

The Backgrounder for Propaganda

By WILLIAM H. LAWRENCE

WASHINGTON—The Nixon Administration has perfected the background news conference as both an offensive and defensive weapon. From the privileged sanctuary where sources may not be named, anonymous officials have been threatening on some occasions and explanatory on others.

President Nixon and his top aides certainly didn't invent the backgrounder—it is an ancient Washington propaganda technique utilized by both Democratic and Republican Administrations and politicians. It also is a rather cowardly technique since those seeking to influence or publicize public policy are unwilling themselves to take responsibility for their words. It was used widely during the Administration of President Lyndon Johnson, but has perhaps been used even more since Mr. Nixon took office.

The current controversy over whether sources of backgrounders should be named, with or without their consent, is far more than a struggle between the press and the President. It concerns the public's right to know who

briefing was placed in the published Congressional Record by Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater, a Republican, who thought he was doing the White House a favor.

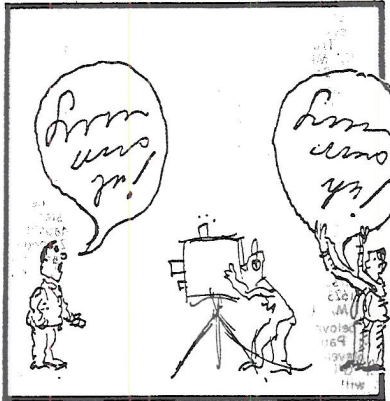
A much more serious incident occurred in May, 1970. Then Mr. Kissinger threatened at a backgrounder that the United States might have to expel the Soviet presence in Egypt if it were not withdrawn voluntarily. The Presidential adviser referred primarily to Soviet aircraft and missile technicians who had come to help the Egyptians in increasing numbers at that time.

To expel, according to all dictionaries, means to drive out or force out—and such an action by the United States certainly would have involved us in war in the Mideast.

Yet under the rules of the backgrounder, neither Congress, which is supposed to declare war, nor the American people, who have to fight such wars, would have known immediately that it was Mr. Kissinger who was threatening to plunge the

country into a Middle Eastern war. Happily, President Nixon did not take Mr. Kissinger's advice, and the Russians did not take the Kissinger threat seriously. Nor are the Russians likely to take seriously the Kissinger threat that Mr. Nixon might reconsider his trip to Moscow.

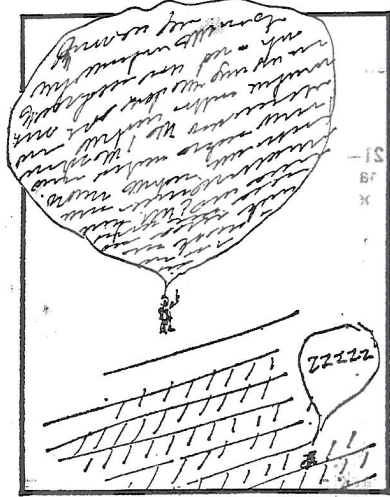
There was a brilliant example last week of the backgrounder being used for defensive purposes. Bill Gill, a White House correspondent for the American Broadcasting Company, was told by high Administration officials that the Nixon Administration had little choice except to be pro-Pakistani in recent controversies because President John F. Kennedy, in 1962, had given the Pakistan Government a top-secret pledge that the United States would come to the aid of Pakistan to avert Indian aggression. Nixon Administration officials said they were fearful that Pakistan might insist we now keep the Kennedy pledge in full. All this came from an anonymous



said what, particularly on issues that might mean peace or war.

Henry Kissinger set off the current row with a backgrounder last week in which he threatened that President Nixon might reconsider his planned trip to Moscow next spring unless the Russians used their restraining influence on India in her war on Pakistan. The Washington Post named Mr. Kissinger as the source, and this triggered the controversy.

This was not the first time that one of Mr. Kissinger's frequent backgrounders got him into trouble. Recently he anonymously blamed India for pressing the war against Pakistan despite U.S. efforts to mediate. Mr. Kissinger's cover in that instance was blown when the whole text of his



Drawings by Stan Mack

source at a time when the Nixon Administration was being criticized heavily for its pro-Pakistan stand in a losing cause.

If Kennedy made such a pledge—and that remains an "if" so long as no responsible official will take responsibility for making it public—his letter presumably bore a high security classification, perhaps "top secret," which would explain why we have not heard of it before. One wonders if anonymous Government officials are authorized to declassify such documents and make their contents known, or whether they should now be indicted as some nonofficials have been on a similar charge.

It would seem that, if Mr. Kennedy made such a pledge, he went far beyond his authority to commit the nation to war without the consent of Congress. Surely no succeeding Administration need be bound by secret and illegal commitments.

One interesting fact is that many backgrounders are given by White House officials who claim "executive privilege" and who decline to testify when summoned by Congressional committees.

President Nixon recently threatened through the press secretary, Ronald Ziegler, to ban the backgrounders unless the news media guaranteed anonymity for his briefers.

My own feeling, after nearly thirty-four years in Washington, is that the politicians need the backgrounder more than the reporters do. It might be just as well if the news media did not allow faceless Democrats or Republicans to make propaganda from this privileged sanctuary.

William H. Lawrence is a Washington political observer and author of the forthcoming "Six Presidents and Too Many Wars."