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## Explaining an Inoperative Editorial

When the editorial page editor of The Washington Post is out of town, I inherit his awesome burdens. But this year the responsibility does not seem quite so weighty, and that is because it has been relatively easy to work out in advance of any potential disaster an explanation of what went wrong. Disaster in this case, of course, means the appearance in the morning newspaper of an editorial that flies in the face of established policy. But never mind . . . the explanatory memo writes itself:

To PLG from MG: I have now completed an exhaustive investigation of events leading up to the publication of Tuesday's lead editorial entitled, unfortunately, "Nuke 'Em." It was an editorial which we both agree was wrong and—far more important—stupid and counterproductive. My investigation indicates that no one on the editorial page staff was involved in the deplorable incident and that no one on the staff or elsewhere in the building had any foreknowledge of what the editorial said.

My log shows that the editorial board conference was held on schedule at 10:15 the morning before the editorial was written and that the meeting broke up at 11:52. Two people left briefly to take telephone calls. (See attachment B.) Participants in the discussion are in general agreement that the subject matter of the editorial—i.e., whether the United States should launch a first strike attack on the Soviet Union—was discussed, but perceptions of what was actually said or authorized differ. Different people, as we all know, recall the same thing in different ways, so the record of the meeting provides only confusing and ambiguous evidence as to who favored what. However, the record supports my version of

events, and there is complete agreement among those who were present throughout, that the editorial itself was assigned to Sedanchair to be written, since it is his subject matter, and that at that point in time when the meeting broke up I said I knew he would do a "good job."

The log then shows that Sedanchair turned in his editorial at 4:25 in the afternoon, that it left my desk at 4:53 for the copy editors and that it was sent by them to the composing room at 5:18 p.m. marked "Hot Daily." I am satisfied that none of them could have known what it said. Sedanchair has explained that when he writes edi-

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torials he does not read them—that these are two quite different thought processes. The copy editors said that they read for "commas, not for sense"—and incidentally, everyone has remarked that the commas were exceptionally well placed.

I should tell you, just to keep channels straight, that the publisher called in a state of great agitation when the newspaper appeared. I explained to her that neither you nor I had read the editorial in question before it went into print, and she found this greatly reassuring. She said she felt it relieved the newspaper as a whole of responsibility for what was said, although she told me "not to do this again."

In this connection, I think we can expect our enemies to make much of the apparent "contradiction" between this statement concerning my role and the fact that my chopmark does appear on the upper right hand

corner of the original copy that was sent to the composing room. However, anyone who knows how a newspaper really works will understand that the words "OK—M.G." are subject to various interpretations. What I was approving, of course, was not the specific words or meaning of the specific editorial, but rather the general concept that an editorial (not necessarily this one) could be written at some point in time on this general subject matter. In hindsight it might have been wise to spell that out, as the term "OK" appears to have been taken as a grant of authority to print the piece in question when I sent it to the copy room.

Nevertheless, as you well know, given the enormous responsibilities of this job, one cannot keep up to speed on everything. We do, after all, have a mandate to oppose the construction of highway I-66 and to support the construction of its connective link, the Three Sisters Bridge—and this is a sixteen-hour-a-day full time job. I have searched my mind, nonetheless, for clues that might have suggested to me what the editorial said or what the copy editors and typesetters intended to do with it, and I am satisfied that there were none.

Naturally it would be naive to believe that our enemies will accept this explanation of events. But for now I think we should just tough it out and see if it will play. If they persist we should, of course, make an appropriate response to their arguments, such as trying to find out whether they paid their income tax. For the rest, we can let them twist slowly . . . slowly . . . in the wind.

Well, that pretty well deep sixes it. I greatly appreciate your expression of confidence in my work.