

The Unbelieving Newsmen

A Hunger at White House

By Nicholas Von Hoffman
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Washington

By day, J. Brian McDonnell sits across the street from the White House in Lafayette Park committing the one free act that even slaves cannot be denied. He is killing himself. He has promised he will take only water until the Cambodian invasion is reversed.

He sits in what would be a pretty little park if this were a happy land. It has benches and small fountains and trees and azaleas and tulips and a statue of Andrew Jackson on a rearing horse that, when viewed against the White House, looks like an illustration in a child's story book.

By night the White House looks like a gangster's suburban hideaway with the floodlights playing across the grounds to illuminate any running figures who might have made it over the closely guarded fences. There are many policemen.

In the White House press suite the news people wait for Senator Fulbright and the other members of Congress to come out of their meeting with President Nixon. The decor is early Martha Mitchell but the mood is reminiscent of the Cook County Illinois Criminal Court press room, a feeling that can make a drunkard out of a reporter.

INCURSION

During the afternoon somebody in the government had tried to get the Administration out of its predicament saying that Cambodia wasn't an invasion but an incursion. This had prompted the New York political writer Murray Kempton to look up the word in Webster's Third Edition,

where he'd found the following example of its use by Justice Cardozo: "The barrier should have been sufficient to protect the adjoining owner against the incursions not of all pigs, but of pigs of average vigor and obstinacy."

As each new person comes in the room, he is told the joke until a loudspeaker invites the crowd into the briefing room. The Fulbright meeting has broken up but there is no Fulbright, only Senator Aiken and Senator Griffin to act as his political keeper because the old man from Vermont is addled enough to think Mr. Nixon has pulled the rock of the

century and senile enough to say so.

There is also a bunch of congressmen. Their looks explain why they don't allow television in the House of Representatives. They're offensively fat, their expensive J. C. Penney-style suits are wrinkled, their complexions either sallow or suspiciously blotchy red. They're unnervingly ugly.

One of them, a guy named Morgan, is introduced as the chairman of the house foreign affairs committee. Did you know there was a house foreign affairs committee? He is asked many questions by the reporters who're hungry to talk to a real public figure; they spend most of their time waiting for their twice daily informational feeding called the 11 o'clock and the 4 o'clock briefings.

Morgan talks about what's going on in a place he calls "thighland," which he believes is in some way connected with Cambodia. If he is worried about a Constitutional crisis, about the president's usurping the Congress' power to make war, he doesn't show it.

Then Ron Ziegler, the pres-

ident's press secretary, gets up to explain what really went on. He is a pleasant, youngish man of somewhat greater warmth than the president's Super Press Secretary Herb Klein, who is standing in a doorway looking like a Chicago hit man. Ron begins in the manner of a midding level advertising executive trying to sell a can of baked beans: "... The President took over an hour of

questions. I should say the President fielded all the questions on his own ... there were questions from Senator Fulbright and Senator Pell ... the meeting ended at 7:15 ... the questioning was carried on in good spirit ... I think that pretty well gives you the flow of the meeting."

From such mush some of the best newsmen in the world must fashion what we see on the tube and read in the papers.

After leaving in a spirit of acrid frustration, they are back in the press suite the next morning. The world is going to hell in a hk, but at a higher velocity than the previous day.

About half past noon, Ron is back in the briefing room.



RONALD ZIEGLER
Mush and credibility

His audience is unhappy. Overnight a new bombing raid on North Vietnam has been discovered, but nobody knows who signed the requisition for the bombs. The secretary of state is on the front pages accused of having lied to Congress.

Among some of the reports the conviction is growing that the quality of the lying here has fallen off badly. Euphemisms like deception or "credibility gap" are themselves misleading. Before Ron comes on stage, his extended arm holding the

can of baked beans, there is some discussion as to whether the crudeness of the lies is owing to a disingenuous ineptitude or a conviction by the Administration that it has got it made and doesn't have to make the effort to concoct a plausible story.

"My job," one of the reporters sighs, is to process and preserve fresh lies."

Ron begins by saying that he is late because he was in a meeting with the President. He intones "the President" in an orotund, monarchical way that makes it sound like he's saying "the royal shishkabob." He's announcing that the royal shishkabob has met with six students from Kent state, and to hear him tell it, the problem of what is delicately called "student unrest" has been worked out.

"One of the points they made was they wanted to get back to school and pursue their educations. They felt the vast majority of students felt the same way," Ron explains, but nobody's buying baked beans. The people who work around here can't believe it. There isn't enough time. There isn't a month, an hour or minute left, school is out, the young men and women of America, having ceased to be the "kids" of

administration for the problems that confront the society.
Outside, the Washington monument goes limp.

they for or against the war? Ron Waffles with expressions like understanding the "thrust" of the conversation, until finally he says, "there is no lack of concern in the

students trying to get a teacher's attention because they want to ask him meaningful questions like why didn't he bring the six in here, didn't they mention Cambodia, are

sentimental, liberal journalism, are on their way. For the press, too, the time of belief is over. "Ron Ron!" They call out like