

REMARK

A Local Tangle With the White House / Michael Hirsh

The following narrative concerns problems that occurred during the week of March 11, 1974. Such problems, the author contends, become more acute when the President and his entourage go out to the hinterlands. The networks have been toughened through their more regular dealings with official Washington, thus are more likely to react as the American Broadcasting Co. did when it canceled a recent guest appearance of Mrs. Richard Nixon on the "Issues and Answers" TV interview program. The cancellation was because of a dispute with the White House over the ground rules of her appearance. The White House had originally agreed to a format for the program that included a few minutes of film from Mrs. Nixon's Latin American trip, followed by questions from a panel of newsmen. But later, Ronald Ziegler, White House press secretary, called ABC to say that Mrs. Nixon would be available for only 10 minutes of questions. "They wanted to change the ground rules on us," said John Lynch, ABC's Washington bureau chief. "We said no."

HERE'S THE situation. The President is coming to give a speech in Chicago. White House advance men make arrangements directly with the hotel, not even consulting the sponsoring group, in this case the Executives' Club of Chicago. The White House folks tell the hotel how the room is to be arranged; they determine the positions of the TV camera platforms — location and height, to produce the kinds of on-air shots they want. Then they unilaterally select the local station to produce the pool video coverage.

They don't say the pool coverage is to be produced to their specifications — but they don't have to. They've done everything they can do to control things, short of providing their own director. And the troubling thing, based on the Chicago experience, is that I'm willing to wager that in most cities the President might visit, if the White House offered to

provide a director — the local news directors wouldn't even think twice.

The Chicago situation for Nixon's visit on March 15 was interesting. In a nutshell, we had the White House press people tell us what we were going to do, when and where. When I told them that in Washington they can make the rules (maybe), but at a public hotel, except for matters of genuine security, they can go whistle — the reaction was interesting. They said they would have to have a meeting. Apparently, no one ever challenged them before.

Actually, I didn't say "go whistle." I believe the phrase to White House press office aide Al Snyder was something like "those rules are a bunch of crap and you have no authority to enforce them."

When I told press aide Jack D'Arcy that we wanted to have cameras in position to do two things, 1) get reaction from Executives' Club members as they were leaving, and 2) hold a sit-down discussion with six of the biggest industrialists in the Midwest following Nixon's address, D'Arcy said, to my utter disbelief, "That's man-in-the-street stuff. We don't feel that's 'presidential.' You're here to cover the President's speech. That's the story."

Watergate and all, here we have a White House flack telling us what the story is. And what really troubled me is that he thought he could get away with it. I didn't ask, but I'll go out on a limb and guess that the reason he thought he could dictate "what the story is" is because he's been able to do it all around the country outside the capital.

When the word hits the hinterlands that the President is coming, normally tough-minded newsmen fall all over themselves (to steal a phrase from Chicago *Tribune* TV critic Gary Deeb) to do just what the White House wants in providing an electronic platform. It's about time that sort of stuff becomes inoperative (to steal another phrase). News directors have

got to realize that just because the guy talking comes from the White House, it doesn't mean that he's either right, or that he has the authority to enforce his wishes. He'll take as much authority as we let him get away with.

An example. On the Tuesday prior to Nixon's Friday speech, D'Arcy says that he couldn't allow a camera in the foyer outside the ballroom. "We don't want you disturbing these people as they leave. It's not right. If they want to be interviewed, they'll have to come to you somewhere else. No, you can't have a camera in the foyer." That camera is to be used after Nixon is out of the Hilton and on his way, but here's the White House telling us that the foyer's forbidden territory.

Then on Wednesday, Snyder blows into town and gives us a bunch of grief about cameras in the ballroom itself — positions that D'Arcy has already agreed to. "What about the foyer?" I ask. "Oh," he says, "we've got nothing to do with that. You'll have to take that up with the Executives' Club."

Back to the discussion with Snyder about why we can't have our own cameras inside the ballroom for a sit-down discussion. "It's a pool," he says. "If we let you in, we have to let everyone in."

"Has anyone else asked to bring a hot camera in for live TV?" I ask. "No, but they might."

Now I have made a few phone calls, and no one else carrying the speech live has asked for hot cameras in the hall to do wraparounds or anything else. But Snyder is saying "they might." He continues plugging away, though. "Why can't you use WGN's cameras? They'll be there for the pool." I answer, "First of all, we don't want to use their cameras and crew. Second, we have our own remote truck and it would be a waste of money to rent facilities we already own. And third, we want to do it our way. As long as the Executives' Club doesn't object — and they don't — you've got nothing to say about it."

Now it's the day before the Presi-

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dent's arrival. We're still not in the hall with what we want. So just before lunch our director, Dave Erdman, and I walk up to Snyder, who is seated at a bare banquet table with a very distinguished-looking guy in a dark suit.

Snyder identifies us, turns to dark-suit and waits expectantly. "Now what is it you want to do?" asks dark-suit, who has been introduced only as "Mark Goode." His tone is a mixture of condescension and irritation.

"Are you with the White House?" I ask back.

Then there is a pause. At least 10 seconds, maybe longer. Goode looks down at his clasped hands, then over to Snyder as if to say "why am I wasting my time with these imbeciles?"

I try again. "Secret Service?"

Finally, his lips seal in a tight line, a muscle in the jaw twitches, and I sense a response.

"I'm a consultant."

Not being certain what that means, I say, "You work out of the White House?"

"Well I work with them," he intones, "part-time."

Now we know we're not dealing with someone who can say "you can't do that for security reasons." Our discussion begins.

He treats us as though we should be back home with our kids watching Sesame Street. We respond as though he's nothing more than a PR man — no, let's not insult good PR men — we treat him like a bad flack. After 15 minutes of circuitous arguing, he accuses me of calling him a liar four times. I say he's capricious and arbitrary.

I tell him I can't understand how he can say he's here to cooperate and help the press — then try to do nothing but keep us out. I tell him the Executives' Club okayed what we want; that he should stop telling me that the White House is working closely with the club, attempting to make sure the media do not take up too much table space. I also tell him that D'Arcy ordered expansion of one of the pool camera platforms so we could put a camera on it; the hotel built the platform, and that when we came in Thursday morning, we discovered that the platform had been

torn down on White House press office orders. That's cooperation?

After 15 minutes of this, I finally tell him he has no authority. We'll listen to the Executives' Club, to the hotel and to the Secret Service.

Goode and Snyder leave to have lunch with the president of the Executives' Club, William Clark, secretary of the Tribune Co. Fortunately, my boss, WTTW General Manager Bill McCarter, has been on the phone with Clark, confirming his participation in our follow-up discussion to the Nixon address. Clark was enthusiastic about it.

Four hours later, Goode and Snyder return to tell us the wonderful things they have done on our behalf. Lo and behold, the Secret Service has cleared out cameras on the far side of the banquet room.

"Now, what about the foyer?" I ask.

"Can't do it. Secret Service says this will be a secure area."

No problem. So I tell him we'll put one camera on the regular press platform in the ballroom, and we've cleared with hotel and fire officials to keep the second camera in the service corridor. We'll wheel it in when Nixon leaves. Since we can't have a position in the foyer for our interviews, we'll just move the third camera to another door in the service corridor, and set up to do the interviews from the back of the room.

Friday. The President is in the hotel, ready to speak at exactly 1:01 p.m. At 12:40, Eric Rosenberg from the White House press staff finds me. (By the way, it's impossible to figure out the hierarchy. Is it Goode to Snyder to D'Arcy to Rosenberg? or is it Snyder to Goode to D'Arcy? or is it D'Arcy to They never tell you who really is in charge; that way it's easier for them to change their minds.) Rosenberg is angry. Mustering all the officiousness he can handle, he growls, "What's that third camera doing out there. Our deal was for two."

Here we go again. I tell him that Goode said we could have charge on that side of the room, the camera was cleared by fire marshals, and that I didn't make any deals with them.

"Well, let's go see Goode right

now," he huffs. He spots Snyder standing behind the presidential rostrum, saying "testing one-two-three-four audio check." Rosenberg tattles his discovery of the third camera. Snyder throws up his hands. I tell them both I have a TV program to do and leave.

Fifteen minutes later, the President of the United States of America enters the jam-packed hall. He makes a brief opening statement. Cracks a few jokes. Then calls for questions from the floor. The first: "Mr. President. Would you encourage young people to go into politics, and if so, how?"

The point of all this is that the White House — I'm sure any White House — will try to control as much as we journalists let them. In Washington, the broadcasters have Dan Rather to tell Ziegler what he can do with his rules. Whom do the locals have out beyond Washington?

No one — as long as you let the White House set up your pool feeds, declare camera positions and tell the local sponsoring organization who can enter the room and where they can go.

If you wonder what the hell the shouting is about, it's just this: Placement of a camera can determine whether you're able to tell the whole story your way, or whether that camera has become a \$50,000 electronic propaganda tool. We all should have learned by now that the medium is the message — or at least a pretty good part of the message. If you don't give a damn who is controlling every aspect of that medium, particularly when the credit reads "a news production of . . .," well, you ought to turn in your RTNDA and SPJ membership cards and switch to sales. Because a journalist, you're not.

One afterthought. Perhaps it might be a good idea for both SPJ and RTNDA at their next conventions to have workshops for the express purpose of teaching local news directors or editors how to deal with the White House press office. Dan Rather might even consent to be the instructor. ■

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