From Gen. George Marshall's biography

From W. Todd Zechel

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resentatives" to communicate with the media directly on military or political affairs. It was not addressed to MacArthur personally, but everyone guessed it had been written for his benefit.

It was, however, not only MacArthur who could not keep his mouth shut. Truman lost control of his tongue, too. At a press conference he was asked whether he would be prepared to use the atomic bomb in Korea to restore the situation and sent the winds of panic skittering around the world by insisting that he would refuse to exclude the use of any weapon in the U.S. arsenal. That brought Prime Minister Clement Attlee hurrying across the Atlantic, declaring to anyone with a notebook in his or her hand that Britain would never agree to the use of atomic weapons. He was assured that it had simply been a *lapsus linguae,* and to reinforce this explanation, the President issued a public statement:

> The President wants to make it certain that there is no misinterpretation of his answers to questions . . . about the use of the atom bomb. Naturally, there has been consideration of this subject since the outbreak of hostilities in Korea [but] it should be emphasized that, by law, only the President can authorize the use of the atom bomb, and no such authorization has been given.

Truman did not mention to Attlee that he had, in fact, already passed control of the bomb over to his trusted secretary George Marshall, who had revealed that fact to his friend Bernard Baruch. (By a curious coincidence, Baruch just about this time called in the assistant secretary of defense Robert Lovett and asked him to pass the message on to Marshall that in Baruch's view, "the American people increasingly favored the use of atomic weapons in Korea." Lovett dropped this nugget of information into the ear of Dean Acheson, who counseled him to let it go no further.)

Meanwhile, the ignominious retreat in Korea continued, with much loss of life and many prisoners taken by the victorious Chinese. There were such reports of chaos, confusion, and panic that Marshall told General Collins, the Chief of Staff, to get out to Korea and report back on the way it was going. Collins was favorably

impressed and considered that in the circumstances, MacArthur and his chief lieutenant, General Walton H. Walker, were handling the withdrawal from the North with stiff-lipped efficiency. But that did not allay the panic felt in Washington. So sure were some Cassandras that World War III was almost here that wild rumors spread around the capital when the U.S. early-warning radar system picked up formations of flying objects, presumably planes, heading toward Washington and calculated to arrive there in about two hours. Marshall was alerted and authorized the interception and defense forces to get ready for action; meanwhile, he hastened to the White House to be with the President if and when the button needed to be pushed to set atom bomb reprisals in action.

Dean Acheson was warned to "inform but not advise" Mr. Attlee. He called him up at the British Embassy to tell him that "Pentagon telephones would be closed for all but emergency defense purposes" and that he would not be able to call back. The British premier sounded so calm when he got the news that Acheson "asked whether he believed that the objects picked up were Russian bombers. He said that he did not."

Among those who had heard the rumors in the State Department, however, it was well and truly believed.

"One of our senior officials burst into the room," reported Acheson later. "How he had picked up the rumor I do not know, perhaps from the Pentagon. He wanted to telephone his wife to get out of town and to have important files moved to the basement. I refused to permit him to do either and gave him the choice of a word-of-honor commitment not to mention the matter to anyone or being put under security detention. He wisely cooled off and chose the former."

Acheson walked over to the White House to join Secretary Marshall and the President, his sense of the dramatic heightened by the thought that, very shortly now, he would be dying in a most distinguished Valhalla. He was met in the corridor by a sweaty Robert Lovett, wearing a rueful smile. He reported that the mysterious flying objects had disappeared from the early-warning screen. It was thought they had probably been geese.

50. DECEMBER DESPONDENCY

THE ATTLEE VISIT

DECEMBER OPENED by bringing us a Job's comforter in Clement Attlee, the British Labour Prime Minister. He was a far abler man than Winston Churchill's description of him as "a sheep in sheep's clothing" would imply, but persistently depressing. He spoke, as John Jay Chapman said of President Charles W. Eliot of Harvard, with "all the passion of a woodchuck chewing a carrot." His thought impressed me as a long withdrawing, melancholy sigh. The fright created in London when the British press misconstrued and exaggerated the unfortunate answers President Truman gave to questions at his press conference on November 30, 1950, propelled him across the ocean. This episode followed two earlier ones. In August Secretary of the Navy Francis P. Matthews in a speech in Boston called for preventive war. He was made Ambassador to Ireland. Then General Orville Anderson, Commandant of the Air War College, announced that the Air Force, equipped and ready, only awaited orders to drop its bombs on Moscow. He was retired.

In the course of the press conference mentioned above, the President had stated that "the forces of the United Nations have no intention of abandoning their mission in Korea." Then the questions began, illustrating vividly the dangers that lurk in the American press conference, with its stress on candid answers to questions that seem to be without guile. To one such the President answered that we would "take whatever steps are necessary to meet the military situation, just as we always have." Did that "include the atomic bomb?" It included "every weapon that we have." Had there been "active consideration of [its] use?" "There has always been active consideration of its use." Other questions, unconnected with the bomb, led to obviously correct answers that the application of appropriate weapons to appropriate targets lay within the province of the theater commander.[1] In London the House of Commons, engaged in a two-day foreign policy debate, received an erroneous report that General MacArthur might be given discretion to use the atomic weapon. Cries of alarm came from every quarter of the House, coupled with demands that before the die was cast the British must participate in deciding their fate. At the end of the debate the Prime Minister announced to cheers that he had cabled to the President his desire to fly to Washington for "a wide survey of the problems which face us today."

Meanwhile a damage-control party had gathered at the White House to prepare a "clarifying statement," issued within the hour: