



Kleizo (left) and the President: The White House stood 'pat'

Probing the 'Slap-Tap Flap'

The floodlights were blinding on the edge of the Orlando, Fla., airstrip, and as he walked toward Air Force One, President Nixon had to squint when he reached into the darkness to shake hands with well-wishers. "Hello," he said to a 7-year-old boy and the shadowy figure of an adult at his side. "Are you this boy's mother or grandmother?" With understandable bewilderment, burly Master Sgt. Edward Kleizo of McCoy Air Force Base replied, "Neither." Mr. Nixon craned his neck for a closer look and remarked, "Of course not." Then the President slapped the sergeant's face.

It was not much of a slap. Photographs taken moments later show Kleizo smiling broadly, and afterwards assistant Presidential press secretary Gerald Warren tried to persuade reporters to describe the gesture—if at all—as a "tap" or a "pat." Many of the newsmen covering Mr. Nixon's Florida trip thought the incident too insignificant to report, and in view of recent speculation about the President's mental health, some of them feared that any mention of the slap might be misconstrued. But eventually low-keyed accounts appeared in three newspapers: The Wall Street Journal, St. Louis Post-Dispatch and New York Daily News. With that, the "slap-tap flap," as it was dubbed, became another point of contention between White House and press—and among newsmen themselves.

The confusion began when one of the pool reporters, William Eaton of The Chicago Daily News, questioned Kleizo. "The President slapped me," Kleizo told Eaton, who thought the sergeant looked "upset and annoyed." Aboard Air Force One bound for Key Biscayne, a baffled Eaton discussed the incident with fellow pool reporters (who acted as surrogates for another 60 or so newsmen back in the

press plane). In normal times, not even Richard Nixon's breakfast menu is too trivial for inclusion in a pool report. But the poolers decided to ignore the President's ambiguous slap. Although Eaton is a Pulitzer Prize winner, he is not his paper's regular White House correspondent, and he deferred to the judgment of West Wing veteran Jack Sutherland of U.S. News and World Report. Sutherland argued that the incident, if included in the report, might be blown out of proportion.

Test: But the pool reporters did discuss the episode with colleagues. "It was a hard slap," said Matthew Cooney of Westinghouse Broadcasting, another member of the pool. "I saw the man's face move." The Wall Street Journal's Fred Zimmerman asked for a demonstration, so both Eaton and Cooney slapped him as hard as they thought the President had struck Kleizo. "I felt I had been soundly slapped by Eaton, and Cooney slapped me even harder," Zimmerman remarked later. Accordingly, he wrote an insert for his Monday-morning story reporting that Mr. Nixon had "soundly slapped" a man at McCoy. "I treated Eaton and Cooney as eyewitnesses to a news event," said Zimmerman.

The day after the incident, Warren told one reporter it "never happened" and said anyone peddling the story was "sick." But after a long debate within the press corps, an "amended" pool report was issued. The President, it said, had given Kleizo a "light slap."

Even so, some correspondents thought the story should not be printed. "It would have been very hard to write about the incident on the basis of what we knew without suggesting that the President was in an unstable condition—and I didn't know that to be true,"

argued one reporter who decided not to file on the episode. James Wiegart of New York's Daily News disagreed. "Whether the slap was a friendly touch or an involuntary response to being embarrassed is irrelevant," he said. "The fact of the matter is, the President was involved in an incident which, even on its best face, was a sign of the stress he's been under."

By then, Warren had learned that the President had indeed touched Kleizo. But after the Monday stories appeared, the White House denounced Zimmerman and James Deakin, who wrote the Post-Dispatch account, for "unethical and unprofessional reporting" based on "rumor and gossip." (Wiegart was spared because his story stuck more closely to the pool report.)

Kleizo himself was far from unhappy. "I would not say that the President 'tapped' me," he admitted. "He slapped me." But the sergeant insisted that "it was just an affectionate slap like a father would give a son," and he said he was so pleased with the accolade that "I may not even wash my face again."

Even reporters who judged the "slap-tap" affair too inconsequential to publish thought that it should have been included in the original pool report. The decision not to reflect what one newsman describes as "a genuine reluctance in this press corps to write anything which bears on the President's mental capacities." But White House reporters certainly are not unaware of the questions that are being asked about the state of Mr. Nixon's emotions under the strains of Watergate. Most of them, in fact, are quietly squirreling away instances of quirky Presidential behavior. Debates wax and wane (out of print) on the significance of his slurred words, jumbled syntax and flailing gestures and of such episodes as the now-famous shoving of Ronald Ziegler last August. To some degree, the press has been censoring itself on a delicate subject, and perhaps it should, so long as the evidence is inconclusive. But the Kleizo incident deserved coverage. "I wrote about it because it was a legitimate news story," said Deakin. "I evaluated it as uncommon behavior on the part of the President of the United States."

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