

# The Woes Of Ron Ziegler

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Washington

RONALD Louis Ziegler is fond of saying that "the greatest day in briefing is the day after the presidential press conference."

This truism reflects the belief that the press vents its frustrations on the White House press secretary because of the inaccessibility of President Nixon. It has meant a lot of less-than-great days for Ziegler, who in four and a half years has been responsible for some 1800 press briefings while his boss has submitted himself to only 31 press conferences — far fewer than any other modern president.

After all these briefings and countless "backgrounders" and "deep backgrounders," Ziegler today seems almost as embattled by the disclosures of Watergate as the president he has faithfully represented before an increasingly skeptical press corps.

Ziegler, now 34, entered the White House as the youngest presidential press secretary in history and he is one of the few surviving original administration officials of any rank.

But he has lost the cherubic look of reserved innocence he brought with him from Southern California, and he is 15 pounds heavier as the result of a marathon work schedule that permits virtually no exercise. He also has lost the trust of various reporters who more or less believed him before the Watergate disclosures and who have now called for his resignation.

"His credibility is shot

and he should go," says Paul Healy of the New York News in a typical comment.

A recent National Journal survey of some 30 reporters who regularly or frequently cover the White House found that nearly half thought Ziegler should resign. And several reporters, who were unwilling to go this far expressed serious doubts about his credibility.

There is, however, no sign that Ziegler is departing the administration. Quite the contrary.

Ziegler today appears more secure than ever in the affections of the president, who only last week reaffirmed his confidence in the press secretary during an evening cruise on the presidential yacht Sequoia.

One of Ziegler's greatest strengths during the first four years of the Nixon Administration was that he enjoyed not only the confidence of the president but of H. R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman, the two most powerful men in the White House. Both men still think highly of him.

"I don't understand all this business about how he's worn out his credibility," Ehrlichman said in an interview last week. "I know how hard he worked to make sure that he only said things that were true, and I've sat and discussed all kinds of legislative issues ... with Ron so that he could get a working knowledge and understanding ... the guy

See Page 16, Col. 1

## 'His Credibility Is Shot'

# Ziegler's Fiery Coming of Age

From Page 15

sweats blood to do that.

"He didn't knowingly lie to the press any more than I did, or any of the other people around there who were saying only those things we in good faith had sincerely believed were true."

The belief that Ziegler's credibility, or lack of it, is only an extension of the president's is prevalent among White House reporters, regardless of whether or not they think Ziegler should resign.

"I think his credibility makes so little difference," says John Osborne of the New Republic and author of the "Nixon Watch" books about the president. "I don't think a different press secretary is going to improve the president's credibility to any substantial extent."

Several administration officials, usually speaking on a background basis, have expressed the opinion that Ziegler has been under more emotional strain than past press secretaries because Nixon's seclusion has frequently made Ziegler the only available spokesman.

"If the president held two press conferences a week no one would be talking about Ziegler," says Herbert Klein, departing communications director.

President Eisenhower held 193 press conferences in his eight years in the White House, President Kennedy 65 in less than three years and Johnson 158 in five years. Nixon, now well into his fifth year, has held only 31 press conferences.

Another source of strain for Ziegler has been the president's conception of the press secretary's role. While

all presidents have expected their press secretaries to make them look good, Nixon regards his press secretary almost solely as a conduit of presidential views.

"Ziegler is the president's man," observes one knowledgeable White House official. "He's the ambassador of the president to the press, not the other way around."

In some respects Ziegler has been the president's man ever since he was fascinated by political public relations while he was attending the University of Southern California in 1960. At that time, Ziegler assisted in press arrangements when Nixon spoke on the campus during his first presidential campaign.

In his own view, the most important years of Ziegler's pre-White House service were the two he spent after graduating from USC. At that time, he worked as public information director for the Republican State Central Committee in California, helping to put out the party newspaper. He gradually became known to the California press corps, where he was generally regarded as a competent young public relations man.

During Nixon's ill-starred 1962 campaign for governor

in California, Ziegler served as a press aide and came to know Haldeman, who managed the Los Angeles office of the J. Walter Thompson Advertising Agency.

After the election, Ziegler joined the Thompson firm at Haldeman's invitation and rose rapidly in the ranks. He became an account executive in 1964.

Ziegler, who is married and the father of two, works a marathon schedule that brings him to his first floor White House office between 7:30 and 8 each morning. He almost always works until 9 at night, frequently until 11.

Ziegler's capacity for hard work also is equaled by an ability to say no more and no less than the president wants him to say.

"He's thorough in his preparation, and he knows what he wants to say and what he doesn't want to say when he goes into a briefing," says Klein, who tutored him in 1962.

Statements which followed in the wake of Watergate disclosures angered some White House reporters who believed they had been misled by Ziegler. The press secretary has insisted steadfastly that he was misled as well when he denounced

pre-election Watergate stories.

Even before the Watergate disclosures, Ziegler increasingly was delegating routine briefings to his deputy, Gerald L. Warren. This has proven less than satisfactory on many occasions.

Warren is popular with the press corps but often he does not attend high-level administration meetings or sessions with the President. The general impression among White House regulars is that he is far less informed than Ziegler.

Buchanan says that Ziegler will stay on because of "an absence of culpability on Ron's part for any of the Watergate matters and because of a long-standing tradition of the president to stand by associates who are under fire and not throw people to the wolves."

Ziegler both understands and reciprocates this kind of loyalty.

"I intend to remain on the job as long as the president wants me to," he says.

He gives every impression that this will be a long, long time.