

Permitting Presidents to manage the news is a bad national habit

WASHINGTON — The national habit of permitting presidents to manage the news is a little like the national habit of smoking cigarettes. Every so often the habit makes us sick. There is much self-diagnosis and resolution. A couple of years later we get sick again and realize that we still have the habit.

The proof is in what happened to former Atty. Gen. Ramsey Clark who went to North Vietnam and told us what he saw.

Within hours after he spoke, the secretary of State denounced him; then the President's press secretary denounced him; then the chairman of the Republican National Committee, senators and congressmen denounced him.

For days, the news was of high dudg-eon. Mr. Clark, the public was told in the process, had done something shameful and embarrassing. He was at least a dupe and at most a traitor. Of one thing there was no question: He had damaged his President's effort to end the war.

Now that it's all over, let's look back and see what it was that Mr. Clark actually did that seemed to warrant calling the Supreme Court back from vacation to re-establish the death penalty.

First, he visited North Vietnam. A lot of Americans have done the same and have come back saying the same things Mr. Clark said.

Now, what did he say? He said he saw a lot of bomb damage to the dikes which the President had promised would not be bombed. He said he saw hospitals and schools bombed and a great many maimed children. He said he saw some of our prisoners of war and that they appeared to be healthy and fairly well-treated.

What was so wrong about saying these things? Does the administration expect the American people to believe that it can drop three times the bomb tonnage of World War II on a state smaller than Missouri and not maim children? Does it expect the American people to believe that anti-personnel bombs are not intended to kill people? Does the administration want the wives and families of war prisoners to believe they are being ill-treated? Apparently so.

Mr. Clark then added his opinion. He said he thought the bombing was an outrage, the war a horror and Mr. Nixon's policy a failure. He might have added — though he didn't — that the President's great success in this war has been ~~so~~ so

arrange troop withdrawals and the draft that Americans can continue to pulverize a tiny country without having to think about it. As Sen. Edward Kennedy has pointed out, "We have changed the color of the bodies." It has made our desire to end the war less strident and says something about us more understandable than admirable.

To all of this, the administration responded in the spirit of the ancient Persians: "Kill the messenger who brings bad news." And there was nobody to say nay. What the secretary of State says is news, automatically. And what the President's press secretary says is news. And what senators and congressmen say is news. And so the newspapers and radio and television carried the news and as a result what might have been treated as a useful service appeared as embarrassing, degrading and worse.

To be fair to the nation's media, the managed news habit is difficult to cure. Are they to interrupt the secretary of State in mid-sentence in order to explain to their readers, listeners and viewers that what Secretary of State Rogers is doing is trying to kill the messenger? Are they to explain that this barrage of criticism is well orchestrated? Wouldn't the public think this was "editrializing"?

But until we find a way to break this habit, we are going to have periods of national sickness. Eventually, as with the cigarette habit, the sickness may be deadly.



Ramsey Clark
Now, what did he say?