

The Voice of the Pentagon

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Jerry Warden Freidheim

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By ERIC PACE

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 4—

Symbols of prestige and power surround the little stage where the Pentagon's official spokesman briefs the press on behalf of all the United States armed forces.

The corridor walls are hung with paintings of chesty generals, swooping helicopters, picturesque battle scenes. The briefing chamber itself is decorated with a vast map of the world and lit by 14 stage lights that technicians have been switching on every morning this week just before 11 A.M.

Then the splendor stops. At 11, a pale civilian plumps himself down on a table on the stage, crosses his ankles and smiles. He begins to talk in a quiet voice, with little resonance, that would carry badly on a parade ground or battlefield.

The Pentagon may have wielded a big stick in Vietnam in recent weeks, but it has been speaking softly—very softly—through the baritone Missouri twang of Jerry Warden Friedman, who bears the title Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Public Affairs).

Mr. Friedman's dulcet tones have evidently been music to the Nixon Administration's ears, for tomorrow he is to be awarded the Defense Department Medal for Distinguished Public Service.

Professionalism Cited

The citation says, "He has provided with faultless professionalism clear, concise, accurate and timely information concerning the worldwide activities of the Department of Defense."

Others feel otherwise. The North Vietnamese Communist party newspaper, Nhan



United Press International

An "adversary relationship" with reporters.

Dan, has denounced Mr. Friedman as the "rusty loudspeaker" of the Pentagon for his refusal to admit that Bach Mai Hospital in Hanoi was destroyed by United States bombing and critics of the Administration's Vietnam policy have charged him with deliberately obscuring the news.

A recent briefing was described as a new low in obfuscation, and yesterday Mr. Friedman was asked about it.

Warding off the question with humor, which is one of his techniques, Mr. Friedman said mildly: "I don't want to quibble with that. I might have chosen 'high' instead of 'low.'"

Explaining his mild approach to the often hostile questions of reporters, Mr. Friedman observed today, "We don't have to shout at each other." He conceded that there was an "adversary relationship" between reporters and Government spokesmen. "It's built into the constitutional system," he said, "but it's still possible to be adversaries without being antagonists."

'He's Performing a Role'

In fact, many of the reporters who regularly cover the Pentagon say they get along fine with Mr. Friedman.

"In private he is more straightforward than he sometimes seems in those public briefings," an old-timer observed. "In a public forum he's performing a role. He's not acting on his own."

Before his appearances, Mr. Friedman confers with White House and State Department officials, who have the equipment to listen in on the briefings if they want to.

Mr. Friedman has been known to flush onstage, and he admits to smoking more of his panatela cigars on certain days than on others, but longtime Friedman watchers say they have seen no clear signs that he agonizes over

any of the statements that he makes.

Sometimes he gets around questions by pleading ignorance or by being brief, and sometimes he uses them to criticize the enemy. The following exchange took place at a briefing this week at which information on the bombing of North Vietnam was sought.

Q. Is there any update on civilian damage around Hanoi from whatever cause?

A. No, I don't have anything further this morning on it.

Q. "There are some additional reports of an apartment complex being essentially wiped out. Is there anything on that at all?"

A. I didn't see that particular report. I don't have anything beyond what we discussed yesterday.

Q. Do you have any comment on the fact that peace groups and other groups are now starting a fund to rebuild Bach Mai hospital?

A. No, I did not read that report. I don't know. I suppose they also have the same concern for citizens of Quang Tri City, An Loc, Hue and some other places.

He was referring to battle-scarred cities in South Vietnam.

Mr. Friedman learned about army life first hand as an artillery officer. He was commissioned a second lieutenant and rose to captain, serving in the United States and Germany from 1956 to 1958.

After that he worked for United Press International, The Associated Press and three Missouri papers, including The Joplin Globe.

Sang as Choir Boy

Mr. Friedman was born in Joplin on Oct. 7, 1934, the son of Volmer Havens Friedman, a newspaper advertising executive, and the former Billie Warden. He sang in a Joplin church choir before going to the University of Missouri, where he took bachelor and master's degrees and taught journalism in 1961 and 1962.

In 1963 Mr. Friedman joined the Washington staff of Senator John G. Tower, Republican of Texas, where he remained until he was named Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense in 1969. The word "Principal" was added to his title in 1970.

Mr. Friedman makes his home in Alexandria, Va., with his wife, the former Shirley M. Beavers of Joplin, and their three children, Daniel, 12, Cynthia, 11, and Thomas, 9.