



Jerry Freidheim briefs the press on "Project Homecoming," the return program for POW's.

By Laura Longley Babb, BJ '68, AM '70

On first impression, Jerry Friedheim seems all wrong for the Pentagon. A rather unassuming, soft-spoken Missourian with an office at the end of a long corridor lined with the likenesses of Commander-in-Chief Richard Nixon and General Douglas MacArthur, Friedheim would strike most as a lightweight amidst all the heavy brass. Chalk up one mistaken impression.

As Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs)—a position with the equivalent rank of a three-star general—Friedheim is best known as the "Pentagon Spokesman." But it's no cushy post. Highly regarded by the Nixon Administration, he was recently awarded the Defense Department Medal for Distinguished Public Service for providing "clear, concise, accurate and timely information concerning the worldwide activities of the Department of Defense." However, he also gets his share of flack from the press who attend his briefings. For example, in December, his denial that U.S. pilots had deliberately bombed civilian targets in Hanoi prompted one New York columnist to write: "Perhaps no man in history has ever lied for his government as doggedly, as witlessly or as unsuccessfully as Jerry Friedheim."

In this instance and others, the mild-mannered spokesman has acknowledged that some of his statements have been proven untrue by later information, but he rejects the accusation that he has ever told outright lies. "I would never knowingly lie," says Friedheim. But, "I never tell you everything I know either, because I have another job, which is to protect classified information."

**Yet Friedheim defends the press's right to criticize.** "Look down the corridor. You'll notice that we're the only building in town with the Freedom of Information Act on the wall. There are a lot of Missouri people here, and we believe in a strong free country with a strong free press. In fact, the jobs in the defense department are about the only place where these two ideas co-exist." The 38-year-old native of Joplin received his BJ from the University of Missouri-Columbia in 1956 and later returned for his master's degree.

With the Vietnam war technically over, Friedheim believes there will be some changes in his responsibilities. "We have to do an even better job of explaining what the military services are doing. We must help the American people understand that if we want the detente we must maintain some defense. Also, we must explain the whys

and wheres of military expenditures. For example, did you know that most of our money goes for people, for salaries? And we will need to make it clear in the future that we want the all-volunteer forces to be a part of society, not drawn from it. This won't be easy; this country hasn't had a peacetime situation for years. We haven't been without the draft since 1941."

But challenges are nothing new to Friedheim who's been meeting—and rising to—them most of his life. After his graduation he became an artillery captain, and then jumped into journalism. He worked for UPI, AP, the *Neosho Daily News* and the *Joplin Globe*, where his parents worked. He then returned to the School of Journalism where, as a graduate assistant, he spent his Saturdays "putting out the *Sunday Missourian*."

"Since then I've visited a lot of journalism schools in this job, but none that prepares students as well as Missouri. For one thing, no others as yet have the teaching facilities, the radio and TV stations and the *Missourian*. And no one has a better faculty." Friedheim completed his master's degree in 1962, after writing a weighty thesis on presidential press secretaries. Then, he received a fellowship from the American Political Science Association to spend a year in Washington studying the government.

That was the beginning of his blending of press work and politics. Remaining in the capital, he served as press secretary and military affairs assistant to Senator John Tower, R-Tex., and worked in the 1964 and 1968 campaigns for both Tower and Richard Nixon. In '68, he'd picked the winning team and, "when Secretary Laird came over to the Pentagon," Friedheim explains, "he asked me to come with him."

He's been at the Pentagon ever since, but it is a political appointment so he doesn't bank on being there forever. Where does he see himself as well as his wife Shirley and their three children—Daniel, 14; Cynthia, 13; and Thomas, 11—four years from now? Many people who leave here go into private industry or business, he says. "I was offered the deanship of Kansas State's journalism school last summer. If it had come at a different time, I might have taken it. But at that time, it was beginning to seem that we would get the war ended and the prisoners back. The opportunity just came at the wrong time, because I still had a job to do for the Secretary of Defense and for the President." □