



Press secretary terHorst: Well-liked and widely respected

THE FRIENDLY FORD BEAT

Last December, when Gerald Ford became Vice President, only a handful of news reporters accompanied him on his travels. Among the first Ford watchers was *NEWSWEEK*'s Thomas M. DeFrank, who describes the new President as seen from the back of the press plane:

Jerry Ford genuinely likes reporters—he always has. When he assumed the Vice Presidency, Ford declined to use a JetStar plane because it was too small to carry the press. He has been unusually accessible to reporters—giving 52 press conferences and 85 formal interviews since he was sworn in Dec. 6. “I think it’s important that we have good relations with the press,” he explained last March, “not because we agree with them, not because they will write something because they like you . . . I happen to believe the news media can and have been helpful in trying to preserve some of the great liberties that we have in this country.”

Ford’s friendly relationship with reporters is based on his openness and generosity. Last December, he delayed his departure to Vail for twenty minutes to wait for a tardy reporter. This year, he invited the press “regulars” to the dinner he gave for visiting King Hussein and to his son’s wedding reception—not as reporters but as official guests. And until recently, Ford would saunter through Air Force Two with a Martini or bourbon and water in hand to share jokes, trade mock insults and hoist a few rounds with the press. Once, after he had labeled the streaking fad as “silly,” the press corps

bought Ford a T shirt with **KEEP ON STREAKING** emblazoned in bold letters across the chest. The Vice President gleefully tried it on over his shirt and raced up the aisle of the plane to the press section.

Ford readily accepts a certain degree of good-natured sassiness. During his daunting round of out-of-town speeches this year, the press was forced to endure endless repetitions of what came to be known as “the telephone story”: how when Nixon phoned Ford at home to ask him to be Vice President, he had to ask the President to call back on a line with an extension so that Betty Ford could listen in. “You know,” one photographer finally told him, “we’re so sick of that story we wish the President hadn’t called back.”

Pique: There have been moments of friction. Last May, Ford told reporters he was worried that Watergate had so weakened the Nixon Administration that its foreign policy might have been damaged. Ford claims he said this off the record; when the conversation was reported in the press the next day, he was furious. He soon got over his pique, but Ford has never been quite so open with the press since.

As President, Ford will likely be more cautious with reporters. But it is hard to believe that he will change his gregarious style—and his new press secretary, Detroit News veteran Jerry terHorst, is equally friendly and well-liked. “Jerry Ford,” one regular predicts, “will probably saunter through the White House press room at least once a week—just to shoot the breeze.”