

Ministers Hit Use of Names By GOP Unit

11/3/72
By Marjorie Hyer
Washington Post Staff Writer

A hand-picked group of evangelical Protestant clergymen, invited to Washington yesterday for a "White House briefing and press luncheon," discovered to their dismay that their names were on a list given to the press under the letterhead, "Committee for the Re-election of the President."

While all of the clergymen personally support the re-election of President Nixon, about half the two dozen men present arose, one by one, to demand that their names be scratched from the list and disassociated from any organized political activity.

The clergymen had been invited by the Rev. Dr. Harold J. Ockenga, president of Gordon College and Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in Boston.

Dr. Ockenga was presiding at the luncheon when the Rev. Dr. John Bisagno, pastor of First Baptist Church in Houston, inquired about the purpose of the gathering.

"The telegram I got invited me to a press lunch and a White House briefing," he said. "Is the press to assume that our presence here has any implications beyond that?" he asked.

The issue was sharpened when a reporter pointed out that the list of luncheon guests bore the heading: "Committee for the Re-election of the President."

"I don't think any of us came here to be a part of any committee," said the Rev. Dr. Lester Harnish, pastor of the Third Baptist Church of St. Louis.

Dr. Ockenga replied that the gathering was "really just a single meeting to try to stimulate the articulation on your part" or support for President Nixon.

While all of the clergymen present indicated they would continue their personal support of the President, many were appalled at the prospect of a public political endorsement. Evangelical churchmen generally take this position.

Some of the clergymen indicated they would be in trouble with congregations back home if their presence were construed as a political endorsement.

"Because of my position in my church I would like my name removed," said the Rev. Dr. James Richard, pastor of the Evergreen Baptist Church in Oakland, Calif., and one of the four black pastors present.

"You read about clergymen being invited for White House briefings—I thought I was just being invited to a White House briefing," commented Dr. Bisango after the luncheon adjourned. He said he would issue further disclaimers of his political involvement when he returned home to Houston.

As he hurried the pastors out of the luncheon and off to the White House briefing, Dr. Ockenga acknowledged that he had asked the Committee For the Re-election of the President to handle public relations for the meeting.

Asked about financing of the luncheon and travel costs for the visiting clergymen, Dr. Ockenga said he believed "a good many of the men have paid their own cost of travel and if there are any who are unable to do so, they can apply to me."

Right to an inquiry in law suits?