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Nixon 'A-Threat' Clarified

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A report by Sen. Alan Cranston (D-Calif.) that former President Nixon once said he "could push a button and kill 60 million people" spiraled into a sensationalized West Coast news account over the weekend.

Cranston, startled by the escalation of his remarks into a report that Nixon made the statement as a threat to stop his impeachment, called a news conference Saturday to put his remarks back into context.

The sequence began with an account published in the San Francisco Chronicle on Saturday* of a Friday interview in which Cranston spoke of his plans for legislation to tighten controls on the use of nuclear weapons.

In the interview Cranston, to illustrate his concern about the problem, said that during the drive to impeach the former President in the summer of 1974, Mr. Nixon told two members of the House: "At any moment I could go into the next room, push a button and 20 minutes later 60 million people would be dead."

Cranston said he later told James R. Schlesinger, then Secretary of Defense, that he was concerned about "the need of keeping a berserk President from plunging us into a holocaust."

This is an episode that Cranston has related, with variations, before, but with little or no public attention.

A pickup of the Chronicle account by United Press

International treated the Nixon remark as a threat "to get two congressmen to drop impeachment proceedings."

At his news conference in Los Angeles Saturday, Cranston emphasized that he had not viewed the remark as a threat. But Cranston said that when he first heard the story, from two congressmen whose names are in his Washington files, he carried his concern about nuclear controls to three senators "most likely to know what controls we had."

Cranston said they were Democrats Henry M. Jackson (Wash.), John C. Stennis (Miss.) and Stuart Symington (Mo.). Cranston said each had gone to "check," had come back a few days later and in one way or another said they were reasonably satisfied that there was no reason to be concerned.

His own additional inquiries at the Pentagon, however, Cranston said, have left him unconvinced that the controls are adequate.

Cranston aides pointed out yesterday that the senator cited the same episode in a speech to the Arms Control Association in Washington on Dec. 9.

At that time Cranston said he had learned that "while impeachment was closing in on him," Nixon told several House members "of his great effort with Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to work for peace, and he pointed out that his work for peace was far more important than any 'little burglary' at Watergate.

"He got very emotional," Cranston continued, "and then said, according to one House member there, 'I can go into my office and pick up the telephone, and in 25 minutes, 70 million people will be dead.'"

Numerous bills already are pending in Congress to tighten controls over the authority to fire nuclear weapons, or to initiate "limited nuclear war."

* See SFC 7 Feb 76 for other refs