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Repair Job for the Presidential Image

Jody Powell, who as White House press secretary is keeper of the Carter image, has decided he must do a better job.

He told a reporter for Newsday recently that he is going to spend less time briefing the regulars of the White House press corps and more time helping the administration get its message across. Apparently those tasks are not mutually inclusive.

That is probably a good idea. In addition to the publicized strains between the White House and Capitol Hill, and the resulting legislative shambles, a couple of recent occurrences have tarnished the presidential image.

Both of them center on Richard Helms, the former CIA director who performed the remarkable feat of concealing that he had been less than truthful under oath and at the same time taking a hero's bow.

That was a good trick on Helms's part, but it left the Carter folks, who engineered the whole deal, in the position of having let an erring big shot off with a wrist slap. And it was done in a way that caused reporters to mutter darkly about their remembrances of things past.

Contrary to normal practice, Attorney General Griffin Bell and his aides kept the charges against Helms sealed until the deal was consummated. Also contrary to normal practice, they made sure that no reporters would be in the courtroom when Helms copped his plea.

Inconveniencing the press is far from

the worst Washington sin. But the whole performance had an under-the-table flavor that was not quite harmonious with the image of an open administration. Beyond that, the Helms case caused another little incident that gave the President's press people some uneasy moments.

In September Carter was asked about the case and how he was dealing with it. He pleaded ignorance, saying that Attorney General Bell had not consulted with him on it.

"I am familiar with it through reading in the press," he said, adding: "I

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have no way to know yet the seriousness of the offense with which he will be charged [the White House later changed that to "may be charged]." When he got the information, he said, he would certainly talk to the Attorney General.

But after the Helms deal was closed, Bell told reporters he had met with the President and others on the case in the White House on July 25. At that meeting, he said, he received a presidential okay to look into plea bargaining.

The contradiction resulted in a front-page headline in The Boston Globe the next morning declaring, "Carter, Bell Statements at Odds." That, in turn, set off a long hassle—11 transcript pages of it—between reporters and Deputy

Press Secretary Rex Granum at the White House.

Granum gave the same explanation he had given The Globe: Carter thought the press knew about the July 25 meeting. What he meant in his news-conference response was that there had been no meeting since then.

Why did he think that? Well, said Granum, Jody Powell had "a very strong recollection" that he told some reporters about the July meeting. Powell has not said who those reporters were, and none has come forward.

Yesterday at his news conference the President offered a different explanation. He said the July 25 meeting was not a "thorough discussion" and it left unsettled the specific issue raised at the September news conference—that is, whether a trial might jeopardize national secrets. He didn't explain his September statement that Bell had not consulted with him, nor did he mention Granum's explanation of the contradiction.

There is more involved in all this than some out-of-joint journalistic noses. Which brings us back to Powell's image-repairing mission. Amplifying the Newsday story, Powell told a Washington Post reporter that one of the things he is going to do is pay more attention to the Washington columnists who comment on politics and public affairs.

In recent weeks they have been depicting an administration in disarray and even nibbling at the idea of a one-term President. Powell thinks they

need to be better informed on what is going on in the White House, and that he is the man to do the job.

Well, the columnists are woefully (history has shown that they respond to a little bit of high-level love) and they are worth wooing. They not only influence the public and each other; they also influence in a subtle way the hard-news reporters whose work appears on front pages and on the news broadcast casts. By their comments, they help set the Washington news agenda—what the press is particularly interested in at any given moment.

But there is a pitfall for Powell here. The Helms case has identified Carter and his Good Ole Boys with the old-line Washington establishment as surely as if they all had started to hit the Georgetown party circuit. And Carter's opponent, at least, on his involvement in the early Helms discussion had a staid Washington smell.

The journalistic movers and shakers Powell intends to court are, for the most part, establishment people. He faces the job of courting them without binding the administration more closely to the old Washington the President ran against last year.

In any case, here is a tip for customers of the news business: Watch your favorite Washington column. See if the President, who has been floundering, suddenly begins to catch on and function in a statesmanlike fashion.

If that happens, send a congratulatory note to Jody Powell.