

# Nixon Is Brought Into Dispute on Background

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Dec. 16—President Nixon was brought today into the controversy over whether newsmen should report information and points of view supplied by officials on other than an on-the-record basis.

Ronald L. Ziegler, the White House press secretary, was asked at Key Biscayne, Fla., where Mr. Nixon is spending a few days, for the President's view of the dispute on the practice of officials offering and newsmen accepting material on a so-called "background" or "deep background" basis.

The controversy, which has been a subject of discussion here for many years, arose again yesterday when The Washington Post and The New York Times refused to abide by the ground rules of a "deep background" held by Henry A. Kissinger, the White House national security affairs adviser.

Mr. Nixon, according to Mr. Ziegler, said that if news organizations did not like the practice of "backgrounders," then "fine, let's not have any more backgrounders."

For many years, newsmen and officials have adhered to a practice by which information and points of view have been disseminated in different guises.

## Categories Listed

Generally, these break down in the following way:

¶ On the record — when the source is attributable, such as, "President Nixon said."

On background — when the official is not named, but his agency may be, such as "A White House official said."

¶ On deep background — when the material may not be attributed to any person or institution, such as "It was learned today," or "informed sources said."

¶ Off the record — when the material may not be published in any form.

The Kissinger "deep backgrounders," which raised the possibility of Mr. Nixon's canceling his trip to Moscow, was attributed to the White House by The Times in the first edition and later to Mr. Kissinger after the Post identified him as the source. Yesterday, Mr. Ziegler said that the White House would soon seek a meeting with press representatives to set up firm ground rules.

Benjamin C. Bradlee, execu-

tive editor of The Post, last night issued a statement defending the violation of the ground rules and promising that guidelines would soon be issued "to get this newspaper once and for all out of the business of distributing the party line of any official of any government without identifying that official and that Government."

This evening, Mr. Bradlee issued his guidelines, which aimed at explaining to The Post staff how to act in background situations.

He said that Post reporters would always seek to get all information put on the record, but if that request was refused to get attribution "specific enough so that no readers can reasonably be confused."

This would seem to indicate that The Post would accept material "on background" but not "on deep background."

## Statement by Rosenthal

A. M. Rosenthal, managing editor of The New York Times, issued a statement this afternoon in New York, explaining The Times's views on use of other than on-the-record information. He attacked what he called abuses in the system but said that sometimes backgrounders were "journalistically and ethically justifiable."

Mr. Ziegler, asked about Mr. Bradlee's comments, said, "The Administration has more to do and think about than the machinations of The Washington Post."

"We believe in full and complete communications with the press," he said. "The question is misuse of backgrounders. We recognize that over the years to some degree government has misused backgrounders."

But he said that in the process, the press had accepted certain established procedures.

"The Post can proceed in any way that they wish," he said, "but if all the other organizations accept the procedures, then we and the journalistic community cannot accept one organization breaking those procedures."

At the State Department's regular noon briefing for newsmen today—a session in which announcements and comments on international developments are made known—Stanley Karnow, a diplomatic correspondent for The Post, said that he would walk out of the session if Robert J. McCloskey put some information "on background"—that is, attributable to a State Department source

but not to himself personally—as the department's spokesman. When Mr. McCloskey started a "backgrounder," Mr. Karnow left.

Mr. Karnow, who said that he was leaving the briefing in conformity with The Post's "anti-background" policy, was joined by James H. McCartney of Knight Newspapers. The other newsmen present remained for the rest of the session. The State Department Correspondents Association called a meeting for tomorrow morning to discuss ground rules for future briefings.

Mr. Ziegler, in talking to a handful of newsmen, did not seem very agitated over the controversy. He said that he thought backgrounders were misused when they announced a new position or policy without attribution but were useful when they provided explanations of policies.

He said that he thought Mr. Kissinger had made a mistake in going on "deep background" instead of allowing his remarks to be attributed on background to "a White House official."

Over the years, officials have spoken to newsmen on a basis other than on-the-record for a variety of reasons. Sometimes, it has been to inform the American public without causing diplomatic problems with a foreign country.

## Other Reasons Given

Thus, at the State Department, from time to time, information is provided on the record as part of a joint agreement with another country, but supplementary information is added on background basis.

Sometimes, officials want to make their views known without drawing excessive attention to them. Sometimes, officials speak on "deep background" to conceal the identity of the informant from their superiors, who may not want the news made known.

Often, officials have asked to speak on "a background basis" when they have not carefully gone over their remarks and are worried about how they will look in print.

In many cases, officials have spoken on background when their remarks could just as well have been on the record, but the officials chose to avoid being mentioned for personal reasons. The White House often gives "backgrounders" when important Presidential messages and speeches are released, often to draw attention to the points that the Administration wants to underscore

and to supply additional information.

The most controversial use of backgrounders has been the attempt by various Administrations to defend or promote their policies in such a way that the news media serve as the mouthpiece for the Government. This has occurred when Administrations issued documents or other information on a "deep background" basis with no attribution allowed.

In past Administrations particularly, the President himself has been known to speak about his record with no attribution made of his remarks.

## Opposition Explained

Mr. Rosenthal, in The Times's statement indicated that the newspaper was principally opposed to nonattributable information, known as "deep backgrounders," in which neither the individual nor his agency could be named.

The full text of Mr. Rosenthal's statement follows:

"The purpose of this newspaper is to provide as much meaningful information as it can to its readers.

"The use of information from confidential or unnamed sources is essential to the press. Otherwise, facts vital to an informed public might never become known.

"It is quite proper for reporters to seek out information or have information given to them privately and then decide that confidentiality must be protected.

"But the problem arises when Government officials or politicians call reporters together and in advance lay down conditions of nonattribution. Often the real purpose is simply to float trial balloons or to present an attitude or a policy without taking the responsibility for standing behind them by permitting the source to be revealed.

"In effect, the press attends a press conference and reports on it without saying who gave

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## *Briefings of Press*

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it. The result often is concealment of sources not on the basis of real need for confidentiality but to suit the political or diplomatic convenience of the government or political sources.

### **Discussions Cited**

"I think that sometimes the backgrounder is journalistically and ethically justifiable, but that the press has allowed it to go much too far, and gov-  
ernments have abused it. The backgrounder has become a way of life and often becomes an obstacle in the way of the flow of full information and the readers' understanding.

"There have been several discussions at The Times among editors and reporters on this subject in the past few months. We have laid down no flat rules, because we don't believe in strict regulations on how to cover every story.

"But we believe that reporters and editors should be a lot more selective about attending backgrounders called by public officials or politicians, and that the movement should be toward attending them only when the reporters and editors themselves believe there is an important reason beyond the sources' convenience for not making the information attributable to the person or government department involved."

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