

A Press Secretary You Can Understand

By Jules Witcover

The English language and civility—missing in action in the pressroom of the Nixon White House—have been found alive and well in the first week of the new Ford administration.

Both have been discovered by a long-suffering White House press corps in the custody of Jerald F. terHorst, a mild-mannered, pipe-puffing, stem-biting colleague who has turned in his press card to be President Ford's press secretary.

But for all his direct language and the modulated tones, controversy and an adversary relationship remain as staples between reporters and the White House office charged with dealing with them.

After a placid few days, Jerry terHorst, Washington bureau chief of the Detroit News from 1961 until his appointment by Mr. Ford, has already

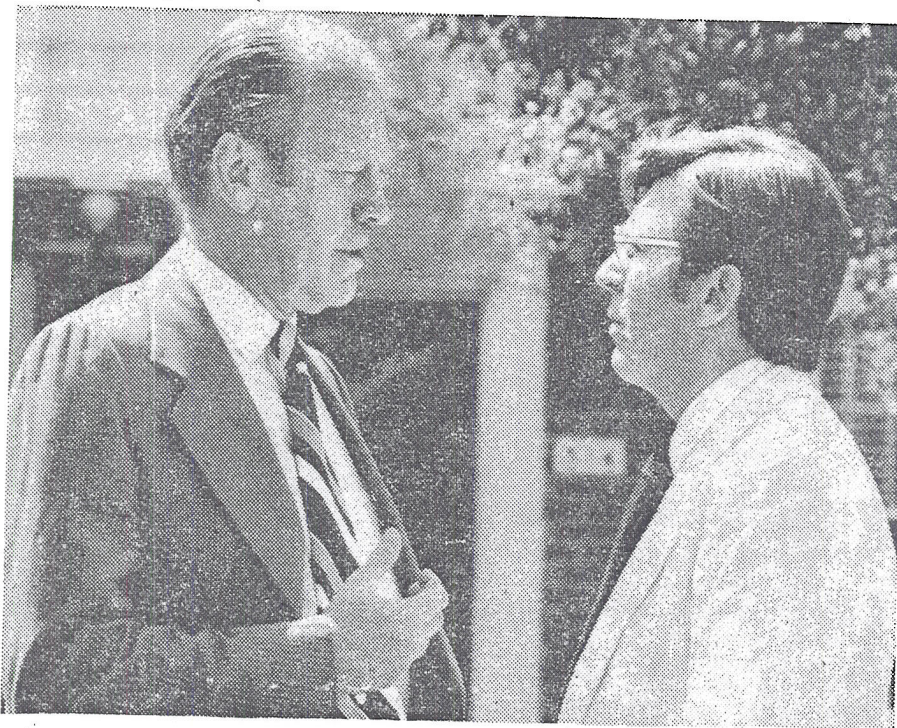
run into a rhubarb or two.

Last week he was criticized by some newsmen for his handling of the announcement that former President Nixon's lawyers, James D. St. Clair and J. Fred Buzhardt, had decided as one of their last acts that the White House tapes are the personal property of Mr. Nixon.

terHorst at first announced that the decision had been made after consultation with the office of Watergate Special Prosecutor Leon Jaworski. But Jaworski's office said it had not been consulted, just informed.

The new press secretary apparently had been thrown a curve by being told the decision was a "collective judgment." He assumed that meant Jaworski was involved, but he learned it really meant only the collective judgment of St. Clair and Buzhardt.

See *terHORST*, B3, Col. 1



President Gerald Ford and his press secretary, Jerald terHorst: The President called and he answered.



Associated Press Photos

Jerald F. terHorst: Common English usage has returned to the press room of the White House.



United Press International

President Ford introduces his press secretary, Gerald terHorst, above; right, terHorst conducts his first news conference with the White House press corps. TerHorst's mission: to revamp the press operation "into the shape newsmen would like to see it."



By James K. W. Atherton—The Washington Post

Then, on Saturday, stories that the President had asked Jaworski to investigate reports of 1972 campaign dirty tricks by former Gov. Nelson A. Rockefeller of New York had terHorst on the run all day. He finally reported that a check had indeed been made, but the charges proved groundless. Why, some critics asked, didn't terHorst simply say so in the first place, instead of lending temporary credence to the allegation by repetition of it?

All this has added up to a very hectic first week for Jerry terHorst, who has set as his goal the restoring of professionalism, goodwill and straight talk in the White House press operation.

He put the matter in some perspective the other day while briefing his old buddies about a presidential luncheon with Egyptian officials.

"We'll probably be able," the 52-year-old press secretary said simply, "to have a picture session of that."

The straightforward nomenclature would have signaled nothing to a visitor. But to the press corps veterans it represented a return to common English usage, shelved or at least sparingly spent for 5½ years by terHorst's predecessor, Ronald L. Ziegler.

In the Ziegler era that ended a week ago Friday, what terHorst referred to would have been known grandly as "a photo opportunity."

TerHorst also reported that the President would be meeting with a group of governors and mayors and that afterward they could be interviewed on the front lawn, or, if he could arrange it, some representatives would be brought into the briefing room for questions.

In the Ziegler era, it would have been announced as a "press availability."

The banning of such Zieglerisms—or, as the departed press secretary would say, rendering them inoperative—is only one visible evidence of the change of the guard in the White House pressroom.

It started on Aug. 8, when then Vice President Ford phoned terHorst at the Detroit News bureau, where terHorst was spending vacation time writing a biography of the same Mr. Ford. The Vice President had just been told by President Nixon he was resigning, and he asked terHorst to come see him.

Mr. Ford and the Detroit newsman had been friends since 1948, when young Jerry Ford first ran for Congress from Grand Rapids. Jerry terHorst was a young reporter on the Grand Rapids Press and, in the President's words, "connived" to get the candidate a little extra space in the paper.

The new President told him forthwith that his first order of business had to be to get rid of the White House's old spokesman—Ziegler, whose credibility in the wake of Watergate was down to zero—and get a new one. He wanted a complete overhaul of the press office, converting it from the politicizing and propagandizing operation of the Nixon White House to straight dissemination of news.

TerHorst agreed to take on the task, provided he had a free hand and complete access to the President. "It is so essential for me, given the problems of the past year, to be able to brief intelligibly," terHorst said in an interview, "and I cannot do that without daily and constant access, even to the point of interrupting to keep the flow of news going."

"I told him I can't stand out there on one leg, I can't speak for the President unless I see the President." Mr. Ford agreed, and now every morning before the regular 11 o'clock White House press briefing, terHorst has scheduled time with him.

Only two others, holdover White House chief of staff Alexander M. Haig Jr. and Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger, are written into the President's schedule daily.

The President got terHorst off properly by dropping by the press room an hour after he was sworn in to personally introduce him to the press corps. Actually, no introduction was necessary, because the new press secretary who came to Washington for the Detroit News in 1958, himself has covered every President since Dwight D. Eisenhower. He also has made every presidential trip abroad since 1960 and many domestic trips as well.

According to terHorst, his mission is to revamp the whole press operation "into the shape newsmen would like to see it." While the changes are just under-way,

one difference already is obvious.

In place of the bitterness and open hostility that existed between Ziegler and the reporters to whom he made those now inoperative Watergate statements from June 17, 1972, on, a climate of mutual respect and goodwill will be breezed in.

TerHorst has been ensconced only 10 days, it's true; the era of good feeling could blow out again with the first major crisis and the first press charges of news blackout, dissembling or whatever. The flap over the St. Clair-Buzhardt decision on the Nixon tapes has demonstrated well enough the tenuousness of peace and harmony in the White House pressroom.

TerHorst is a short, stocky, unassuming man of Dutch heritage with a boyish look and steel-rimmed eyeglasses. He briefs the press with his pipe clenched tightly in the right side of his mouth, white smoke punctuating each sentence. But the words come out in an even, temperate flow—so far, anyway.

He provides reasonably straight answers except when he doesn't know the answers, and then he says he doesn't know—so far, anyway. That seemingly exceptional talent had been on display only rarely during the Nixon reign, and the obfuscation-weary White House press corps seems grateful for its reappearance.

Press secretaries during terHorst's own tenure as a reporters have ranged from the contorted nothing-saying Ziegler to the sometimes philosophical George Reedy for Lyndon B. Johnson to the oftentimes whimsical Pierre Salinger for John F. Kennedy and the no-nonsense Jim Hagerty for Dwight Eisenhower.

Salinger, ironically, was among the press corps as terHorst briefed, a roving correspondent for L'Express of Paris, and gave him high marks.

TerHorst said in an interview that he hopes to convert the Ziegler press operation—and the Ken Clawson communications office that will be folded in—into "some kind of Hagerty operation"—meaning essentially news-dispensing.

Hagerty, an old New York Times political reporter, evolved into a member of the policy-making team for Eisenhower. Whether terHorst will do the same is for the future to say, but the evidence suggests he will be a prime Ford adviser. Last Monday, for instance, when the President prepared to speak to Congress, terHorst spent 90 minutes going over the speech with him.

But his principal task now is the care and feeding of news to the press, and this he performs like a member of the fraternity. He tells the reporters he will attend a presidential meeting and come out and give them "a small fill"—a brief account of what was said.

When he announces the names of new presidential appointees or resignees, he pronounces them adroitly and spells them out as if he were dictating a story to his paper against a deadline—"Philip Buchen—B for boy, U, C, H for Harry, E, N for never."

All this happens with the pipe stuck determinedly in his mouth. He is said sometimes when talking excitedly to lose his grip, sending pipe falling and tobacco scattering, his hands out in a desperate rescue mission. But it hasn't happened yet as the White House briefer.

In fact, he has been rairy unflappable, even against curve balls, as when one reporter, noting Mr. Ford is a member of the Episcopal Church, asked whether the President was in favor of the ordination of women, now a raging controversy in that church.

"As the President said in his speech [to Congress]," terHorst replied without hesitation, "he is for women's liberationists, male chauvinists and all those in between."

But he is also cautious. He referred to the President's "warning" to General Motors about its price increase, then withdrew the word. Why? "That's a value judgment perhaps a press secretary shouldn't make," he said.

Nor is he invulnerable to slips, for all his caution. He was talking about King Hussein's visit here last Friday, and then, moving to another subject, announced that "this afternoon the king will meet with counselor Kenneth Rush. The press corps roared, and terHorst smiled sheepishly.

"That shows what happens when you get a new press secretary," he said. "The President of the United States, which is a title I think is much preferred to any royal title,"

would meet with Rush, he corrected himself.

"Why insult a foreign guest?" United Press International White House correspondent, Helen Thomas, piped up, ribbing him.

Like all press secretaries, terHorst tries to tout reporters off speculation about what the President will do. But unlike some, he recognizes the futility of it. The other day, when he warned against "unnecessary speculation" on one subject, a reporter told him it was getting difficult "to tell the difference between necessary and unnecessary speculation."

"When I was out in the room [as a reporter]," he replied, "it never seemed to be that much of a problem. We just continued to do it anyway." And he took his pipe out of the corner of his mouth long enough to grin broadly.

For a man who has been in the Washington press corps for 16 years, there are not very many terHorst stories about, perhaps a tribute to his reputation as a steady, reliable citizen and reporter.

There is the one, though,

about the time he was traveling with the JFK party in Billings, Mont., and was listed on the roster as "J.F. terHorst," which was his by-line signature. When the party checked into the local hotel for the night, every reporter had a room but him. Finally the manager said he could give him one. A room had been reserved but not claimed—for somebody named "Chief Two Horse."

Then there was the time he was toting a pipe in a belt holster on a presidential trip and an edgy Secret Service agent approached him and said: "I wouldn't wear your pipe like that if I were you."

Old colleagues tell of the time his paper rented a large billboard in Detroit with his picture, name and the slogan "Your man in Washington." Rep. Lucien N. Nedzi (D-Mich.), a local congressman, is said to have spied it and exclaimed nervously, "Dammit! What's he running for?"

TerHorst, married and the father of three girls and a boy, lives in Alexandria. He likes to fish and sail, little of which he is likely to do for the foreseeable future.

He is a political independent, but his wife, Louise, is an active Democrat, and presumably will continue to be. "I've told her, I didn't ask you to check your mind at the door when we got married," he says.

As a reporter, he joined in the hard questioning of President Nixon on the rare occasions Mr. Nixon submitted to press conferences. In a June 1, 1971, press conference, for example, he asked Mr. Nixon if the police acted properly in the mass arrests of May Day demonstrators that year in Washington, "then why are the courts releasing so many of the cases and so many of the people that have been arrested?"

Among terHorst's lesser-known talents is as a lyrics writer for the annual Grid-iron dinner, of which he was

music chairman last year. He wrote this lyric about his future boss, then for some reason dropped it from the show. It was to the tune of "Michael, Row the Boat":

"Jerry, row the boat ashore,
hallelujah!

"Jerry, row the boat ashore,
hallelujah!

"Up the creek without an oar,
How we need ya!

"Crew is jumping overboard,
How we need ya!

"Sprung a leak in the ship
of State,

"Lost the skipper!

"But you could steer around
Watergate,

"Hallelujah!"

TerHorst's talents as a newspaperman were regarded, for obvious reasons, more highly than those as a songwriter. Before taking

the White House job, he was said to be under consideration as the new editor of the Washington Star-News.

He answered the President's call, he said, because "I always liked him and wanted to see him get off to a good start. But more than that, I felt the relationship between the news media and the White House press office had fallen to such a state of disrepair, distrust and antagonism that if someone from the news fraternity could not step in and return it to a credible, believable operation, it probably couldn't be done by anyone."

TerHorst said there will not be regular press conferences on a set day each week as in the Eisenhower years. But once past the transition, they will be "frequent," at least one ev-

ery other week, and hopefully more often.

He says categorically that there will be "no more blatant politicizing of the office of the press secretary." He has talked with Republican National Chairman George Bush, he says, and arranged to have the national committee handle all such political sessions with the press.

Jerry terHorst, for all these good intentions, is not without the wherewithal to confuse, if he finds that step necessary in the unpredictable future. The other day, a reporter from The Netherlands asked him whether his parents or grandparents who came from the old country. As the rest of the press corps stood open-mouthed, terHorst replied—in Dutch.

Even Ron Ziegler never pulled that.