planned to cut the political ground out from under Clifford. But the big question is, did he go too far?

Everyone from Senators to diplomats and from newsmen

to politicians has been debating that question. The chief worry in the White House is that Mr. Nixon cut the ground out not only from under Clifford but also his own negotiators in Paris, and that the North Vietnamese are not going to budge further toward concessions as long as they know Mr. Nixon is committed to massive troop withdrawals.

Only time can tell what will happen in Paris. However, it's pretty well agreed that President Nixon made a prodigious mistake.

His friends point out that other Presidents have also made mistakes, which is true. In addition to Mr. Truman's boner regarding the use of the atomic bomb in Korea, he also once got Yugoslavia mixed up with Czechoslovakia, and the White House had to issue a correction.

Then there was the very serious error made by President Harding when he got the Japanese-mandated islands of the Pacific mixed up with the Japanese home islands and the entire Washington treaty had to have a protocol added to clarify this point.

There were also small errors in Gen. Eisenhower's press conferences chiefly resulting from long, rambling sentences. The late President had a passion for prolixity.

But neither Eisenhower, Truman nor Johnson, it should be noted, considered himself a star on television.

© 1969, Bell-McClure Syndicate, Inc.