

Monday, October 15, 2007

When the White House ejects reporters

Bill of Rights. (From the public domain.) Neither Republicans nor Democrats have a monopoly on oversquelching others' speech, in their efforts to obtain picture-perfect media events. I have written more about this here. Bizarrely, and according to WTOP (Washington, D.C.) news radio, on October 11, 2007, WTOP political commentator Mark Plotkin was shown the door out of the White House during an event honoring D.C.'s Ballou High School's marching band. The attendees included hostess Laura Bush, the high school band, Barbara Bush, D.C. Mayor Adrian Fenty, Council Chair Vince Gray, Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton and School Chancellor Michele Rhee. Laura Bush gave a short speech, and Mark Plotkin asked: "Mrs. Bush, do you agree with those who say and believe that members of the Ballou High School band should not grow up to become members of the House of Representatives?" Ms. Bush remained silent and walked away. According to WTOP reporter Mark Segraves, the following events then unfolded: "At that moment, White House staff formed a human wall between the press and the First Lady and pointed to the door. One White House staffer told Plotkin he was out of line because the event was 'about the kids.' 'My question WAS about the kids,' Plotkin fired back. "As we left the East Room, Plotkin ran into White House Chief of Staff Josh Bolten. Bolten wasted no time telling Plotkin he had been disrespectful. As we stood in the horseshoe driveway of the White House, Sally McDonough from Mrs. Bush's press office hurried over to us. 'Next time you have a question for the First Lady you can call me and request an interview.' 'Great,' he said. 'I'll call tomorrow and we'll set it up.' 'I said you could request an interview.' Plotkin smiled. "Then McDonough asked Plotkin for his name and employer, which she wrote in her notebook. 'Thanks, I'll walk you out.' She escorted Plotkin to the gate." Your tax dollars at work. Curiously and sadly, many online commenters -- but certainly not all -- viewed Mr. Plotkin as having been out of line. Kudos to Mark Plotkin for his years of passionately standing up for District of Columbia statehood and voting rights in Congress. I lived in the District of Columbia for fourteen years, always feeling tremendous discomfort about living in the city of taxation without Congressional voting representation (which phrase finally reached D.C. license plates several years ago). Around fourteen years ago, I met Mr. Plotkin at a neighbor's holiday party. He struck me as a very likeable, bright, and articulate person. I wonder whether the Lyndon Johnson White House would have ejected Mark Plotkin under similar circumstances, as opposed to just telling him that no question and answer session was scheduled, and that for him to stay, he'd need to refrain from news-related questions. Lyndon Johnson may have been many things, but he apparently was not high on social graces, perhaps even less so as a reaction to John Kennedy when Johnson was vice president, and Robert Kennedy during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. Johnson apparently went as far as meeting with reporters (and possibly some staff members) while sitting on the toilet, apparently thinking less of those reporters who would not look him straight in the eye during such sessions. (This raises the question about gender discrimination concerning reporters and staff members.) The question remains whether Johnson was doing bathroom meetings merely as a time-saving device, with the idea that he sometimes only had time to meet reporters while on the toilet. As a further digression, I once heard a story about Johnson taking Robert Kennedy hunting at Johnson's ranch. Kennedy is said to have fallen down from the force of pulling the trigger, and Johnson is said to have reacted dismissively at Kennedy's having lived a life that would not have gotten him accustomed to such shooting exercises. Back to the topic of Mark Plotkin's question to Ms. Bush, which was District of Columbia statehood. The denial of statehood to the District of Columbia comes in the context of decades of customary discrimination against African Americans in D.C., which long has had a majority African-American population. Republicans might fear greater Democratic Congressional power if D.C. obtains statehood, but this apparently would not involve more than two senators and one member of the House of Representatives. The argument that Washington, D.C., as a federal city, should not be a state, does not fly either. The federal government only occupies a small percentage of downtown Washington, D.C., and it would not be hard to set aside that part -- most of which does not even cover residential areas -- from a state in what is now Washington, D.C., which covers sixty-one square miles, and has a population exceeding 580,000. Retrocession of Washington, D.C., to Maryland is another idea that has been proposed by some for enfranchising District of Columbia residents, although statehood seems to be more the talk of the day among its residents. In any event, kudos to Mark Plotkin, for sticking to his convictions, for doing so with Laura Bush (whose husband and his political party have been no friends of District of Columbia statehood), for somehow finding a way to get hired by WTOP when his rabble-rousing bona fides were well known when he was hired, and for finding a way to stay with WTOP apparently without watering himself down. I would like to see or hear a full and unvarnished version of this whole White House ejection affair from Laura Bush or her handlers, but am not holding my breath. Jon Katz. ADDENDUM: Curiously, the White House's full quote of Ms. Bush's speech at this event ends with "Thank you all so much for coming. I'm so excited to see this story of the Ballou High School Marching Band. (Applause.)" Not surprisingly, the White House's online version of the event omits any mention of Mark Plotkin's question and ejection that immediately followed.

Posted by Jon Katz in Constitutional Law at 00:10