

In The Nation: The Whole Truth and Nothing But?

By TOM WICKER

President Nixon said during his news conference Monday night that he will willing to take his chances on the press, "so long as the news media allows, as it does tonight, an opportunity for me to be heard directly by the people."

No one ever really disputed that right, or could, but Vice President Agnew did suggest in his celebrated dissertation on television news that the American people had "the right to make up their own minds and form their own opinions about a Presidential address without having a President's words and thoughts characterized through the prejudices of hostile critics before they can even be digested."

Informing the People

What, then, of the responsibility of Presidents to inform the American people accurately and fully? Not even Presidents, after all, can be infallible.

It was probably a pure slip of the tongue when Mr. Nixon said that the Marines had built this year "over 250,000 churches, pagodas and temples" in

Vietnam; and the point was well-taken anyway, because the Marines have built 117 churches and 251 schools, no mean feat. And Mr. Nixon was not wrong, just not very clear or instructive, when he said that a \$5,400 minimum income for every family of four in America would cost \$70 to \$80 billion a year.

Guaranteed Income

Actually, the Government could guarantee every family of four the difference between what its breadwinner now earns and \$5,400 for perhaps \$20 billion a year; it could, that is, if they all kept on working and earning as much as they do now. If, on the other hand, they all quit earning anything, and started taking the full \$5,400 from the Government, the cost would zoom up to at least \$40 or \$50 billion, and probably more.

The figure Mr. Nixon used would apply to a program with a so-called "work incentive" which would reward people for earning more income, on a declining scale of assistance that would reach zero only when

the family of four was actually earning about \$11,000 annually.

The impression the President left on the subject of Laos was much more seriously misleading. There are, he said, no American "combat troops" in Laos, when the fact is that the most that should be said is that there are no American "ground combat troops" there, so far as we know. There are Air Force pilots who drop bombs, and plenty of C.I.A. agents and Army personnel who organize, train, accompany and support native armies.

Mr. Nixon went on to say that American involvement in Laos was "as a result of the Laos negotiations and accords" worked out by the Kennedy Administration. But those accords supposedly guaranteed the neutrality of Laos. In fact, both North Vietnam and the United States violate the accords every day.

The Thai Subsidy

The President was no less facile in discussing the subsidy being paid Thailand for its division in South Vietnam. He said this was similar to subsidizing Western Europe after

World War II, when it could not afford its own defense.

In this case, however, members of the Thai expeditionary force in Vietnam are being paid twice what they would receive from their own Government for duty in Thailand, and subsidy is also being paid to Bangkok. The Thais would not be fighting in Vietnam at all if the cost of their doing so were not being so underwritten. Neither would the forces of South Korea or the Philippines. To call these troops in these circumstances "volunteers," as Mr. Nixon did, is to misuse the word and mislead its hearers.

Frankness Preferred

There may be a good case to be made for the American part of the war in Laos, and for hiring friendly troops to fight in South Vietnam. After their experiences of the past few years, it is a good bet that the American people would rather hear the President make those cases frankly and honestly, rather than once again to be told that there is no real problem, no reason to ask serious questions or expect candid answers.