

Mr. Hogan's Question

At the end of the questioning of President Ford last week before the Criminal Justice Subcommittee of the House Judiciary Committee, Rep. Lawrence J. Hogan (R-Md.) put the following question to the President:

Now, there have been press reports that Dr. Kissinger is alleged to have said to you that he feared that former President Nixon would commit suicide. That appeared in several news accounts. Is there any truth to that?

President Ford: No truth whatsoever, so far as I know.

Even though he had the President's response, Mr. Hogan pushed on: "Well," he told Mr. Ford, "it appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* on two occasions, and is al-

The writer is a member of the editorial page staff.

luded to in a research paper prepared for the subcommittee." Mr. Ford could only answer as he had previously: "There was no discussion between Dr. Kissinger and myself that included any such comment." At that, Mr. Hogan got to what we suspect was his real purpose in bringing up the entire subject: "I think if I might add a gratuitous comment, Mr. Chairman, that much of the controversy has been generated by the press by just such erroneous statements that have been given wide circulation."

Mr. Ford's appearance was a unique occasion, and it would be impossible to recall that audience of millions to set the record straight on this little by-play, but there's more behind Mr. Hogan's "gratuitous" commentary on the press. It is an episode in which Mr. Hogan was started along his erroneous way by a slightly faulty sentence in a document from the Library of Congress. He did the rest himself. It is interesting not just because Mr. Hogan transmitted several distortions in the course of allegedly clearing one up, but also because it helps to show how a small mistake can become a larger one that manages massively to misinform.

In its attempt to prepare the members of the subcommittee with background material for their historic meeting with Mr. Ford, the staff of the subcommittee turned to the Congressional Research Service for assistance. One of the documents requested from the service was a background paper on what the press had reported on the pardon controversy. The service turned out a document called, "The Pardon of Former President Richard M. Nixon by President Gerald R. Ford: The Facts as Reported, Alleged and/or Speculated on by the Press as of October 6, 1974." On Page 5 of that document, amidst references to all the background stories done by the major newspapers, there appears a sentence that says: "Also allegedly involved was Henry Kissinger, who was said to have expressed to Ford his fear that Nixon would commit suicide." The rest of the paragraph covers other speculations, all of them supposedly supported in a footnoted reference to three stories.

One story was from *The New*

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to in the footnote, describes how "two friends" of the former President told President Ford they believed Mr. Nixon was so emotionally depressed that he would have been "unable to withstand prolonged indecision" in Cannon's words. There is no reference in the entire story to Henry Kissinger or to a prospective "suicide."

That leaves Evans and Novak. In their column appearing on the opposite editorial page of *The Post* on Sept. 12, this paragraph appears after 11 paragraphs of a column largely devoted to the roles of General Haig and Secretary Kissinger in convincing Mr. Nixon to resign:

"Heightening this presidential concern about Nixon were alarming reports flowing into the Oval Office—reinforced by Haig and Kissinger—that the former President was on the edge of mental breakdown. At one point, Kissinger expressed a private fear that Nixon's life might be in danger by his own hand."

As you might have guessed, Mr. Hogan did not investigate any of the articles in the footnote before he leaped to the conclusion before the President and the nation that "several news accounts" contained references to Mr.



Kissinger's telling Mr. Ford that the former President was on the brink of suicide. If he had checked—as his office attempted to do only after subsequent inquiries—Mr. Hogan would have discovered that the footnote referred only to Evans and Novak on that point, and that even they did not claim Mr. Kissinger's fears ever reached President Ford directly. On the contrary, the columnists later said, they never intended that sentence to be taken to mean that Mr. Kissinger expressed such fears to the President.

The Congressional Research Service overreached the literal facts in its privately circulated report by saying that there were news reports linking Mr. Kissinger and President Ford to a discussion of a possibility of a Nixon suicide. But it remained for Mr. Hogan, even as he was condemning the press for "erroneous" statements, to misread his own background material, to fail to check the primary sources and then to take the occasion of a nationally televised presidential appearance at a congressional hearing to falsely blame the press for a sin it didn't commit.

York Times, one was a syndicated Evans and Novak column that appeared in *The Post* and the third a story by Washington Post Staff Writer Lou Cannon. The Times story, dated Sept. 17, is devoted to the subject of how Gen. Alexander M. Haig and others around former President Nixon might have helped persuade Mr. Ford to act on the pardon when he did because Mr. Nixon's mental health appeared to be deteriorating. However, there is no reference of any sort to Secretary Kissinger in the Times story. The Lou Cannon story of Sept. 9, also referred