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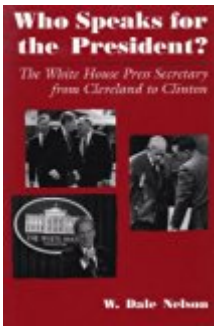

W. Dale Nelson. *Who Speaks for the President? The White House Press Secretary from Cleveland to Clinton.* Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1998. 256 pp. 29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8156-0632-1.

Reviewed by Karen Miller Russell

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Beginning his book with the observation that presidential press secretaries must serve two masters, both president and press, W. Dale Nelson offers a chronological review of these press secretaries that is both informative and entertaining. The book is grounded in thorough secondary research and the author's own experience as a Washington reporter. However, because it lacks analysis of the events and people examined, its usefulness to mass communication historians is limited.

Like James E. Pollard's 1947 book *The President and the Press*[1] and Elmer E. Cornwell's *Presidential Leadership of Public Opinion*,[2] published in 1965, *Who Speaks for the President?* devotes a chapter to each U.S. president, briefly reviewing press relations activities and the contributions of the press secretaries who worked for them. One of its strengths is that it updates these earlier works with information on press secretaries of the presidents since Lyndon Johnson. The secondary research is also strong, with each chapter based on virtually all of the available secondary literature as well as oral histories from presidential libraries. In addition, the author interviewed press secretaries including Marlin Fitzwater and Jody Powell, such journalists as the redoubtable Helen Thomas, and former president Gerald Ford. Finally, as a longtime reporter and editor at the Associated Press (including reporting on the presidency), Nelson approaches his topic knowledgeably and with an appreciation of the nuances of the relationship between press secretary and reporter.

The book is full of engaging anecdotes, classics and those less well known to scholars of presidents and the press. Nelson relates, for example, the story of Stephen Early, FDR's press representative, who caused a controversy when he apparently kicked a black police officer who had been trying to prevent thirty-five reporters and White House officials from boarding the president's train. Roosevelt, running for election in 1940, counted on the black vote to help him win, and Early, a Southerner who already had a poor reputation with African-Americans, found himself in the news. "Steve Early was the first White House secretary to be officially assigned to handle press

duties exclusively, and would become a public figure in ways that no previous presidential secretary had been," Nelson explains (p. 67). The incident with Patrolman Sloan provides but one example of Early's sometimes high profile. Nelson also describes Pierre Salinger's rules for the press during the Cuban missile crisis, which were, somewhat disingenuously, not called "voluntary censorship" (p. 140), and tells the story of Ronald Ziegler, President Nixon's press secretary, who famously dismissed all of his previous comments on Watergate as "no longer operative" (p. 166). Nelson breaks new ground with discussions of more recent press secretaries such as Dee Dee Myers, the first female press secretary, who worked for President Clinton. These anecdotes provide good examples for class discussions on presidents and the press or the role of press secretaries in public relations history.

The book is, nevertheless, ultimately disappointing for historians of mass communication. While the history of the presidential press secretary is the single best-documented area of political public relations, Nelson makes no effort to explain the rise of the press secretary or the reasons for its expansion. The book lacks any context at all about public relations history, although it relies on numerous journalistic and media history sources. Lacking this perspective, Nelson cannot offer generalizations about the role the secretary has played in the presidency or in public relations history. In fact, his concluding sentence-"In the end, it was the president who spoke for the president"-seems to undermine the need for the study of the press secretary at all. Nelson's book has much to offer, but the definitive history of the presidential press secretary has yet to appear.

Notes

[1]. James E. Pollard, ***The Presidents and the Press*** (New York: Macmillan, 1947); see also Pollard's ***The Presidents and the Press: Truman to Johnson*** (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1964), which updates his first book to the beginning of the Johnson administration.

[2]. Elmer E. Cornwell, Jr. ***Presidential Leadership of Public Opinion*** (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965).

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