



Inside the White House

A CLASH OF CONSCIENCE

By MIKE BLACKMAN

Too bad. TerHorst will be missed. In his month on the job he labored mightily — and successfully — to restore candidness and honesty to the White House press operation. One hopes that the setup will not slide back to the Zieglerian flackery and deceit that served former President Nixon and nation so badly.

— From an editorial
Cincinnati Post
Sept. 10, 1974

HE HAD settled into his new job with transitional efficiency that amazed, and though officially on leave from the *Detroit News*, Jerald F. terHorst appeared to have found a home as press secretary to the President of the United States. Overnight he transformed the long-embattled press office. Suddenly there reigned a robust news flow and credibility, civility and an AWOL appreciation for the English language, even humor. UPI correspondent Helen Thomas probably best articulated the new mood of the White House press corps. "Finally we're out of the gulag, the dungeon."

Four weeks into his new position — two days before President Ford announced Nixon's pardon — terHorst discussed with this reporter the role of press secretary. He recounted why he'd accepted the job, what he hoped to accomplish. He reiterated the necessity for total, daily access to the President to ensure a candid and open administration, which Ford said he so earnestly and publicly sought. The

52-year-old Washington chief of the *News* accepted the job only after the President had assured him of such blanket access; indeed, terHorst was one of only three White House staffers (along with Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and then Chief of Staff Alexander M. Haig Jr.) to be placed on the President's daily schedule.

And if he suddenly found himself without this total access? TerHorst answered quickly, unequivocally.

"I'd quit."

Less than 48 hours later he resigned. He cited his inability to defend the President's pardoning of Nixon without granting pardons to others, which to an extent he would have been obligated to do had he stayed on to face reporters' questions about the pardon. "I simply could not perceive how forgiveness for Nixon could precede his confession or conviction, or, at minimum, his indictment. Mercy, like justice, should be dispensed evenhandedly by a chief executive," terHorst would write later.

But the painful decision to resign was made easier by other earlier developments. There was the misleading story on the ownership of Nixon's tapes he later had to correct. TerHorst had also been upset because he hadn't been informed about a shakeup in Republican leadership. He is said to have told the secretive aides: "I misled the press. Don't ever do it again." Then at the very moment he was telling *The Quill* what he'd do if access to the President ever waned, pardon negotiations with the former Presi-

dent in San Clemente were already in their second day. TerHorst knew nothing of this activity, and would not find out until the next day — Saturday — the day before he resigned.

And because he still had been in the dark up until then, terHorst apparently was told a lie by another of the President's close friends and advisers, Philip W. Buchen, according to a published report by David Kraslow of the *Cox Newspapers*. Buchen misled terHorst and terHorst, in turn, misled Kraslow in following up on an inquiry from the *Cox* bureau chief as to whether a pardon was in the works for Nixon.

Kraslow's instincts, based on information he had already gathered elsewhere, told him that Ford was considering a pardon. But terHorst, apparently assured by Buchen that such was not the case, passed that assurance on to Kraslow. Kraslow's respect for what he called "terHorst's great store of that perishable commodity called credibility" prompted him at that point to hold back on a story he had in the works about a possible pardon.

The die was probably cast, Kraslow said, when Buchen lied. Certainly it was when terHorst learned the truth.

"Ninety minutes before the President announced the pardon for Nixon, terHorst told me, 'I'm very sorry, Dave. If I had known on Friday what I know now I would not have guided you away from that story.'

"TerHorst sounded very sad. Further discussion at that moment seemed pointless as we both under-

if asked, he wouldn't say no to a president. Friedheim has a master's degree from the University of Missouri. The subject of his thesis: "Presidential Press Secretaries."

Finally, on Sept. 20, 12 days after the terHorst resignation, word leaked out that Ron Nessen would be the new press secretary. That day he held the White House press briefing (adjoining story).

Thus, Nessen became the first television correspondent to serve as official spokesman for the President. Nessen had covered Ford for NBC throughout his vice presidency. And at the age of 40, he brought to the new job an attractive background of news experience.

With UPI from 1956 to 1962, he then joined NBC and covered Washington beats, including the White House, during the Johnson administration. He also reported on the Vietnam war and the civil rights movement at its height.

His experience in Washington includes growing up there and attending American University where he majored in history.

No one would have to tell Nessen how tough his job would be. There are basic, inherent difficulties to contend with, he knew, let alone the unexpected jolts which could crop up at any time. If Nessen should have questions about how to conduct himself as press secretary, he could go to Bill Moyers, who served President Johnson in that office:

"He has the most awkward and delicate and difficult of all jobs because he is flying in the face of the ancient admonition that no man can serve two masters. If he is a thorough-going professional, . . . he will want to help the press as their reporter of the President's life and thought. If he is a man of loyal instincts toward his chief, he will understand that there are times when the President is unable to speak. The tension is like a prolonged toothache. If he is a devoted man, . . . he'll want to do both jobs well; and eventually the inherent contradictions of the job will plague him night and day because he sees both sides."

Moyers in offering advice to any

new press secretary said: "Remember that secrecy corrupts and absolute secrecy corrupts absolutely. If I had to err in telling too much or too little, I would err in telling too much."

Another press secretary of the Johnson years, George Reedy, said, "The position per se is not a difficult one; the difficulty is with the President. It becomes difficult if the President wants to play tricky games. The press secretary will have to play the games or quit, because the press will soon find out."

"One way of dealing with the problem," *Newsweek* offered, "is the 'never mislead' approach practiced by former State Department press secretary Robert McCloskey, now ambassador at-large. A 'no comment' on a situation too delicate to discuss served McCloskey and the reporters far better than a deceptive half-truth or unwitting lie. Such an approach requires that the press secretary be plugged into all important policy discussions and means that reporters given the tell-tale 'no comment' may redouble their efforts to get the story."

Principally, the thrust of the job is to maintain credibility between the president and the people, via the media. One might recall what the lack of credibility did to the Johnson and Nixon administrations.

Compared to Ford — at least in his first month of office — presidents of recent memory operated semi-open administrations at best.

But, in the old days, a little Salinger showmanship or Reedy philosophizing could buoy the flabbiest of answers, often satisfying the press. Then along came Ronald L. Ziegler, the former Disneyland prodigy, who proved jungleland narrations to be excellent training for White House circumlocution. Or stonewalling, so to speak.

More than a year ago, Press Secretary Ziegler was denounced by the National Press Club in Washington as worse than useless ("His Master's Voice," *The QUILL*, July 1973): "The White House press secretary has been reduced to a totally programmed spokesman without independent authority or comprehensive background knowl-

edge of administration policies. Rather than opening a window into the White House, the press secretary closes doors."

That's why the appointment of terHorst was seen as such a brilliant beginning for the new administration. TerHorst not only would change the Zieglerian atmosphere, he wouldn't stand for any of it to linger about. A White House press corps, weary of repeated Watergate-related attempts to lead it down the garden path, was anxious for him to succeed.

TerHorst's Low Profile

Beyond the media and government life of Washington, terHorst was not widely known when he was plucked from the press corps to become press secretary, the first to come directly from working press since the Truman days. There were few Jerry terHorst stories around town and his low profile, as Jules Witcover of the *Washington Post* pointed out, probably was a credit to his stability as a person and a professional.

Other colleagues also spoke highly of him.

Bonnie Angelo of *Time* magazine: "If I wanted a good opinion right down the middle, I'd go to Jerry. He's straight and doesn't have any axes to grind. He's got integrity and professionalism." Dan Thomason of the Washington bureau of Scripps-Howard: "He's a very high caliber kind of guy, a very thoughtful kind of person, unassuming, with a good sense of humor . . . He has an aura of pipesmoking thoughtfulness."

Tom Joyce of *Newsweek*, a former reporter under terHorst in the *News* Washington bureau: "He's a hard-headed Dutchman. He calls things as he sees them. He's extremely conscientious. Politically he's a middle-of-the-roader. Civil rights, the war in Vietnam, he came through as a middle-of-the-roader. Conservative in his writing? No. He wrote some pretty tough columns on those subjects . . . I've never seen him in a rage. On many occasions when I'd be outraged at Detroit over some sensitive story, he'd say 'Okay, I'll talk to them about it.'

He's not the kind of guy to blow up."

Bill Moyers (now with WNET in New York): "I never dealt with a more competent reporter."

TerHorst is described by friends as a devoted family man (four children). He is an elder in the Presbyterian church and a former Sunday School teacher. Lest one think presidential pressure could have swayed his notions, Ben Cole of the Indianapolis *Star* Washington bureau recalled an incident involving Ford's predecessor.

"After one of the Gridiron dinners (terHorst was historian of the Washington club), Richard Nixon invited the Gridiron officers to the Sunday services at the White House. Jerry refused to go because he thought they breached the line on church and state. I always admired him for his principles."

Why did terHorst accept the position of press secretary, given the longevity of the last two administrations and the inherited ills of the job? Did he take the job for the prestige? Despite the ego-feeding closeness of presidential power, the office of press secretary had long been regarded as just another of inept, deceitful, bureaucratic flackdom. For money? Even though he made top White House aide salary of \$42,500, he turned down a "major editorial" position — wide rumor has it the national editorship with the *Washington Star-News*, and that surely would have paid more.

Contrary to reports, Ford as minority leader or vice president never offered terHorst a staff position. The first offer came midday on Aug. 8, less than two hours after Ford met with then President Nixon and learned of the imminent resignation. After unanimous advice from five aides, the vice president phoned terHorst at the fifth-floor *News* office in the National Press Building. "Obviously the press secretary had to be one of his first appointments," terHorst told *The QUILL*. "He had to speak to the American people and he couldn't do it through Ziegler."

He accepted the job immediately, for two reasons. "One, I've known the President for 28 years and

respect him highly, an honest and decent man with the country's interest at heart, and so I was amenable for that reason."

(They first met when Ford was a Grand Rapids attorney and terHorst "fell into journalism" at the *Grand Rapids Press*. Two years later, 1948, terHorst was assigned to cover Ford's first congressional race.)

"Second, there was the challenge to run the White House press office operation so it would be a truly professional and believable office representing not only him to the public, but dealing with the media. It was a challenge because of the hostility, acrimony and credibility gap that had developed . . . I felt that if one of us couldn't do it, then nobody could do it."

But, like President Ford, terHorst felt the pressure immediately. During the interim between the Johnson and Nixon administrations, Ziegler had the benefit of 10 weeks in which to become familiar with the operations of the White House press office and absorb the careful briefings of George Christian, President Johnson's last spokesman.

"As Ford's incoming press secretary," terHorst wrote in his column, "I had the benefit of 20 minutes of conversation with Ziegler before he choppered off from the south lawn of the White House with Nixon. From then, I was on my own with responsibilities not only to speak for the new President but, among other things, to grasp some urgent national security matters from Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger."

TerHorst was considered not only a spokesman for the Ford administration but also an adviser. Newsmen pointed to the fact that the former press secretary spent 90 minutes going over the President's speech to be given before the joint session of Congress. But it was the erosion of his advisory role, the withholding of information by fellow aides and the President, that led to terHorst's trouble.

Said Moyers: "I don't think you can divide them into compartments. The press secretary is both spokesman and adviser, both spokesman and companion. Simply because he

is there, he knows, and because he knows he is tempted to tell. But I would take that dilemma over the Ron Ziegler dilemma, because Ron apparently didn't know, was misinformed and believed the people who duped him."

Herb Klein, former director of communications under Nixon, said, "A good press secretary has to be fully informed on all that happens in the White House and in some degree in government. In that role, inevitably, he must be an adviser."

TerHorst himself, after settling into the job of column writing, added these thoughts on the importance of input, as well as access, to the President: "In the best sense, a good press secretary must play the role of devil's advocate — questioning, testing, objecting, challenging a President's alternatives. At the end of the process, a spokesman should feel in his heart and mind that the chief's decision is the right one so that he can speak with a persuasiveness that stems from conviction. A controversial presidential decision will lack public credibility if the press secretary is a doubting Thomas on the rostrum. . .

"A first-class press secretary then must be a true mirror of the President, neither distorting the image by puffery or ignorance or by statements that blur a painful fact."

Postscript on Press Conferences

For all the obvious good a popular, professional newsman like terHorst could bring to the White House press office, there are inevitable by-products that by nature could stifle the reporter's drive for news. For example, shortly after the Ford administration had taken over, one highly respected Washington reporter predicted that "the guys are going to take it easier on Jerry [terHorst] than they might on someone else." The implication was that the press corps would not pressure "one of their own" for details as they might someone else. However, an opposing argument was that reporters might tend to expect and demand more from a press secretary with solid news credentials.

Whatever the reason, there are those among the White House press

corps who were not doing a sufficient job in digging for news during the early weeks of the new administration. "They're fooling around with nonproductive and inane questions," Peter Lisagor said after one daily briefing in early September. "We get six hard items [news announcements] and they're asking questions about [the President's plans for] tomorrow or [about] going to Pittsburgh next week."

On the day of Lisagor's observations (Sept. 7), the *Washington Post* published a lead "it was learned" story saying (among other developments) that Sen. J. William Fulbright would soon be named ambassador to Great Britain, the most prestigious of American diplomatic posts. The White House briefing later that day lasted for more than half an hour, but no one inquired whether the White House would confirm Fulbright's possible appointment. (The inquiry did come at the next day's briefing, and terHorst said the matter was under "active consideration.")

A related argument for more aggressive questioning is that White House briefings are generally held about noon, fast approaching the final deadline for many afternoon papers in the eastern United States. This time factor appears to make even less important the routine daily questions about whether the President went swimming that morning, whether the press pool helicopter will land on the White House lawn or what the President had prepared for breakfast.

"The senior men here are not reacting like they ought to," said Lisagor, noting the lack of pressing for more substantive news.

Charles Lord, correspondent for the Television News, Inc., provided an explanation for the level of press corps coverage during that first month of the new Ford administration.

"Most of us are brain-scrambled. You cannot believe what it's been like the last six or eight months. If somebody wanted to do a psychological study on stress, the White House press corps would have been perfect. We were like rats in a cage. We had to chisel away to get any-

thing for so long, and now that we're getting news we don't know how to act with it. It's just a carry-over from the previous administration. It will take time but we'll adjust to it."

When the President got around to holding his second press conference on Sept. 16, a less friendly attitude was evident among the White House reporters. To columnist Nicholas von Hoffman it was one of being overly self-righteous.

Some reporters, he said, under the guise of questioning, were actually insulting President Ford by putting his honesty on the line [in connection with the Nixon pardon].

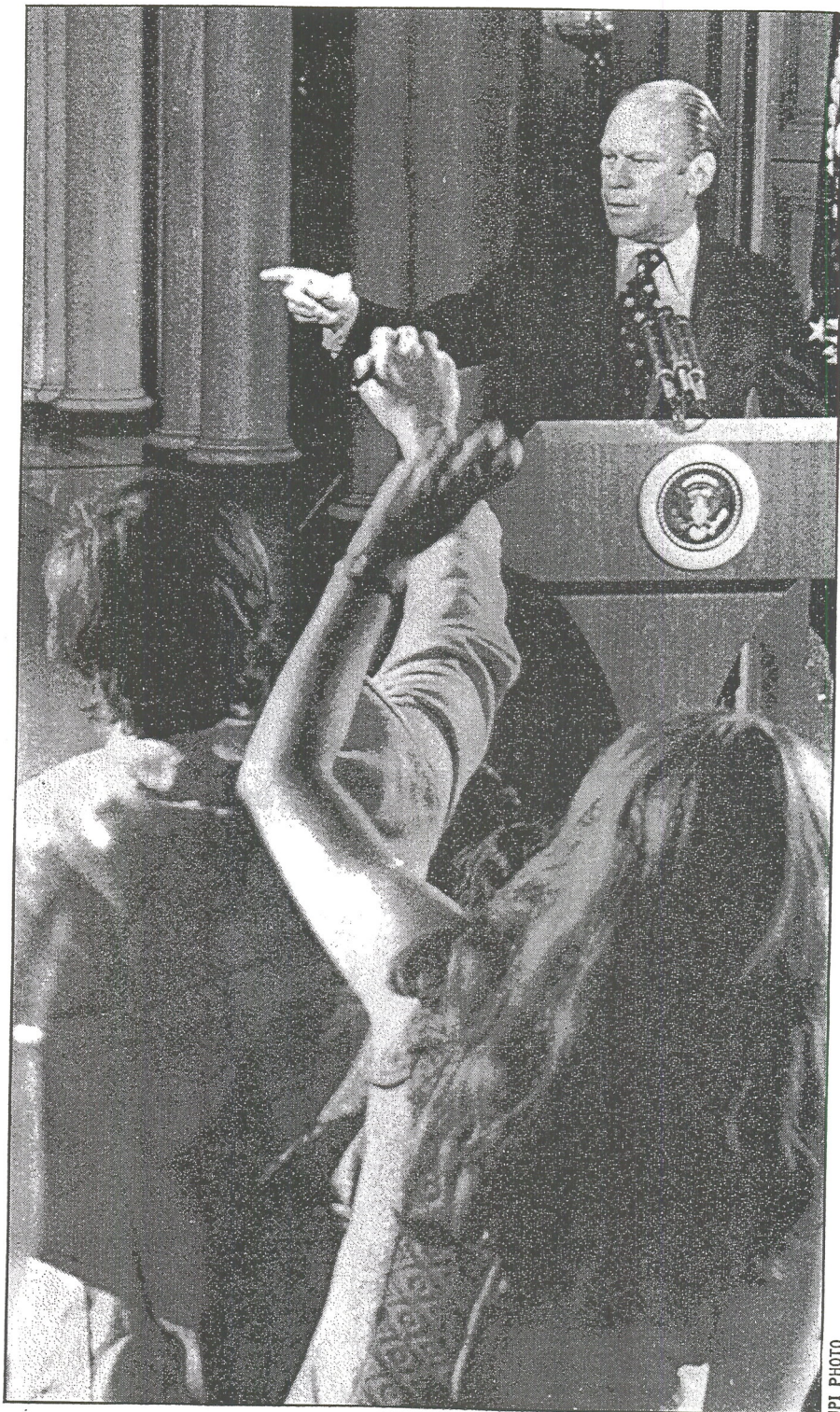
Such questions, von Hoffman added, are not asked to elicit information. "They are statements by self-righteous journalists, few of whom can even claim to have been early opponents of Richard Nixon, but who now, because of the fall of the former President and the part the press played in it, accidentally enjoyed a power and a prestige few of them have earned."

Von Hoffman observed that only one question was asked about the economy. No questions came on "the major collateral issue of housing, although you can safely assume that the millions watching might have a passing interest in these frivolous topics.

". . . the impression left by the press conference is that it is easier to puff up and ply the Conscience of America — and certainly more satisfying — than to do homework needed to ask useful questions. Assuming a posture of high-headed moral outrage demands little thought and less study.

"It is a bad pose to strike near Jerry Ford. This man of limited talent and bleakly narrow understanding is an easy target when attacked as a President, but not as a man. He's wrong on nearly everything, but he's not a bum. And if the high flyers who cover him can't make that distinction, Ford will be justified in abolishing the press conference as an institution that has not only grown to be archaic, but as an obnoxious intrusion on the television quiz shows where at least they give away money." ■

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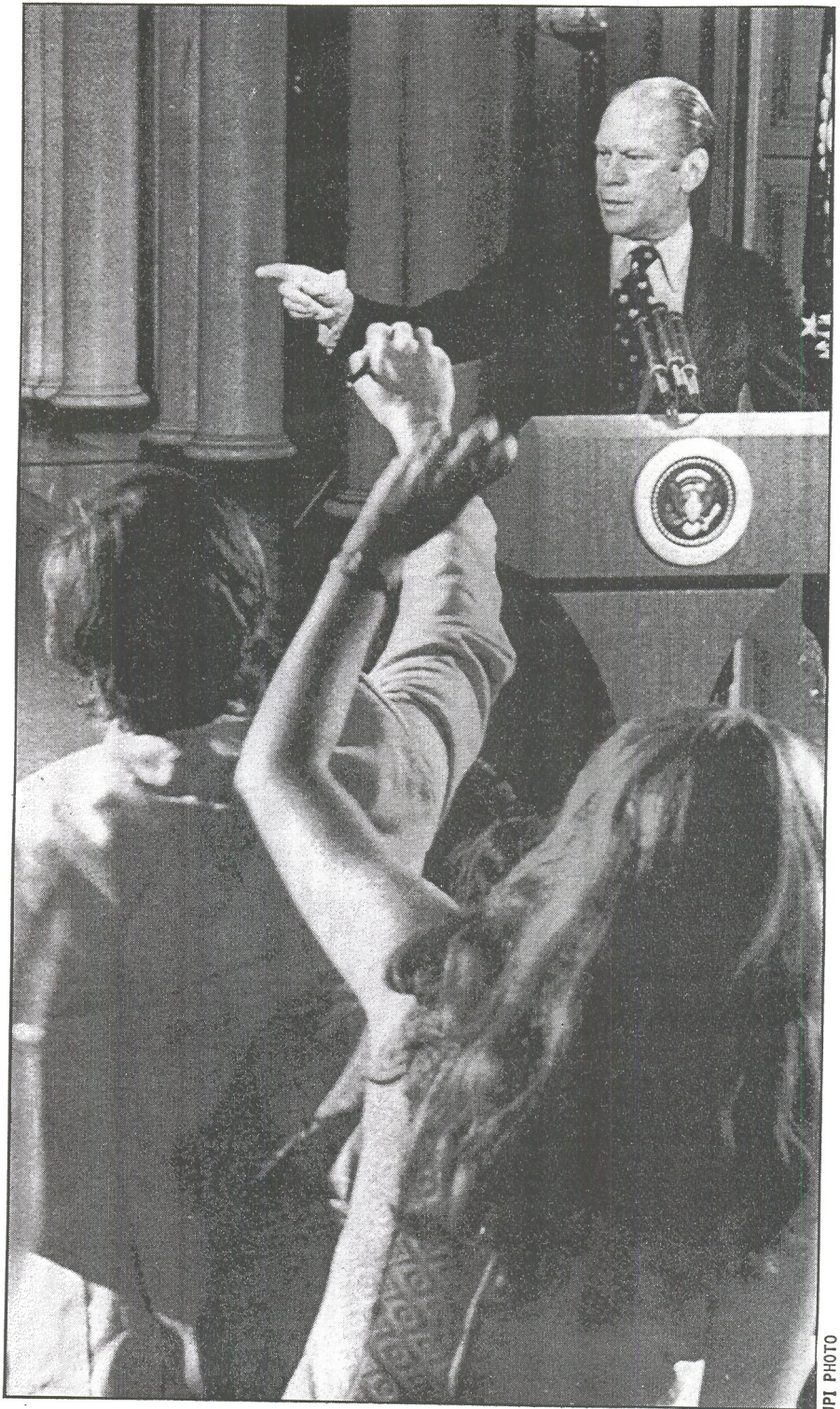
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