

SFChronicle

DEC 12 1975

How Nessen Upset

By Martin Schram
Newsday

Honolulu

For President Ford, the Peking summit had its moments of professional success. For his press secretary, Ron Nessen, the Peking summit was a professional disaster.

Analysis
and
Opinion

The President's sweep through the Pacific ended with members of the White House press corps embittered, virtually unanimously, over what they felt was Nessen's inept performance. More accurately, his lack of performance, his failure to really carry out the role of the press secretary.

Press secretaries and the press often find themselves squared off in skirmishes over one issue or another; the conflict is inherent with the roles of the two sides.

But never before, in the memory of veteran White House reporters, has a press secretary done as poorly on a trip abroad as Nessen did on this trip. And never before has this opinion been shared so unanimously and discussed so openly among the divergent group of journalists that make up the White House press corps.

It got so reporters were discussing the Nessen situation in dining rooms, press rooms, airplanes, bars, making no effort to change the topic of conversation just because a White House official happened to come within earshot.

One of the major criticisms of Nessen's performance was that he

Reporters
claimed that
he was not
accessible
in Peking



was not performing very much at all. He was hardly ever around the press rooms or the White House press office, hardly ever available for consultation by reporters. At least a half dozen respected reporters complained at various times that they could not reach Nessen by telephone and that when they left messages for Nessen, the messages went unanswered. Other, high-ranking Ford officials were far more accessible than Nessen, the one man whose job it is to be available to reporters.

Most of the time, Nessen was living the high life of a member of the President's official party, shuttling around in the country's best cars, being wined and dined, living in plush quarters near the President, rather than living at the Min Zu Hotel where reporters and the rest of Nessen's press staff were staying.

At the end of the Peking summit, Secretary of State Henry

Kissinger had some sharp criticism for the reporting that had been done. But Kissinger in subsequent private conversations seemed naively unaware that the problem (if indeed it can be called a problem) of the articles that came out of the summit was the fault of the White House, and Kissinger himself, in failing to get the information to reporters — and at times putting out wrong information.

Take the case of the non-communicate. At about 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, Nessen materialized at the press headquarters and told reporters that at a midnight meeting Tuesday, Kissinger and Chinese Foreign Minister Chiao Kuan-hua had decided that there would be no communique issued at the close of this summit, as there is at the close of most summit conferences. There was no explanation of why the information about a decision that had been made at midnight had been

the Press

held almost an entire day.

More important, Nessen could not or would not provide any other information about why there would be no communique. He only offered the standard bit of flackery that reporters should not view this as an indication that the talks were not going well.

One could hardly expect a press agent to come out and tell reporters that the President's summit was flopping and so reporters put little stock in Nessen's press agency once he could not back it up with any other information. And on the basis of there being no other hard facts or even explanation, reporters could only write that (1) the night before China's vice premier had given a stern foreign policy lecture to Mr. Ford on the dangers of detente in their public banquet toasts; and (2) now there was to be no communique. It sounded, to many reporters, ominous.

Then in his press conference at the summit's close, Kissinger gave a version that differed significantly from Nessen's. Kissinger said that the "preliminary" decision not to have a communique was made way back in October, on his visit to Peking to lay the groundwork for the President's summit talks; this old decision was merely being ratified in the midnight meeting Kissinger had with the foreign minister.

Someone — Nessen or Kissinger — clearly was not telling the truth. Kissinger's version seems more accurate, largely because two U.S. officials close to the secretary had said in Washington before Mr. Ford left for Peking that it was likely there would be no communique on the Peking summit this trip.

In his press conference, Kissinger went on to explain why there would be no communique, an explanation that could have been given by Nessen much earlier. He said the two sides had not advanced their positions on such things as the key outstanding issue, Taiwan, and that this was why there would be no communique. This lack of progress on the Taiwan issue was fine with the United States, which does not want to break off relations with Taiwan at this time and which was glad that Peking was not pressuring Mr. Ford on this.

At one point during the President's stay in Peking, Susan Ford was mysteriously summoned from a lavish luncheon about to be served at the Ming tombs. The reason was a hastily arranged meeting with Mao Tse-tung. Reporters, who were not given the reason, tried to find out why she left, but Nessen refused to help. Instead, he played a juvenile pass-the-buck game, foisting it all on a young junior aide to Betty Ford's press secretary.

In all, perhaps the reporters' unhappiness with Nessen is traceable back to Kissinger and his penchant for secrecy — his desire to keep as many details from the public as is possible, as often as possible. But good press secretaries are always smart enough and influential enough to see that overzealous secrecy could be dangerous to a President and then to convince the President and his other officials of this.

Other press secretaries, including President Kennedy's man, Pierre Salinger, who writes for the French magazine *L'Express* and who was on this trip as a correspondent from *New Times* magazine, used to deal with their

Committee Approves Stevens

Washington

The Senate Judiciary Committee, after less than a minute of discussion, gave unanimous approval yesterday to the nomination of John Paul Stevens for the Supreme Court.

Chairman James O. Eastland (Dem-Miss.) said he hoped the nomination will reach the Senate floor Monday, 16 days after President Ford named Stevens to replace retired Justice William O. Douglas.

Swift confirmation is expected for Stevens, 55-year-old judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals in Chicago.

The high court will recess Tuesday for the holidays and resume hearing cases January 12.

Washington Post

President for summit information; Nessen seems to have to get his mostly from Kissinger.

And this is still another problem because Kissinger does not like Nessen — has no use for him or respect for him, according to some sources — and this seems to be a roadblock to the rational functioning of the Ford staff.

Meanwhile, Nessen has staff problems of his own. His top deputy, William Greener, a savvy information man who seems better able than Nessen to sense what the press needs and how to get the facts to reporters, is being shifted out of the White House to become the Pentagon's spokesman.

So it is that the White House press office shows signs of sharp deterioration. And that is a bad thing for what Mr. Ford likes to think is an open administration.