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Dec 24, 1975

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J. McCarthy

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ag



National Press Club
Washington

FOR RELEASE TUESDAY AM's DECEMBER 30, 1975

The National Press Club and its Professional Relations committee have completed an eight-month study of White House press relations under President Ford. They have compiled a report noting accomplishments as well as failures and have made eight specific "findings and recommendations."

A copy of the report is attached.

This is the second such report by the National Press Club. An earlier study, completed in 1973, severely criticized the White House handling of press relations under former President Nixon. It accused that administration of "an unprecedented, government-wide effort to control, restrict and conceal information to which the public is entitled," and complained of "official lies" by that Administration.

The National Press Club, with headquarters in Washington, has more than 2,700 active journalists in 49 states as members. Its Professional Relations committee deals with a variety of issues, including participation in legal actions concerning freedom of the press, problems of accreditation of journalists in Washington and the Freedom of Information Act.

For further information concerning the report, please call James McCartney at 638-2844 or 229-4629 or Jack Kole at 737-2985 or 737-6453 or 245-4231.

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The White House and The Press
Under Gerald R. Ford

A Study by the Professional Relations Committee
National Press Club

December 1975



"...That the Professional Relations committee undertake a study of the performance of White House press relations and submit a report to the Board of Governors to be completed this year, the study to be conducted by active members of the National Press Club who hold White House credentials,"

---Resolution of the Board of Governors
National Press Club, April 7, 1975.

"...That the Board...gives its formal endorsement of the report of the Professional Relations committee on White House press relations."

---Resolution of the Board of Governors
National Press Club, December 8, 1975.

THE WHITE HOUSE AND THE PRESS

UNDER GERALD R. FORD

A study by the Professional Relations Committee

National Press Club

Printed Under the Auspices of the National
Press Foundation, Inc.

December, 1975

FOREWARD

Three years ago, after former Vice President Spiro Agnew had launched a not-so-subtle White House attack on the press, many members of the Board of Governors of the National Press Club were deeply concerned. They asked the Club's Professional Relations committee, which is assigned to concern itself with professional journalistic issues, to "investigate" White House press relations. The result, just as the Watergate scandals were coming to a head, was a 40-page report analyzing what the White House was doing, and demanding reforms.

In April of 1975 a new National Press Club board asked the same committee to take a new look at White House press relations, under the new president, Gerald R. Ford. The thought was that if improvements had been made, the White House should be given credit. If they hadn't, it should be noted.

John Kole of the Milwaukee Journal, an experienced Washington reporter with a reputation for objectivity and integrity, was appointed chairman of a subcommittee to make a study and an assessment.

This report is the result. It has been debated, and approved, in turn, by the Professional Relations committee and the Board of Governors, acting for the Press Club.

But events move rapidly. As the report is made public problems between the press and the White House are growing more serious. The wall between the public and its ostensible servants is growing higher once again.

It is the committee's hope that future studies to monitor this vital problem area will be undertaken by future press club administrations.

James McCartney, Chairman
Professional Relations Committee

The Press Club Participants

Subcommittee which conducted the study:

John W. Kole, Milwaukee Journal, chairman.

Aldo Beckman, Chicago Tribune; Clifford Evans, RKO General Broadcasting; William Shannon, New York Times; Daniel Moskowitz, McGraw-Hill; James McCartney, Knight Newspapers.

Professional Relations Committee

James McCartney, Knight Newspapers, chairman.

Muriel Allen, Business Week, McGraw-Hill; Roy Bode, Arkansas Gazette; Adam Clymer, Baltimore Sun; William Eaton, Chicago Daily News; David Kraslow, Cox Newspapers; Richard Zimmerman, Cleveland Plain Dealer; Gilbert Bailey, Ridder Publications; David Barnett, Hearst Newspapers; Aldo Beckman, Chicago Tribune; Peter Behr, Gannett Newspapers; Karen Elliott, Wall Street Journal; Mary Lou Forbes, Washington Star; John Herling, National Newspaper Syndicate; John W. Kole, Milwaukee Journal; Donald Larrabee, Griffin-Larrabee News Group Research; Clark Mollenhoff, Des Moines Register-Tribune; Edward O'Brien, St. Louis Globe Democrat; Judy Randal, New York Daily News; Leo Rennert, Sacramento Bee; Warren Rogers, National Forest Products; Dick Ryan, Detroit News; Richard Smith, attorney; William V. Shannon, New York Times; Jack Steele, Scripps-Howard Newspapers; Dan Thomasson, Scripps-Howard Newspapers; Vivian E. Vahlberg, Daily Oklahoman; James Wieghart, New York Daily News; Dan Moskowitz, McGraw-Hill; Cliff Evans, RKO General Broadcasting.

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THE REPORT

"I believe that truth is the glue that holds government together, not only our government, but civilization itself. That bond, though strained, is unbroken at home and abroad. In all my public and private acts as your president, I expect to follow my instincts of openness and candor with full confidence that honesty is always the best policy in the end."

--Gerald R. Ford, August 9, 1974.

In June, 1973, when the National Press Club's Professional Relations Committee surveyed the media relations of Richard M. Nixon's White House, it deplored a situation without parallel in American history.

"In summary," the committee said, "we conclude that the Nixon Administration has engaged in an unprecedented, government-wide effort to control, restrict and conceal information to which the public is entitled, and has conducted for its own political purposes a concerted campaign to discredit the press."

That, of course, was while the full story of the Watergate scandals still was unfolding. Fourteen months later, in August, 1974, President Nixon was driven from office--the first US president ever forced to resign--because of the greatest scandal in any American presidency.

During the 16 months of President Ford's administration, there is no question that White House press relations have improved. However, our interviews with more than 30 Washington reporters, most of them White House regulars, demonstrate that they still have substantial complaints about the quality of the information they are getting despite the clear improvement in the atmosphere.

Press Secretary Ron Nessen, who has consistently had grave problems with foreign affairs, plunged to his nadir on the recent China trip by what many White House reporters believe was the most inept performance in modern times in handling the press relations on a president's mission overseas. It is difficult to see how Nessen can be the presidential spokesman abroad unless he finds some way to improve on this kind of disastrous nonperformance.

President Ford himself has accomplished much of the improvement in the atmosphere by restoring regular White House press conferences and granting dozens of interviews. Through the end of November, after almost 16 months in office, the president had held 23 press conferences, 14 in Washington and 9 in other cities. And he had granted more than 50 interviews to individual journalists or groups of reporters.

Nixon, by contrast, had only 37 press conferences in his 5½ years as president, by far the fewest of any president since Franklin D. Roosevelt made the forum popular. Roosevelt held 998, an average of more than three every two weeks over a 12-year period.

After only a month in office, Ford discovered how devastating the secretive ways of the Nixon Administration could be to the credibility of his presidency. The negotiations leading to the surprise Sunday morning pardon of Nixon "for all offenses against the United States" were shrouded from Press Secretary Jerald terHorst even though he inquired about them. He was deliberately misled by other White House officials who made a mockery of Ford's pledge of openness and candor. On the day the pardon was announced terHorst resigned in protest.

There is a widespread feeling among White House reporters that much information still is being withheld from them. As Norman Kempster wrote last March when he was covering the beat for the Washington Star: "A typical Ford press conference is a predictable series of restatements of the president's already well known positions, interspersed occasionally with the dismissal of a whole subject as 'inappropriate' for comment."

A recent Ford press conference (Nov. 3) demonstrated this problem once again--no matter what questions were asked about the reasons for the high level firings in his administration, the President kept returning to his opening script, that he simply wanted to field his own team.

Not until a week later, on Meet the Press, did Ford acknowledge that "growing tension" between Secretary of State Kissinger and Secretary of Defense Schlesinger led to the firing of Schlesinger.

By this kind of press conference stonewalling, the President sabotages the purpose of the followup question, an innovation which permits a second chance for a reporter to pin down a point. This feature is generally praised by reporters, although some of them think it is too often abused, thereby reducing the opportunities for other queries.

Most of the reporters we interviewed believe that Ford is doing much better on his pledge to conduct an open and candid Administration than Nixon, who made a similar promise. But some reporters disagree.

"You can't conduct openness by proclamation," said Peter Lisagor of the Chicago Daily News. "To communicate what really is going on back there would risk showing the warts. The game is one of selective coverup."

White House Press Secretary Ron Nessen and his staff generally are given credit for improving the efficiency of the operation. Particularly helpful are the regular morning postings and the punctuality of the daily briefing, usually held at 11:30. The recorded message about the President's schedule also is considered an improvement.

As for Nessen's staff, John Carlson and Bill Greener are given the highest marks for competence. Tom Brokaw of NBC comments: "It is an eager, good humored staff that understands the role of the press as an adversary. Unanswered questions are chased down. Much of the red tape has been cut through."

We of the National Press Club have found that Nessen is willing to listen to complaints about press office procedures. Last July, he scrapped new guidelines for White House press credentials after Club protests that it was unfair to require coverage "on a regular, ongoing basis." Instead, he agreed to allow an applicant's bureau chief or editor to affirm that a reporter needs a permanent White House credential.

In September, Nessen responded to complaints from the Club and other organizations by persuading Ford to relax the ban on coverage of White House social receptions.

President Ford's press office also has purged itself of the favoritism which infected Nixon's operation in, for example, the selection of coverage pools. This depoliticizing of the White House press office is a refreshing change.

On the negative side, we received repeated complaints that Nessen and his staff too often do not have adequate information to answer questions. Dennis Farney of the Wall Street Journal concludes: "I view the press office as giving you lots of information on trivial things and not much on important things. I view the press office as a hindrance to openness." And Carroll Kilpatrick, the retired White House correspondent of the Washington Post, adds: "Nessen has made a real effort (to achieve openness) and has been disappointing in achieving it."

Many reporters suspect that Nessen has been the victim of higher authorities in the White House structure, particularly Donald Rumsfeld, the chief of staff until he was appointed Secretary of Defense last month. Rumsfeld was seen as working against an open administration because of his overriding desire to protect the President from criticism. We shall have to wait to see whether this situation improves under Rumsfeld's successor, Richard Cheney.

Nessen has had a particular problem in foreign affairs because of the penchant for secrecy by Secretary of State Kissinger. Because Nessen has had trouble getting good information in this area, his foreign policy presentations often strike reporters as shallow and uninformed. Earlier this year, Nessen conceded in one interview that "the quality of my foreign policy statements is far below the quality of my domestic statements."

Near the end of the year, Nessen contended in another interview that he had made substantial progress on his foreign affairs problem, but that certainly was not evident on the President's recent China trip. In the judgment of Martin Schram of Newsday, "The Peking summit was a professional disaster." Wrote Schram: "The President's sweep through the Pacific ended with members of the White House press corps embittered, virtually unanimously, over what they felt was Nessen's inept performance, his failure to really carry out the role of the press secretary."

Nessen has complained about the "mood of hostility and suspicion and distrust" between the White House and the press corps as an aftermath of the misinformation and lies peddled regularly during the painful periods of the Vietnam War and Watergate scandals. Reporters believe there is generally a healthier attitude of skepticism, but they do not believe they are improving their own performance by more enterprise reporting.

Most White House reporters want to continue the daily briefing, although some think it is unnecessary, particularly when Nessen has nothing substantial to say. Some suggested that an additional briefing in the afternoon would be helpful, with a particular emphasis on clearing up unanswered questions from the morning session. Others said it would be helpful if Nessen brought experts to the briefings more often to present detailed explanations.

White House reporters believe there has been some improvement in the availability of key White House officials, but there still are many complaints about lack of candor. And in many instances the responses to telephone calls do not come soon enough to meet deadlines.

With this background, the Professional Relations Committee of the National Press Club makes the following findings and recommendations:

--President Ford has restored civility to White House relations with the press, which, in a free society, must necessarily be an adversary to the chief of state. We commend him for his regular press conferences and for his unprecedented and frequent interviews with journalists throughout the country.

--We also commend the Administration for improving the accessibility of White House officials and for allowing its press office to co-operate with, rather than hinder, the work of journalists. We appreciate the clear improvement from the Nixon Administration when we were forced to conclude, in a June, 1973, report, that "rather than opening a window to the White House, the press secretary closes doors."

--The President, however, has not always operated with the "openness and candor" which he promised the American people the day he took office. Without admitting that he is refusing to answer tough questions, he has spurned legitimate inquiries at press conferences by reverting to prepared and inadequate statements.

--Some of his top White House and Cabinet associates have repeatedly evaded vital questions by refusing to provide requested information. Accessibility is not enough in itself. We urge President Ford to issue an executive order that will result in the implementation of his pledge to conduct a truly open Administration.

--Top White House officials must do much better in informing Press Secretary Ron Nessen and his staff about what really is going on. It is untenable for the press office to try to explain Administration policies while its efforts are being sabotaged within the White House itself. But at the same time, a press secretary must probe within the White House to learn what is going on and we are not persuaded that Nessen has done all he could in that regard.

--In the spirit of the sound innovation of permitting followup questions at presidential press conferences, we urge Nessen to hold a second news briefing in the afternoon, with a high priority on clearing up questions that he is unable to answer in the morning.

--There is a critical need for more detailed and solid information at White House press briefings. Government experts, particularly in foreign affairs, should be brought to the briefing room more often to explain Administration programs and views.

--We suggest a reexamination by the White House of the proper role of the press secretary as an official government "spokesman." The press secretary in recent Administrations appears, himself, to have become the victim of manipulation by White House policy level officials. In general, we support the principle of direct and sustained access to policy level officials -- particularly the President, the assistant to the President for national security affairs and the chief of staff.

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APPENDIX

Comments by White House Reporters

From August to October, 1975, more than 30 reporters were interviewed by members of a subcommittee of the National Press Club's Professional Relations Committee.

The subcommittee was headed by John W. Kole of the Milwaukee Journal. Other members were James McCartney of Knight Newspapers, Aldo Beckman of the Chicago Tribune, Clifford Evans of RKO General Broadcasting, William Shannon of the New York Times and Daniel Moskowitz of McGraw-Hill.

Some of the comments made in answer to a series of prepared questions are included here.

Tom Brokaw, NBC: Gerald Ford in his relations with the press is one of the most accessible, empathic, good humored presidents in the history of the office. His staff is not quite so forthcoming...for the most part they're determined to carry on that well established White House tradition of treating candor as if it were a social disease.

The press office, under the direction of Ron Nessen, has a mixed record. The press office is not as well informed on issues and policy as the Ziegler operation. The Ford press operation is generally weak in foreign policy, a subject that Ziegler handled surprisingly well.

If there is a consistent flaw in television's coverage of the White House it is that we are too much a prisoner of the man, the presidential person. We need to remind ourselves more often that we're covering a politician, not a monarch. The White House is a home, not a castle. The medium needs to improve its coverage of the White House decision making process. With so fresh a reminder as Watergate, I am embarrassed and puzzled by our almost careless attitude toward the influence of special interests. We must become more diligent in our coverage of the presidential promises.

Peter Lisagor, Chicago Daily News: There's a great improvement between Ford and the press but not between Nessen and the press. For all his (Nessen's) effort to be obliging, he has a certain arrogance and impatience with the kind of niggling that inevitably occurs. So he runs against the grain of people and creates unnecessary animosity and antagonism.

The briefings have taken on a life of their own. They have become the source for daily stories that don't reflect what is going on. They have become a dueling exercise with Nessen being forced into saying things. It has become an institution in and of itself and Nessen must break that chain...the only way to break it is not hold a briefing every day.

Bonnie Angelo, Time Magazine: The daily press briefing has slid from adversary to antagonist...(because of) his (Nessen's) temper, his irascibility--I just don't think that's a trait that's tolerable in a press secretary.

Dennis Farney, Wall Street Journal: He's been about as open as any politician, but like any other one, he tries to present himself in the best light.

He (Nessen) gets all caught up in gamesmanship. He feels himself tested and responds by making us drag information out of him...I'd like to see briefings only when there is news. You are unlikely to get more than they want to tell you anyway. I could better spend my time setting up interviews.

Eugene Risher, Cox Newspapers: He's (Ford) more candid and open than Nixon but the timing and distribution of information is being done to enhance his position and image.

It (the press office) suffers more from incompetence than credibility.

Forrest Boyd, Mutual Broadcasting System: White House officials are not always accessible and cannot answer every question. It is still hard to get official comment or explanations while they are still timely insofar as our deadlines are concerned.

Donald R. Smith, Congressional Quarterly: I've found the White House a lot more informal, a lot more relaxed, a lot more friendly...it's a different planet.

Nessen seems to be a messenger boy; he just doesn't seem to really be in the Administration...I'd like to see a more important, more influential person in that job...I think his heart is in the right place, but I just don't think he's keyed in to decision making.

I just think the daily press briefing is a horror show, but a necessary horror show, I guess. Nine times out of ten it's just not that productive.

It's clear that it's a lot more open than it was, but it's not as open as it should be...people are afraid of telling the truth.

Saul Kohler, Newhouse News Service: It's like day following night after Ziegler. Nessen has done some great things, but I think he does let the briefing get out of hand. There is nothing wrong with saying: "I don't know." I would like to see Nessen refrain from his "cute answers" and be more serious and less frivolous.

William Theis, Hearst Newspapers: I can't recall an incident when they (the press office) didn't make a reasonable effort to get information out. And that's half the battle.

You have to measure him (Nessen) against his predecessor (Ziegler). And that was pretty awful. But Nessen doesn't stack up with men like Jim Hagerty or Steve Early. These were mature experienced spokesmen who had the complete confidence of their bosses.

Paul Healy, New York Daily News: He (Nessen) talks too much and doesn't control briefings like he should. He lets things get out of hand because he likes to talk when he doesn't know what he is talking about.

Robert Pierpoint, CBS: You can't rate an office, You rate a press secretary. I think Nessen is doing a better job than Ziegler or several

of the LBJ press officers, but not as good as Bill Moyers or Jim Hagerty. I think the job any press secretary does is limited by the wishes and commands of his master.

The biggest problem is getting accurate guidance or information from Nessen on a background basis. This is particularly true when you have exclusive stories. Very often, either he doesn't seem to know what's going on or is afraid to give you any real help. The big area of why things are happening he never seems able to explain.

I think reporters always should suspect the worst of government officials on any level.

Top officials in this Administration are a little more accessible than in most previous administrations. Candid? I know few government officials who are candid. Getting through to some officials is harder than others. Generally, the press office is not overly helpful, except in giving out phone numbers.

Lee Walczak, McGraw-Hill: It's not as candid as is widely believed, but it is open...I've never had a major access problem. I'd be hard pressed to finger anyone as being inaccessible.

The major criticism of the White House press people is that they are tremendously uninformed...they always seem to be on the fringe...the press office is chronically underinformed, although they are the nicest possible fellows.

James Deakin, St. Louis Post-Dispatch: Like the past five administrations, it is still too difficult to get the pros and cons offered to the President on various major decisions. The doctrine of executive infallibility continues to apply.

The press office under Nessen is weak as a kitten on foreign policy but I give it reasonable marks on the domestic side.

Nessen's complaint about a poisoned atmosphere because of Watergate is special pleading. Reporters were much harder on Lyndon Johnson because of Vietnam than they are now.

Godfrey Sperling, Christian Science Monitor: Of course, Watergate poisons the atmosphere in the press room. But this is a healthy aftermath to the scandals.

Morton Kondracke, Chicago Sun-Times: I would like to see more officials come down to explain positions. As it is now, Frank Zarb is the only regular visitor. Nessen should release whatever information he has in hand and not insist that a question be asked to pull it out of him.

Don Irwin, Los Angeles Times: Too often they don't know answers or have wrong or incomplete answers. Some answers are misleading because of inadequate information.

I get the feeling of improvisation. He(Nessen) seems to ad hoc every problem.

James Naughton, New York Times: Too often the press office is not informed.

Reporters are not doing any better job. They are putting up more bluster in the open but as far as general enterprise is concerned, it is not better and no worse than before.

I would like to see the White House experiment with press conferences including a small number of reporters, perhaps three or four, with the participants rotated and the interview available for coverage by all. This kind of a relaxed atmosphere might be conducive to thoughtful answers.

Clifford Evans, RKO General Broadcasting: The image (of openness) is there, but the reality does not measure up.

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Some Comments by Ron Nessen

After six months on the job, Nessen delivered what he called his "first public speech as press secretary" to the Washington Chapter of Sigma Delta Chi, March 18, 1975:

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...

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...

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.

Interview by Paul Duke, Public Broadcasting Service, June 30, 1975:

Now as for the mood of the press after Watergate, I think a lot of members of the press have written about this. And I would share the view that it's very hard to come down off the "high" of Watergate; it was a very exciting time in the life of every Washington journalist, including mine, because I worked on that story.

And I think it's difficult, after that excitement of that period and the magnitude of the story, to settle down and deal with more mundane everyday

stories like the budget and the energy program and the recession, and so forth...

There's every effort at the White House to keep me straight and not to program me to mislead...And the terHorst episode, I think, perhaps is one of the reasons for it. I think people at the White House who were there then learned from that episode that the press secretary needs to know everything that's going on so that he doesn't...he is not misinformed and through misinformation damages the White House's credibility or the President's credibility. The effort is to avoid anything like what Jerry terHorst said happened to him...

If you want to talk to Rumsfeld or Marsh or Hartmann or Buchen or anybody you call them directly; if you have trouble arranging a meeting or a phone call, then I will help get the reporter and the official together. But as far as being a traffic cop or a censor, I got totally out of that business and that HAS opened up the White House more.

Interview by Jack Kole and Jim McCartney for the National Press Club, November 6, 1975:

The President has announced his decisions (on the Cabinet shakeup), has explained why he did it and the reporters think: "I wonder what he meant by that, what's really behind this?"

Well, there's nothing really behind this except what he said the other night. But I mean if there is a search for hidden meanings or explanations other than the ones he gave then obviously there's going to be dissatisfaction because it comes to a very simple question of do you believe the President or don't you.

But what evidence is it other than the sort of feeling in Washington these days that nothing is what it appears, that everything has a conspiracy behind it, that there must be more to anything than shows on the surface...

Now what does "generally believed in Washington" mean? It means a bunch of guys sitting at the press club bar and saying: "O bull shit!" Well, God damn it, I think there is a difference in the quality of the information between either the President saying something or somebody in the White House who really knows and a bunch of guys sitting around and saying: "That just can't be true--it's too simple."

And I really think that this spate of credibility stories, unless there is some evidence, unless somebody comes forward and says: "Look, I just got to tell you the President lied the other night and here are the real facts." If it's suspicion or press club gossip or the mentality that things must be other than they appear than I just think that those stories are irresponsible...

I'm overprepared (for the daily briefings). I probably come to the briefing with a good 50% more than I'm ever asked about. And on occasion when I try to elaborate on an issue there are moans and groans and people say: "Oh, we can read that ourselves..." Just to be frank, I'm better prepared than the questioners are.

Speech, National Association of Realtors, San Francisco, November 11, 1975:

My experience as a news reporter for 20 years and now as White House press secretary for 14 months convinces me that the American people sometimes miss the full complexities and background of important issues in their newspapers, television, radio and magazines. This happens once in awhile because of the pressures under which reporters, editors and producers must work: the deadlines, the competition, the lack of air time or newspaper space, the need to find something catchy for the headline. Unfortunately, these pressures have created a trend toward trivia in the news and the resulting downgrading of serious coverage of serious issues...

There has been a great deal of speculation about what's really behind these personnel changes. Some people suggest there's more to it than meets the eye. This speculation reminds me of the two psychiatrists who pass on the street. One says: "Good morning, doctor." And the other walks around the rest of the day wondering: "I wonder what he meant by that."

...A mood of suspicion has grown up in the country because of the events in the past few years. One of the problems with honesty these days is that some people don't believe the simple truth...

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