

the unelected: Gary Pearce

Press Secretary and Political Advisor

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— Gary Pearce

At 8:30 on three or four mornings a week, three men sit down together in the library of the executive mansion. They are James B. Hunt Jr., the governor of North Carolina, John A. Williams, the governor’s executive assistant and head of the State Budget Office, and Gary Pearce, the governor’s press secretary. The governor and Williams sit at opposite ends of a sofa, the governor with a briefcase at his feet, Williams with a thick file folder in his lap. Pearce sprawls on a sofa across from the other two men.

On one particular morning, the conversation touches on a broad range of subjects—from the allocation of social services funds to the latest letter from the U. S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare on the University of North Carolina’s desegregation plan. The subjects are raised by Williams, who pulls letters, reports, and memoranda out of his folder and hands them to Hunt for comment or instructions. Pearce does more than listen. The press secretary plays an active part in this meeting of the inner circle of the Hunt administration.

He interrupts Hunt, for example, during discussion of a pending minor appointment in the energy field to suggest that the governor might want to “look at it again” in light of the fact that the man under consideration has been unsympathetic to the development of unconventional sources of energy. Hunt acknowledges Pearce’s observation and raises names of other potential appointees.

Later, the governor would characterize Pearce’s comment on the appointment as “one small example” of the way the press secretary influences his decisions. But there are others.

Pearce is one of two men who meet with the governor

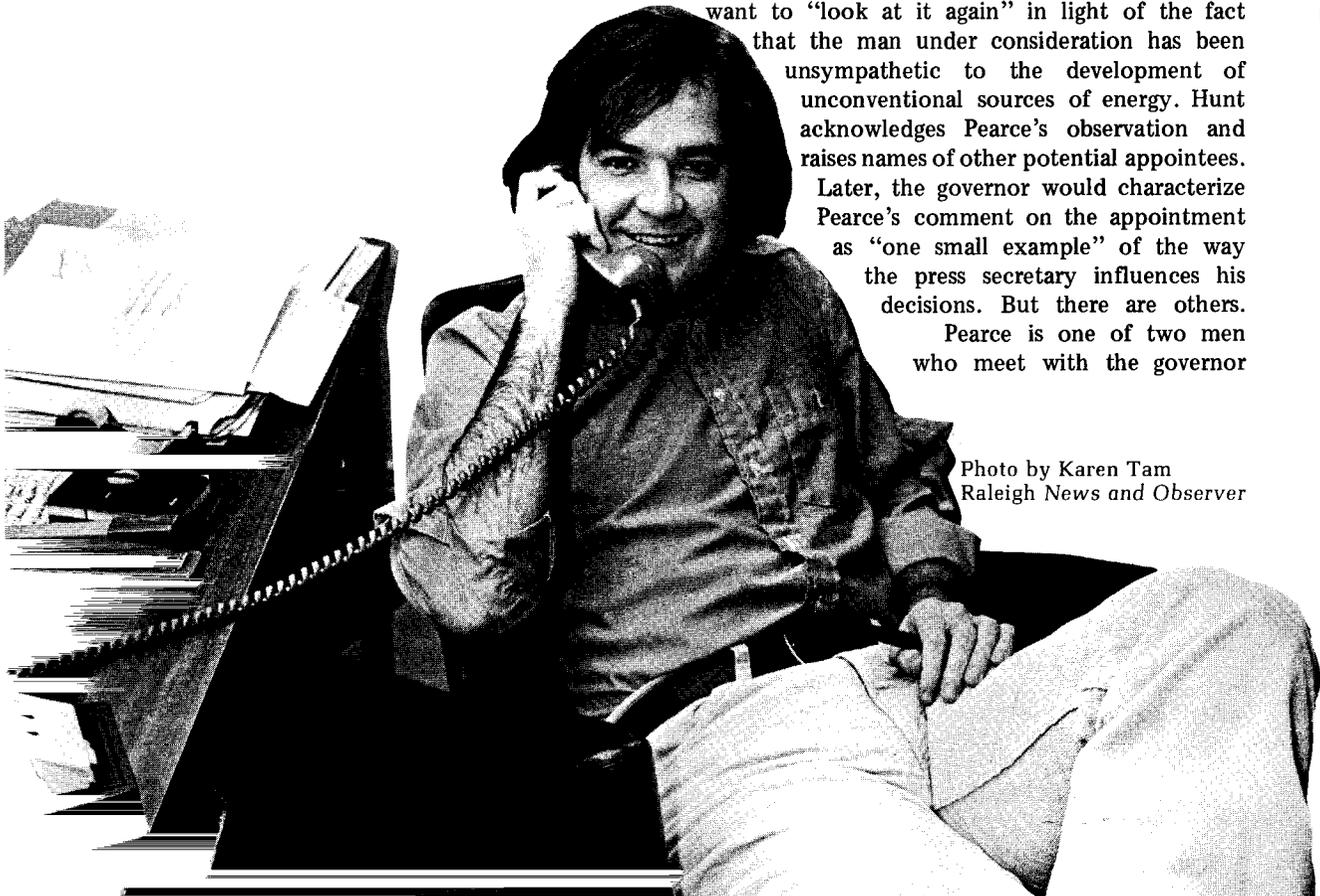


Photo by Karen Tam
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during the first hour-and-a-half of most working days, and he attends those meetings as a participant rather than as an observer. He does the final drafting of all of Hunt's major speeches. He usually travels with the governor, and, by his estimate, he spends more time with the governor than anyone in state government except the governor's security guards. Gary Pearce is more than the governor's press secretary. He is Jim Hunt's advisor, confidante, aide, and friend.

But Hunt and Pearce choose their words carefully when describing the way in which the press secretary exerts his influence in state government matters. Neither will cite specific state policies that bear the stamp of Gary Pearce. Pearce is a policy advisor, according to the governor, in the sense that the Supreme Court makes law, the analogy suggesting that Pearce's role is to react to policy initiatives rather than to introduce them.

Hunt describes Pearce as someone who helps him think things out and reason through his decisions, as someone whose influence is communicated in "a subtle, reflective way" to make the governor aware of different sides of an issue. Hunt also sees Pearce as an advisor who, because of his inside knowledge of the bureaucracy and his contacts with many people in and out of state government, is able to give him a sense of "how things are going, how people are feeling."

Pearce sees his influence as deriving largely from the fact that he sits in on so many of the governor's key discussions. In some of those discussions, he is able to give "a little bit of a push or a nudge" to affect a policy. But the press secretary does not pretend to offer the governor a point of view he would not hear otherwise. Because of his penchant for seeking out many views on all subjects, Pearce says, the governor would get from one source or another the same kind of counsel even if his press secretary were not there. Perhaps and perhaps not. The point is that Pearce is there.

Pearce owes his job to his friendship with Paul Essex, the governor's special assistant for federal-state relations. Essex was wire editor of the *Raleigh News & Observer*, where Pearce worked as a copy boy while he was a student at North Carolina State University. Pearce was hired, by his account, on the basis of Essex's recommendation and an hour's conversation with Hunt over lunch. Pearce was not unknown to Hunt; he had covered the General Assembly for the *News & Observer* in 1975, when Hunt was lieutenant governor. But it was not until after he had been hired that he and the governor discussed the press secretary's role fully. That discussion, Pearce recalls, took place on a cold, winter day when he and Hunt drove back to Raleigh from a campaign appearance in High Point and Hunt stayed overnight with Pearce and his wife, Donna.

Hunt and Pearce agreed on what would be their

cardinal principles in dealing with the press---accessibility and openness---and during that discussion the two men first began to develop the deep respect and mutual trust that now characterizes their relationship. Hunt: "I have never met a more honest man than Gary Pearce." Pearce: "He (Hunt) is one of the most open-minded, tolerant people I have ever met."

"The fact that Hunt chose him gave me more confidence in Hunt's judgment of people."

—A reporter

Outwardly, Hunt and Pearce are, as a newspaper once phrased it, an "odd couple." At the governor's weekly press conferences, for example, the two men present a study in contrast. Hunt stands behind a lectern, his posture duly formal, if not stiff. His hair is neatly trimmed and styled, and he wears a coat and tie. Pearce lounges on a bench or a chair at the side of the room. His hair is long and rumpled, and he wears neither coat nor tie.

Pearce's habit of dressing casually in the business-like world of state government has earned him a small measure of notoriety---notoriety the press secretary appears to enjoy. Although he professes to be wary of embarrassing the governor by his informal attire, he wears coat and tie only for sit-down dinners. He walks the corridors of the state Capitol in open-necked sport shirt, slacks and loafers. He says the fact that the governor has never said anything to him about his dress or long hair except in a joking way "says a lot about him." He sees Hunt's tolerance of his personal style as symbolic of the governor's broader tolerance and his willingness to consider new ways of doing things.

Pearce attributes his own willingness to consider new ways of doing things to the climate in which he grew up. He was a student during the late 1960s, that much-chronicled period of student protest. He participated in demonstrations against the Vietnam War while he was at State, and he had a hand in organizing some of them, including a joint UNC-State march on the Capitol in 1970 in the wake of the shootings at Kent State University. Other participants in that march included Stephanie Bass, who now works as Pearce's assistant, and Jack Cozort, the governor's legal counsel. Although he describes himself and his fellow demonstrators as "young and naive" and partially motivated by fears of being drafted, Pearce has no regrets about his involvement in the protest movement. He describes the experiences of his generation as "one of the good things we bring to government." Many of his peers became cynical about government and politics

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and swore off involvement in public life. Those like himself who decided to work in government, he argues, tend to dismiss the automatic, easy approaches to government problems and to ask why new approaches can't be tried. "There is nothing government needs more."

The rapport between Hunt and Pearce has made Pearce a more effective press secretary. The members of the capital press corps view him as an advisor to Hunt, and they consequently have confidence in his ability to represent the governor's view with an insider's knowledge. Talking to Gary Pearce is "like talking to the governor himself," according to Martin Donsky, who covered state government for the *News & Observer* and the *Durham Morning Herald* and now works in Washington. Pearce says he makes a conscious effort to use the governor's own words when he discusses a state policy with the press.

Pearce's style, of course, is not at all like the governor's. One capital reporter, talking off-the-record about Pearce, distinguished between the form and the substance of the press secretary's representation of the governor. He noted that Pearce refers to the governor as "Hunt," the same way a reporter refers to him, "and sort of rolls his eyes," but the content of what he says is "that Hunt's a great governor." That reporter and others remember that Pearce was known during his coverage of the legislature for his imitations of state officials. Hunt was one of his favorite subjects.

The capital reporters value Pearce's openness and his willingness to make the governor available to them---through a hurried interview during a brief break in the governor's schedule, through a telephone call when Hunt is traveling, and through the weekly press conferences. Hunt describes the press conferences as a joint idea of his and Pearce's and as "one of the best things we've ever done." The press conferences, the governor says, make him accessible to the press on a regular and frequent basis, and they help him spot problems in state government. Pearce thinks the biggest advantage of the press conferences is that they help the governor do a better job because "every week he's got to be on top of everything." The press conferences have also helped Hunt and Pearce benefit from the comparison reporters inevitably make of press relations in the Holshouser and Hunt administrations. The former governor held infrequent news conferences, and some of those he held were limited to discussion of a single topic.

Reporters say they can rely on Pearce to be truthful. "I've never known him to lie," says A.L. May, who covers the governor for the *News & Observer*. "If there is any deception, if it can be called that, it's in not telling something he knows. On the whole, he does a damned good job." Pearce

does not pretend that he tells reporters everything he knows. A reporter who walks into the press office and asks him "What's happening," is not likely to get a juicy news tip. But if the reporter has a specific question, he is likely to get an answer. "He's as open as anybody in that kind of public relations, public information position as any of us have ever seen," says Susan Jetton of the *Charlotte Observer*. Pearce insists, in return for being open with the press, that reporters tell the governor's side of issues. Most of the reporters who cover the governor can cite instances of Pearce's being "mad as hell" about stories that were critical of the governor without presenting Hunt's side. Pearce acknowledges that he responds promptly and strongly when a reporter writes a story without touching base with him or the governor. His assumption in responding is that the next time the reporter will tell the governor's side "to keep Pearce from getting on my ass."

A press secretary, in the words of one of the reporters who covers Hunt, is "a weird animal," a person who has to be loyal to the man whose views he represents and yet open and truthful with reporters who see themselves as adversaries of his boss. He is also required to articulate and defend positions with which he may not agree. Pearce says he has no diffi-

culty with that requirement because he is given an opportunity to argue his point of view while a decision is being discussed. Once the decision has been made, though, he becomes the governor's spokesman. "My only reason for existing," he says, "is because the governor doesn't have time to sit down with each reporter . . . I don't believe you can be in this job and have your own crusade to push. Only one of us was elected." Pearce is comfortable in his job because he is able, as he puts it, "to get my two cents in." The other side of the coin is that reporters feel comfortable dealing with the press secretary because they know he has been in on the decision-making.

"The key to professionalizing press relations," wrote Joseph P. McLaughlin Jr., a former campaign press officer and reporter, in an article in *State Government* (winter, 1977), "is to hire a press officer who is capable of providing policy advice and to involve him in the decision-making process . . . Eventually, reporters and editors will recognize the press officer not as just a messenger told to deliver a particular version of a decision but as someone who was there when the decision was made and who may even have influenced it."

Gary Pearce is recognized as that kind of press officer.

—Henry Wefing

LETTERS

You asked for it and now you are really going to get it! In the lower right-hand corner of the second page of your summer, 1978, issue you solicit views from the readers on articles related to state government, on what the Center is doing and what it should be doing.*

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The focus of the Center is clear. Your approach is level-headed, without frills and equitable. The publication itself is understandable, graphically appealing, useful and concise.

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Edward Ellis
Editor and Promotions Director
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