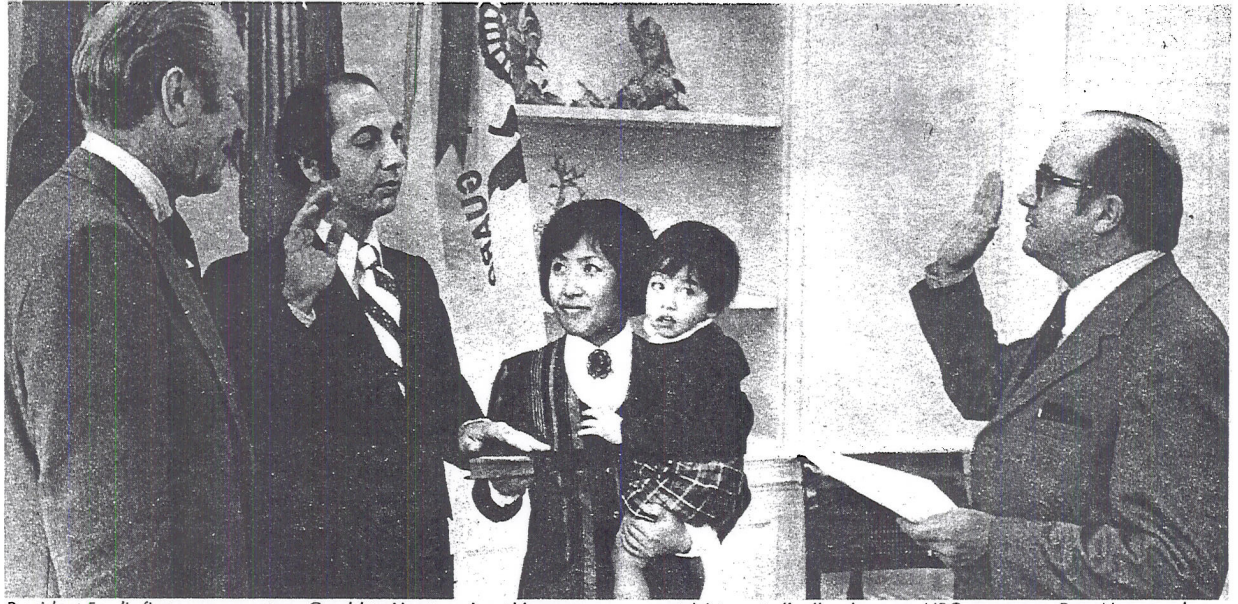


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on the cover
Ron Nessen With His Wife and Son—
President Ford's Press
Secretary Promises:
'I Will Never Knowingly Lie'
by Lloyd Shearer



DEC 8 1974



President Ford's first press secretary, Gerald terHorst, resigned because he disagreed with Ford's pardon of Nixon. Ford had a hard time finding

a replacement, finally chose ex-NBC newsman Ron Nessen, shown above at the swearing-in ceremony with wife Cindy and son Edward.

Ron Nessen, President Ford's Press Secretary:

"I Will Never Knowingly Lie"

by Lloyd Shearer

WASHINGTON, D.C.

Ronald Nessen, 40, press secretary to President Gerald Ford, claims he is laboring under one of the severest problems known to any press secretary—"living down the atmosphere created in the White House by five years of Ron Ziegler.

"Ziegler," he forcefully maintains, "built up in the press corps a mood of suspicion and cynicism and distrust that hasn't gone away. Consequently I am constantly being measured against Ziegler to see if there are any similarities. So my big problem is to live down Ziegler. It will take time, but that's what I'm trying to do."

Ronald Ziegler was and still is—at least at this writing—Richard Nixon's press secretary.

A pleasant, personable, well-dressed young man of 35, Ziegler, in the opinion of many veteran Washington newsmen, was the least competent White House press secretary employed by any U.S. President in the past 50 years. A slavish acolyte of Harry R. "Bob" Haldeman, Nixon's chief of staff and possibly the single most dangerous, press-hating

Presidential adviser of modern times, Ziegler for almost six years pursued a policy of disseminating useless, misleading, deceptive, self-serving, and fraudulent information to a press corps suffering from mounting frustration.

In all fairness to Ziegler, it was not he who originated the policy of treating the members of the news media as lepers. That policy originated with Haldeman whose hatred of the press has been visceral and vengeful.

Under orders

Ziegler simply did what he was told, and since the Nixon Administration was scandal-ridden, he was told to cover up. Thus his press briefings became exercises in obfuscation, delay, deceit, and feigned indignation.

After years of fruitlessly objecting to unresponsiveness, negativism, and downright hostility, the White House press corps, of which Nessen was a sometimes member, grew understandably to distrust Ron Ziegler. One correspondent cracked, "When Ziegler says 'good morning,' I doubt it." An-

other suggested that Ziegler's epitaph would consist of one word, "Inoperative." All of which is why, when on Sept. 20 President Ford appointed Nessen his new press secretary, Nessen remarked: "I hope the White House press corps is ready for another Ron. I am a Ron, but not a Ziegler. I can tell you that.

"I do want to say a couple of things," he continued to his former colleagues. "One is that I will never knowingly lie to the White House press corps. I will never knowingly mislead the White House press corps, and I think, if I ever do, you would be justified in questioning my continued usefulness in this job.

"My concept of the job is that a press secretary does not always have to agree with the decisions of the President. I think a press secretary's job is to report to you the actions of the President, why he has taken the actions, how he has arrived at the action.

"I don't think that the press secretary and the press are natural antagonists . . . but I think we have the same aim, which is to get as much news as pos-

sible about what goes on in this place to the American people."

Nessen's declared occupational philosophy is idealistic and desirable but most probably beyond realization. His first loyalty is to President Ford, not to the press, and his primary job is to make the President look good under all circumstances—no easy task, since Ford is not particularly creative, innovative, colorful or imaginative. In 25 years as a Congressman his name appeared not once on any single piece of major legislation. Basically he is a decent, wholesome, too-trusting, well-liked, industrious conservative, given on occasion to "misspeaking" and tortuous use of syntax.

For example, after he had been sworn in as Vice President, Ford gave a brief speech to a joint session of Congress in which he said emotionally: "For standing by my side, as she always has, there are no words to tell you, my dear wife and mother of our four wonderful children, how much their being here means to me."

As time goes on and Ford's programs

and appointees are publicly scrutinized, Nessen will find himself increasingly in the position of defending as well as explaining the President. Gradually his relationship with the press will develop into an adversary, although hopefully a good-natured, one, because while Nessen may have a quick temper, he is essentially an honest man of goodwill with a friendly sense of humor and a deep respect for the abilities and parameters of newsmen.

If asked to lie or deceive the press corps, he will resign, he says. "I would also resign from this job," he avers, "if any of the President's senior staff members mislead me so that I in turn mislead the press corps, because then my credibility would be gone, and I couldn't serve the President."

When asked how he might react "should President Ford or his advisers leave you out of the play as obviously they left your predecessor Jerry terHorst out of the Nixon pardoning," Nessen says, "I haven't been in this job very long, but I've had a couple of pleasant surprises since I took office, and one is that I am in on more meetings with the President and his senior advisers, both formal and informal, than I thought I would be, and as far as I can tell I'm getting all the information there is to get to do my job. I thought originally that as press secretary I'd see the President maybe once a day on a regular scheduled appointment, say at 9 or 10 in the morning. Well, it's much more frequent than that. The same thing holds true for my sessions with his senior advisers. I wander into their offices many times a day, and they wander into mine. It's very informal."

Contributing factors?

Why after 19 years as a working newsman—one with The Montgomery County Sentinel, six with United Press International, and 12 with NBC—did Ronald Nessen decide to work the government side of the tracks? Had he reached a salary plateau of \$50,000 a year with NBC? Was he miffed because NBC had brought in Tom Brokaw from Los Angeles as the network's White

House correspondent? Was he scheduled for assignment in Hong Kong and decided that he'd had enough of the Far East and Southeast Asia?

"Two main reasons," he explains, "why I took the job. One was that I met Gerald Ford when I was assigned to cover him by NBC the morning after he was appointed Vice President and I followed him during his entire time as Vice President. At the beginning it was a small press corps who traveled with him: Marjorie Hunter of The New York Times, Phil Jones of CBS, David Kennerly of Time, myself and a few others. We flew on one plane, and the President is a gregarious man. He spent a lot of time in our compartment, or we went up and spent a lot of time in his. He's an extremely likable man. I got to like him very much, so that's one reason.

Journalistic question

"The other reason I guess is that many people in the news business get an itch to participate in events instead of just observing and reporting them. I mean I've been assigned to cover all the major events of our time, all the elections of the past 20 years, five trips to the Vietnam war, the civil rights marches in the 1960's, the capture of Che Guevara in Bolivia. I simply reached a point in my life where I ran and covered and wondered why I was always standing on the sidelines watching, why not participate?"

"I'm 40 years old, and when President Ford offered me the job I decided to take it. I hope to model myself after Jim Hagerty who was Eisenhower's press secretary and probably the best of modern times. I'd also like to adopt Pierre Salinger's grace and good humor, and I hope I can achieve the same level of respect that Jerry terHorst achieved in the short time he held down the job."

Ronald Nessen was born in the old Sibley Hospital in Washington, D.C., on May 25, 1934, the first of the two children of Frederick and Ida Nessen. He has a sister five years his junior, Mrs. Sheila Wiron, who lives in Silver Spring, Md.

Nessen's father was a merchant, origi-

nally from Boston, who set up dime stores and subsequently a small chain of furniture and jewelry shops around Capitol Hill. In 1968 a holdup man entered Frederick's as the store on 8th Street S.E. was called, shot Fred Nessen twice in the chest. Fortunately he recovered. With his wife, who had worked beside him in their various stores for 38 years, he then retired to North Miami where two years ago he died of cancer.

His son, Ron, was reared in Washington, attended the local schools, Shepherd Park, Calvin Coolidge High School, was graduated from American University, a history major, who, according to one of his professors, "wrote an outstanding paper on Hannibal Hamelin, Abraham Lincoln's first Vice President."

Nessen's mother Ida—"I'm a Jewish mother but a rather shy one"—says, "Ron, always knew what he wanted to do from the time he was a little fella. He always wanted to write or to be in journalism. He was an honor student all through school and he always worked hard. He would help us out in the store over holidays. He was like his father, ambitious and industrious. In a way he had to, he got married when he was only 21."

A first marriage

Nessen doesn't like to dwell on his first marriage to the former Sandra Lee Frey who was divorced from him in 1964, remarried, lives in Rock Island, Ill. The couple had one child, a daughter, Caren, 18, who attends the University of Iowa.

He prefers to discuss his present wife, the former Young Hi Song, 39, of Pusan, South Korea, who named herself "Cindy" when she broke in as a 17-year-old singer, entertaining the GI's in Korea in 1952.

"I went to Vietnam in 1965," Nessen recalls, "and I'd been there just a short time—I guess about a month—and we had a Korean cameraman with whom I worked a lot. This cameraman—everyone called him "Youie"—introduced me to Cindy who was on a singing tour. It was a Saturday night. Next morning I was supposed to leave Saigon and cover a battle somewhere, and she was scheduled to go on to Bangkok. I figured I wouldn't see her again, but when I got back I learned that Cindy had apparently been attracted enough to me to postpone her trip to Bangkok. We started going with each other. Then she canceled the rest of her tour and just sang in Saigon.

Dangerous assignment

"We went together the whole time I was in Saigon," Nessen continues, "about eleven months. Then in July of '66 I was out covering a battle between the 101st Airborne and the North Vietnamese. I was injured by a hand-grenade fragment, and I was evacuated to Walter Reed Hospital in Washington. But she was a Korean citizen and had to

remain behind."

Cindy Nessen recalls that particular period painfully. "Trying to get a visa to the United States was not easy. I couldn't get one in Saigon. I couldn't get one in Hong Kong. I went to Taipei, and there was so much red tape, I was getting real sick and couldn't work and lost so much weight. Finally I got one, but when I landed in New York I was so skinny, only 85 pounds. I looked so bad, I was so afraid to face Ron that I hid behind a big man.

"Anyway we got married in January, 1967, at the Carlyle Hotel but we didn't live in New York City very long. NBC moved us to Mexico City. A year later we were assigned to Washington, and that's where our son Edward was born. He's only 20 months old."

Changing Life

Mrs. Nessen generates mixed feelings when discussing her husband's new position. "We were all ready to go to Hong Kong," she explains, "when President Ford offered Ron the job, and he took it. I really left the decision up to him. It's my Korean background not to know everything. But now I know that the job takes long, long hours.

"Sometimes I wonder what I'm doing sitting here with the baby every day and every night, worrying about little problems in the house. Ron comes home one o'clock in the morning exhausted. I can't bother him with little things.

"It is still a little too early to learn what his job will do to our life, how I will fit into it. I guess I am a little self-conscious because I am foreign."

In 1970 the Nessens went out to Korea to visit Cindy's family and arranged to bring her three brothers, her mother, and her dog back to Washington where they're all prospering.

Early reports

How Nessen is doing as the President's press secretary is difficult to assess at this point. Newsmen agree that he is, as one so pithily puts it, "a million light years better than Ziegler, and who is not?" Others say that he is "still feeling his way . . . He is no terHorst . . . He genuinely tries to be helpful . . . He's learning fast . . . This is the period of his apprenticeship, and we've gotta be patient . . . Ron's got a flip sense of humor . . . Many of us were surprised when he decided to keep Jerry Warren on [Gerald Warren was Ron Ziegler's deputy] . . . Ron seems to thrive on work . . . He's got a real short fuse . . . Eventually he'll get cut up in the crossfire trying to serve the President, trying to serve the press, and still trying to retain his integrity . . . He's a new man in a new team and he's getting roughed up."

Nessen, in short, has his work cut out for him. Compared to life on the White House firing line, daily serving three masters—the press, the President and himself—he will realize longingly, if he hasn't already, that working for NBC was a cool-cool breeze.



Nessen mounts the firing line twice a day to brief the White House press corps. He's a new man trying to handle a tough job and they give him a rough time.