

**THE BLOG**

The State of the Scrotum

By Marty Kaplan

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Quick (and looking is no-fair): What was George W. Bush's State of the Union speech about?

I thought so. You haven't a clue.

The days before his address were saturated with he-has-to-give-the-speech-of-his-lifetime punditry, and his-energy-policy-will-knock-your-socks-off spin; the days after, with who-stood-up-first-for-which-applause-lines, what-members-wanted-autographs and who-got-french-kissed. But the actual substance of the speech, let alone its rhetoric, was instantly forgettable - not because it was Bush (though that had something to do with it), but because the event itself was utterly meaningless.

It was a classic example of what historian Daniel Boorstin first labeled a "pseudo-event." Nothing happened. It was a pointless little play, staged for the media, covered by the media, and as consequential to the state of our union as are the Anna Nicole Smith and Britney Spears Grand Guignols currently sucking most of the oxygen out of our democracy.

At the National Press Club this week, as Glenn Greenwald reports, an affable panel of White House correspondents agreed with moderator Tony Snow that journalists are being unfairly singled by bloggers for failing to do their jobs, because the blogosphere just doesn't get what journalists are supposed to do. And just what is it they're supposed to do? Said one panelist, *Newsweek's* Richard Wolffe (whose gig on Olbermann may be a mitigating factor on Judgment Day):

Our role is to ask questions and get information. It's not a chance for the opposition to take on the government and grill them to a point where they throw their hands up and surrender... It's not a political exercise, it's a journalistic exercise. And I think often the blogs are looking for us to be political advocates more than journalistic ones.

But journalism isn't stenography. As Greenwald writes,

The reality, of course, is that most media-criticizing bloggers do not want journalists to be "political advocates." They want them to do what journalists are supposed to do — which is not, contrary to Wolffe's belief, sit around

with their good, trustworthy, nice-guy friends in the White House and simply “ask questions” and “get information,” but instead to scrutinize that information, treat it with doubt, investigate it before passing it along to determine whether it’s true. And the reason bloggers want them to do that, the reason that bloggers demand more of journalists like Wolffe, is not because bloggers are enraged, confused, unreasonable partisans. It’s because bloggers are American citizens who are deeply concerned about what has happened to their country over the last six years and criticize the press and demand more of it because Wolffe’s overly-friendly relationships with Bush officials like Tony Snow, and Wolffe’s simplistic and lazy conception of what a reporter does, produces extremely destructive and shoddy “journalism.”

That’s what’s been on trial in the Libby prosecution. Libby and his media co-dependents committed journalism-as-usual, and then he made the mistake of lying about it under oath. Journalism-as-usual is when a powerful figure feeds a reporter something - a fib, a lie, a secret, a slander, a factoid, a fudge, a fly-on-the-wall bonbon - and the reporter passes it along to the public. Sometimes the journalist looks for another source to confirm or deny it (though these days, reporting what Insiders are saying is often enough to pass an editor’s smell test); in either case, it’s still a pseudo-event. Nothing has really happened. Words have been written down, and perhaps collaged with other words, but no facts have been checked, no evidence assessed, no shoeleather worn, no truth-value adjudicated. What’s “true” is only that people have said things, that journalists and sources have had conversations, that access has been spun from dross to gold.

It doesn’t even require an off-the-record lunch at the Hay-Adams for that to happen. The whole transaction can occur in daylight, and as long as its outcome serves both sides - a meme starts moving in the media bloodstream - it’s considered a big success. Even better for the perps, it’s no-fault: unless an FBI agent or grand jury is involved, there’s no accountability for negligence, character assassination or error.

Consider two examples from the last couple of days.

Rep. Adam Putnam (R-FL), the chairman of the House Republican conference committee, a guy whose job description is to drive the GOP’s message, was a leader in spreading last week’s bogus Pelosi plane story. “It’s about an arrogance of extravagance that demands a jumbo jet that costs \$22,000 an hour to operate to taxi her and her buddies back and forth to California,” Putnam said on Fox.

But then it turned out that that claim was false. Putnam was maliciously parroting an anonymously-sourced story planted in the Moonie-owned *Washington Times* by Pelosi’s enemies. That’s all it took to spread the lie to the right-wing echo chamber, and from there to the MSM. Putnam had no idea whether it was true or not; he didn’t even care. As the *Tampa Tribune* reported, Putnam “is unapologetic about that. He calls the Pelosi plane story, whatever its legitimacy, ‘the first break [Republicans] have had from the media in driving our message since before the Mark Foley story broke.’”

The media didn’t care, either. As Greg Sargent (one of those pesky bloggers who, like Glenn Greenwald, isn’t soothed by stenography), put it,

This story was all over the airwaves and newspapers for days and days - even well after it had been discredited. Can we all agree that’s a bad thing for journalism, for politics, and for the state of our discourse? Can we all agree that this is something that it would be desirable to avoid? ... So now that we know that one of the people in charge of shaping the GOP message in the media couldn’t give two turds about whether what he’s saying is

true or not, you'd think that we'll see a bit more media skepticism the next time a similar GOP attack is launched from the same quarters. You'd think, anyway.

That's not a partisan complaint. It's not even rude; if the President of the United States calls the Assistant to the President, Deputy Chief of Staff and Senior Advisor "Turd Blossom," doesn't that define it as civil discourse?

Second example: Jack Murtha's proposal — that American armed forces be adequately trained, rested and equipped before being deployed to a war zone — is now being summarized in the MSM by this shorthand: "slow bleed strategy."

The term was born in *The Politico*, an online publication, in a story by its congressional bureau chief, John Bresnahan. As Media Matters documents, the word was Bresnahan's own. Yet the RNC quickly put out a statement saying that Pelosi and Murtha "call it their 'slow bleed plan.'" A zillion MSM repetitions later, and "slow-bleed" is the new cut-and-run. Death is the new life. The media have permitted Murtha's plan to support our troops - to give them aid and armor - to be labeled a plan to put them in harm's way. Where was CNN when R.J. Reynolds needed them?

Today, the debate over the proposed merger between XM and Sirius is centered on the health of the free marketplace of news and information. According to communication lawyers, the key question is, if those satellite stations combine, how much other information will consumers still have access to? Actually, the truth is that there is already no free marketplace of news and information. What there is (to shift the metaphor) is a pathology, a vast, festering sickness. Sure, consumers have choice, but they have to work pretty hard to find voices they can trust, brand names that mean more than marketing, and journalists who think accuracy means truth, not taking dictation. Is that what the Founders really meant when they said that an educated public is our best protection against tyranny?

Don't blame yourself if you can't remember what Bush's State of the Union was about. You're not supposed to remember. All you're supposed to do is pay attention to whatever shiny object the media and the powerful dangle in front of you, so your eyeballs can be sold to advertisers. Hey, MSM, if you really want ratings to go through the roof, don't bother truth-squadding the speech. Just rename it. How about The State of the Scrotum? That should really get the librarians going.

UPDATE: My old friend, fellow HuffPoster and self-professed Jurassic journalist Al Eisele is right: enterprise reporting, like the expose of Walter Reed Army Medical Center by the Washington Post's Dana Priest and Ann Hull, illustrates the power and the glory of the MSM. Thumb-sucking, whether from pajama-clad yakkers, or tailored courtiers, is no substitute for fearless investigation. The problem with White House journalism is that its subjects and objects occupy the same bubble; the occasional claw-baring that occurs within it, just like the no-Colbert-zone, no-WMDs-here! laughs they share, pose little risk to the official narrative.

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Marty Kaplan 

USC Annenberg professor and Norman Lear Center director