

Eye on Washington by Nicholas F. Benton

Reagan shoots from hip to wing Dukakis

President Reagan's now-famous remark in response to my question about Governor Dukakis's secret medical history, "Look, I'm not going to pick on an invalid," created a firestorm of reaction at the White House Aug. 3 and put the question of Dukakis's mental condition on the front pages of every newspaper in the world.

Reagan decided to make a rare personal appearance at the White House press briefing room that morning in order to say that he was vetoing the Defense Authorization Bill, mainly, he said, because of deep cuts in the budget for the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI).

Reagan's seeming declaration of war against the Democratic-controlled Congress on the defense issue was clearly designed to try to sharpen election-eve public perceptions that there is a difference between George Bush's stand on defense issues and that of the Democrats.

At the conclusion of his remarks, Reagan agreed to take a handful of questions.

Mine was not one of the hands he called on. After the last question, a dozen reporters dropped all the polite hand-raising and began shouting all at once to get Reagan's attention for just one more question.

Reagan had started to move away from the podium, but paused to listen to my question: "Do you feel that Michael Dukakis should make his medical records public? He has refused to make his medical records public—the first candidate for high office since Eagleton in 1972. He's had campaign representatives call up with unsolicited phone calls to newspapers saying

he never had psychiatric care. He walked away from a question about that last Friday. Do you think the American people deserve to know whether he's fit to govern by having his medical records made public?"

Reagan got a glimmer in his eye, and let forth his now-famous line.

The White House press corps was stunned, and then let loose a deafening uproar of protest. "What do you mean by that?" "What do you mean by invalid?" "Invalid in what sense?" "Why did you call Dukakis an invalid?"

Reagan departed the press room and went to the East Room to speak to a small gathering of major media executives. There, in remarks which were piped into the press room, he said he had "said something in answer to a question he probably shouldn't have," implying his use of the term invalid was a blunder. He then added, pointedly, "I do want to make it clear, however, that I believe the public does have a right to know the medical details of any man who would hold the nation's highest office."

In the press room, many reporters swarmed around me seeking further information on what I knew on the issue of Dukakis's medical history.

The natural question on the minds of thinking journalists (and asked me by some) was: Is there something that President Reagan knows about, which caused him to feel he had the license to use such an explosive word as "invalid" to characterize the Democratic candidate for the presidency? After all, that is pretty strong language.

Indeed, Reagan's use of such a term could not have been a slip, or a poor attempt at a joke. The President has never been known to be sloppy in his choice of words for anything. On the contrary, it has been his mastery of the speaking platform which has been his forte all these years. Anybody who really thinks Reagan's ref-

erence to Dukakis as an "invalid" was just a blunder is a good prospect to buy the Brooklyn Bridge.

And so many White House reporters said at the daily briefing the next day, when they confronted spokesman Marlin Fitzwater with charges that the President had plotted in advance to use the term.

An NBC reporter asked if the President discussed the rumors of Dukakis's mental condition with members of his staff, and whether he came out to the briefing room "with the word 'invalid' on his mind."

LaRouche's role in White House questioned

Then a reporter from the *Wall Street Journal* remarked that "these rumors about Mr. Dukakis were generated originally by followers of Lyndon LaRouche," and demanded to know "aside from any who might happen to be in the press part, whether any of those followers have had meetings with White House officials or campaign officials in the second term."

Fitzwater answered, "I have no idea." When the reporter asked, "Can somebody check on that?" Fitzwater replied, "No, I wouldn't. We wouldn't want to check on meetings. You can't check on everybody's staff."

Another reporter, a partisan Democrat, then challenged the White House for granting press credentials to what she called "LaRouche's outfit," while denying them to other media. Fitzwater said he was not aware of any legitimate journalists who had been denied passes. When asked, "Is LaRouche's outfit legitimate journalism?" he said, "The courts ruled . . . if you've got a news outlet that reaches the public, the courts have defined you as eligible for a White House press pass."