

Agnew Converts Times Columnist

WASHINGTON — Vice President Agnew must be delighted with the newest convert to his struggle against television news — James Reston, Washington columnist and vice president of The New York Times. Reston set down some of his thoughts the other day, reflecting on President Nixon's statement to a news conference that Charles Manson, now on trial in Los Angeles, was "guilty, directly or indirectly, of eight murders." By the time he was through, Reston had made it clear he stood firmly with Agnew and all

the other news manipulators whose aim is to keep a high and lustrous cosmetic sheen between the people and their government.



To Reston (and perhaps to other, and less visible, news executives) the problem raised by the incident was not what it revealed about the attitudes of the strict constructionist in the

White House but "how to protect the President of the United States in these days of instant news from unintended and potentially damaging blunders during extemporaneous news conferences."

What is one to make of all this? One might think that one way to achieve that protection is not to make the blunder. (After all, how many presidential blunders are intended?) Or, if that course proves too difficult, another might be to hold no extemporaneous news conferences. But that is not Reston's

8-12-70
no 5-11

solution. In support, evidently, of the Agnewian doctrine that no news is good news, he says it is "surprising" that Mr. Nixon's staff "did not protect him in time to keep the blunder from going out on national television."

In other words, edit the tape and either keep the Manson statement from the public entirely—a sort of Orwellian unstatement—or edit it in such a way as to convince the public that the President really said something else.

Coming from any newsman, the suggestion is astonishing; coming from an executive of The New York Times, it is nearly incredible.

But this is clearly what Reston has in mind. "The interesting thing here," he says, "is that the President's original charge of (Manson's) guilt was not going out on live network television. It was being taped for release later. Thus, the blunder could easily have been corrected before the damage was done."

Indeed. For that matter, an actor could be hired and the President made to look like Cary Grant delivering the Gettysburg Address off the cuff, but something might be lost in the process.

But Reston is not done. "It is not quite clear why these presidential news conferences cannot always be taped and checked for bloopers before they are released," he continues, presumably relying on New York Timesmen to do their own sensitive

editing of background discussions.

And then Reston's final suggestion as to how Americans should perceive their President: "After all, even the football games have instant replay, and even congressmen have the right to revise and extend their remarks in the Congressional Record."

But "instant replay," as everybody — well, almost everybody — knows, is a replayed video tape of what happened, not of something the coach or the player wished had happened. And newsmen, historians and researchers see congressmen's right to edit their remarks in the record as a national scandal.

The suggestion that the President appear to the public as a congressman does to a reader of the Congressional Record says something about freedom of the press and the public's right to know, which we do not often hear from government news managers, let alone from news executives.

It is sad to see this kind of thing. It is true that presidents (and governors and city councilmen and sewer commissioners) often dissemble, and film and tape on television offer grand new opportunities to do so.

One would think Reston would be leading — or at least cheering — the charge in the other direction rather than offering ways for a President to conceal the impact on him of reading all that crime news in the Southern California newspapers.

James Reston



JAMES RESTON
Incredible?



SPIRO AGNEW
Gains a Convert?