

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

SEPTEMBER 20, 1974

OFFICE OF THE WHITE HOUSE PRESS SECRETARY

THE WHITE HOUSE

REMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT

AND

RONALD NESSEN

UPON APPOINTING

RONALD NESSEN

AS

PRESS SECRETARY TO THE PRESIDENT

THE BRIEFING ROOM

1:45 P.M. EDT

MR. HUSHEN: Ladies and gentlemen, the President of the United States.

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you very much, Jack.

This is an opportunity for me to make a very, very pleasing announcement. I think I am very, very fortunate on this occasion to have the opportunity of announcing to all of you and to others, in fact, that Ron Nessen is going to be my Press Secretary.

Ron, as you know, has a superb reputation, standing in the electronic media, but I was pleased to find out in my discussions with him that he had a background in the writing press.

So we are very fortunate to have someone like Ron who not only knows the writing but also the electronic press.

I had the opportunity of getting acquainted with Ron in the many, many trips that he took with me on Air Force Two. I think the number is some 57. So, in that luxurious aircraft, in the many travels we made around the country, I was given the opportunity of getting to know Ron very well.

I admired his skill and objectivity as a reporter. I enjoyed his company. I was greatly impressed with his ability and overall approach to the problems that I faced and others did.

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(OVER)

So when I asked Ron if he would take the job, I couldn't have been more pleased.

I must say that this announcement comes at a somewhat unique time. I just spent 2-1/2 hours with one of the leading Communists, and now I am about to meet with one of the most wealthy and influential capitalists. So in between those two meetings, it is my privilege and pleasure to indicate to all of you that Ron Nessen will be my Press Secretary, and I couldn't be more pleased.

MR. NESSEN: Thank you, Mr. President.

THE PRESIDENT: Fine, Ron. You are the boss.

MR. NESSEN: My wife said to tell you that this entitles you to one free dancing lesson. (Laughter)

THE PRESIDENT: I need it. (Laughter)

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MR. NESSEN: Thank you very much for the trust you put in me, and I will try to live up to it.

THE PRESIDENT: I have no doubt about it, Ron.

So, I will turn the job over to Ron. He has my full backing and support, and I think I am very lucky to have somebody like him handling the job.

MR. NESSEN: You are not going to leave me out here all alone, are you?

THE PRESIDENT: You better get used to it. No, I am going to stand here until you finish your remarks.

MR. NESSEN: Well, I did want to say a couple of things.

I hope the White House Press Corps is ready for another Ron. I am a Ron, but not a Ziegler, I can tell you that.

I do want to say a couple of things. One is that I will never knowingly lie to the White House Press Corps. I will never knowingly mislead the White House Press Corps, and I think, if I ever do you would be justified in questioning my continued usefulness in this job.

My conception of the job is that a Press Secretary does not always have to agree with the decisions of the President. I think a Press Secretary's job is to report to you the actions of the President, why he has taken the actions, how he has arrived at the action. I don't think that the Press Secretary and the press are natural antagonists. I think we really both have the same aim.

I have been out on the other side for a long time, and now I am on this side, but I think we have the same aim, which is to get as much news as possible about what goes on in this place to the American people.

Obviously, the Press Secretary needs to know what is going on to do that job, and I have been assured that I will know what is going on. I don't expect to be a salesman for the President. I am not going to try to sell his programs to you.

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I am apolitical. Like most of you, I have worked on covering most of the political campaigns of the last 15 years. The last time I voted, I am ashamed to say, was in 1960 when I voted for John Kennedy. Other than that, I have no affiliation with any political party.

I think my models in trying to do this job will be Bill Moyers for his knowledge and his honesty and the amount of information that he put out, Pierre Salinger for the good humor and the good fellowship and the grace that he brought to this job, and I would hope to be able to earn as much respect from you as Jerry terHorst had.

I think it is probably too late to go back to a honeymoon, but maybe we could have a trial reconciliation.

Thank you.

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you, Ron.

We are very proud to have him, and we look forward to working together.

I will leave you to your friends.

Thank you very much.

MR. NESSEN: Thank you very much, sir.

If you have any questions about my job, I would be happy to answer them. I really haven't been here long enough to know anything else.

Q Ron, are you going to provide us a bio?

MR. NESSEN: The Press Office is making one or has already made it.

Q Are you taking over right now?

MR. NESSEN: Yes.

Q How much is your salary?

MR. NESSEN: \$42,500.

Q Ron, Jerry was a little upset because he felt he was betrayed in his last couple of days in office. Have you talked to Mr. Buchen, have you talked to other people Jerry had some problems with to make sure this doesn't happen to you?

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MR. NESSEN: I have talked to people here, and they understand what the problem was with Jerry terHorst, and I don't think that will be a problem again.

Q What was it?

MR. NESSEN: I think Jerry has spelled out himself what his problem was, and I really shouldn't speak for Jerry.

Q Can you tell us when you heard about this, how this came about?

MR. NESSEN: About a week ago I was contacted by one of the offices at the White House that deals with recruiting and asked if I would be interested, and I said I would be interested under certain conditions. I was later contacted by one of the President's advisers, and we discussed it, and I made some of the same points that I have made to you, and then I had a chat with the President yesterday in which I made these same points and in which he offered me the job and I accepted.

Q What were the conditions that you accepted the job?

MR. NESSEN: I don't think I would call them conditions. Some of the points that I made to you, that I did not picture the Press Secretary as having to be a salesman, that I did not think the Press Secretary had to agree with every Presidential decision, but I very strongly felt that the Press Secretary needed to know what was going on in this place so he could do his job.

Q How will he inform you of that? I mean, will you be able to attend the Cabinet meetings?

MR. NESSEN: The Press Secretary will attend, as I understand it, all except the National Security Council meetings, and private meetings, that the President may have face to face with his own guests. I will be in daily contact with the President.

Q Ron, will daily briefings be open to sound on film coverage?

MR. NESSEN: We will have to think about that. I am just a little too new in the job to understand what the problems are, but I certainly will look into that possibility.

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Q Ron, can you assure us that we will have a little bit better schedule on briefings?

MR. NESSEN: Well, Maggie, I guess I have gotten as tired of waiting out here in the lobby as you have, and since I understand the problem from the waitees' point of view, I will certainly try to keep a better schedule.

As you know, the main reason the briefings are sometimes late is because the Press Secretary is trying to get information that he thinks will be requested at the briefing.

Q Couldn't we then set it for 12:30, say, instead of 11?

MR. NESSEN: If you would like to think about that or have us think about that, we will.

Q Ron, are you going to make any changes on the staff?

MR. NESSEN: Well, for the moment everybody on the staff is going to stay on the staff.

Q Ron, are you here for the duration? Have you resigned from NBC?

MR. NESSEN: This happened rather quickly, Bill, and I only had one brief conversation with NBC last evening. I have requested a leave of absence, and I haven't gotten an answer as to whether I would be granted the leave of absence or whether I will have to resign.

Q Ron?

MR. NESSEN: Yes, Phil?

Q What about Father McLaughlin?

MR. NESSEN: Where is Les. That is his question.

Q Is he still on your staff?

MR. NESSEN: I am going to have to ask for some help on this one. There is a large administrative function to this job, and obviously, in the few hours that I have been trying to get a hold of it, I don't know all the ins and outs of personnel.

He will be leaving soon. (Laughter)

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Q Ron, a question about your approach to the job itself. In sitting in on the meetings that you say you will have access to, are you going to be playing the role of simply the voice for the President after the meeting is over, the kind of role that Jack Hushen mentioned earlier that he played, or do you feel that you should have policy input in other areas than simply the press?

MR. NESSEN: This job does have three aspects to it, really. One is to be the President's spokesman, the second is the administrative function that I mentioned, and the third is to advise the President. The President has a group of senior advisers, as you know, numbering about five or six, and the Press Secretary is one of those senior advisers and, therefore, will have an input as well as an output.

Q The President met with Mr. Gromyko for, I think he said, two and a half hours. Are you going to give us something on that today?

MR. NESSEN: There will be a posting on what happened at the meeting with Gromyko.

Q Ron, I didn't hear what you said would happen if you misled or lied to us.

MR. NESSEN: I think if I misled or lied to you, then you are justified in questioning my continued usefulness in this job.

Q Ron, could you say in your own mind what persuaded you to take the job after so many years in the news field?

MR. NESSEN: I think, like most people out there, I have had an itch for a while to be a participant in events instead of always an observer at events, and this opportunity presented itself to be a participant, and I took it for that reason.

Q Ron, do you believe you could ever go back to being a reporter after you hold this job?

MR. NESSEN: John, this is my first day on the job. I rather not look forward to retirement quite yet.

Q Ron, does the fact that you took a leave of absence indicate, like Jerry terHorst kept telling us when he first came on -- he said I am not necessarily permanent, I am on a leave of absence -- does this mean that you also want to make sure that promises that have been made to you are going to be kept?

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MR. NESSEN: No, that was not really the reason. Well, in all honesty, I don't know what the White House set-up is, how soon I get on the payroll, how soon I get my first check, whether I get hospitalization, or pension, or what, and I want to make sure I hang on to my NBC pension and hospitalization and so forth until I am fully aboard over here. That is the only reason.

Q Did Brokaw recommend you? (Laughter)

MR. NESSEN: I don't know.

Q What about Jack Hushen? Is he still deputy?

MR. NESSEN: Yes.

Q Ron, Jerry terHorst's column today says that a Presidential spokesman is responsible -- and he puts them in this order -- to the media, to the President and to the public. Do you want to look at it?

MR. NESSEN: I would say that the Press Secretary is responsible first to the public.

Q Ron, do you have any notions on how often a President ought to have a press conference?

MR. NESSEN: I think as often as possible, and I think this President has and intends to continue to hold press conferences frequently.

Q Is that part of the agreement between you and the President?

MR. NESSEN: I didn't think there was any need for an agreement because that has been his policy and as far as I know will continue to be his policy.

THE PRESS: Thank you.

END (AT 2:00 P.M. EDT)