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The House That Talks

By Russell Baker

WASHINGTON, Dec. 25—If anybody out there still reads the news from Washington, he will have noticed an eerie development. There is an awful lot of it—news, that is; or, more precisely, printed matter which fills newspaper space—but practically none of it comes from people any more.

The closest we have come in a long time to receiving news from a human being in the hire of the Administration who might have a bona fide claim to be classified as "people" were Professor Kissinger's twin news conferences—one, just before the re-election, when he announced that peace was at hand; the other, after the re-election, when he cried "April Fool!"

We also have Ronald Ziegler, authorized voice of the White House. His name is constantly in the Washington news. No matter how fascinating the news item, how absorbing the great issue in the day's headlines, Mr. Ziegler invariably has nothing to say about it except that he has nothing to say about it.

There are thousands of vital, news-worthy activities in which the White House is involved every day, and all that Mr. Ziegler will ever have to say about any of them is that he has nothing to say about any of them. Occasionally he may qualify this declaration with the phrase "at this time."

When he does so, presses shudder from Coast to Coast and bulletins spurt forth from Washington announcing that Mr. Ziegler may have something to say about something at some other time.

It would be cruel to laugh at the Washington reporters for clinging to the dry husk of a Ziegler statement that he may have something to say one of these days. With the shutoff of human voices ordered by the White House, Ziegler's is at least a name to lend a breath of humanity to their eerie reports.

It is very hard to appear credible in reporting events when the reporter's source of information is disembodied and ghostly. Note, for example, the insubstantial quality of the second sentence in the preceding paragraph. "A shutoff of human voices ordered by the White House..."

This phrase attempts to cover a good deal of ignorance with a pompous generality. The writer of phrases like this knows less than he is willing to concede. He knows that people in the

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Nixon Administration have stopped talking to the public, and he knows from experience that when men as ambition-ridden as these grow silent *en masse* it is invariably out of fear.

He knows also that no small fear can silence such men, but only a fear almost as terrible as the fear of God. And he knows, of course, that the ability to instill fear of that grandeur lies only in the White House. But where in the White House? Is it the President who will have them mum, or not at all? Is it some whim of Mrs. Nixon's to which the President, as docile husband, has generously acceded?

Is it perhaps someone in, or all the members of, the German General Staff surrounding the President, himself or themselves acceding to some dim genetic yearning in the blood for the old days of order, discipline and silence in the barracks at Pankow?

Who knows? Obviously not the man who writes about "a shutoff of human voices ordered by the White House." Houses don't order anything, even when they are white. Their roofs leak and their paint gets dirty, but they don't give orders that scare successful, well-to-do, ambitious men.

This illustrates the difficulty we all get into when people in the Government stop telling us what is going on, and let this important job go to white houses. The White House has been doing a lot of talking lately, and so has the Pentagon, whoever he is.

Usually, reporters, whose instincts are probably as decent as the average man's, cringe at the fakery involved in these pompous frauds and try to reduce the offense by referring to White House "sources," Pentagon "officials," "sources close to" this or that famous man or large building.

This is touching on the part of reporters hard-pressed by ulcerous editors to find out what is going on inside a government which, for paranoia and duplicity, would have delighted the Borgias, but it doesn't help us understand what is going on, and may even mislead us, as it did in the case of the royal gulling we had from the professor and the President, with the press' well-intentioned assistance, in the instance of the peace that was at hand on election eve.