

# The Trials Of Ron Ziegler

By James Reston

WASHINGTON, May 29—One of the mysteries around the White House these days is why Ron Ziegler remains as the President's spokesman rather than being called to testify before the grand jury and the Ervin Committee on the Watergate case.

For an official who has lost the confidence of his audience to continue speaking for an Administration that needs more than anything else to restore confidence is a puzzle. But what is more puzzling is why he has not been asked to explain who instructed him to give all the misleading answers to questions put to him at the White House.

In the first place, there is an element of unfairness in his present exposed position. Unlike his predecessors in this savage job—Jim Hagerty under President Eisenhower, Pierre Salinger under John Kennedy and Bill Moyers and George Reedy under Lyndon Johnson—Mr. Ziegler has never had any real freedom to interpret the substance or even the tactics of President Nixon's actions.

He was brought in, unlike the others before him, not to interpret the President to the press and vice versa, but merely to put out what he was told to put out. He was a guided propaganda missile from the first, or, as somebody put it better, he was "a recorded announcement."

Apparently at 29 when he first took over, he liked this role as his master's voice, but it has led him into all kinds of distortions during the Watergate

## WASHINGTON

year, and every day now he is little more than an official punching bag for the people he misled.

Aside from the fact that he himself is now "inoperative" as a believable official spokesman, the main question, about which so many other Nixon associates have been called before the investigating committees, is: Where did he get his instructions? Who told him to dismiss the Watergate as "a third-rate burglary attempt" or to say that "the White House has no involvement whatever in this particular incident"?

If one of the purposes of all these investigations is to find out whether there was a cover-up in the White House or an obstruction of justice, Mr. Ziegler is probably in a position to know at least part of the answer.

Every day, Patrick J. Buchanan of

the White House staff prepared a digest of newspaper, radio and television news reports and commentaries. This went to the President and key members of the White House staff, and was used as the basis for anticipating the questions that would be asked by reporters at each day's White House press briefing.

When the Buchanan digest contained day after day for months the published reports on Watergate leaks or developments, somebody had to decide what Mr. Ziegler was to say in denial, confirmation, or rebuttal.

In Hagerty's or Moyers's days in the White House it might be conceivable that they would undertake to face the firing line on their own, since they were filled in on the substance of policy and trusted to know better than anybody else how to react in tight situations to an inquisitive press. But this was not the way in the Nixon White House.

Few subjects concerned the White House staff more than the protection of the President from rumors, false or true. No Administration in memory has used the official White House denial nearly as much as the Nixon Administration, and the obvious question, since Ziegler seldom acted without instructions, is who gave the word?

More important, on particularly embarrassing questions requiring precision, or, more likely, carefully calculated imprecision, were the official answers written out, and if so, by whom?

Answers to these questions should be instructive. A catalogue of Mr. Ziegler's answers is on the public record, along with his apology for his incorrect answers, which he said were "inoperative," and he is not likely to explain how or where he got his answers unless he is called to testify under oath.

Meanwhile, he goes on putting out statements condemning the Federal prosecutors for what he calls their "shocking and irresponsible abuse of authority" in saying that there was justification for calling on President Nixon to testify before the grand jury. "If in fact they made the statements attributed to them," he added.

In short, he charged the prosecutors before checking on whether they had actually made the statements he was condemning. But again: Who authorized his denial?

Mr. Ziegler has been put in a false position from the start, asked to handle subjects with which he had little familiarity, armed with answers to opening questions, and then left stranded to fend off the inevitable follow-ups.

In the process, his usefulness has been steadily eroded, but he is still out there taking his lumps every day with more patience and courtesy than ever before. The Watergate was his Waterloo, and he must know it, but he is still taking the rap for other men.