

Editor's Report

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Headline turnabout

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NEW YORK — A funny thing happened to me and millions of other American newspaper readers this week. Tuesday afternoon and Wednesday morning we were confronted with headlines proclaiming that President Ford was considering a blanket pardon for all those accused in the Watergate scandals. Then, just 24 hours later, the headlines were reversed with White House denials that any such all-inclusive forgiveness had ever been contemplated.



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Actually, of course, there was nothing at all funny in this sudden flip-flop of sensational news. An instant national furor already had been created, apparently without solid foundation. As a newspaperman, proud of the profession and keenly aware of its responsibility to report factually, I was appalled that the whole news media—some-

how—had been led to disseminate a startling inaccuracy. How could it happen? For the answer I consulted the veteran assistant chief of our Washington Bureau, David Barnett, as astute and as capable an all-around newspaper-

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man as any in the business. The detail provided by Dave was a revealing example of just how a major mixup in the news can occur when the White House pressure cooker steams up to the point where nobody can see with full clarity.

Get the picture in this case. An atmosphere of great tension had been caused on Sunday by Ford's abrupt and controversial pardon of former President Nixon — a pardon I support, incidentally, as a humane act in behalf of a man whose greatest possible punishment was his forced resignation as leader of our great nation. Others disagree violently and all sorts of questions remain to be answered as a result of the Ford action.

Facing the White House reporters on Tuesday to answer some of those questions was a man previously untested as a presidential spokesman, Deputy Press Secretary John Hushen. What happened was summarized for me by Dave, backed by a transcript of the conference which — so far as I know — was not carried in any detail by a major news service. His run-down and the actual quotes give a fascinating, behind-the-scenes picture.

After several announcements and questions about other subjects, Hushen was asked about a news report that Mrs. John Dean, the wife of Nixon's former counsel and his chief Watergate accuser, felt her jailed husband deserved a pardon since the ex-president had been given one. It went like this:

Q — Mrs. Dean is now talking about a pardon for John Dean. What is the President's feeling about a pardon for any of the other people involved in the whole Watergate thing?

A — (by Hushen) — I am authorized to say that that entire matter is now under study.

Q — Can you give us a little more on that?

A — No.

There followed an estimated 15 minutes of fevered questioning attempting to elicit more information from Hushen. To their credit, the wire service reporters and others on deadline stayed in the briefing room purposefully, rather than rush to the phone. A sample of how they repeatedly tried to make sure of what the press spokesman was actually telling them follows:

Q. — Mr. Buchen (Philip Buchen, the present White House counsel) said Sunday that he knew of no other pardons under consideration. What has changed, and what has happened that caused the change?

A. — I think we will have to stand where we are for the time being.

Q. — Is the President considering at this time pardons for Mr. Dean and any or all of the other Watergate defendants, people involved in the whole Watergate matter?

A. — I will restate. That matter is under consideration.

Q. — Can you clarify? This means anybody who has already been convicted in connection with the Watergate or anybody facing trial, right?

Q. — (Interjected by another reporter) — All persons connected with Watergate, involved in Watergate?

A. — That is correct.

Q. — Does that mean that he is in fact considering pardons for all of these people, or is he just reviewing it?

A. — The question of pardons is under study. . . all I said was there is a study. Don't try to predict the results of the study.

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SO THERE IT IS. The transcript proves irrefutably that Hushen said nothing specific about the possibility of a blanket pardon. Yet his bombshell, ambiguous answers certainly were open to that interpretation. And that was the unanimous, almost automatic interpretation they got — not so much from the reporters, whose stories were worded with great care — but from headline writers, columnists and knee-jerk editorial writers.

It also was the interpretation of members of Congress from both parties, most of whom joined the instant clamor of protest against a blanket Watergate pardon. All hell broke loose, in a word, and continued for a full 24 hours before the White House came up with its denials.

Dave Barnett, in defending the original press reports, stressed that newsmen made repeated and concerted attempts to get clarification after the storm broke. They got nowhere. The original story had to stand until the White House eventually came up with its statement that possible Watergate pardons were under consideration, but only on a case by case basis.

What we have in this situation, it seems to me, is both a mix-up in communication and a sample of how words can be misread to mean what the hearer wants. Thus if everyone of the 48 Watergate cases is open to consideration for pardon, then the entire lot is involved. But to assume that a possible blanket pardon is involved was not necessarily justified, as it developed.

The Washington press corps is convinced that Hushen's Tuesday statements constituted a deliberate trial balloon, while the White House contends he was misunderstood. It is not my intention to blame anybody for what happened. My interest was in determining what happened. And what happened can be seen as a classic example of how the White House and the press can get each other into hot water.

The White House, at the very least, was clearly remiss in not explaining an explosive announcement in the most definitive terms. The press, on the other hand, may be seen as possibly guilty of a mob psychology reaction motivated by its eternal search for a headline.

Both sides, it is to be hoped, have learned a valuable lesson in the wake of this week's regrettable exercise in hero news.