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Address by Ron Nessen
Before the Society of Professional Journalists,
Sigma Delta Chi

March 18, 1975

Thank you, my former colleagues. As the President said the other night: "Here but for the grace of God, go you."

I take very seriously the responsibility of the job of Press Secretary to the President. I take very seriously the relationship between the Press Secretary and the profession of journalism. And I take very seriously the right of the public to know what their President and their White House are doing.

So, when the Society of Professional Journalists, Sigma Delta Chi, invited me to speak here on this date, two days before my six-month anniversary in this job, I decided to take this opportunity to make my first public speech as Press Secretary. My how time flies when you're having fun!

I would like to review tonight what I think has happened for the better in relations between the White House and the press over these past six months, and to point out the direction in which I would like to go in the future.

On the day that President Ford appointed me as his Press Secretary, I promised that I would never knowingly lie and never knowingly mislead. Looking back over the incredibly long days and weeks, despite the pressures, the sensitivity of certain issues we've dealt with, and the new aggressiveness of the White House Press Corps, I can honestly say I have kept that promise ... with the possible exception of the Jackie Gleason golf tournament.

The accomplishment of which I am most proud is the restoration of believability in the White House. The President, and the office of his spokesman, are believed, something which could not always be said with certainty during the previous five years or perhaps during the previous ten years. The White House and its Press Office are open, their personnel are accessible, and more legitimate news is flowing out.

President Ford, with the assistance of his Press Office, has held eleven news conferences in six months, an average of nearly one every two weeks. Who was the last President who maintained that schedule?



President Ford, with the assistance of the Press Office, has given private interviews to the Associated Press, United Press International, the Washington Post, the Washington Star, Chicago Tribune, Time, Newsweek, U.S. News and World Report, ABC, and NBC. Two more private interviews are scheduled within the next few days. What other President has maintained that schedule?

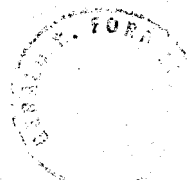
Further, the President has granted requests from a number of photographers to film him exclusively and extensively.

Speaking of David Kennerly, David and I have established a procedure for releasing his own official White House photographs. This procedure does not compete with news photographers. At the same time, it does assure that, on occasion, David's pictures of the Fords in their most private moments, will be distributed to news-gathering agencies in a fair and equal manner.

As long as I can remember in Washington, the major concern about Presidential news conferences was that there was no opportunity to follow up on an incomplete answer, no opportunity to pin down an evasive President. During my first week on the job, I proposed to President Ford that he eliminate this roadblock, and agree to allow follow-up questions at his news conferences. He readily agreed, and has done it ever since. I consider this to be a major -- a really historic -- improvement in the institution of the President's news conference.

Another legitimate request by newsmen, that had gone unanswered for years at the White House, has been to receive a copy of the White House telephone directory, floor plan of offices, and organization charts. When the President completed his White House organization several months ago, I urged him to allow me to issue these three documents. Again, he readily agreed. I think that is another breakthrough for this White House Press Office.

The Press Office has broken down another obstacle to full coverage of the White House, by eliminating the procedure which required reporters to go through the Press Office to obtain interviews with White House staff members. I don't want to be a talent booker, nor do I want to be a censor. Officials in the White House share President Ford's views on openness and accessibility, and I have seen more White House officials interviewed on television and in print in the past seven months than I have for many, many years. Getting the White House Press Office out of the way, so reporters go directly to White House officials, means that another barrier has been removed.



For many years before President Ford came to the White House, newsmen were treated as unwelcome guests. Some would even say "enemies". But that is not the outlook of President Ford and this White House Press Office. Some of his best friends are reporters. Before each official White House social function, he has asked me to invite a half dozen or so working journalists as his personal guests.

In the day-to-day running of the Press Office, I think we have made a number of small but significant changes that reflect the openness of this President and his understanding of the function of a newsman. For instance, we have increased the size of the press pool which flies on Air Force One with the President. We have done this in a way that assures, for the first time, that a television film crew will always be in the Presidential pool, and at the same time, assures that an adequate number of newspaper and magazine writers will be in the pool. We have also changed the procedure so that the press pool is able to do its job better by following the President more closely when he is in public.

We have made it a policy of the Press Office that when questions are not answered in the daily briefing, the answers are tracked down as quickly as possible and the reporter who requested the information receives an answer by phone.

Another thing: we answer questions which have not been answered by the White House in recent years, or at least answered forthrightly. For instance, some reporters expressed amazement when the Press Office reported that mail and phone calls after a Presidential speech were running heavily against the President's views ... and when the White House disclosed unfavorable economic forecasts.

Other reporters have told me that we have adopted one policy that is unprecedented -- it has never been done before -- by a White House Press Office. That is to give detailed reports on private meetings the President holds with his Cabinet, or Congressional leaders, or economic and energy advisors. When I began doing this at the beginning of my service in the Press Office, I didn't realize that it hadn't been done before. I did it because it was simply a reflection of the President's desire to make public as much as possible about the White House. In these meetings, I consider myself to be a press pool of one, taking the same notes and the same quotes that I would if I were a reporter covering the meeting. And then I come out and report to the press on these private meetings.

To sum up, the policy of the Press Office under President Ford is to make as much information available as possible, rather than as little information as we can get away with.

In my view, the most important function of any Press Secretary is to accurately reflect the President's own views. The Press Secretary's personal views and opinions are irrelevant. He should answer all questions just as the President would if he were asked the same question.

The best Press Secretaries have been those who have spent enough time with the President, and have the President's trust, to the degree that they can accurately reflect the President's views. I believe that I spend enough time with the President, and know him well enough, and have sufficient sensitivity, to accurately reflect his views on the issues.

The most difficult part of my job these past six months has been to overcome a mood of hostility and suspicion and distrust that was built up between the Press Corps and the White House during the Watergate years and the Vietnam years. I have been only partly successful in this.

It is my goal to restore the kind of atmosphere that I remember from my first tour as a White House correspondent, in 1963 and 1964, when we used to sit around on the chairs and on the floor in the office of Pierre Salinger or George Reedy or Bill Moyers and in a relaxed and friendly way ask our questions and get our information.

We are a long way from that now. I hope we can get back to that atmosphere. But it's not easy to change a mood that has grown steadily worse in recent years. The terrible legacy of Vietnam and Watergate is that many reporters and many of their readers, viewers and listeners simply do not believe what Government officials tell them.

I don't agree the White House Press Office and the White House Press Corps are natural antagonists. Rather, I believe that we share a common goal, and that is to provide as much factual information as possible to the American people.

The clouds of suspicion and mistrust have begun to lift in the seven months President Ford has been in the White House. But we have a distance to go. I'm going to work like hell as Press Secretary to see that we get there.

The best remedy for the hangover of suspicion is honesty. And if your side and my side do our jobs honestly we will change the mood...and the beneficiaries will be the American public.

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