

Washington: Making Things Worse Than They Are

By JAMES RESTON

WASHINGTON, Aug. 4—Ever since President Jefferson announced that Aaron Burr was guilty of treason in the Gen. James Wilkinson conspiracy case (he was later acquitted), Presidents of the United States have been in trouble over careless or ill-considered public remarks.

Accordingly, there is nothing particularly new about President Nixon's recent statement that Charles Manson, the gypsy cultist now on trial in California, "was guilty, directly or indirectly, of eight murders without reason."

Like former Attorney General Herbert Brownell, who got in trouble during the Eisenhower Administration for passing judgment in the Harry Dexter White case, Mr. Nixon merely talked before thinking, and is entitled to a presumption of innocence, which he later granted to Mr. Manson.

The News Conference

The incident raises, however, the old question of how to protect the President of the United States in these days of instant news from unintended and potentially damaging blunders during extemporaneous news conferences.

Every President since Herbert

Hoover has become increasingly casual or bold about talking to reporters. Mr. Hoover insisted on written questions at his news conferences; Franklin Roosevelt banned them at his first press conference, but insisted that his answers be reported in the third person. With the advent of television, news conferences were first taped in advance for release later, but Mr. Nixon has insisted on addressing the reporters "live" on TV and without notes.

He is a master of the art and the political advantages are obvious. He conveys the impression of controlling a wide range of complicated subjects and of facing his critics manfully under difficult and often dangerous conditions.

The President's Staff

But Presidents, like baseball pitchers, don't always hit the mark. Unlike Jefferson, who assured the Congress in writing that Aaron Burr's "guilt is placed beyond question," Mr. Nixon merely stumbled into the guilty charge against Manson and then hesitated about setting the record straight.

It is odd that a President, trained in the law, should have violated the elemental presumption of innocence, particularly during a lecture on the majesty of the legal process, but what

is even more surprising is why his staff did not protect him in time to keep the blunder from going out on the national television.

Attorney General Mitchell was at his side. He and other members of the President's official family realized what had happened, but either they hesitated to make it clear to the President in time or the President's instructions were not carried out accurately by Ronald L. Ziegler, the White House press secretary.

Accordingly, the correction was not made until four hours later when the Presidential plane got to Washington, and even then the big jet was circling Andrews Air Force Base to get the correction in order.

The interesting thing here is that the President's original charge of guilt was not going out on live network television. It was being taped for release later. Thus, the blunder could easily have been corrected before the damage was done. The question, therefore, is whether the staff was alert and confident enough to tell the President what had happened, and if so, why Ziegler came back with a mystifying "clarification."

The relations between a President and his staff are private,

and nobody can be quite sure whether Mr. Nixon's staff is timid or intimidated. It is certainly intelligent, but in this case something obviously slipped.

Why Not Later?

Beyond this, it is not quite clear why these Presidential news conferences cannot always be taped and checked for bloopers before they are released. After all, even the football games have instant replay, and even Congressmen have the right to revise and extend their remarks in the Congressional Record.

The trouble is in catching up with charges after they are made, even when corrected. Albert J. Beveridge, writing in *The Life of John Marshall*, says of Mr. Jefferson's charge against Burr:

"The awful charge of treason had now been formally made against Burr by the President of the United States. This . . . at once caught and held the attention of the public, which took for granted the truth of it . . ."

Mr. Nixon's slip, of course, is not comparable, but it was recoverable, and the odd thing was that the President and his staff were still trifling with it four hours after the accident.

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