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The Pants Way of Life

By Marlene Cimons
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HELEN THOMAS wore a black-and-white print dress to the White House the day after President Nixon told her he didn't like women in slacks, but—amid some gentle teasing from her colleagues—she said it didn't mean she was giving up pants forever.

"Hey, Helen, are you caving in?" one newsman asked, laughing, as he walked by. Miss Thomas, UPI White House correspondent, smiling, shook her head from side to side.

Even deputy White House press secretary Gerald Warren couldn't resist cracking: "I think I'll wear my kilt to work tomorrow."

"I won't stop wearing them," she said. "I plan to continue. Pantsuits are part of my way of life. I'm always in motion, jumping on and off helicopters, in and out of Air Force One, constantly on the run from one vacation resort to another — where casual attire is the thing."

Some of Miss Thomas' comrades in the White House press corps felt her response to the President was almost too diplomatic. "We're all on Helen's side around here, but we think she should have taken the President on," said Alan Lidow, of Golden West Broadcasters. "She was too nice."

Another newsman, who

did not wish to be identified, agreed.

"She was ridiculed," he said. "It was a cheap way for the President to get a laugh — at her expense."

The exchange occurred a week ago, in the Oval office, after a bill-signing ceremony. President Nixon stood up from his desk and said to Miss Thomas, who was wearing white slacks and a navy blue overblouse: "Helen, are you still wearing slacks?"

He asked her if they cost less than "gowns." No, she said. "Then change," he said, grinning, as the rest of the room erupted in laughter.

Miss Thomas did not challenge him. "I was not offended," she said. "I knew he was only trying to tease, to make small talk. It was not ill-meant."

Warren, listening to her comments, added: "Helen and the President have a very good rapport."

But, after Warren left, Miss Thomas said:

"It's pretty well-known the President does not like pant-

suits on women. His own daughter Julie says she doesn't even wear them, to walk the dog around the White House grounds. The President has not been out on the American scene enough to recognize that pants are just a trend—but a part of the American woman's wardrobe."

She has received several letters and telephone calls, all but one urging her not to give in. One postcard, from Hampton, Va., was critical:

"I just want you to know that I heartily concur with President Nixon's views on women who wear slacks in public. Your legs must really be something to be ashamed of if you lower yourself and show so little respect for the honor accorded you of being allowed in the White House . . . Why can't women be content to look like women and let men wear the long pants? To me you are a disgrace to womanhood."

Miss Thomas shrugged. "I don't think I've ever dressed improperly for the White

House," she said.

Miss Thomas does not think the incident will serve as an inhibiting fashion factor for White House visitors, both tourists and official reception guests. Helen Smith, press secretary for the First Lady, agreed.

Although dress standards have been relaxed in many government offices, pants have not become totally accepted for women in some of these places. On Capitol Hill, for example, where there are no official rules governing clothing, women aides wearing pantsuits have been harrassed upon attempting to enter the legislative chambers.

The crisis, however, does not yet appear to have affected the stream of tourists going through the White House. In hot, muggy weather women wear pantsuits, slacks, dungarees and shorts.

Mrs. Virginia Dorough, of Warner, Robins, Ga., in a white dacron pantsuit, said she thought it tasteful and proper.



* SFC, WXP. 7 MSZ, 73

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NEWSWOMAN HELEN THOMAS
"I won't stop wearing them"