

The Secret of Mr. Nixon's 'Secret

By William Safire

WASHINGTON—"The Old Guard dies, but never surrenders." Those ringing words were supposed to have been said by Gen. Pierre Etienne de Cambronne, commanding Napoleon's Imperial Guard at Waterloo, when called upon to surrender.

He never said it. A reporter named Rougemont invented the remark some time after the battle, and General de Cambronne went to his grave firmly denying he was the author of the famous phrase.

Could that happen in modern times? With tape recorders, press conferences, attributed quotations, microfilm records—is it still possible to invent and then perpetuate a quotation?

Consider this one: "I have a secret plan to end the war."

Who said it? Why, Richard Nixon of course. When? On March 5, 1968, in Nashua, N. H. Or did he?

Everybody says he did, carefully using quotation marks to show the "secret plan" was right out of the 1968 candidate's mouth.

As George McGovern put it in 1971: "Three years ago, Richard Nixon campaigned on the pledge that he had a 'secret plan to end the war.' . . ." McGovern returned to the theme in his acceptance speech: "I have no 'secret plan.' . . ."

John Lofton, editor of the Republican National Committee's weekly publication, "Monday," has made a hobby of writing a polite query to everybody who quotes Richard Nixon directly as having used the words "secret plan." Once in a while he gets a reply.

The most forthright of these came from Anthony Lewis of The New York Times, who wrote in October 1969: "I think you have caught me in a mistake. The truth is I wrote that out of the same general impression that so many people seem to have. But I have

now checked back through our files and agree with you that I cannot find the precise phrase 'a plan' in what Mr. Nixon said during 1968."

What Mr. Lewis did find, and what is most often cited as the basis for "secret plan," was this remark of Mr. Nixon's on March 5, 1968, in Nashua, N. H.: "And I pledge to you the new leadership will end the war and win the peace in the Pacific. . . ."

In late 1970, John B. Oakes, editor of the editorial page of The New York Times, responded to a new query on another use of the "plan" by citing the same quotation and asking: "How could he make such a pledge if he didn't have a plan?" The Times editor argued: "It seems obvious that Mr. Nixon implied that he had a plan when he gave his pledge. But, as I say, it was doubtless an error to put the words in quotes and if that is what you want me to admit, I am glad to do so, and to state that it won't appear that way in this context again." Nor did it—in The Times.

Not everyone was willing to stop using the phrase when its unreliability was pointed out. N.B.C.'s Edwin Newman replied: "When I spoke of a secret plan, I did not mean it as a quotation. It was shorthand, which is sometimes unavoidable, for a plan that the President said he had and the particulars

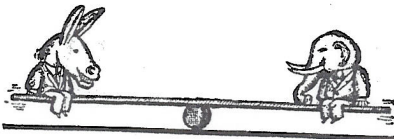
of which he said he could not divulge without impairing the plan's chance of success." (Italics mine.)

Did Mr. Nixon ever say he had a "plan," secret or otherwise? He did not; nobody who has been challenged on the use of a direct quotation on this has ever come up with the citation of time or place. Mr. Nixon never said it; the use of quotation marks is inaccurate, unfair and misleading. But it continues, error feeding on error, as a myth becomes accepted as truth. The question then becomes—if he did not actually say it, did he imply that he had a secret plan? His remarks on March 5, 1968, in Nashua, N. H., were a pledge "to end the war and win the peace." He continued he had no "push-button technique" in mind, but would "mobilize our economic and diplomatic and political leadership."

Not surprisingly, both press and political opponents came back with the question "How?" Newsmen pressed for details, and when no plan was set forth, its absence was noted. The first use of the word "plan" that I could find was in the March 11, 1968, New York Times subhead: "Nixon Withholds His Peace Ideas/Says to Tell Details of Plan Would Sap His Bargaining Strength If He's Elected." The Associated Press lead three days later added to the idea of a specific plan, necessarily cloaked in secrecy: "Rich-

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ard M. Nixon says the reason he is not ready to spell out the details of his plan to end the war in Vietnam is because he is reserving his 'big guns' for use against President Johnson if he wins the Republican Presidential nomination."

In that A.P. story, Mr. Nixon stressed that he had "no magic formula, no gimmick. If I had a gimmick I would tell Lyndon Johnson." The furthest he would be drawn into a discussion of a "plan" was this: "But I do have some specific ideas on how to end the war. They are primarily in the diplomatic area."

That's as much as the clips I have seen show about the "plan." Would a fairminded person say they constitute the basis for an inference that the candidate possessed a detailed, and necessarily secret, panacea for the conflict? I think not—no more than one would infer that Senator McGovern has a "secret plan" to fulfill his pledge to bring back the prisoners in ninety days.

Throughout the campaign and on into the years ahead, we can expect to hear some orators and commentators use a little inflection around "secret plan" that makes it sound like a quotation. The quotation thereof is no dark media conspiracy, just an example of how some writers and cartoonists, too lazy to check source materials, casually pick up and perpetuate an error. A small but hardy band of newsmen, with no constituency but objectivity, will wince when they see the nonquote quoted.

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