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The News Is Broken

By William Rivers Pitt

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Once upon a time, working the White House Press Briefing Room was the crown jewel of mainstream political journalism beats. That was it; short of reporting live from under the President's desk or nailing down an interview with the ghost of Abraham Lincoln, you weren't going to get a better gig if you were a political reporter.

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To hold such a position was also to be the repository for a great responsibility. If you are privileged enough to be placed there, if you have put in the time as a reporter to earn the right to be there, you are the first line of defense in the eternal struggle between the rights and well-being of the people and governments that are always willing and ready to lie, cheat and steal in our name and 'for our own good.'

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All governments lie. That is what they do. A reporter in the White House Press Briefing Room bears the burden of being the person whose role it is to speak truth to power, to write down what happens after speaking truth to power, and to beat their editors and publishers about the head and shoulders to make sure that truth is delivered to the people intact.

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We perhaps like to imagine the men and women in that briefing room - if we take the time to think of them at all - as people with big ears and sharp eyes, with too many pens in their pockets, a rolodex with every important name on the planet sitting on their desks, a hand well used to holding a glass of scotch, an unspoken promise to keep sources protected to the bitter end, and a bedrock sense of being beholden to nothing and no one beyond the integrity and mission of their chosen profession. 'Without Fear or Favor,' goes the refrain.

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Something like that might have existed at one time in our history. Certainly, careerism has always played a part in the reporting of any



journalist in that briefing room. Make the administration spokesperson angry enough and he or she will pull your pass, thus humiliating you and derailing your climb up the ladder. Probably a lot of reporters have let important stories drop in order to preserve their access and their careers, but the really good ones report the stuff anyway, and they wind up being the ones asked to speak at the commencement for the Columbia School of Journalism. Ask Seymour Hersh what it means to be a good journalist. He can tell you.

Something like that might have once existed, but it is almost completely gone now. The sad and sordid tale of Jeff "Don't Call Me Guckert" Gannon" is a final nail in the coffin, as far as I am concerned. This story went from irritating to outrageous to appalling to downright nauseating and scary in rapid succession.

I went into great detail on the "Gannon" phenomenon [in my blog](#), but this is it in a nutshell: An avowed conservative partisan managed to boll-weevil his way into the White House Briefing Room, where he was the go-to guy for administration spokesman Scott McClellan whenever the questions from the press corps got too hot for comfort. His final exposure came in exactly this fashion, when he manufactured quotes by Senators Clinton and Reid in order to score points off Democrats while hauling McClellan's chestnuts out of the fire during a press briefing on Bush's hare-brained Social Security plan. He managed to do this without even using his real name, which is actually James Guckert.

"So what?" his defenders cry. It isn't as if one has to be anointed by the saints to get a pass into the briefing room. On this, "Gannon's" allies have a point. There are two kinds of passes for that room. To get a hard pass, one has to attend the press gaggle four or five times a week over the course of at least a month. In other words, you have to work at it. To get a day pass, however, one has only to call the Media Affairs Office, give them your social security number and whatever credentials you can offer, and more often than not you can get in. You don't need to be a saint to get in, or even a professional, apparently. What you do once you get there is what matters.

This is how "Gannon" got in, and so long as he followed the protocols with the media office, he had as much of a right to be in there as any of the left-wing opinion writers who follow that same procedure many times a year. One may question his ethics - his reports were little more than cut-and-paste jobs from GOP press releases - but it is hard to argue that he didn't belong in the room with the rest of the day-passers.

"Gannon is being attacked for being gay," say some of his defenders. This comes from a prurient angle of the story that has "Gannon" allegedly involved with gay prostitution websites, as reported by a number of blogs and mainstream news sources. While the hypocrisy of "Gannon's" possible involvement with gay escort services even as he wrote some of the most virulently homophobic screeds to be found anywhere - he at one point referred to John Kerry as being potentially "the first gay President of the United States" - is enough to make one choke, it is not the main tent. In truth, this angle of the story deserves to be a sidelight in a much larger problem.

"The lefties are attacking Gannon because they don't like his politics," goes the defender's refrain. Here is where the train decisively leaves the tracks, because "Gannon" wasn't just some gomer who followed the procedure and is now being attacked for asking partisan questions. In the catastrophically simplified explain-it-to-me-like-I've-experienced-brain-death realm of television news, however, that's as deep as the analysis has gone.

"Gannon" was on with Wolf Blitzer and CNN Thursday evening, and Blitzer didn't even try to pose a hard question. He merely stepped aside and let "Gannon" pule. "Gannon" was allowed to paint himself as the victim in all this. Blitzer even went so far as to say that he absolutely didn't understand one key facet of the story, and just let "Gannon" frame it as he pleased. It was as luxurious a backrub as has ever been broadcast. The other 'reporter' involved in that CNN report was Howard Kurtz, who had earlier in the day stated emphatically that there was nothing at all to this story. He knew this because he had asked Scott McClellan about it, and McClellan said that was the deal. Move along. Nothing to see here.

And therein lies the rub. If "Gannon" were getting zapped for simply being a conservative reporter who filed boilerplate GOP talking points as news, one could possibly have some sympathy for him even if you find his views repugnant and his hypocrisy intolerable. Yet the real issue at hand here has to do with the name Blitzer failed to bring into the conversation: Valerie Plame.

Plame, you will recall, was the deep-cover CIA agent tasked to track the sale and delivery of weapons of mass destruction to terrorists. Plame was outed by two Bush administration officials, who leaked word of Plame's secret career to Bob Novak and several other journalists. They torpedoed her career deliberately as an act of revenge against her husband, Joseph Wilson, who a week prior had exposed Bush's claims of uranium from Niger being used to make bombs in Iraq as a whole lot of smoke and nonsense. The breaking of

Plame was also a none-too-subtle warning to any other administration insiders who might have been getting happy feet and were thinking of calling a reporter.

The Plame affair is, in the end, one of the grossest and most despicably deliberate breaches of national security to come down the pike in a long time. The perpetrators have thus far managed to slip the noose because the journalists who received their little tip are standing (correctly, in my opinion) behind the fundamental tenet of journalism: A reporter must not be forced to reveal their sources. Former Illinois U.S. Attorney Patrick Fitzgerald has been tasked to investigate the matter, and has issued subpoenas to the journalists in question. The names involved are some of the most well-known in the news media.

"Jeff Gannon" has also been subpoenaed by Fitzgerald in the Plame matter. That's where the train leaves the tracks.

According to the Washington Post, "Gannon" did an interview with Joseph Wilson in October of 2003. In that interview, "Gannon" directly referenced a secret internal CIA memo that named Valerie Plame as a covert CIA operative. According to the Post story, "Gannon" was the only reporter in the entire realm of journalism who had seen and read this confidential CIA document. "Gannon" proudly bragged about his role in outing Plame on the forums of the ultra-conservative website FreeRepublic.com, posting under the subtle pseudonym 'Jeff Gannon.'

"Gannon" wasn't just some gomer who got a day pass. He had serious access, as displayed by his knowledge of a CIA memo that no one else had ever heard of or seen. He bragged publicly about playing a key role in an act of treason perpetrated by members of this administration, something he would not have been able to do had he not had friends inside the Bush White House. Scott McClellan claims to not know him. I, for one, think that is a bald-faced lie.

This is journalism today, and "Gannon" isn't alone in disgrace. Conservative columnist Armstrong Williams got paid more than a quarter of a million dollars by the Bush administration to peddle No Child Left Behind. Conservative columnist Maggie Gallagher got \$21,500 to peddle Bush's ideas on marriage. Conservative columnist Mike McManus got \$10,000 to pitch the same policy as Gallagher.

This particular administration can't sell its policy initiatives on the merits, but has to pay journalists to pimp them by proxy. As bad as that is, it is far worse to know that there are journalists out there who would willingly play that role. Most of them don't even have to get paid to

preach the party line. The aforementioned careerism, and the simple fact that a lot of 'reporters' these days are little more than vapid, blow-dried spokesmodels trying to get famous, is enough to get too many of them to roll over and sing for their supper.

Wolf Blitzer and Howard Kurtz got ten minutes of television time with a guy who was involved in blowing the cover of a CIA operative tasked to keep weapons of mass destruction out of the hands of terrorists, and the best they could do was to let him talk about how sad he is that all these bad people are after him. That pretty much says it all. The combination of careerism, an absence of journalistic standards, and the notorious allergy the mainstream media has when it comes to self-critique, has proven to be a poisonous cocktail.

Some of my co-workers and friends have said they think I should try to get one of those day-passes to the briefing room, to see if it is as easy as it sounds. Once upon a time, the very idea of walking into the White House Press Briefing Room and raising my hand with the rest of the crush would have kept me awake nights in giddy anticipation. To walk in the footsteps of giants, at least in my profession, would have felt akin to striding to the high-rollers table in the best casino in Vegas with a fat wad of bills and an eye for the opening.

After "Gannon", after Williams, after Gallagher, after McManus, after Wolf and Howie, after seeing what corporate conglomerate ownership of journalism has done to a once-honorable calling, after watching this administration ruthlessly exploit the glaring cracks in what we call reporting today, I don't feel that way anymore. Today, walking into the White House Press Briefing Room would make me feel like a cheapjack slot jockey sneaking into a crummy casino on the dusty end of the strip, hoping to hustle a few chips from a dealer who knows the table is already fixed.

I know there are still reputable journalists, men and women of integrity, working that room. Those are the people who need to raise the hue and cry on this matter, before it is too late. What is happening in American journalism, and in that most important of rooms, is a lessening of us all, and it is very, very dangerous.

William Rivers Pitt is a New York Times and internationally bestselling author of two books - 'War on Iraq: What Team Bush Doesn't Want You to Know' and 'The Greatest Sedition Is Silence.'

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