

Ziggy Ron II

A Commentary

By Nicholas von Hoffman

Ron Ziegler was out of sight in the back of the White House, telling the reporters able to find him that he could too give the daily news briefing if he wanted, but he had larger responsibilities now. Whatever the actual state of his affairs, in the antechambers of the American imperial court where the media gathers to gossip and speculate, the impression is that the former Disneyland tour guide has had his undrammatical, rambling, mendacious mouth corked. It is thought with his recent promotion to the rank of gentleman companion of the royal bed chamber that his duties will henceforth be to inspect the monarch's sheets to make certain they are without soda cracker crumbs.

In the absence of the Ziggy Ron, who revealed more by lying than others might by telling the truth, the job of misleading and misinforming the public has fallen to Deputy Press Secretary, Jerry Warren. Since Jerry has actually held a legitimate newspaper job, the media is prepared to like and trust him.

However, strains are already developing as reporters come to suspect that Warren scarcely ever sees Nixon and that at their daily 11 o'clock briefing they are being fed third-hand hearsay news of the very sort President Truthful's people always complain about. Warren claims he does see the President but doesn't specify from what distance, so it may be that the "information chain" now runs from the Commander-in-Chief to General Haig, the Chief of Staff, to the Ziggy Ron, the custodian of the royal chamber pot, to the hapless Warren, and it is that resulting garble which is proffered to us on television every night as news.

Whoever is back there in charge of putting the peas under the shells, Jerry's jive isn't so different from Ron's. On this day when they had to suspend trading in wheat futures and the baking industry was predicting a bread shortage, Jerry led off with a biggie, mondo announcement, to wit that the Honorable Caspar W. Weinberger, the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare has agreed to lend his dynamic and effective leadership to the local Red Feather drive this fall.

The White House attitude seems to be what are you folks kvetching about? You can't buy hot dogs, so what do you need the buns for? If there was beef in the stores, you couldn't afford it.

Hence no announcement on food, but we were told that Nixon is deeding one acre of federal land on Wissahickin Avenue to Lower Township, Cape May County, N.J., for a picnic area. What those folks are going to eat at their picnics wasn't discussed, but that's the kind of bumf the new Ziegler is pushing.

The reporters inquired about topics of greater general interest. Instead of answers they got pigeon entrails suitable only for political devination. Inspection of the auguries indicated that President Truthful is spending so much time with his lawyers, constitutional and criminal, he can't give the national menu much attention. With yet one more Watergate explanation coming up, and yet one more final, definitive statement on who paid for San Clemente, the old boy is off his feed and not much interested in topics like food.

The direction of things, at least as it is reflected in press corps chit-chat, is one of decline and cynical purposelessness. No talk of policies and projects, but whispers that he's drinking, something which, like insanity, is attributed to all unpopular Presidents. If producing a convincing statement on Watergate is something one does every month, like signing a Vietnam peace treaty, expectations for the next performance aren't high. It is anticipated that Checkers III will not only display the star performer with flag and Lincoln bust in the background, but the whole family cum sons-in-law and pets with Tricia holding the goldfish bowl in her lap.

Nobody quite had the temerity to ask Jive Jerry if the leader was backing his second in command 1,000 per cent, but the joke is that if Number Two gets sacked Eagleton will be appointed in his place on the basis of better shocked than shocking. The dementia and disgust has reached the point that some people are speculating that President Truthful set up Vice President Eggplant to get the heat off himself.

Number Two's performance hasn't been very tony. The failure to immediately deliver his financial records when asked, and the hints that the doctrine of the separation of powers immunizes him against prosecution even when apprehended at high noon, gun in hand, robbing a bank, are more worthy of Lucky Luciano and Frank Costello than the occupant of his office. Anyway, after his press conference, Mr. Eggplant, the emigre from the produce department of a Baltimore supermarket, flapped off to Palm Springs, where his friend Frank Sinatra lives, another man about whom they tell "damned lies."

Back in the White House people are arrested almost daily for praying for peace, the only licit object for such orisons being President Truthful, but then, as Heaven knows, he needs them.