

# Bush's first press conference: a craven media welcomes a political impostor

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The presidential press conference has traditionally played a distinctive role in the workings of American democracy. It represents, at least in theory, one of the few occasions when the proverbial “most powerful man in the world” can be challenged or questioned in a way that is not completely scripted.

This assumes, however, that the representatives of the media adopt a critical stance, or at least maintain some degree of independence in relation to the political elite in general, and the occupant of the White House in particular. President George W. Bush's initial news conference underscored the fact that any such assumption is today wholly false.

Bush met the press on February 22, more than a month after his inauguration. It is difficult to decide, after viewing this 30-minute interchange, whether Bush or his media questioners gave a more pathetic performance. The press hurled one softball question after another, addressed in friendly, even fawning tones. Bush replied haltingly, barely able to articulate an intelligible response on the few occasions where he had to go beyond the lines prepared by his White House handlers.

As is generally the case in such affairs, what was *not* asked was far more revealing of the state of political affairs than the questions actually posed to the president. Two weeks after a consortium of major newspapers began a survey of disputed Florida ballots—with results expected by early April—there was not a single question about the presidential election and the dramatic events that followed it.

It is hardly to be expected that members of the journalistic upper crust in the service of media monopolies like CNN or NBC, or pillars of the establishment like the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post*, would stand up and directly

challenge Bush's legitimacy, or suggest that he only occupied the White House thanks to the suppression of votes in Florida and a Supreme Court ruling that made a travesty of democracy.

But it is remarkable that not one of the dozens of reporters who clamored for Bush's attention and shouted questions chose to raise the subject even indirectly. Bush was not asked if he had any message for the majority of American voters who cast ballots for his opponents, or to acknowledge that nearly 600,000 more people voted for Democrat Al Gore than for him, or even whether the contested election had affected his ability to govern.

There were no questions about reports of ballot rechecks in Florida counties, which indicate that Gore would have won a full recount of disputed votes, or about proposed legislation to provide more uniform balloting times and procedures. Nor was there a single question about Bush's relations with the Democratic Party, which holds half the seats in the Senate and nearly that number in the House of Representatives.

This media silence demonstrates that in the press corps itself, and especially among the well-heeled television personalities and pundits, corrupted by the giant conglomerates they serve, there is little, if any, concern for the fundamental issues of democratic rights posed by the de facto political coup carried out by the Supreme Court in behalf of the Republican right.

There was only one question that sounded a critical note. The lone iconoclast in the White House press corps, veteran freelance journalist Sarah McClendon, challenged Bush's support for “faith-based” social programs run by religious groups, asking him whether he was a secular official or a missionary. Naturally, Ms. McClendon's press colleagues regard her as something of a crank.

The press lovefest with Bush is in the sharpest contrast to the media frenzy over the affairs of the departed Bill Clinton. This was on display at the press conference itself, where considerable time was devoted to Clinton's pardons of billionaire Marc Rich and assorted drug dealers, swindlers and con men who hired Clinton relatives and cronies to gain the outgoing president's ear.

The Clinton pardons were the subject of five of the seventeen questions at the press conference, more than Bush's tax cut plan (four), his bombing of Iraq (three), the FBI spy case (two) or any other subject. Any politically serious observer would feel compelled to ask: Which is more important, whether the Clintons stole the silverware as they left the White House, or whether the Republican Party and the Supreme Court stole the election? Which has greater significance for the democratic rights and social interests of the American people?

The media focus on the latest round of Clinton scandals serves as a political diversion in two senses. The incessant coverage distracts attention from the sordid and anti-democratic pedigree of the new administration, as well as the extreme-right policies being pushed by Bush and the Republican congressional leadership. And it allows Bush to posture as a moderate, conciliatory figure, urging that it is "time to move on," even while his allies on Capitol Hill and in the media stoke up the anti-Clinton sentiments of the ultra-right.

But even the most compliant media cannot disguise the intellectual feebleness of the new commander-in-chief. There were the usual verbal gaffes—Bush proclaimed his determination to eradicate "cocoa leaves" in Colombia, suggesting a war to the death against chocolate. (The official White House transcript corrected Bush, inserting "coca leaves" in the appropriate place).

The president repeated his rehearsed lines: "It's time to go forward ... the [Iraq] sanctions regime is like Swiss cheese ... this administration will have the highest ethical standards," and, of his tax plan, "Some are saying it's too small, some are saying it's too large, and I'm saying it's just right."

Then there were the non-answers, such as this response to a question about the proposed European rapid-reaction force:

QUESTION: There are some concerns in this country about the European plan for what they call a rapid-reaction force, their own military capability. What will you tell Prime Minister Blair about the American attitude to this rapid-reaction force?

BUSH: I first look forward to the visit. I'm anxious to meet the prime minister. We've had a couple of good conversations on the telephone. I'm thankful that he's coming across the—actually, coming down from Canada, but coming across the sea to visit us. Laura and I are looking forward to having a private dinner with he and Mrs. Blair Friday night.

Bush's performance, to put it mildly, will do nothing to reassure people in high places both at home and abroad who are concerned over the competence of the American head of state. The *Washington Post*, using the language of diplomatic understatement, noted in its news analysis, "Many of Bush's answers were tentative and repetitive, and he did not put to rest questions about his command of policy and his ability to forcefully articulate his views on a variety of complex issues."



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