

Bush skips baseball's opening day

David Walsh
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If George W. Bush's unpopularity and isolation needed to be underscored, his decision not to throw out the ceremonial opening day ball of the major league baseball season served the purpose.

Bush spokeswoman Emily Lawrimore told the *Washington Post* that the president had been invited by the Washington Nationals baseball team to throw out the first ball at the afternoon game between the Nationals and the Florida Marlins at RFK Stadium, but "it's not possible with his schedule."

She elaborated, "He's got various meetings during the day, a meeting earlier in the morning . . . It just wasn't going to work out."

With the president's ratings languishing, the *Post* asked Lawrimore whether Bush "feared he'd get booed."

"No," she replied. "Certainly not."

Most people over the age of 10 would be skeptical.

According to the White House, the president's schedule included an 11 a.m. meeting on health savings accounts in the Roosevelt Room and at 2:35 p.m. the presentation of "the Commander-in-Chief's Trophy to the United States Naval Academy Football Team in the Rose Garden," awarded to each season's winner of the college football series among the various service academies.

Of all the recent US presidents, Bush is most closely identified with baseball, having served (profitably) as a part-owner of the Texas Rangers' franchise from 1989 to 1994. In remarks before a group of baseball Hall of Famers at the White House in 2004, Bush declared, "You know, I love the game of baseball. I grew up loving baseball." He also noted that "One of the traditions, of course, is for the president to throw out the opening pitch for baseball."

The official White House web site has special pages devoted to baseball. One begins, "When President George W. Bush threw out the first pitch at the 2001 World Series, the moment not only continued a presidential tradition, but it symbolized America's desire to continue life undeterred after the attacks of September 11, 2001.

"President George W. Bush's love of baseball began

during his childhood in Midland, Texas, where he played Little League Baseball and dreamed of following in the footsteps of baseball great, Willie Mays . . .

"From throwing to catching and fielding to batting, America's presidents have long enjoyed playing or watching a good game of baseball. A soldier's diary reveals that George Washington and his men played an early version of baseball called 'rounders' on the fields of Valley Forge. History records that John Adams played 'bat and ball' and Andrew Jackson played a similar game of baseball called 'one old cat.' Abraham Lincoln's love of the game was so well known that an 1860 political cartoon showed Lincoln and his opponents on a baseball diamond."

The Baseball Hall of Fame web site carries an article entitled, "Baseball as patriotism and pride: the connection between our national pastime and the presidency." It declares, "The president's annual appearance at the start of each season symbolically renews the bonds that unite the country, its leaders, and the game—a ceremonial springtime rebirth as America's National Pastime. For presidents, baseball offers a welcome connection to a wholesome, all-American image.

"Baseball and the American presidency have had a long history together. Since baseball's inception in the mid-19th century, presidents have been involved with the National Pastime in many ways, by participating, watching or supporting. As far back as 1860, associations between presidents and baseball appeared in print and illustration. Since 1910, presidents have ceremoniously rung in the new baseball year by throwing out the first pitch on Opening Day, providing official sanction to the beginning of the season. In addition, for more than a century, US presidents have also taken time from their busy schedules to attend other games, from amateur sandlot contests near the White House to All-Star and World Series games."

Photos of presidents, including famously Woodrow Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt, throwing out the first ball at crowded stadiums are part of American political

lore.

Major League Baseball's web site notes, "When you think of Opening Day in Washington ballparks, you think of presidents throwing out the first pitch in the days of Walter Johnson and the old Senators." However, "For this game [in 2007], the ceremonial first pitch will feature a celebration of baseball history in the nation's capital."

In its article on Bush's decision not to attend the game, the *Post*, inevitably, downplays the real reasons. The newspaper prefers to suggest that the decision merely perpetuates "a ritual's slow decline," i.e., fewer presidential appearances on baseball's opening day in recent decades. Baseball no longer holds "a singular grip on America's imagination," argues the *Post*. Baseball may be losing that grip, but the gulf between the US population and the political establishment is growing at an even more rapid rate.

Bush's absence at RFK Stadium is the result of the fact that he is widely despised by the American public—and he despises it back. Bush's approval ratings hover around 30 percent and Vice President Dick Cheney's are even lower.

In 2006, Cheney appeared at the Washington Nationals home opener—apparently sporting a bulletproof vest under his baseball jacket—and was roundly jeered. Fox News and others muted the sound when they ran videos of the vice president's appearance, because the booing was so politically embarrassing. It was a humiliation to which Cheney was not likely to subject himself again. This year, according to the White House, the vice president will be speaking at 1:30 pm at a reception for Republican Senator Jeff Sessions in Birmingham, Alabama.

The alienation of the present administration from wide layers of the population is perhaps unprecedented in modern American history. It takes countless forms. From manipulating information and the media, ensuring that no critics are allowed to attend any events where the president and vice president appear, to creating a physical barrier between themselves and the public, this government is unique.

Both the president and the vice president speak only before a select type of crowd. Generally, they address right-wing veterans' organizations, business groups, vetted audiences of military personnel and the like.

Recently, for example, Bush delivered a bellicose attack on opponents of his Iraq war policy to a Washington DC convention of the National Cattlemen's Beef Association convention, the chief lobbying arm of beef producers and a notoriously right-wing outfit.

Dick Cheney addressed the Veterans of Foreign Wars in early March, promising to fix the mess at the Walter Reed medical center in Washington, where wounded veterans have been mistreated. In the middle of the month Cheney launched an attack on war critics before a crowd at the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee, the well-known pro-Israel lobby (where he was received coolly, in fact).

It would be unthinkable for Bush or Cheney to make a spontaneous appearance in any large or even medium-sized American urban center. Massive security, armies of Secret Service and local police, bullet-proof SUVs and Black Hawk helicopters accompany both men on their forays into American and foreign cities. They move about like the heads of authoritarian regimes or invaders in hostile territory. Their handlers, with good reason, operate on the premise that there are many reasons for these men to be despised.

During the recent trial of former Cheney chief of staff I. Lewis Libby in Washington, the difficulty of assembling an impartial jury was noted by commentators, so deep and widespread is the hostility to the Bush administration and its cast of characters. Dozens of potential jurors were excluded after expressing contempt for the administration and Cheney in particular. The Bush decision to skip the Nationals' home opener, in its own fashion, speaks to the political and social chasm between the people and the ruling elite.



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