

**THE BLOG**

W Chews Off-the-Record Fat with MSM; Democracy Gets Heart Disease

By Marty Kaplan

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It turns out that over the past week or so, the President has been holding a series of off-the-record conversations with selected Washington journalists. The reporters who've attended them have agreed not only to keep what's said secret; they've even agreed to the White House request to keep the very existence of the sessions secret. The only reason we know about these chats is that someone leaked word that they're happening to the Washington Post, which has provoked a flurry of follow-up stories, including one in Editor & Publisher with this quote:

"A scribe who attended a session last Thursday called it 'a little surreal....He wants to chew the fat,' the reporter said. 'He asked about our backgrounds, our families.'"

The New York Times isn't attending. Maybe they learned their lesson when Judy Miller revealed that she told Scooter Libby that she'd comply with his request to attribute his Iraq war-justifying "intelligence" leaks to an unnamed source on the Hill.

But apparently the other press hotshots shmoozing with W think they're immune to his charm. Nosirree, they can't be spun. They may drink W's coffee, but they won't drink his Kool-Aid.

Who do they think they're kidding?

The White House wants one thing, and one thing only, from these sessions. They want to prove to the press corps that it's unfair to demonize the President as a liar, ridicule him as an ignoramus, stigmatize him as being in a bubble. They want the Big Feet of the Washington Press corps to think this: If the President can thrust and parry with someone as smart and skeptical as I am, then surely he can't be as deluded as I thought.

There's nothing like chewing the fat with the most powerful man on the planet, and being asked by him how the kids are doing, for castrating and declawing the press corps' potentates. Sure, they may think they're asking tough questions about the rationale and conduct of the war. But in W's briefing book, there's no hostile Q without a Rovian A. The answers he gives in private no doubt seem "special" — more laced with top-secret tidbits, more marbled with geopolitical bigthink, more original than the same stupefying talking points he robotically reiterates on the stump. But they're calculated to seem that way. And it takes rare self-knowledge for a reporter to respond this charm offensive not with, "Wow, he's not a chimp after all," but rather with, "Wow, he's playing me like a piccolo.