

Helen Smith— Protector and Publicist for the First Lady

by Connecticut Walker

Serving as press secretary for a First Lady who basically dislikes and distrusts the press is a thankless and nerve-wracking job. But Helen Nicholson Smith, a soft-spoken, gracious, 54-year-old widow, seems to have succeeded where others have failed.

In the six years Mrs. Richard Nixon has occupied the White House, she has granted only a handful of interviews, made only the blandest of public pronouncements. Preferring to play a quiet second fiddle to her husband, she has generated little of the spirited independence that highlighted Jackie Kennedy and Lady Bird Johnson. Yet, since November, 1968, Patricia Nixon has employed three different press secretaries to publicize or low-key the activities of herself and her two daughters, Julie and Tricia.

The first spokeswoman to meet the challenge of protecting while publicizing the Nixon ladies was Mrs. Gerry Van der Heuvel, a one-time columnist for the Newhouse National News Service. Mrs. Van der Heuvel held the post of press secretary for a year before she was moved to Rome as assistant U.S. Embassy press secretary. "I was replaced," she explains, "because Ehrlichman and Haldeman wanted one of their own people in the job."

Her successor was a tall, outspoken, relatively inexperienced redhead, Connie Stuart, wife of Charles Stuart, who had been hired by John Ehrlichman as an advance man during the 1968 election campaign. Stuart, now a Maryland real estate developer, was still working for the White House when his wife took command of the "East Wing" or women's department of the White House. The East Wing refers to the residential side of the Executive Mansion. The West Wing is where the Presidential offices are located.

Mrs. Stuart had little firsthand knowledge of the press when she became Mrs. Nixon's press secretary in November,

1969. She had worked previously for the public relations division of the telephone company in New York City. Nevertheless, she held down the White House job for 3½ years before she, too, was moved over to the State Department. She is currently deputy director for the Office of International Visitors in Washington, D.C., helps make arrangements for visiting dignitaries.

A change

In contrast to her predecessors, Helen Smith is an old Washington hand, experienced in the newspaper field, carefully attuned to the vicissitudes of political personalities.

"She's more a part of life here than almost anyone else in the White House," says Helen Thomas, UPI's veteran White House correspondent. "She's lived here almost her whole life. She's been involved in the news business for almost 20 years. She knows how things operate. I'd say she's one of the best First Lady press officers the White House has ever had."

Only child of a British army officer and his Washington-born wife, Helen Smith has been immersed in diplomatic



Close rapport: Mrs. Nixon and Mrs. Smith, her low-keyed press secretary, who is trusted by the White House press corps. She has the reputation of being more concerned with the truth than with public relations gimmicks.

corps society from her early youth. She remembers first going to the White House at the age of 9 with her grandfather, Gen. William J. Nicholson, and the then British Ambassador, Sir Esme Howard, to meet President Calvin Coolidge.

"My mother's was an old Washington family," she explains. "My great-great-grandfather was born in Georgetown. I grew up surrounded by diplomats, politicians, and military men."

Holding dual British-American citizenship, Mrs. Smith spent her school years shuttling back and forth between the U.S. and England. "I'd spend one year in school in Cheshire and the next in Washington," she recalls in her faintly British accent. "I was always out of place. In England I was 'that little Yan-

kee,' and in America I was 'that girl who spoke funny.'"

After her parents were divorced, Helen moved with her mother and established residence in Washington where she attended the Sacred Heart Convent and for a time worked in the British embassy. In 1943 she married an American lawyer, McCain Smith. Two years later while training at Lakehurst Naval Base in New Jersey, he was killed in a flying accident.

Marine Corps major

Mrs. Smith spent the next few years working as an administrative secretary in the Navy's information department at Pearl Harbor. Her mother, then a major in the Marine Corps, was also stationed in Honolulu. Together they returned to Washington where in 1950 Helen signed on as a secretary in the Washington bureau of the New York Daily News.

As executive secretary for the bureau chief she was earning \$10,000 a year, when a friend and former colleague, Gerry Van der Heuvel, asked her to join the White House press office. "It was the week before Julie's wedding," remembers Mrs. Smith. "I wasn't certain I wanted to leave the News. After all, I had been with them for 18 years, so I took a temporary leave of absence."

Today, six years later, Helen Smith earns \$26,000 a year as Mrs. Nixon's press secretary, does not regret relinquishing her place in the media world. "I like being a part of what's going on," she explains. "I'm proud of my relationship with the First Family. I think I'm

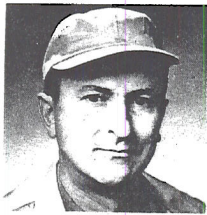
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President and Mrs. Nixon wave from helicopter on White House lawn before taking off on historic China trip. Mrs. Smith went along. She describes Pat as "the perfect political wife," says Nixon likes her to travel with him.

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By Mike Senkiw
Agronomist

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Pat and Helen (r) stroll with some Russians on their recent Moscow visit.

FIRST LADY CONTINUED

their friend as well as their employee. They basically trust me. I don't try to divulge anything they want kept private. But if I do hear a rumor concerning them I can and do go directly to Julie, Tricia or Mrs. Nixon for a response. Last winter, for example, people were speculating about Tricia and Eddie [Cox]. Supposedly they were having marital problems, because Tricia had spent 18 days with her family in California. I went straight to Tricia, who flatly knocked the rumor down. The Nixons always ask me to come to them should I hear anything that hints of marital discord. I get an answer to any question that I put to them, and I'm able to impart it."

For the press who depend on Mrs. Smith for information on Pat Nixon and her daughters, Helen's candor and persistence are greeted with gratitude. "She's more concerned with the truth than public relations puffery," says Helen Thomas. "People trust Helen, which is more than you can say for other press secretaries around here." Nixon's press secretary, Ron Ziegler, is notorious for his general hostility and inaccessibility.

"Helen doesn't regard the press as adversaries," adds Patti Matson, 28, one of Mrs. Smith's two deputies. "She has close personal relations with many of them as well as with the First Family. Which is why she's able to walk a fine

line, helping the Nixons maintain their privacy; while getting the press people the answers they need."

According to her press secretary, Mrs. Nixon feels considerably less antagonistic towards the news media than her husband.

"She has a great many really good friends in the press," Mrs. Smith explains, "and realizes that many of them regard her with respect and admiration and have for years. She likes to joke and be with them. But because Watergate is brought up so often in conversation nowadays, and that's one subject she won't discuss because she feels she can't or she shouldn't, some of the press feel she's been shying away from them more and more."

First Lady's task

"On the whole, however, I would say Mrs. Nixon feels that she personally has been treated fairly by the press. She's very philosophical. She knows it's a very sad time, but that things will go on, and she doesn't want to sit around talking. She knows that the press has to ask certain questions, but she doesn't want to provide the occasion for their coming up."

Ms. Smith's opinion, "Pat Nixon is the perfect political wife, because she's gone along with whatever her husband wanted to do, and of course, she still does. Take her schedule, for example, which pretty much depends upon the President's."

Mr. Nixon likes Mrs. Nixon to travel with

him. If he has to go to Alabama or some other place, and she has a tea scheduled with some organization, she will try to rearrange it. He comes first. She's very proud of her husband being President, but my personal opinion is that while she will look back on the White House experience with pride, she'll be glad to be out of it, too.

"She just loves being with her friends and family in a normal environment, I mean one without all those Secret Service agents around. As nice as they are, there's a limit to how much you can do. Although she's very considerate of them, she doesn't like to put them in awkward spots. But normalcy is what she misses. She loves to walk and go to museums and travel, and I would say she surely doesn't feel her present First Lady state is going to go on forever. So her attitude is to make the most of it. But basically, despite the public life she's led for so many years, she is a very private person with a very close family who enjoy being together.

He writes notes

"Mrs. Nixon was just saying the other day how affectionate the President is with his family. Apparently he's a great one for writing notes. He does this very frequently, leaves a note on her pillow or slips one under the door."

Asked to comment upon Mrs. Nixon's clothes-shopping routine, Mrs. Smith concedes, "She loves clothes, but she doesn't particularly love the idea of posing for clothes layouts in magazines, although she has done a few to be cooperative. She does have a great eye for color and for line. She never wears what I would call faddish clothes. She usually wears very handsome suits in pretty colors. She likes shopping, goes out two or three times a year for them. She has someone who coordinates the clothes and brings them to her hotel in New York. She's very quick to say, 'Yes, I like that,' or 'No, I don't like that.' She loves silk, and chiffons for the evening."

When Mrs. Nixon tires of a particular dress or suit she will frequently pass it on to daughter Julie. "But generally," says Helen Smith, "Mrs. Nixon keeps her clothes for a long time. She doesn't buy that many new things. She'll put them to rest for a year, then out they'll come, and she'll change them a little, maybe let a hem out or take one up. But she keeps her clothes and wears them out. She's done this all her life. She's a very practical person."

Relaxing upstairs

As to Mrs. Nixon's smoking. "She smokes," her press secretary says, "but never in public, and she does not like being photographed while smoking. Usually she takes a smoke when she's relaxing upstairs. But she's no chain smoker, and neither of the girls, Julie or Tricia, smokes at all.

"As you can tell," Mrs. Smith goes on, "I admire Mrs. Nixon tremendously. I know and understand the life she has to lead, because in many ways I'm like her. I, too, know what it means to be involved in the Washington whirl and yet to be alone much of the time. I share the premium Mrs. Nixon

places on privacy.

"I know that the press sees her as a thoroughly organized woman of iron self-control. And she is that kind of person, but she also has a lovely sense of humor, even though she doesn't reveal it frequently in public. But she does let her hair down at times, but she does it in private. Somehow

people want to plasticize her. I try to make them see her as the warm, understanding human being she really is."

In these days of scandal, Watergate fallout, and impeachment discussion, that's no easy job. But likable Helen Smith keeps on trying without pressuring. She's a low-key press secretary with a low-key First Lady.

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