

## His Master's Voice

For the Washington press corps, it was a week of almost surrealistic vindication. First President Nixon applauded the role of a "vigorous free press" in exposing the Watergate scandal and urged reporters to "give me hell every time I'm wrong." Next, Vice President Agnew deplored the "unfortunate hostility which has existed too long" between the media and the Administration. Finally, Presidential press secretary Ronald Louis Ziegler publicly apologized to Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein of *The Washington Post* for having reviled them and their disclosures about Watergate. As questions about his own chances of survival circulated in Washington, a chastened Ziegler began to lard his daily briefings with respectful "sirs" and "ma'ams." New York Times correspondent R.W. Apple even suggested that the beleaguered White House spokesman might be "trying to lay the basis for a new relationship with the press."

Certainly few reporters would mourn the old one. From his earliest days in the West Wing, Ziegler, at 29 the youngest Presidential press secretary in history, faithfully executed a White House policy of giving the press as little information as possible. At first he befogged his briefings with computerese: there was talk of "inputs" and "outputs," of "implementing" a policy within a "time frame." As his skill developed, the stocky, boyishly handsome press secretary raised evasion to the level of an art form. The press corps christened it "Ziegling." When asked, in February 1971, whether a Laotian incursion was planned, Ziegler replied, "The President is aware of what is going on in Southeast Asia. That is not to say anything is going on in Southeast Asia." Unlike other government press officers, Ziegler rarely gave reporters hints or guidance of any substance. Detailed backgrounders by the press secretary, a useful tool for informally clarifying policy, are rare at the White House.

**Assassination:** Evasion is also served by "Zieglerisms"—the modifying clauses that often festoon the press secretary's prose. Even Ziegler's apology to Woodward and Bernstein retained the habitual modifiers: "I think we would all have to say, and I would be, I think, remiss if I did not say, that mistakes were made during this period in terms of comments that were made, perhaps."

Ziegler's language is blunt enough when he is denouncing the press: only a few months ago he labeled reports linking the White House with Watergate as "based on hearsay, character assassination, innuendo or guilt by association." Then the Watergate dam finally broke, and *Des Moines Register* and *Tribune* columnist Clark Mollenhoff, a former Nixon staffer, blew his top. "Do you feel free to stand up there and lie,"



Ziegler (right) squares off with Pierpoint: Adversaries in action

he shouted, "and then come around later and just say it's all 'inoperative'? You're not entitled to any credibility."

Yet, in a curious sense, Ziegler never had any of his own. Not programmed to interpret or explain Presidential policy, Ziegler has harnessed himself so closely to the man he serves that his personal credibility is wholly a reflection of the President's. "He's a recorded announcement," Adam Clymer of *The Baltimore Sun* told *NEWSWEEK*'s Philip S. Cook last week. "His only job is to give what he's told to give." And *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reporter James Deakin snaps: "He is a human punching bag, someone to take the questions and give back a smile."

Ziegler's role as front man has been custom-tailored for a remote President who prefers dealing with the press as formally—and as little—as possible. Critics charge Ziegler with failing, as one newsman defines it, "to let the President know how bad things were" on issues like Watergate. Yet the press secretary reflects a White House-wide conviction that media criticisms are capricious, self-serving and generally best ignored.

Ziegler began his career in public relations by working as a guide at Disneyland to support himself while he was majoring in politics and government at the University of Southern California. In 1960, he volunteered to handle press arrangements for Richard Nixon's visit to the campus, and in 1962, after a stint with Procter and Gamble, he joined Mr. Nixon's California gubernatorial campaign. After Mr. Nixon lost, H.R. Haldeman found Ziegler a job with the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency. In 1968, Ziegler again joined Haldeman on the Nixon campaign trail.

Since entering the White House, Ziegler has established a record for working

more doggedly than many of his adversaries in the media. His self-confidence has blossomed with a succession of fifteen-hour days. Once reluctant to attend National Security Council meetings for fear of learning something that he might later blurt out, Ziegler is now the only Nixon aide to attend daily staff sessions on both domestic and foreign policy. He has also become something of a martinet. One day recently, he slammed the door of an aide's office, then opened it again and declared: "There are only two people in the White House who slam doors—Henry Kissinger and me."

**Touch:** Off duty, most reporters concede, Ziegler is an affable fellow. He relishes rough tennis, smooth Scotch—he drinks only Chivas Regal—and giggling romps with his two young daughters at their home in Fairfax, Va. On the road, he enjoys the press corps's good-natured camaraderie. "I do find him insufferable when he's in that double-chin, bassopropundo mood of bogus importance," says New York Timesman Robert Semple. "But as a drinking, traveling companion he's a fairly decent guy." He even displays an occasional light touch. After an angry confrontation with CBS News correspondent Robert Pierpoint, Ziegler sent the newsman a photograph of the incident with a jocular inscription: "The adversary relationship in action."

When Ziegler came to the White House in 1969 as a subordinate to communications director Herbert Klein, some pressroom veterans predicted that the inexperienced young adman wouldn't last six months. By last January, his position had improved so much that when Klein announced he was leaving, Ziegler seemed destined to inherit his mantle as the Administration's "information" czar. Klein has now delayed his departure, reportedly to avoid the implication

## THE MEDIA

that he had been tainted by Watergate. But White House officials say that his successor in the communications post (rumored to be Ken Clawson) will report to Ron Ziegler.

That is, if Ziegler himself is still around. His closeness to Haldeman and his record of "inoperative" statements have both prompted speculation that Ziegler's may be one of the heads still to roll in the Watergate blood-letting. But in his television speech last week, Mr. Nixon went out of his way to take the heat off Ziegler, noting that his misstatements had been made "in my behalf." The press secretary seems to have avoided what many people in the Administration contend was Haldeman's fatal mistake: going further than Richard Nixon wanted him to go. Ronald Ziegler is one Presidential servant who knows his place.

## Late-Late Rock

Television may be the opiate of the people, but until recently the industry has had relatively little success in hooking the hip generation. Now, however, ABC and NBC are opening a potentially lucrative new programming front with a pair of late-night rock music shows that are reaching as many as 20 million young viewers at a clip.

The ABC show, "In Concert," consists of 90-minute rock concerts starring such heavy-music idols as Alice Cooper, T. Rex, and Blood, Sweat and Tears. In ABC's rotating late-night schedule, the programs appear every other Friday. More people are watching "In Concert" than anything else on the network's menu for that time-slot, including Dick Cavett and the sagging Jack Paar, and the rock festivals are giving talk-show king Johnny Carson some of the toughest competition he's had in years. NBC's show, "The Midnight Special," follows Carson on Friday nights and marks network television's first step into wee-small-hours-of-the-morning programming. "We're tapping an audience that doesn't watch much prime-time TV," says Burt Sugarman, "Midnight Special's" executive producer. "These people go out on Friday night. Now they have something to watch when they get home."

**Mainstream:** For its shows, ABC usually tapes an actual rock concert, and it sticks close to the hard-rock mainstream. To approximate a stereo sound, the programs are broadcast simultaneously over FM radio stations in 65 markets. "Midnight Special," in contrast, is a studio show taped every Tuesday night at NBC's facility in Burbank, Calif. It usually features more performers and more diversity in musical styles.

To produce the shows, both networks drafted pros from the rock-music establishment. The man behind "In Concert" is 38-year-old music mogul Don Kirshner, who launched Bobby Darin, Carole King, Neil Diamond and The Monkees. "I always believed that rock was right for TV," Kirshner told NEWSWEEK's Betsy

Newsweek, May 14, 1973