

What Price Candor?

President Ford's decision to pardon Richard Nixon marked the end of his honeymoon not only with a dotting public and an accommodating Congress but also with the White House press corps. Ford's sudden step prompted the resignation of his highly regarded press secretary, Jerald terHorst, whose appointment had seemed to signal a heartening new candor in White House press relations. And terHorst's departure immediately raised the troubling question whether Ford's promises of an open press policy would—or even could—be kept.

TerHorst, 52, resigned because he strongly disagreed with the pardon and because he was misled by a top Ford aide. But some White House topsiders—and many newsmen—speculated that Ford hadn't kept his pledge to plug terHorst into the decision-making process itself. "I can't be much help," he told one reporter seeking background after the news of the pardon broke. "I was cut out of it."

TerHorst's stand-in, John W. Hushen, 39, quickly ran into trouble, too. A veteran of four years at the Justice Department, Hushen served as spokesman for Attorneys General ranging from John Mitchell to William Saxbe and survived with the kind of modest competence and low profile tailor-made for the No. 2 White House press post. As terHorst's replacement, however, Hushen was clearly in over his head. Asked if the Nixon pardon meant that Ford put a higher priority on amnesty for the ex-President than for draft dodgers, Hushen replied startingly, "That's a conclusion you can draw." His subsequent statement that Ford had "under study" pardons for "those convicted of Watergate crimes" so flabbergasted his listeners that Chicago Daily News correspondent Peter Lisagor asked incredulously: "Jack, are you aware of the impact that what you have just said is going to have?" Hushen evidently had been instructed to stick to the bare-bones statement and couldn't amplify. Next day, he complained that stories on the possible mass pardons were "completely distorted."

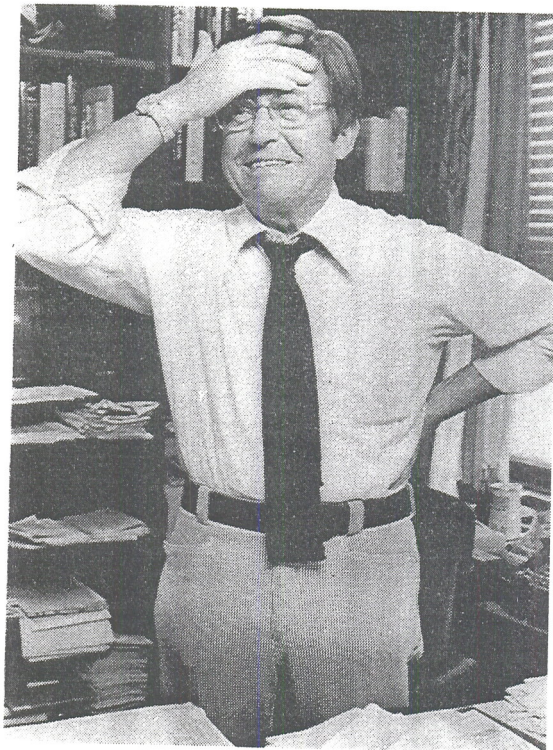
Millennium: Some of Hushen's problems plainly stemmed from the kind of inadequate guidance that bedeviled terHorst. But some veterans of the press corps began to wonder whether they hadn't overestimated the potential of the kind of "open" press policy promised by Ford. "We made too much of this openness and truthfulness," sighed Lisagor. "Everything was so buttoned down in the Nixon Administration that we were overwhelmed by a little candor. Basically our interests are in conflict and we're damn fools if we feel there is some kind of millennium here."

The episode that caused terHorst to quit illustrates the problems an open

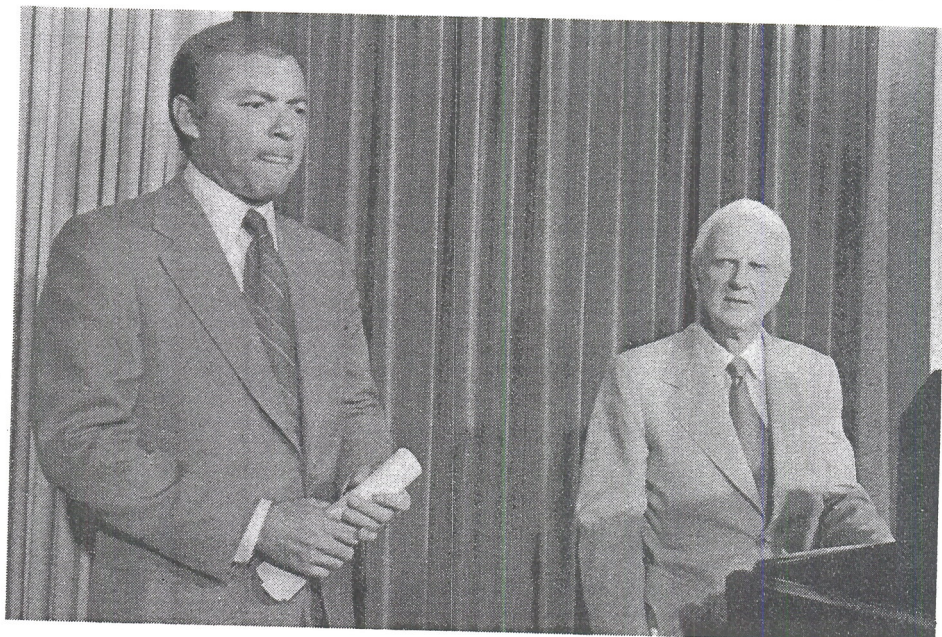
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press policy can lead to. During the week before the Nixon pardon was announced, terHorst was approached by a reporter who suspected that a pardon was in the works. The press secretary checked with Ford counsel Philip Buchen and was told that only an agreement over custody of Nixon's tapes was involved. TerHorst passed this on to the reporter, who dropped the story. Thus, Buchen misled terHorst who then misled the newsmen. But does a candid press policy mean that an Administration is obliged to confirm newsmen's hunches about highly delicate projects before such matters are settled? To do so would in many cases drown the project in premature publicity.

'No Comment': One way of dealing with the problem is the "never mislead" approach practiced by former State Department press secretary Robert McCloskey, now ambassador-at-large. A "no comment" on a situation too delicate to discuss served McCloskey and the reporters far better than a deceptive half-



TerHorst: 'To tell the truth' UPI



Hushen (left) and White House counsel Buchen: 'A sense of déjà vu' Lawrence McIntosh

truth or an unwitting lie. Such an approach requires that the press secretary be plugged into all important policy discussions and means that reporters given the telltale "no comment" may redouble their efforts to get the story.

TerHorst returned to The Detroit News Washington bureau last week as a columnist, insisting that he wasn't discouraged by his month on the other side of the press pool. "Openness in government was beginning to work," he said. Still, the atmosphere at the White House press briefings last week lapsed into the kind of bickering and contentiousness that gave one reporter an unnerving "sense of déjà vu."

The search for a permanent replacement for terHorst is already under way.

High on the list are departing Pentagon press secretary Jerry W. Friedheim, New York Timesman Robert Semple and Hearst reporter J. William Theis. All are esteemed in Washington, but they all say they aren't interested in the job. Whoever finally accepts it will follow a spectacularly tough—if brief—act. As one newsmen put it: "TerHorst thought that the press office and the White House ought to tell the truth."