

**THE BLOG****Message: I Listen**

By Marty Kaplan

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What, no landing in Marine One on the Tysons Corner shopping center parking lot, so that the President can hear from holiday shoppers about a timetable for withdrawal from Iraq? No pre-dawn visit to the Lincoln Memorial to listen to that other war president's advice about timetables? How about a photo of W in the family quarters, listening intently to the video of Stephen Colbert at the White House Correspondents Association dinner? W with his iPod, taking in Stanley Karnow's history of Vietnam on the treadmill? Surely there's more juice to be squeezed from this PR lemon.

Actually, it's hard to decide which is more pathetic: Bush's "listening tour," or the national media, which have cravenly agreed to call it by that name and cover it within that frame.

This "tour" has required no tourism. It has taken Bush from the Oval Office, over to Foggy Bottom, back to the West Wing, then over to the Pentagon, and back again to the White House. But the media have treated it like Lenin's trip to the Finland Station, or the Beatles coming to America. Wow! Lookit him go! He's even taken his fingers out of his ears! That bubble boy sure can listen!

You can imagine the staff meetings in the days leading up to the Iraq Study Group report. "We gotta give the appearance of paying attention to the report, Mr. President. We gotta let some time pass after Baker's big show, until some serial killer or anorexic distracts the country again. In the meantime, we gotta give those newsie jerkoffs something to cover. Snow can only snow 'em for a day or two. We need action. Photo ops. Soundbites. A storyline.... Wait a minute, I've got it: we'll put you on a listening tour. Yeah, that's the ticket. They'll eat it up. A listening tour... and A New Way Forward!"

I'm not surprised that Bush has tried such a brazen stunt; I'm just stunned that the media has fallen for it so frictionlessly. Maybe it's just the time of the year; perhaps the press corps's just preoccupied with playing Secret Santa.

As everyone knows, for the past five years, Bush could have had anyone from State or Defense come over to the White House in a heartbeat. He could have had options up the wazoo to contemplate. He could have filled his days from morning to night with experts, analysts, historians and anyone else he wanted advice from. No member of Congress would have turned down the chance to bend his ear.

But instead, as everyone knows, he and his buddy Cheney have chosen to operate from a position of supreme confidence, impregnable isolation, and contempt for the pussy concept of agonizing reappraisal. Today's "listening tour" President is the same one who couldn't spare half an hour to listen to Cindy Sheehan. The same one who screened anyone but hard-core supporters from his public events. The same one who said he'd be happy to sit down and talk to Democrats — as long as they said upfront that they already agree with him. This is the same President who won't talk with Syria or Iran because, he says, they already know our position, the same President who sent John Bolton on a shut-up tour of the United Nations. And this is the man we're now supposed to believe is the Listener-in-Chief?

Why hasn't the press called it instead a "so-called listening tour"? Why haven't they insisted on surrounding "listening tour" with scare quotes? Just because the networks sell branding rights — Welcome to the Vioxx Classic at Merck Stadium! — doesn't mean that the news media, or the rest of us, are obliged to parrot the propagandists' talking points.

One of Bush 41's lowest moments came during a speech attempting to convince Americans that he was not a man cut off from ordinary people's concerns, not a patrician who hadn't been to a supermarket since forever, but instead that he was a regular guy. What he said in that speech was this: "Message: I care."

I've always wondered whether the mistake he made at that moment was that he read the heading typed into his copy of the speech. MESSAGE: I CARE, I suspect, was the title of that section of his remarks, just before the section titled MESSAGE: DEMOCRATS SUCK. He wasn't supposed to read the heading aloud; it was just a road sign to guide him through the text, in case he wanted to ad lib.

But when he did say it out loud, its admission — its awkward on-the-noseness, its desperate spinnyness, its baldfaced attempt at flackery, its phony-as-a-three-dollar-billishness — was breathtaking. No clothes, Emperor. Gotcha.

Bush 43 has not, so far, whether by accident or design, actually said the words, "Message: I listen." But that is the true meaning behind this sham "listening tour." I wonder what it will take for the press to actually say so. Maybe he needs to get to zero in the polls?

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