

Town meeting on Iraq: A shabby pretense of democracy

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There was unintended irony in the statement by Secretary of Defense William Cohen describing the town hall meeting in Columbus, Ohio as “a tremendous example of what democracy is all about.” While vocal opposition was expressed to the Clinton administration’s plans to bomb Iraq, this took place despite a systematic effort to stage-manage the meeting and suppress any serious criticism of US foreign policy.

The heavy security surrounding the event was hardly conducive to a free and open debate. A press release from the Ohio State University Communications Department stipulated that no cameras, banners or placards would be permitted in St. John Arena. Those entering the arena had their purses and bags searched and had to pass through metal detectors.

Security was stationed throughout the arena to deal with disrupters. During commercial breaks security rounded up some of the more vocal hecklers and removed them from the arena. One student who displayed a placard opposing the bombing of Iraq was thrown to the floor, handcuffed and arrested for trespassing and resisting arrest.

Outside the arena the authorities were prepared to deal violently if necessary with antiwar protesters. Columbus police parked an armored personnel carrier in an alley across the street.

CNN and the Clinton administration worked together in the selection of the audience which was to attend the forum. No one was permitted to enter the arena without a special pass that had been issued beforehand. No passes were available on the day of the meeting.

The passes were themselves of three different types. Grey passes were for dignitaries and other special guests. Red passes gave entry to the floor of the basketball court, where temporary stands had been set up near the platform for the speakers. White passes,

issued to the bulk of the students and Columbus residents, meant a seat in the permanent stands of the basketball arena, far above the proceedings.

Only those with red or grey passes—at most 300 people—were permitted to ask questions of the Clinton administration representatives. Those possessing only a white pass, the overwhelming majority of those in attendance, were effectively excluded from the proceedings, unless they chose to shout to make their opinions known to the speakers and the television audience.

Many of those invited to the inner tier were campus administrators, politicians, military men and representatives of the local political establishment. Others given red passes were carefully vetted beforehand. One student with Ohio State University Ethnic Student Services said that those invited from his organization first had to submit a list of questions to CNN. Then Secretary of State Madeline Albright personally telephoned a representative of the group and asked for the questions they would be posing.

In another effort to insure a submissive audience, CNN brought in hundreds of military personnel. They sat in large groups, all in uniform, and occasionally engaged in shouted exchanges with students opposed to military action against Iraq. Uniformed soldiers served as ushers, stood shoulder to shoulder with the security personnel who conducted weapons searches of all those entering the arena, and were stationed next to each of the floor microphones.

Just before the start of the meeting a CNN representative polled those in the inner “red ticket” group to find out who wanted to raise questions. All potential questioners were then interrogated individually to determine the nature of their question and how it would be phrased. Each individual was then

assigned to sit in a specific location where he or she could be monitored by CNN officials. CNN further stipulated that no one would be allowed to bring notes to the microphone.

When, prior to the broadcast, some in the audience booed Albright and Cohen, CNN moderator Bernard Shaw declared, "This is not a sporting event." He went on to instruct those waiting to ask questions to be brief. "Just questions, no speeches," he ordered.

During one of the first commercial breaks Shaw confronted a man who had been protesting his exclusion from the microphone. Shaw shouted, "This is a 90-minute program and I am not going to allow you to disrupt it." Security then escorted the man outside, although he later returned and asked the final question of Secretary Albright.

When the initial questions took a sharply hostile tone, CNN took a commercial break to regroup. The two moderators then began taking questions from telephone callers. These could be more carefully screened, with the result that every telephoned comment or question was either in support of Clinton's policy or suggested even more aggressive military action against Iraq.

CNN's censorship extended to rival news organizations. It had exclusive control over the entire affair, excluding all other broadcast networks. Initially, CNN planned to exclude even local reporters, but relented at the last minute.

After the meeting many in the audience expressed disgust with the attempt to stifle a genuine discussion. One Ohio State University graduate student told this reporter, "They are creating an illusion that this is a town hall meeting and we'll have a debate about the issues we are concerned with. But it is constrained. In all these forums you can only say certain things. There is not the free speech you are supposed to have.

"Columbus has long been known as a good test market for companies trying to sell products. I think it is interesting that they are coming here to try to market war to us."



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