

White House Press Aides Tell of Lies

Austin, Tex.

Presidential press secretaries for three administrations said yesterday they had "lied" to White House reporters. All said they did so inadvertently, usually because they had been given inaccurate information by White House staff members.

These acknowledgements came from George Christian of the Johnson administration, Ronald Ziegler of the Nixon administration and Gerald terHorst and Ron Nessen of the Ford administration during a symposium on the presidency and the press sponsored by the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

For Ziegler, it was his first public appearance except for a pair of television interviews since Richard Nixon resigned as president.

Ziegler declined to go into any detail about specific untruths that he told but he responded to a question by saying, "Obviously things that were said about Watergate turned out to be untrue and we all know that."

"I was never asked to go before the press corps and tell a lie," Ziegler added.

Christian said he had "lied" to Dan Rather of CBS and wire service reporters after he had been given inaccurate information by Pentagon officials and White House staff aides on various issues.

terHorst quit the Ford administration after only 30 days as press secretary because staff aides withheld information from him about the Nixon pardon and terHorst in turn misled reporters who inquired about it. Nessen, who succeeded him and still holds the job, said he almost resigned recently because White House aides withheld from him the information that Mr. Nixon had submitted a report on his China trip to President Ford.

Nessen said later that the President had persuaded him to stay.

In the day-long symposium, which also involved various present and former White House reporters, both the operation of the White House press office and the performance of the White House press corps were repeatedly criticized.

Nessen said that the press does not apply the same standards of criticism to itself that it does to other institutions and is reluctant to admit mistakes. In a spirited exchange with Helen Thomas of United Press International, Nessen accused UPI of being "one of the worst offenders in refusing to admit an error."

He also said that "newspapers, like doctors, bury their mistakes."

Hugh Sidey of Time agreed with this criticism. He singled out the "sneaky" practice of news magazines, including his own, in refusing to correct errors except in letters to the editor column.

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