

Bush Eats the Press

by Michael Crowley

Sam Donaldson is long gone from the White House beat, but as he watched President George W. Bush's prime-time press conference on Thursday, March 6, the wild-browed shouter they nicknamed "Leather Lungs" itched. Mr. Donaldson—who, for all his booming caricature, didn't hesitate to ask Ronald Reagan about Iran-contra or Bill Clinton about Juanita Broaddrick—wincing as he saw deferential reporters trying to question a scripted President in a rare, potentially historic media availability that sailed into autopilot as one of the all-time stage-managed White House electronic events.

"People ask me, 'Do you wish you were back at the White House?'" Mr. Donaldson said. "And I say, 'No, not really.'" But, said Mr. Donaldson, inflating his supersized larynx up to indignant, mega-bass proportions, "there are moments like Thursday night when—*yeah*—I want to be there!"

It wasn't just Sam. Somewhere Mike Deaver, Ronald Reagan's media-fixing P.R. king, was smiling. But reporters on-site were alternately flabbergasted, flailing and embarrassed by the experience. None seemed to have the legs to get into the game. Mr. Bush ran out the clock on his hour of prime time, using it with the focus of Jimmy Dean selling sausage, snubbing tough reporters while calling on buddies, issuing one-size-fits-all talking points to all comers, giving the answers he wanted to the questions he didn't. He even openly taunted one correspondent, CNN's John King, for daring to ask a multi-part question.

"I don't think he was sufficiently challenged," said ABC News White House correspondent Terry Moran. He said Mr. Bush's hyper-management left the press corps "looking like zombies."

Mr. Bush worked from a podium-pasted pre-determined list of acceptable reporters to call upon. *USA Today's* Larry McQuillan, on the White House beat since Jimmy Carter, said Mr. Bush's homeroom-proctor sheet of preferred questioners managed to insult those didn't appear on it—and make those who did seem like Karl Rove's brown-nosers, the camp kids who got the best desserts. "The process in some ways demeaned the reporters who were called on as much as those who weren't," Mr. McQuillan said.

"They completely played us," added a correspondent for a major daily newspaper. "What's the point of having a press conference if you're not going to answer questions? It was calculated on so many different levels."

But to what extent were the reporters themselves to blame? Although some asked reasonably pointed questions, most did with a tone of extreme deference—"Mr. President, sir Thank you, sir Mr. President, good evening"—that suggested a skittishness, to which they will admit, about being seen as unpatriotic or disrespectful of a commander in chief on the eve of war. Few made any effort to follow up their questions after Mr. Bush's recitation of arguments that were more speech-like than extemporaneous: Saddam Hussein is a threat to America, Iraq has not disarmed, Sept. 11 must never happen again.

It was a missed opportunity. From the media's perspective, the purpose of a press conference is to hold a President accountable, to see him work on his feet, to understand his priorities, to give viewers insight into his character, to make a little news, or to allow the President to speak to the people in a responsive and human voice that a formal address doesn't allow.

That didn't happen. On Thursday night, Mr. Bush reinforced an image of a scripted man on a tightrope who followed his handlers' cue cards:

Here's a synopsis of the event:

Question: Why not give Iraq more time to disarm?

Bush: "This issue has been before the Security Council ... for 12 long years."

Question: Why don't our allies want war?

Bush: "Saddam Hussein has had 12 years to disarm ... Saddam Hussein is a threat ...

Sept. 11 changed the strategic thinking ... Sept. 11 should say to the American people that we're now a battlefield "

Question: Why has world opinion turned on you?

Bush: "Saddam Hussein is a threat ... 12 years of denial and defiance "

Question: How is your faith guiding you?

Bush: " ... the tragedy of September the 11th ... the lesson of September the 11th "

Question: How much will war cost?

Bush: "Three thousand people died."

And so on. One suspects the reporters could have informed the President that his daughters had appeared on *Girls Gone Wild!* and still gotten some answer interchanging the lessons of 9/11 and Saddam's years of defiance. Former Clinton press secretary Joe Lockhart later called the event "a perfectly acceptable performance for a re-election press conference."

In other words: *They ... wuz ... used!* The press corps seemed mainly to serve as a prop, providing Mr. Bush with an opportunity to deliver another pro-war speech while appearing to bravely face the music. The White House sprung it on them at the last minute: The press conference was announced that very day, giving reporters little time to prepare.

That's fair; after all, if it's a game, and Mr. Bush is in charge of the playbook, he doesn't need to reveal it. But nevertheless, there was still a faint whiff of Marshall Tito about the whole thing. When the time came, reporters were escorted into the East Room in pairs, apparently to ensure they adhered to a careful seating chart. During his appearance, Mr. Bush answered what he wanted, no matter what the questions were, and there were no follow-ups. When Mr. King of CNN asked a somewhat multilayered but utterly reasonable question about the costs of war, Mr. Bush scoffed in the midst of his response: "The rest of your six-point question?"

In fact, the event's only moment of candor may have come when Mr. Bush admitted during the conference that he was calling on reporters according to his pre-arranged list of names, which his press secretary, Ari Fleischer, later copped to preparing.

"This is scripted," Mr. Bush joked.

Strangely, many reporters laughed at this remarkable joke, which had the additional benefit of being true.

They then buckled in for a happy hour of snubs. Correspondents there were particularly startled by two. Mr. Bush failed to call on *Washington Post* White House correspondent Mike Allen in the front row. Given that it was the second straight news conference in which the hometown paper of record—both Mr. Allen and the other Post White House correspondent, Dana Milbank, have particularly irritated the West Wing—was chilled and chopped, it was hard not to see it as punitive.

Mr. Bush also passed over Helen Thomas, the 82-year-old Hearst News writer who has customarily asked the opening question at White House press briefings since John F. Kennedy was President. It is true that Ms. Thomas has become something of a crank in recent years—Fox News' Brit Hume recently referred to her as "the nutty aunt in the attic of the Washington press corps"—and that she may have made the impolitic mistake of telling one newspaper that Mr. Bush is the worst President in her lifetime or American history (whichever, as Ronald Reagan said, is longer)—and that, as the White House notes, she is now a columnist and no longer a wire reporter.

Nevertheless, plenty of people—including Mr. Donaldson—considered this a particularly gratuitous break with tradition. "If I'm the President and I can't handle reporters' questions, I don't have any business being in the office," he said.

A call to Ms. Thomas found her uncharacteristically subdued. "That was his privilege, I guess," Ms. Thomas said. "I think he had a right to do that." Ms. Thomas' prepared question: to ask Mr. Bush "if there's any way to preserve peace and not kill thousands of people in their own country."

Those granted the opportunity to ask questions seldom seemed to raise the President's blood pressure. For every pointed query, there were several softballs that could have been capably handled by a press-office deputy. There was a question about Mr. Bush's faith, which allowed him to hold the floor on the topic of prayer—a good topic for another day—and another reporter asked whether Mr. Bush would allow journalists and arms inspectors time to get out of Baghdad before the hostilities began, a question that allowed the President to assure the public that his war plan would not cause the death of Hans Blix or Geraldo Rivera. It should also be noted that no one asked Mr. Bush about anything besides Iraq and North Korea—crucial topics both, but a question about the struggling economy might have taken Mr. Bush at least temporarily off-message.

A lack of follow-ups was also problematic. "In that room, one of the things a questioner has to do is create a moment, a confrontation with the President," said Mr. Moran, who got in a question about world opinion—but now regrets not following up more forcefully. "Not to showboat, not to draw attention to yourself, but to bring the President back down to what he is: a citizen President who needs to be engaged in a normal, ordinary conversation about these issues. So you almost have to issue a challenge to him up there. The point is to get them to answer questions, not just to stand up there and use all the majesty of the Presidency to amplify his image."

Some correspondents said they had a fear, for all their desire of "the moment," of appearing disrespectful—even unpatriotic—by confronting a President about to lead troops into battle. Reporters also said that Mr. Bush, for all his locker-room jocularities—referring to reporters by last names or nicknames—subtly intimidates them on a personal level. His aides let it be known that Mr. Bush sneers at the way reporters sculpt their hair and apply makeup for their prime-time appearances, a disdain that shows. "He'll laugh at your questions," said a White House newspaper correspondent who has suffered that fate.

Others said Mr. Bush will glare at a reporter whom he likes personally for asking an unexpectedly tough question, as if it were a betrayal. Viewers of Alexandra Pelosi's 2000 campaign documentary, *Journeys with George*, will recall Mr. Bush icily, if briefly, turning on her after a grilling about the death penalty.

Of course, Mr. Bush is not the first to exploit press conferences for his own ends. Even when Franklin Roosevelt was gathering reporters around his desk for freewheeling chats, he was buying their good will. John F. Kennedy began to have press conferences televised at least in part to show off his looks and charm.

But Ronald Reagan set the previous standard for demeaning White House reporters. His media adviser, Mr. Deaver, tried to phase them out. And he infantilized the press corps by instituting the so-called Deaver Rule, which held that anyone jumping up and down with his hand in the air would be passed over for the polite correspondent quietly awaiting his turn.

Mr. Reagan's conferences were so scripted, Mr. Donaldson recalled, that he would choose questioners based on a seating chart. "One night he called on someone who wasn't there—Joe Ferguson," Mr. Donaldson recalls. "He didn't come, and someone had taken his place. 'Joe, Joe Ferguson,' the President said. Well, of course it wasn't Joe!"

But it's not as if a leader on the eve of war can't risk departing from his script. Just look at how British Prime Minister Tony Blair does it across the Atlantic. At a Downing Street presser in January, Mr. Blair took one blunt question after another, including this killer: What he would say to a mother who has just waved her young son goodbye, knowing he may never return from Iraq? Yet rather than retreat into dogma, the Prime Minister spoke like a real—yet intelligent—person. "I understand, of course, my people think it's a very remote threat, and it's far away, and why does it bother us.... Now I simply say to you, it is a matter of time, unless we act and take a stand, before terrorism and weapons of mass destruction come together. And I regard them as two sides of the same coin." Mr. Blair was so intellectually honest that he even raised the complicating question of North Korea unprompted. Mr. Bush probably would have insulted the reporter.

But in keeping with tradition, Mr. Bush's conference last week was of a piece with his Presidency, which has always been a masterful exercise in message control.

"They're very strict and disciplined," says one wire-service reporter who was present. "But it's not normally that galling."

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