

Brit Hume

My Fall Into Disabuse

Hate mail (and fan mail) from viewers of the Rose Garden showdown.

BRIT HUME: *Mr. President, the withdrawal of the Guinier nomination; sir, and your apparent focus on Judge Breyer, and your turn, late it seems, to Judge Ginsburg, may have created an impression, perhaps unfair, of a certain zig-zag quality in the decision-making process here. I wonder, sir, if you could kind of walk us through it, perhaps disabuse us of any notion we might have along those lines. Thank you.*

BILL CLINTON: *I have long since given up the thought that I could disabuse some of you of turning any substantive decision into anything but political process. How you could ask a question like that after the statement she just made is beyond me. [Applause.] Goodbye. Thank you.*

—unabridged text of presidential news conference after Bill Clinton's introduction of Judge Ruth Bader Ginsburg as his nominee for the vacant seat on the Supreme Court, Rose Garden, June 14, 1993

When President Clinton blew up at my now-famous question about the "zig-zag quality" of his decision-making, I wasn't sure what had set him off, but I knew one thing: the fifteen minutes of fame that Andy Warhol had promised me were about to begin.

By the next afternoon, there were forty-three messages on my answering machine at the office, and the correspondents' reception desk at ABC News had fielded at least a dozen more. Most were from talk-show producers wanting to set up interviews, but there were a lot of messages from viewers who had watched the event live. The reactions fit a predictable pattern: Clinton-lovers

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thought I had behaved outrageously, and Clinton haters thought he had. The calls fell off sharply after the first day or so. And after the president patched things up by calling on me for a "follow-up" the next day and jesting about my recent marriage ("You got a honeymoon, and I didn't"), my fifteen minutes were up, except for one thing: the mail continued to pour in for a week or more.

Unlike anchors and talk-show pundits, news correspondents don't normally get much

viewer mail, so we pay a lot of attention when we do. Like the callers, the letter-writers fell mostly into two categories: ardently pro- and ardently anti-Clinton. In the pro-Clinton camp, there was a prominent subgroup: those who were especially impressed with Judge Ruth Ginsburg and moved, as Clinton was, by her remarks. Typical was Marian Sherman of Maple Valley, Washington, who said of the judge's statement:

I found myself crying and was glad that I was alone at the time. To have that moment shattered by your crude and insensitive question was shocking. . . . You are an arrogant bastard, and thanks to the zapper I won't have to listen to you anymore.

Equally to the point was Dorothy Freeman of Livermore, California, who wrote:

Couldn't you have let the judge bask in her glory for one minute in time? Couldn't you have acknowledged her accomplishments before dumping s--t on them?

My favorite in this category came from one Sidney Pepper of Ada, Oklahoma, who identified himself as a "Ph.D. Madill [sic] School of Journalism, '50." He said he'd never before written such a letter but had been motivated by "your rudeness to President Clinton, Judge Fineburg [sic] and the television audience." If Dr. Pepper really did attend Northwestern's Medill School of Journalism, he must have heard the old editor's dictum about keeping copy "tight, light, bright and (most of all) right"—in other words, more like the card from an anonymous soul identified only as a "non-fan," who said simply, "You, Sir, should be horsewhipped."

Another non-fan, Robert Ellrich of Seattle, said my question "displayed a remarkable composite of snideness, disingenuousness, false politeness, and self-promotion." Even a "sixteen-year-old from the Ozarks," he said, would have spotted the bad faith in the question. "In fact, you are lucky that the person was not a sixteen-year-old from the Ozarks, because if he were, your honeymoon might have ended with a broken nose."

There were other references to my recent marriage, with some writers seeing in it a parallel with Mr. Clinton's selection of Judge Ginsburg. John E. Puelle of New York City asked:

When all is said and done, I'm curious whether the choice of your wife was done in a zig-zag manner, or whether there were any disappointed girlfriends who felt jilted when it was all over.

Another writer began with congratulations, then said:

Hopefully during the toasts to the bride, someone wasn't gross enough to ask you why you picked her. And not other women you knew. Perhaps she served your purposes the most?

Other writers didn't bother to quibble with my question or its wording but made clear that their complaint was with me personally. "You are an ass and a clod," said one anonymous note, adding: "Pig Media personified." Another nameless writer asked, "How could you? Your fine suit, your smirking smile, your insincere face. The very most important thing that President Clinton has done—he could have spit in your face." "Don't you just hate it when Bill Clinton makes you look like an even bigger jerk?" wrote another, who signed off, "Have a nice day."

Several writers made clear they don't regularly watch ABC News, but did so on the night of June 14 to see how the episode was handled. In my report on "World News Tonight," I referred to myself only as "a reporter." Since what immediately followed was the sound of my voice asking the famous question, my identity seemed obvious enough. But some viewers took this as a sign of reluctance to own up. Mary Anderson of Kalamazoo, Michigan, wrote:

I saw Mr. Clinton kick your little butt on C-Span and I'm writing to add fuel to his fire. Then I saw you lying on ABC trying to act like you weren't the person who got mopped up. I despise you, but I watched ABC for the first time in months to see you crawl. It was wonderful. I loved it. Go Bill. He cut your hair.

Another writer, anonymous, who'd seen the event on CNN, had strikingly similar feelings: "So I watched you on ABC News for the first time in months. You are worthless and evil and it's about time someone told you so."

The president, to be sure, had his share of detractors among my correspondents. Wrote David Slick of Indianola, Iowa, "Don't worry, there are a number of things that are beyond this president! Keep up the good work." Jere Irby of Midlothian, Virginia, was similarly encouraging: "You'll still be around doing a magnificent job when Mr. Clinton is back in Arkansas working for his wife's law firm." Roy Glassberg of Oakland, California, sent me a copy of his letter to Mr. Clinton:

I think your response to Brit Hume's question was disgusting. The world is not about you. . . . In the words of your predecessor: "If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen."

Most of the letters, though, were critical of me, which is normal. People usually write to reporters to complain. I expected the margin to be about eight or nine to one critical, but it ended up about three to two, which I found surprising.

The most surprising thing, though, was not the ratio. It was the content of a single letter from someone I had heard from before. In January 1991, following an appearance with several other White House correspondents on "Donahue," I received a card from Mrs. K. Campbell of San Francisco. I liked it so much I tacked it on the wall of the ABC booth at the White House. Mrs. Campbell called me

a man, like Bush, who wears arrogance, as Bush does, as naturally and unselfconsciously as you wear a suit. I know you are a personal friend of George Bush's and therefore I take your reporting with a grain of salt. . . . I admire your poise, but I'm wary of your views. I'm writing because I just saw the Donahue Show. You patronized Helen Thomas and were rude to her. Your EGO was huge. You even patronized Donahue. And you did it as though you had a natural right to patronize people.

Last April, following an embarrassing incident in the Rose Garden, in which NBC's Andrea Mitchell and I got into a shouted competition for the president's attention, Mrs. Campbell made my wall again: "You were terribly RUDE to Andrea Mitchell," she wrote. "You forged an image of yourself as a rude, ill-bred bully."

Naturally, I expected to hear from Mrs. Campbell again after the Ginsburg episode and had little doubt what she would say. She was, after all, a person deeply concerned with manners who plainly did not like me. Here, though, is what she wrote:

President Clinton was RUDE to you and he should apologize. . . . I supported President Clinton last fall. Never again. He is a bumbler, incompetent, testy, vain and has surrounded himself with a too-young inexperienced staff.

There were, I confess, moments in the days just after the incident when I wondered if perhaps my question had been inappropriate. Mrs. Campbell's letter put an end to all that. □

William McGurn

Clinton East

A New Age Ugly American.

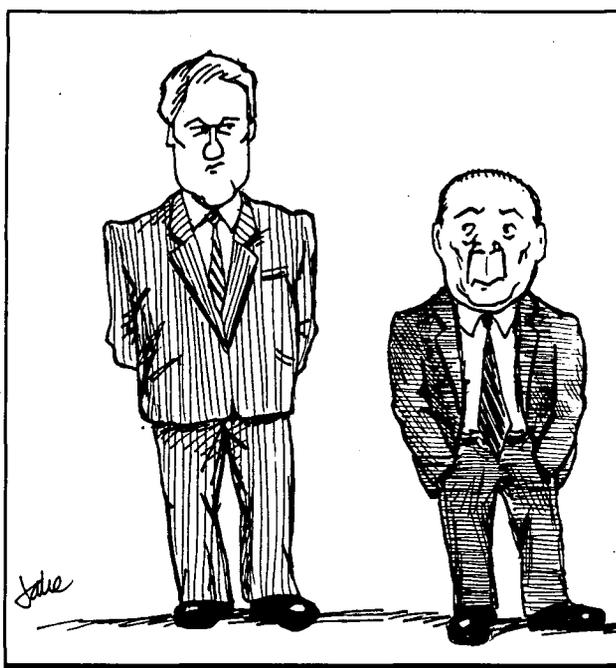
Hong Kong

Give David Gergen his due. Hired to appease the unforgiving gods of the media, the new chief of communications has offered up a treasure trove of positive imagery from Bill Clinton's first trip to the Far East. There was a relaxed Clinton fielding questions from young Japanese students; a presidential Clinton announcing a dramatic breakthrough on tariff reductions with his fellow Group of Seven members; a friend of democracy jogging with newly elected Korean president Kim Young Sam; a commander-in-chief playing the sax for the fighting men of the Second Infantry at Camp Casey; a grim leader of the New World Order starting down North Korea on the demilitarized zone with uncompromising talk on Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program.

"In person?" said a U.S. business consultant in Japan. "In person he charmed their pants off." Not an uninteresting choice of metaphor.

But charm has its limits, especially in foreign affairs. However engaging the Asians found Bill Clinton, the verdict on Clintonism is less favorable. Take the overexposed speech at Wasada University. Like so many other Clinton moves, this one was a studied imitation of the Kennedys—in this case of a visit to Wasada by Bobby in 1962, when the then-attorney general diffused a tense situation by inviting agitators onstage for discussion. This time Clinton was

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there to tell them that increased American access to Japanese markets would be good not only for U.S. business, but also for ordinary Japanese like themselves. In a polite country the students responded politely, and it may have looked good on American TV. But that doesn't mean they were convinced. "I got the impression that Clinton likes to grandstand," 20-year-old Tsumaki Oku told the *Los Angeles Times*. Others simply said that Clinton's ploy fell flat.

It did not help that Clinton happened to be right. The Japanese are tired of being hectored about their economy, especially in the midst of their own recession. Hence the cynicism of Japanese coverage, which gave short shrift to Clinton's appeal to a new Japan (old hat for them) and instead zeroed in on the president's remarks about regional security. Similarly, TV commentators noted with glee how the president's walk down a narrow Tokyo street had been staged by Hollywood's Mort Engberg, producer of the *Smokey and the Bandit* movies.

The Japanese had already been angered by a private Clinton comment to Boris Yeltsin at their Vancouver meeting in April, warning the Russian leader to be careful in dealing with the Japanese, "because when they say 'yes' they frequently mean 'no.'" Needless to say, the Vancouver story was widely repeated during the G-7 get-together. For the Japanese, it was evidence that Clinton had called them liars. In these circumstances, even the president's schmoozing with Japanese opposition members during a reception at the U.S. Embassy was bound to backfire. While the Japanese want change, they do not want Uncle Sam telling them how to go about it.