

Nessen Attacks Reporters as Cynical

By JAMES M. NAUGHTON

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, June 26—Ron Nessen, the White House press Secretary, accused some members of the White House press corps today of "blind, mindless, irrational suspicion and cynicism" and said that he was thinking of altering the format of his daily news briefings.

The denunciation of unidentified reporters followed a relatively mild clash at Mr. Nessen's noontime briefing over interpretations of President Ford's policy on the use of nuclear weapons. But it came after several weeks of increasingly hostile confrontations between a handful of the 50 or 60 regular White House correspondents and the President's spokesman.

"I think that some people here are too quick to make unsubstantiated charges or implications that I am lying or that my credibility has been destroyed," Mr. Nessen said in a steady voice as he read from notes prepared before the briefing.

He said later, in an interview, that he nearly resigned three weeks ago after an acrimonious briefing at which one journalist called Mr. Nessen "a liar," and two others asked him if the White House was engaged in a "cover-up" of alleged plots by the Central Intelligence Agency to assassinate foreign political leaders.

Door Left Open

Mr. Nessen also left open the possibility that he would resign his White House post if what he called the "poisonous atmosphere" of the briefings did not abate.

"I only have one commodity," he told the interviewer. "If I lose my credibility, then I do have to go."

The outburst, which Mr. Nessen said later he regretted, underscored the difficult and, in the view of some, irreconcilable problems of both the White House and the news media in coming to terms with the skepticism over official pronouncements that is a legacy of Watergate.

Reporters who discovered, through the Senate Watergate hearings and the impeachment proceedings, how little they had penetrated the secrecy of the White House under President Nixon have tended to view Mr. Ford's assurances of openness with doubt. Mr. Nessen has, conversely, expressed private frustration that his word is questioned and, occasionally, doubted in public.

"This President has been in office for 10 months now," he said at the briefing today. "I

think that is more than enough time for this blind, mindless, irrational suspicion and cynicism and distrust to evaporate."

He said that he had not cleared his remarks with Mr. Ford, and that the President had "kidded" him about the briefing conflicts.

"If these briefings are going to serve the public and, in fact, if we are going to continue to have briefings in their present form, I think the atmosphere has got to change," Mr. Nessen said.

The briefings, a stylized ritual that often produces more sound than information, are regarded as sacrosanct by some journalists who report on the White House. Several of them asked Mr. Nessen today if he was making a "threat" to abolish them.

He at first declined to answer, later said that he was only considering a change in procedure and ultimately said, in the interview, that he and his aides would spend the coming weekend at Camp David, the Presidential retreat in Maryland, discussing whether there were better methods of providing information.

"I get paid to go out there and take the heat," He said. "But I also get paid to go out there and give out information, and that's not happening."

Predecessor Resigned

Mr. Nessen was appointed press secretary after his predecessor, J. F. terHorst, resigned last Sept. 8 in a protest over Mr. Ford's grant of an unconditional pardon to Mr. Nixon. Mr. terHorst told friends that his credibility had been undermined when, acting on assurances from others in the White House, he had led reporters to believe that a pardon would not be granted.

Difficulties that Mr. Nessen has encountered stem from similar uncertainty that his are the last words on White House matters.

He said in the interview that his resentment dated from the acrimonious June 6 briefing that centered on a then-pending report on C.I.A. activities prepared by a commission headed by Vice President Rockefeller.

Mr. Rockefeller and others on the commission had advised reporters that the report would contain a section on alleged C.I.A. assassination plots. There was, accordingly, open doubt at the June 6 briefing about Mr. Nessen's statement that the commission had never meant to include the assassination material in its report and that Mr. Ford had not intervened to have the material excised.

The President said at a June 9 news conference, however, that he had made the decision that the assassination material

was too sensitive to be made public now.

More recently, Mr. Nessen said that he was not aware of an unannounced meeting on June 18 between the President and John B. Connally, the former Secretary of the Treasury and a putative challenger of Mr. Ford for the 1976 Republican Presidential nomination. Reporters questioned whether Mr. Nessen could serve as the White House spokesman if he were unaware of such sensitive events.

Mr. Nessen said today that he had been reminded that another aide told him of the meeting shortly before it took place. He said that it had "slipped my mind" when the subject was raised at a briefing several days later.

At one point in his briefing today, Mr. Nessen volunteered the view that some reports on Mr. Ford's news conference yesterday had made a "serious mistake" by interpreting the President's remarks to mean that there was a new policy of keeping open the option of using nuclear weapons first in the event of an emergency.

Mr. Ford twice declined to say, at the news conference, if he would approve the first use of nuclear weapons.

Mr. Nessen contended today that some news accounts suggesting a new policy stemmed from a "false premise" in a question posed to Mr. Ford. The premise was that the United States has consistently disavowed a first use of nuclear weapons.

Previous Administrations have said that they opposed nuclear war in principle, but retained the option of using nuclear weapons if the security of the United States or of its European allies was immediately threatened by conventional military forces.

But Helen Thomas, a longtime White House correspondent for United Press International, who asked Mr. Ford the question, and others took issue with Mr. Nessen's interpretation, with his remark that "a lot of us on both sides don't know what we're talking about" and with his suggestion that the briefing be interrupted so "corrections" could be written by reporters.

In his office after the briefing, Mr. Nessen contended that he wanted to "open the briefings, not close them," and that the press's mistrust blocked his intentions.