

Eye on Washington by Nicholas F. Benton

Front-row fools in the press room

Arrayed in the front row of the White House press briefing room are the media superstars of the three major TV networks, as well as correspondents from three wire services, AP, UPI, and Reuters. Six in all.

While ABC loudmouth Sam Donaldson is usually the most obnoxious, he is followed in order by CBS's Bill Plante, NBC's Chris Wallace, and UPI's Helen Thomas (who isn't obscene, like the others, but just hates the administration).

Observing the infantilism of these propagators of "truth" up close, you appreciate what a pathetic resource Americans have to find out what's really being said and done in the world. Mind you, other correspondents in the room are equally bad, just not quite as influential. It is more than the classroom-style set-up of the briefing room that makes these people seem like school children, which is how White House spokesman Larry Speakes treats them when they, as he puts it, "smart off."

They tend to become more unruly the more the administration is committed to strong stands on key issues—such as the War on Drugs offensive in September and the post-Reykjavik reassertion of the President's Strategic Defense Initiative.

A question from this reporter on the SDI Oct. 21 is an example. President Reagan had just greeted West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who arrived at the White House south lawn for a state visit, and in brief remarks, the President reasserted his commitment to SDI, noting in passing, "If a defensive system is not such a viable

option, the Soviet Union would not be committing so much of its own resources in developing and deploying strategic defenses of its own."

At the regular press briefing afterwards, I asked Speakes, "The President again today referenced the Soviet SDI program. Given the Soviets don't even admit they have one and the American people know so little about it, is he going to go into more detail on exactly what we believe the Soviets have in their SDI?"

Speakes replied, "It could be in the future we would." The next day, Chancellor Kohl picked up on this theme, saying he encouraged Reagan in his meeting with him to "tell all he knows about the Soviet SDI," a recommendation, the White House's Mitch Daniels subsequently said, was "good advice."

However, this question set off "the front row."

Donaldson piped up, "Have we asked the Soviets to share with us their technology?"

Speakes took the question seriously, saying, "No, but we would be willing to do that."

"Well, why don't we ask them?" Donaldson said, still believing the whole matter to be a joke.

Speakes answered, "I'm not sure it wasn't done at Reykjavik. We would be prepared to enter into an agreement with them, that whichever side reached the technological level appropriate, then it would share. First one who gets it shares with the other. I'm not sure that it was suggested in Iceland, but I know that's his [Reagan's] viewpoint."

Still thinking the whole issue was a joke, Bill Plante, next to Donaldson, giggled and whispered loudly to Donaldson, "You want to see my laser beam?"

An unsmiling Speakes said, "We

may have reached the end of the briefing, at least for the front row." Plante, red-faced, got up and walked out.

Koop drives nails in own political coffin

Surgeon General C. Everett Koop tried to order this reporter to shut up in the middle of his press conference on Oct. 21 announcing the release of his pamphlet on AIDS, where he recommends teaching grade school children the virtue of condoms to prevent spread of the deadly virus.

I was the only dissenting voice in the room of over 100 reporters to challenge the outrageous conclusions in the Koop report.

I told Koop that his claim that universal blood testing would be counterproductive and "cost prohibitive" was, in reality, only because of the cost consideration. I showed that Koop's argument that testing would lead to "false security" for people who would test negative because the antibodies hadn't yet appeared in their blood would also call into question the safety of the nation's entire blood supply, because if the test creates "false security" in one case, then it would in the other (testing of blood used in transfusions), as well.

A red-faced Koop could only reply that the blood supply is safe, because only non-high-risk people donate blood!

I then rattled off four facts that contradicted the assumptions in Koop's report (facts based on reports carried frequently in the *EIR*), including the evidence of possible insect transmission of AIDS, and Koop growled, "You've said enough." "I don't think so," I retorted, "I've just supplied facts that challenge the conclusions of your report." Koop had no response.