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Nixon Seeking Curb on Press

By GAYLORD SHAW

WASHINGTON (AP) — On President Nixon's orders, the Justice Dept. is trying to draft legislation intended to strip away one of the news media's principal shields against libel suits: by public officials or public figures.

The Presidential move was disclosed by ranking White House officials, who said Nixon's objective was to give political candidates better defense against campaign attacks deemed slanderous or libelous.

As outlined by these officials in interviews, the White House plan is to present a proposed law intended to overcome a landmark 1964 Supreme Court decision granting newspapers virtual immunity against libel suits by public officials.

While some Justice Dept. lawyers and other libel attorneys question whether such legislation can overturn a Supreme Court decision, the move appears certain to kindle new controversy in Nixon's relations with the media.

Hint Given

And it could lead eventually to a historic legal confrontation on the Constitution's freedom of the press clause.

The President himself volunteered fleeting mention of his proposal in his news conference last night, but he didn't divulge his instructions to the Justice Dept. Aides said he planned to make that disclosure tomorrow when he sends Congress

his campaign reform package.

According to White House officials familiar with Nixon's views on the issue, the President believes the Supreme Court has gone too far in interpreting the Constitution to protect the media against libel suits by public officials and public figures.

Another White House official said Nixon thinks "the pendulum has swung too far" in favor of the press and that the Supreme Court "has legislated libel and slander laws" to the detriment of public officials and public figures.

Cite '64 Decision

Both these Presidential aides singled out the Supreme Court's 1964 decision in a libel case brought against The New York Times by L. B. Sullivan, then a Montgomery, Ala., city official.

Sullivan, who was in charge of Montgomery's police department won a \$500,000 state court suit over an advertisement in The Times criticizing his department's handling of racial demonstrations.

The Supreme Court, in overturning the libel award, held that a public official cannot collect damages unless he proves a defamatory statement was made "with knowledge it was false or with reckless disregard of whether it was false or not."

This made it virtually impossible for a public official to successfully sue for libel unless he could prove malice was involved.

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