

Eye on Washington by Nicholas F. Benton

Speakes slams press in departure

In a speech before the National Press Club on his final day as press spokesman for the White House, Larry Speakes surprised the 150 assembled journalists with a serious critique of dangerous trends in journalism. He said that reliance on unnamed "administration sources" for "leaks" in the leading daily newspapers, and fixation with entertainment ratings on the nightly TV news, have subverted the profession.

Speakes, who became President Reagan's chief spokesman when press secretary James Brady was seriously wounded during the attempt on President Reagan's life in March 1981, served longer in that job than anyone in the postwar period since President Eisenhower's James Haggerty. He had also worked in the Nixon and Ford White Houses.

Although his picture of the degenerate trends in journalism was on the mark in many ways, his limitations in the job reflected more general weaknesses that continue to dog the administration as a whole. Just the fact that Speakes chose to go on to the "greener pastures" of Merrill Lynch, an institution notorious for its ties to laundering dirty money since the days when Don Regan was its CEO, betrays the kind of amoral thinking on economics which was massively rebuffed by voters last November.

Speakes's ignorance, for example, of the release in late January of a major document by the Vatican attacking the debt collection policies of the International Monetary Fund, was intolerable for a spokesman of the

President of the United States. During his final press briefing at the White House, he professed ignorance of the document when asked by this reporter if he could comment on it. "No," he said, and then added a stupid retort, "You Catholics aren't giving your 10 percent?"

Despite this crippling flaw in judgment on the moral basis of economic policy, in his closing speech, Speakes had some sharp insights about the so-called Fourth Estate.

"When I began in this business," Speakes said, "the way an editor chose the lead story was by asking the questions, 'How many people does this affect?' 'What's the impact on the community or nation?' Today it seems the number one factor in determining what's news is conflict—still better if it's personality conflict."

Reporters from the major media often come to the White House briefings "preoccupied with an axe to grind about a policy they are interested in." There is an "automatic presumption by many members of the press corps," he said, "that the government is lying."

He said that TV has developed an overwhelming influence over American public opinion, even though the subject on the nightly news may be based on a leak that appears in the front page of that morning's *New York Times* or *Washington Post*.

Speakes said he'd never been asked to lie during his years at the White House, but admitted that he had been "misled" by certain people. Yet, he said he often felt he was spending 90% of his time reacting to "leaks" in the morning papers rather than presenting information.

One way around this, he proposed, was to "send that well-quoted 'administration official' off to a long, overdue retirement. Let government pledge to tell the story on the record. . . . Too often an administra-

tion official speaks from behind a cloak of anonymity, making news by sabotaging those with whom he disagrees, by conducting character assassinations on his colleagues in government, and, most seriously, leaking top secret information that may be damaging to our country.

"This official hidden behind this cloak is a phantom. Reporting him as a 'senior administration official' makes the press and the public unable to evaluate his credibility. Is it a mid-level bureaucrat with an axe to grind, or is it a Cabinet secretary who knows what he's talking about? Let's try it. Tell it on the record, or let's not tell it at all."

Because of television, "today, more often than not, a single issue will dominate the White House news for the day. This is brought on by television which airs only one story a day from the White House beat." Television press conferences with the President "may have outlived their usefulness to the President, the press, and the public," and "the White House and the press must together take steps to save this important institution of the democratic process," he said.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "The press conference is a theater. They're scripted. Reporters ask written questions to which a President gives a rehearsed answer. The spontaneity is lost. The press is not looking for information, they're out to make news. An 'I gotcha' syndrome prevails. There is an attempt to entrap a President. 'How can he get him to say what he doesn't want to say?'"

Speakes proposed "taking the TV news shows out of the ratings game." He said, "See if there is a way to exempt the nightly news from the sledgehammer of the Nielson's poll. . . . Let's take the news business out of the entertainment business and put it back where it belongs . . . in the news department."