

All Is Back to Normal in the White House Press Room: Grumbles

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WASHINGTON, Jan 30 — Things are normal in the White House press room. The reporters who regularly cover the President are grumbling about the faults, real and imagined, of the Presidential press secretary, Ron Nessen, and Mr. Nessen, if he has no harsh complaints about the press corps, has at least some disappointments.

The atmosphere is all very different from what it was when President Nixon was in office. Then a virtual state of war existed between the White House press corps and Ronald L. Ziegler, the press secretary. Now it's rather like border sniping. Or as Variety, the daily show business newspaper put it recently, "Ron Nessen—is he fading with D.C. newsmen?"

Fifty or so newspaper, magazine, television and radio reporters are regularly assigned by their offices to cover the President, and the assignment is considered in the profession to be among the most important in Washington journalism. Likewise, the job of Presidential press secretary is one of the most important in this city, since the secretary is the main conduit through which Presidential policies and pronouncements and even foibles are made public.

A Balancing of Views

There are several built-in problems in the press secretary job, the most important being the need to balance what the press secretary conceives his job to be against what the President often perceives as the secretary's proper role.

Many secretaries begin seeing themselves as mere dispensers of information. When Mr. Nessen was appointed to the job in September he vowed never to "knowingly lie" to the press, announced that he did not believe that the press secretary always had to agree with the President and said that he would not become a salesman for the President.

Some reporters think he has shaded the truth at times, although that is not a major criticism of him. No one knows whether or not he always agrees with the President. Mr. Nessen says now that the "job looks a lot different to me

than it did when I came here, and I can no longer be precise about drawing the line between giving an explanation of the President's policies, which is my job, and salesmanship."

Nearly to a man most of the White House reporters believe that Mr. Nessen has become a salesman for the President's energy and economic policies. At a recent press briefing, for instance, he delivered a long commentary on the dangers of gasoline rationing—which the President opposes—and delivered it not in response to a reporter's question but because he wanted to.

Mr. Nessen, 40 years old, came to the job from NBC-TV, where he was the White House correspondent. He is articulate, about medium height and baldish. He dresses somewhat modestly, has a tendency toward pudginess and chain smokes through his daily press briefings, which are scheduled each morning for 11:30 A.M. but usually start about 20 or 30 minutes late.

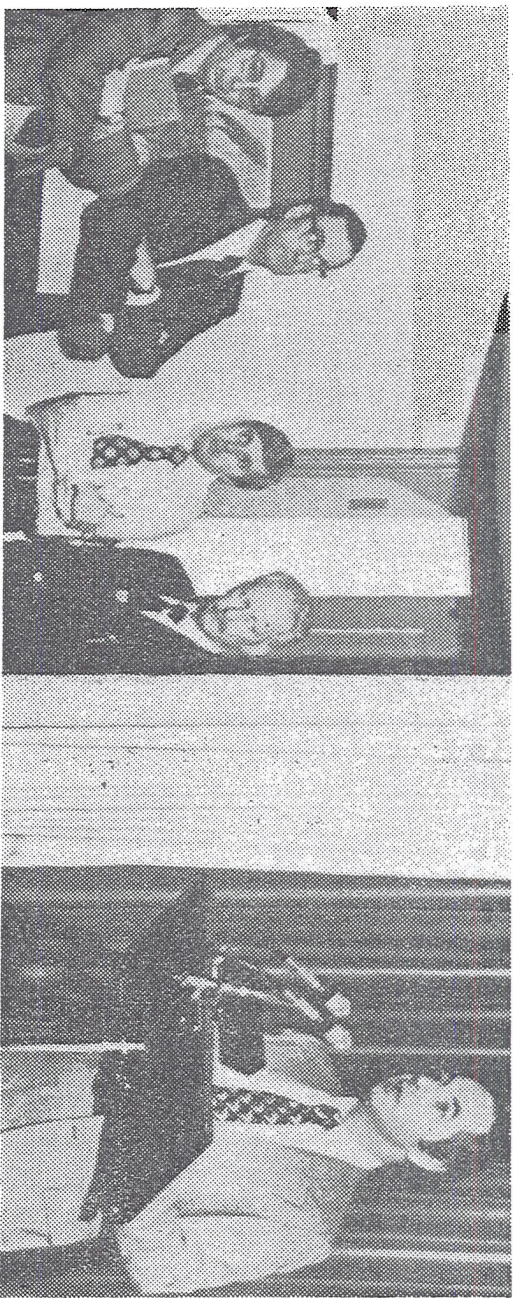
He generally opens with a joke, partly because that's the nature of the man and partly as a device to relax the years of tension that developed between Mr. Ziegler and the White House press. Most reporters give him credit for relaxing the President Ford's budget yesterday.

Because of that, Mr. Nessen ordered an advance copy of the President's Economic Message withheld from the paper until deadline time and banned the paper from a briefing on the message.

On some occasions Mr. Nessen, who is known to have a rather volatile temper, can be preachy. Last month, for instance, he scolded a reporter, accusing him of being disrespectful in questioning Rogers C. B. Morton, the Secretary of the Interior. "I would like to remind you again of something I said before about the need for civility in the press room," the secretary said.

Another time, when a reporter started chucking in a press briefing, Mr. Nessen snapped at him, "How would you answer that question if you were press secretary — a job you would dearly love to have?"

Some reporters feel that Mr. Nessen has a tendency to let his temper get the better of him. Thus, they feel, he overreacted when the Washington Star-News broke the White House release date on President Ford's budget yesterday. Because of that, Mr. Nessen ordered an advance copy of the President's Economic Message withheld from the paper until deadline time and banned the paper from a briefing on the message.



Ron Nessen, White House press secretary, at the lectern as members of his staff stood in the doorway.

The New York Times/Mike Lien

One of the complaints about the press secretary is that the press office he runs is inefficient. Thus, on President Ford's trip to the Far East last month, press briefings were often held in the middle of the night, some reporters were never told that the press briefings were being held and frequently neither Mr. Nessen nor his aides could be found to answer questions when they were needed. For all of this, he later apologized.

In his own defense, he says that the job of press secretary "looks fairly simple from the outside, but that it really involves complicated machinery" whose handling it took him some time to learn. Reporters generally agree with this assessment of the job.

There are areas in which Mr. Nessen deserves high praise, most White House reporters believe he has, for example, apparent ready access to the Pres-

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ident, and when he speaks about how the President feels on some situation, reporters can be fairly sure that that indeed is how the President feels.

In fact, some members of the press corps criticize Mr. Nessen because they think that he is more concerned with helping to make policy than to giving out news about policy. Similar criticism has been made about other Presidential press secretaries.

At Mr. Nessen's suggestion, President Ford became the first President to allow "follow-up" questions at his news conferences, meaning that a reporter, after listening to the President's answers to a first question, could ask a second question on the subject.

An Open White House

Largely because of Mr. Ford the White House is probably more open to reporters than it has been since the early days of President Lyndon B. Johnson. That is because Mr. Ford does not seem either to fear or dislike reporters.

If the reporters have their usual complaints about the press secretary he in turn has some unusual complaints about them. Mr. Nessen says, for instance, that he spends about five hours each morning preparing for the morning press briefing and is "surprised how little homework the reporters do."

He has told friends that the caliber of questioning is such that most often he never gives out much more than 20 per cent of the answers he is prepared to make.

When asked about it he puts the percentage somewhat higher, conceding that "I was no better when I covered the White House" and adds that he is disappointed in the press corps.

Mr. Nessen cited a number of examples of news events in recent weeks on which he received no questions at his news briefings although he had been prepared, often with quotes from the President.

He arrives each day at the press briefing with a large loose-leaf notebook jammed with information—often including long quotes from the President.

No Question on Topic

On a recent day, for instance, there was a news article that the Chinese had canceled a contract to purchase 601,000 tons of wheat from the United States. At his press briefing, not one question was asked about it.

In the same day's papers, there were accounts of the withdrawal of 1,000 Turkish troops from Cyprus, about a Latin-American Foreign Ministers' meeting, about the United States' asking the Soviet Union to explain a possible violation of the 1972 agreement on limitation of strategic arms and about the White House's asking the courts to allow it to send a substantial number of former President Nixon's papers to him in California.

The briefing lasted 54 minutes, and not one question was asked about any of those news events, the official transcript of the briefing shows.

"The format of these briefings is question and answer, and it bothers me—the question how much should I volunteer when I'm waiting for questions?" Mr. Nessen says. "Where is the line? I fear if I volunteer people are going to say I'm using salesmanship for the President, or we are trying to manage the news. I can't tell the press what news they are not going to get out by not asking the questions."
