

Press Scolded

To the Editor:

Granted that President Nixon's *gaffe* concerning the Manson trial was a serious, albeit human, mistake. Granted that his staff should have acted more quickly than they did to minimize the error.

However, it seems to me that the media representatives at the press conference share a major portion of the responsibility for blowing a minor error out of all proportion. Why did not a single reporter there immediately ask the President if he actually meant to say what he did and if he wished to clarify his remarks? Why was not Mr. Ziegler asked, immediately, the same questions?

It is obvious that reporters were more eager for headlines that would embarrass the President than they were interested in fair play either for Mr. Nixon or for Manson. Again Mr. Agnew is proved right

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Remarks on Manson

To the Editor:

Speculation about the President's remarks on the Manson case has thus far failed to produce an explanation that fits the facts. (News analysis, "Impulsive Nixon Action"; editorial, "Mr. Nixon's Loose Talk," Aug. 5.)

These are, principally, that the President, a lawyer, "did not betray concern, plunging ahead to criticize Manson's attorneys" and to call Manson himself guilty; that Attorney General Mitchell "standing to his right, also registered no emotion"; that fifteen minutes were allowed to pass before Mr. Ziegler's clarification; and that at no time has the President's remark been retracted.

There are additional facts: In the public mind "law and order," one of the Administration's leitmotifs, is not so much an abstract concept as a crusade against racial minorities and, significantly, unconforming youth.

The Administration's legislative program in this field, its record of prosecutions and its intelligence-gathering operations are products of an increasingly narrow definition of constitutional guarantees and are themselves attempts to institutionalize them.

There can be no doubt that

the middle American coalition upon which the President is staking his future has noted his remark with approval, and its reverence for due process and the like would be strained should a mistrial result or the state's case be lost on appeal.

Only one kind of conclusion really fits these facts: that the President's statement, far from being an "impulsive remark" or "loose talk," was a calculated political act, carefully orchestrated to permit maximum dissemination before a couple of weak clarifications put the professionals at ease, leaving the original remark intact.

Mr. Nixon once again has confounded his critics and gone over their heads to the country. He has only echoed popular wisdom, and there can be no political liability in that. What is more, he has set the stage for a series of legal maneuvers around the trial which can only serve to shorten this country's patience with due process itself.

It can no longer suffice to judge the Administration's actions by the conventional yardstick of Presidential politics. It is time we began to understand that the whole enterprise is being redefined by the White House, and that if we want to comprehend these actions we had better find out what the new goals are.

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New York, Aug. 5, 1970