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Ron Ziegler Has Come

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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 one-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 recent 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.

Bu 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. "I think because of Watergate there is a degree of contentiousness now in the briefings that is non-productive. The questions get tougher and on occasion he reacts in a tougher way. It is like a marriage that has become incompatible."

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.

It was recognition of this acquired hostility that prompted Melvin R. Laird, the new White House domestic counselor, to say in an interview two weeks ago that Ziegler should be replaced as the administration's principal press spokesman despite Laird's belief that Ziegler did not knowingly mislead the press.

There is, however, no sign that Ziegler is departing the administration. Quite the contrary. Despite the press criticism and despite Laird, Ziegler today appears more secure than ever in the af-

fections of the President, who only last Tuesday reaffirmed his confidence in the press secretary during an evening cruise on the presidential yacht Sequoia.

"Ron fills precisely and well the President's envisioned role as a press secretary," says Patrick J. Buchanan, the President's special counselor and chief media troubleshooter.

"Consider what the alternatives are," says Herbert G. Klein, the departing White House communications director: "It's vital to have someone who knows government and the press and has the full confidence of the President, and that's Ron. It's important that he stays on the job."

One of Ziegler's greatest strengths during the first four years of Nixon administration was that he enjoyed the confidence not only of the President but also 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 this 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 sweats blood to do that."

"And I think he's been badly used by people who say that he lied to the press. 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."

A number of White House reporters who are less confident than Ehrlichman about the administration's essential innocence on Watergate make a similar point in a more adverse fashion.

"I don't think he has any credibility of his own apart from the President's credibility," says Jack Germond of Gannett Newspapers. "To the extent he has been lying to us, I think it is the President, who has been lying to us."

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 of-

ficials, usually speaking on a background basis, have expressed the opinion that Ziegler has been under more emotional strain than past press secretaries because Mr. Nixon's seclusion has frequently made Ziegler the only available spokesman. This is the same point that Ziegler makes when he talks about the ease of briefing the day after a presidential press conference.

"If the President held two press conferences a week no one would be talking about Ziegler," says Klein. "When the President has added press conferences, this will take the heat off."

Both Klein and Ziegler have been talking about an increase in press conferences for years, but the track record does not offer very promising outlook.

President Eisenhower held 193 press conferences in his eight years in the White House, President Kennedy 65 in less than three years and President Johnson 158 in five years. Mr. 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, Mr. Nixon regards his press secretary almost solely as a conduit of presidential views.

"Ziegler is the President's man," observes a knowledgeable White House official. "He's not a go-between between the press and the President. He's the President's man front and center. 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 when he was attending the University of Southern California in 1960. At that time Ziegler assisted in press arrangements when Mr. Nixon spoke on the campus during his first presidential campaign.

Ziegler, a native of Covington, Ky., transferred to USC in 1958 after attending a year at Xavier College in Cincinnati on a football scholarship. While at USC he helped put himself through college with a summer job as guide on a jungle cruise boat in Disneyland.

"Welcome aboard, folks," he would say in those days. "My name is Ron and I'll be your skipper down the rivers of adventure. As we pull away from the dock, please turn around and take a good look. You may never see it again . . . Note the alligators. Please keep your hands inside the boat. They're always looking for a handout."

"On the left, the natives

a Long Way—To Stay

on the bank. Please be quiet. The natives have only one aim in life—and that is to get 'ahead.'"

Twelve years later, Ziegler is still somewhat sensitive about the Disneyland references.

"I didn't get to be press secretary because I ran the jungle cruise or because I was in advertising," he has said.

In his own view, the most important years of Ziegler's pre-White House service were the two he spent after graduating from USC. Then he worked as public information director for the Republican State Central Committee in California under John Krehbiel, a dependable GOP warhorse whom President Nixon has since appointed ambassador to Finland.

Ziegler helped put out the party newspaper and gradually became known to the California press corps, where he was generally regarded as a competent, young public relations man. During Mr. 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 and listed Disneyland as one of his accounts.

The 1962 campaign, in which Ziegler served as aide, marked the low point of Mr. Nixon's relations with the press, and many Nixon aides associated with that

defeat have never forgiven or forgotten what they believed to be unfair press coverage.

In the aftermath of his defeat, Mr. Nixon held his celebrated "last press conference" and promised that "you won't have Nixon to kick around anymore."

This distrust of the press—which, in Mr. Nixon's case, dates back to his service on the House Un-American Activities Committee—is in some ways shared by Ziegler. Describing relations between Mr. Nixon and newsmen, Ziegler has said:

"There has historically been a built-in animosity among many members of the national press corps toward the man, Richard Nixon."

This shared attitude has perhaps helped reinforce the President's support of his press secretary. But there are other, Nixonian attributes also possessed by Ziegler, among them a capacity for hard work.

Ziegler 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 and frequently until 11.

Ziegler's capacity for hard work also is equalled 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.

Sometimes, though, it seems that Ziegler will go to remarkable lengths to say nothing. At other times—

and long before the Watergate scandal raised the credibility issue—he has said things that simply couldn't be believed.

After the Senate rejected Mr. Nixon's Supreme Court nomination of Clement Haynesworth in 1969, for instance, Ziegler took pains to deny recurrent reports that the President was angered by the action. The following exchange occurred:

Q—Are you saying he hasn't been angered or upset in recent weeks?

A—Yes.

Q—Nothing has upset or angered him?

A—I haven't seen him angered or upset at all.

Q—For how long at time?

A—For quite a while, since January 20.

Ziegler's assertion that Mr. Nixon had not been angry for eight months on this occasion ended in laughter. But there has been little laughter at White House briefings since his April 17, 1973, briefing when Ziegler, after repeated questioning on Watergate, said several times that the new presidential statement was "operative." He was then asked whether previous statements were "inoperative" and like many a press secretary or President before him, picked up the reporter's language:

"The other statements that were made were based on information that was provided prior to those events which have been referred to in the President's statement today," Ziegler said. "Therefore, any comment which was made up until today or previously was based on that activity. This is the operative statement."

"The way to assess the

previous comments is to assess them on the basis that they were made on the information available at the time. The President refers to the fact that there is new material; therefore that is the operative statement. The others are inoperative."

This statement and others which followed in the wake of subsequent Watergate disclosures angered some White House reporters who believed they had been misled by Ziegler. The press secretary has steadfastly insisted that he was misled as well when he denounced pre-election Watergate stories.

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

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

On Thursday, for example, Warren spent half of the daily morning briefing attempting to explain how he could speak for the President accurately without having access to the President. When a reporter suggested that Warren's information was based on "hearsay," he replied:

"The President's spokesman daily gives you the President's view. I suppose you could call that hearsay if you wanted to."

The colloquy was precipitated by Warren's statement that he had not met with

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the President personally, as Ziegler did virtually every day when he gave a briefing. Ziegler, while retaining the title of press secretary, has conducted the briefings less than half the time since he became assistant to the President on June 6.

Now, Ziegler has the title of assistant to the President as well as press secretary, and he presides over fewer than half of the White House news briefings.

Buchanan says that Ziegler will stay on, however, 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.

Hearings Resume On WMAL Today

The Senate Watergate hearings will resume at 10 a.m. today with Richard A. Moore, special counsel to the President, continuing his testimony.

Scheduled to testify after Moore is Herbert W. Kalmbach, who until recently was President Nixon's personal lawyer.

Channel 7 (ABC-WMAL) will televise the hearings live, beginning at 10 a.m. Channel 26 (WETA) will rebroadcast the hearings at 8 p.m.