

FORD RD

Ron Nessen, President Ford's press secretary, gets annoyed at the suggestion that he's just "another Ron"

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That Stern Front Man For Ford



Washington.

Ron Nessen thrusts another cigaret smack into the middle of his mouth, lights up, inhales deeply and pauses. A White House reporter has just asked him whether David Bruce will be the next ambassador to NATO.

Nessen stuffs a hand into his natty suit, sips ice water, then somberly replies, "I have no announcements on that today." The announcement is made the following day.

Nessen, a 40-year-old former NBC correspondent who distinguished himself by his coverage of Vietnam, must now face his one-time colleagues as Gerald Ford's press secretary and the glib patter of his TV reports has been replaced by stiff, studied, halting replies.

The Nessen sternness, exaggerated by icy looks from under an arched brow, have caused some White House correspondents to compare this Ron to another Ron — Ziegler. Nessen recoils at the suggestion.

"Why another Ziegler?"

he asks. "If I'm serious, it's because this is a very serious job. I've been told that if I make a mistake on a domestic issue, it can cause a flap, but if I make a mistake on a foreign policy issue, it can cause a war. But I do try to inject a little humor. Don't I?"

In person, Nessen certainly seems relaxed. Sitting with his feet on his desk in the privacy of his gray and red office, he is surrounded by pictures of his Korean wife, Young Hi Song (whom everyone calls Cindy), and his children, Edward, one and a half, and Caren, 18.

Nessen's family is highly important to him, and one of the reasons he left NBC for his new assignment was the desire to spend more time with his wife and children.

There were other reasons, too. One was to become a participant in history, rather than a spectator; another might have been, according to sources at NBC, that Nessen had gone about as far as he could go with the network.

"I decided to take the job really because after 18 years of being a Washington journalist, always on the outside looking in — what they call a professional observer — I got the itch to be a participant," says Nessen.

"And when the opportunity to participate on this high a level presents itself, there is an awfully strong pull to it. John Chancellor and I have talked about it often. That's why he took a pay cut to head Voice of America under Lyndon Johnson.

"John Scali (who was with ABC) did the same thing. He left the news business, too, to go to the United Nations.

"There's an obvious excitement about being on the inside, getting the inside look; seeing how things run, being a part of history."

Nessen's impressions so far are that "not only do people work harder than I thought, but the machinery of the bureaucracy is much more complicated than I had suspected. I covered Ford and Johnson. I thought I knew what went on in

here, but it's much more complex."

Is that complexity the reason he sometimes hedges reporters' questions? Or is he under instructions from the White House to keep some things from the press?

"No," says Nessen, with a look of horror. "It's just because with all that goes on here, it's impossible to keep it all in hand. Some decisions I'm asked about have not quite been made, or the President hasn't quite said, 'That's the way we're going to do it.'"

"Some questions I just haven't asked the President yet. Besides, I'm here to announce and explain the President's policy, not to make it."

What's it like being on the receiving end of questions? Is the adversary relationship still there?

"You know, I have a lot more information to give out every day than gets out because the press only asks questions about what they're interested in."

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