



Ron Nessen. *Making the News, Taking the News: From NBC to the Ford White House*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2011. Illustrations. ix + 243 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8195-7156-4.

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In the Shadow of Watergate: Media Relations in the Ford White House

Since 1999, Ron Nessen has worked in some capacity at the Brookings Institute, a Washington DC-based think tank. During a 2010 phone interview with Mindy Kotler, the director of Asia Policy Point, she inquired about his past experience as Richard Nixon's press secretary (she likely confused him with Nixon confidante and press secretary, Ronald Zeigler). Nessen, by all accounts, went ballistic. He shouted a two-word expletive-laced phrase worthy of the Nixon Tapes; informed Kotler that he had worked for Gerald Ford, not Nixon; and then slammed down the receiver in disgust.

Nessen, assumed the duties of White House press secretary in September 1974 about one month after Ford had been elevated to the presidency. Ford's then controversial decision to grant a full and complete pardon to Nixon prompted his press secretary, Jerry der Horst, to resign in protest. As Ford sought to move the country beyond its fixation with the "long nightmare" of Watergate, Nessen inherited the thankless task of improving the toxic atmosphere among the White House press corps that had developed during the Watergate scandal and that Zeigler had allowed to fester. For the next two plus years, neither Ford nor Nessen proved up to the task of overcoming the trauma inflicted by the Nixon White House.

Nessen's memoir, *Making the News, Taking the News*, represents his second attempt to explain his role as Ford's spokesman. By his own admission, the first book, *It Sure Looks Different from the Inside* (1979), was a "quickie book I had written without much introspection or analysis" (p. viii). Nessen provides plenty of introspection this time around, but falls short in offering much meaningful analysis or context to the Ford era. *Making the News* is a mea culpa of sorts for the author. As he tells the story of his career as a successful television reporter for NBC, from 1962 to 1974, he also relates the challenges in his personal life—the death of his son, two failed marriages, and repeated infidelities.

Making the News begins on a spring day in April 1975. Ford was at Tulane University to formally announce that the final U.S. forces had been withdrawn from South Vietnam. This chapter of our nation's history had been especially painful to Nessen. He had developed a love and respect for the Vietnamese people. Nessen arrived in Saigon on a temporary assignment and ended up serving five tours of duty there. On one combat mission, near Pleiku, he and his team came under enemy fire and Nessen was seriously wounded. Nessen admits to a degree of envy when he considers the way wars from Iraq and Afghanistan are reported compared to the antiquated methods that he employed in the sixties. "In Vietnam, sometimes it was easier to get the story than it was to get the film and radio reports of the story back to the United States" (p. 38). His stories had to be shipped to Saigon's airport. In some cases, reporters pressed flight attendants and even passengers to transport films back to the United States. If he were lucky, Nessen could expect his stories from the field to air a day or so after he filed them. The upside of this apples and oranges comparison is that Nessen feels the additional time that he had well spent writing copy for the story and supplying context to the story when appropriate. The twenty-four-hour news cycle, Nessen laments, does not afford today's reporters such luxuries of time.

Before joining the Ford White House, Nessen came up through the ranks of NBC during the sixties. He received plum assignments, covering Martin Luther King Jr.'s civil rights march in Selma, Alabama, before shipping out to Vietnam and the White House. He was a pioneer of sorts, in 1964, serving as a floor reporter at the Democratic National Convention, equipped with a portable transmitter and headphones, providing live coverage. Following Lyndon Johnson's landslide election in 1964, Nessen was given the special assignment to cover the inauguration from a special vantage point.

NBC welded a platform big enough to seat Nessen, a microwave dish, and a cameraman to provide running commentary of the event.

The lion's share of *Making the News*, not surprisingly, is devoted to the Ford years. In one chapter entitled "The Ghost Who Wouldn't Go Away," Nessen relates his utter frustration about the press corps' preoccupation with Nixon and the aftershocks of Watergate. He cites a Gallup Poll which indicated that people cared more about rising inflation rates than the former president. "The results would have been a lot different if the poll had been taken among the White House press corps," the author observes (p. 110).

The one major insight that Nessen's book provides relates to Watergate. The fact that the biggest political scandal of the century was broken by two relatively junior reporters who had never set foot in the White House irked members of the press corps to no end. At other

times, Nessen struggled to keep the president newsworthy and relevant. The low point occurred when all three major television networks refused to air the president's speech, which was designed to roll out the administration's ill-fated Whip Inflation Now (WIN) initiative.

Nessen is obviously fond of his former boss. He recounts how Ford visited his Maryland house for a weekend barbeque. On another occasion, at Camp David, Ford advisors cut loose from the rigors of their jobs and pushed each other into the president's swimming pool—fully clothed—as the president and First Lady watched in approval.

Regrettably, the book contains no footnotes, endnotes, or index. From that standpoint, scholars will find it cumbersome and challenging to use. The table of contents and the organization of the narrative, which flows in a logical chronological format, offsets those deficiencies.

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