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Truman's Press Relations Droop

By Drew Pearson Propaganda Balloons

President Truman's relations with reporters at the White House are at an all-time low. The boys in the White House press room, usually among his staunchest friends, resent the frequent cracks the President has been making about the press generally. And they don't appreciate the bawling out they get when asking simple questions at the White House news conferences.



Pearson

For instance, when this columnist last spring urged sending propaganda balloons behind the Iron Curtain, it was frowned on by military advisers and by some State Department officials. They feared a violent reaction in Moscow.

But when the crusade for freedom was able to float balloons into Czechoslovakia and Poland, the freedom leaflets were mimeographed, tacked on telephone poles, mailed anonymously to Communist officials, and created such a furor that Communist newspapers, the Czech Prime Minister and Radio Moscow had to go into high gear to reply.

Public opinion became so riled inside Czechoslovakia that the Communists actually began looking for some way to free Association Press Correspondent Wilcrochety, almost took two more digs at the reporters recently.

It didn't get into the newspapers, but Mr. Truman, who returned from Key West tired and crochety, almost took two more digs at the reporters recently. First, he wanted to lecture them for not emphasizing that the list of war prisoners put out by the Chinese Communists was unverified and thus probably inaccurate—something, incidentally, that all reporters already had stressed.

However, when similar balloon or propaganda projects have been urged for Hungary and other satellite countries, an official wall of discouragement has been erected by the Pentagon and by some of the more timid souls in the State Department.

He also wanted to bowl them out for leaking the story that Judge Tom Murphy of New York had turned down the job of chief graft investigator. However, the President's press officers, led by able Joe Short, convinced Mr. Truman to forget about it.

The reason is partly illustrated by a story told by Gen. Bedell Smith, expert head of Central Intelligence. He recounts a conversation between Georges Dimitrov and Stalin. "Are you afraid of war?" Stalin was asked.

Inside Hungary

Final decision to pay the ransom of the four United States fliers in Hungary was made only after significant back-stage debate which goes to the very root of American policy toward Russian satellites.

"Yes," replied Stalin, "but not as afraid as the West."

Nevertheless, there are plenty of propaganda steps that can be taken with no danger or war. Furthermore, it remains a fact that the law of the jungle remains the law of the Kremlin. And when United States propaganda stirs the population of Czechoslovakia or Hungary to a boiling point, the Kremlin is much more likely to act with reason.

Inside fact is that the Defense Department, not the State Department, made the decision to put up the ransom money—for two reasons:

1. The four Air Force men were official representatives of the United States and specifically of the Defense Department.

Military Playground

2. The Joint Chiefs of Staff shied away from any threat of retaliation for fear Hungary might call our bluff.

When Senate investigators probed Army camps recently, they didn't seem to notice that while Fort Belvoir, Va., has squandered thousands of dollars on fancy golf courses, it has let its living quarters run down shamefully.

This latter point gets down to the root problem of whether it is wise to provoke the Soviet. It has come up time after time in the past, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff always shy away from, any showdown. In general, so does the State Department.