

Fifteen Questions

Since many of the powerful, famous and rich in America have perfected the technique of spin and run, I am enlisting you, the reader, to please ask these people the following questions if you happen to see them at Wal-Mart or something.

To President Bush: Since CIA chief George Tenet presided over the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, the failure to stop 9/11, the failure to find Iraqi WMD's and finally the gross underestimating of post-war problems in Iraq, why does Tenet still hold his job?

To Donald Rumsfeld: Why did you not inform your boss, the President, the moment you found out about the Iraqi torture allegations?

To John Kerry: Your Iraq strategy seems to center around giving the United Nations more power in that country. Is that the same United Nations that cut and run after their building was attacked in Baghdad, or another United Nations?

To Kofi Annan: You have to be aware that UN officials are trying to stonewall the investigation into the oil for food bribery scandal, as letters presented to you prove that. But based upon your lackluster answers on "Meet the Press," you don't seem to care much. Why?

To Dan Rather: Did you believe that anti-American forces would use the torture pictures you aired to promote violence against America? Because that's what many of them are doing.

To Barry Bonds: Every time you're asked about whether or not you took high-tech steroids, you give a wise guy answer. Why do you do this and did you take the juice?

To Howard Stern: No question you're a smart, funny guy who could get high ratings without all the gross out stuff. You

just turned 50-years-old and you're a gazillionaire. Is it time to modify your on-air approach?

To Hillary Clinton: You campaign on the promise that you would improve things for upstate New Yorkers. Yet in many places like Buffalo and Syracuse, things are worse. Do you feel any remorse?

To Bill Clinton: According to Vanity Fair Magazine, you do not want John Edwards to be chosen as Kerry's running mate. Why do you feel this way, and will you come on the Factor to promote your new book?

To Howard Dean: Do you believe Bill Clinton and DNC chief Terry McAuliffe sabotaged your campaign?

To Colin Powell: There is more opium coming out of Afghanistan than ever before. Did you make a deal with the Afghan warlords that in return for keeping the countryside quiet, you would let them deal drugs?

To Frank Rich: As a columnist for The New York Times you put forth that Mel Gibson's film about Jesus was likely to cause anti-Jewish sentiment. Not one incident of that has been reported. In light of that, do you feel silly?

To Michael Jackson: Do you feel silly?

To Janet Jackson: Oh, forget it.

And finally to Osama Bin Laden: You apparently believe that Allah will reward you for ordering the deaths of tens of thousands of human beings, including innocent women and children. How disappointed will you be when that doesn't happen and have you ever read Dante?

Just asking.

Paging Don Corleone

In the last week or so, some of the liberal media like The Village Voice and the editorial page of the Los Angeles Times has hammered John Kerry for being, well, John Kerry. The general criticism is that the guy is not anti-war enough and can't rally the faithful like Howard Dean did.

But underlying the brickbats is the belief by some Democrats that if Kerry can't surge in the polls now, then when can he?

President Bush has taken a mauling from the 9/11 Commission theatrics and the bloody theater of battle in Iraq. There is no question that the Bush administration made major mistakes by ignoring Al Qaeda warnings and underestimating anti-American feeling once Saddam was deposed.

Despite those errors, the President has actually gone UP in some polls and Senator Kerry has either gone down or stayed the same.

But the more distressing poll question for democrats is the one Fox News/Opinion Dynamics asked: "Regardless of how you plan to vote, who do you really believe will win the 2004 presidential election – Bush or Kerry?"

Only 29% of the respondents said Kerry. That kind of response would get him booted off "American Idol."

So some Democrats are worried, even though the Senator has five months left to strut his stuff. The question is, does Kerry even have any stuff?

I say don't underestimate a guy who was dead last December but made Bela Lugosi look like an amateur two months later.

However, Kerry needs to get some policies. The reason Bush hasn't faded is that he is steadfast in fighting the terror war while the best alternative Kerry has is to let the U.N. handle it.

Here's a news flash, Senator. Many Americans don't trust the United Nations and well remember it cut and ran in Iraq as soon as the going got tough.

The Bush people, of course, are watching all this carefully. A high-ranking Bush advisor told me that as it stands now, the White House doesn't think John Kerry can beat the President unless Mr. Bush makes a huge Jerry Ford-like mistake. You'll remember that President Ford told a stunned Jimmy Carter and national TV audience that Poland wasn't in the Soviet orbit back in 1975.

The high-ranking Bush person also told me that if I used his name in any way, I would disappear to the place where Dick Cheney goes and never be seen again.

So, at this point, the Republican strategy to retain power seems to be a 'rope-a-dope' tactic. Some of you may recall that when Muhammed Ali fought the younger, stronger George Foreman in Africa in 1974, he stood against the ropes, covered his body and face with his hands and arms and allowed Foreman to punch away doing minimal damage. When George finally got tired, Ali knocked him out.

The President believes he can absorb the media punishment because John Kerry does not have a better plan. Kerry can exhaust himself running around the country spouting slogans, while Bush leans against the White House ropes looking calm and tough-minded.

Will this work? It will, unless things get dramatically worse in Iraq and/or in the other aspects of the terror war. Or, unless John Kerry comes up with a tough, cogent plan to heighten America's security. All this dopey stuff about lost

medals and National Guard attendance will mean little come November. Americans want to punish those who would kill us and keep them on the defensive. They will vote their own security this time.

Savvy democrats know that and thus are huddling to come up with something to counter W's "firm resolve." Partnering up with the UN guy Brahimi won't do it and neither will promising better relations with the hated France.

John Kerry needs a wartime consigliere. Paging Don Corleone.

0' Dodge Ball

Let me ask you a direct question: Do you get angry at politicians who avoid answering tough questions? Don't dodge now. Does it bother you that President Bush has only held three press conferences in more than three years? Does it grate on you that Hillary Clinton considers Larry King her media guru? Does it drive you nuts that Donald Rumsfeld and Colin Powell and Dick Cheney have sought sympathetic media venues since the war in Iraq started going south?

If none of the above rankle you, then you're in tune with the latest trend in politics: "Forum Shopping." That means whenever a politician is faced with a controversy or a situation whereby he or she is looking bad, they have certain friendly "forums" where their spin will not be challenged.

Thus, a politician can seem accessible to the public because they appear on Oprah or Leno or The Daily Show. But these forums are purely entertainment and rarely is the politician put on the spot. They can pretty much say what they want to say.

Now, there is nothing wrong with our leaders going on entertainment venues. Talking to Jay Leno helped get Arnold elected governor. But if that's all they do—if the only interview deal is a sweetheart deal, then we have a problem in this country.

Here's an example. I would like to ask Defense Secretary Rumsfeld one simple question: Why didn't your department warn the country that the aftermath of the war could be very bloody? Was it another intelligence failure?

I cannot get Rumsfeld to answer that question.

That's simply wrong. All Americans, including the thousands of families who have sons and daughters serving in Iraq, deserve to know as Rummy might put it, "what the hell is going on."

Speaking before the Hollywood Radio and Television Society, Ted Koppel said: "I have no problem whatsoever with entertainers and comedians pretending to be journalists; my problem is with journalists pretending to be entertainers."

With all due respect to Mr. Koppel, whom I do respect, most electronic journalists must have an entertainment component these days, or they are out of business. We can't all work for PBS. It is the rise of ideological entertainers doing quasi-news programs on cable and talk radio that has changed the playing field. Politicians now have many more sympathetic ears in the media than ever before.

So a calculation is made: Avoid the tough guys and gals who have been trained to ask incisive questions, and meander on over to the cozy little studio on the prairie. All of those seeking power know they can avoid scrutiny and still be "out there" if they choose their conversations wisely.

Dennis Miller, Rush Limbaugh, Bill Maher and Michael Savage all have a perfect right to make a living analyzing current events. None of these guys are deceptive. You know what you're

getting when you sign up to listen.

But powerful people making decisions which affect all our lives are being deceptive and cowardly if they avoid answering questions that are sometimes about life and death matters. And that is happening more and more.

This is a big issue for our Republic. Pay attention to it.

Who's Watching Us

This checks and balances deal the founders set up has worked pretty well for us here in America. We have a process whereby most powerful people in the public sector can be held accountable for their actions by other powerful people. Hi, there, Richard Nixon. But there is no oversight on the press, which is a private enterprise. We get a free pass and now that's beginning to hurt the nation.

As you may know, the Federal Communications Commission is cracking down hard on Howard Stern and his outrageous brethren by fining companies that employ them if the shock jocks venture into the murky world of "indecency." You can't have sex on your front lawn, and you can't detail sexual activity on the airwaves owned by the public. Fine. But, to be fair, "indecency" should be explicitly defined by the FCC.

When it comes to the news media, there is no FCC to fine us when we do something unsavory like intentionally mislead the public. Let's cite a few examples, and please forgive me because some of these exhibitions are personal. Unfortunately, I am a primary source these days in confronting declining media standards.

When a fanatical Shi'ite militia attacked American troops in Iraq, many in the press labeled the situation "an uprising." But it wasn't. It was a well-planned power grab attempt directed by a militant cleric with ties to Iran. An uprising is when regular folks throw off those in power. The collapse of the Berlin Wall was an uprising.

But many newspaper editors chose to headline an "uprising." Some simply made a mistake, but others wanted to put the worst possible face on that action for political reasons. That is deceitful.

Here's another example. As you may know, The New York Times has done everything it could to disparage Mel Gibson and his movie about the death of Jesus. The Times lost the battle, but continues its jihad.

Last week Times reporter Anne Thompson played down the success of the film and wrote this: "(Gibson) was able to deploy partisan news-media pundits like Fox's Bill O'Reilly to appeal to their constituents to show their support by seeing the movie."

Thompson's statement is flat-out false. I never recommended the film. I told Gibson on television the movie was too violent. That's on the record. And when I attempted to ask the Times to supply evidence that Gibson had "deployed" me, Ombudsman Daniel Okrent refused to take my call.

The declining standards in journalism extend to television news as well. Recently, right-wing bomb thrower G. Gordon Liddy appeared on CNN and MSNBC and asserted that my radio program was a "failure." Westwood One, the company that syndicates the show, fired off a memo to those networks providing detailed information proving the opposite. Both CNN and MSNBC refused to correct the record.

I could give you dozens of other examples, but the point is that press accountability no longer exists in this country.

Ten years ago most of the media policed itself, at least somewhat. Today that's rare.

What's changed is that many press outlets are now run by ideologues on a mission. The gloves of fairness are off. These editors have set the journalistic rules on fire, and there is no one to put out the flames. Thus, Americans who depend on information to make responsible decisions about their country are often hoodwinked.

One more example. A few years ago, The Washington Post ran an article that said I lied about my upbringing—that I was not raised in Levittown, New York as I stated. The article was intended to damage my credibility. That untruth was picked up by scores of media outlets, and was even exploited by a major publishing house.

Over Easter, I was rummaging through the attic at my mother's home. There I found the house deed from 1951. It was sent to my parents by the County Trust Company. The address on the deed is Levittown.

Running Against Himself

At this point, President Bush is actually running against himself. With the situation in Iraq tenuous, Mr. Bush finds himself in a race against time to straighten things out in the land of Saddam. Even though the U.S. economy is improving, chaos on an overseas battlefield is emerging as the end-game issue in the upcoming election.

Wisely, John Kerry has said little about the Iraq fighting. You don't criticize the Commander-in-Chief in the middle of a firefight. That could be construed as putting U.S. forces in

jeopardy and undermining morale. Kerry would be smart to keep it zipped.

Also, the Senator can read the polls. President Bush is sinking into the morass that Iraq is threatening to become. If things are this messed up over there next October, Kerry won't have to say a word. He can wave at the voters, and they'll wave him right in.

So George W. Bush has to stabilize things in Iraq over the next few months, or he goes the way of Lyndon Johnson. Thus, Bush is really running against himself. Can the Commander get things under control in a land rife with fanatics and terrorists?

Bush should expect no help from the elite media. It has been grossly unfair to him on the economic front, and will spin negative on Iraq as well. There is no question that Bush has made policy mistakes, but economic growth in this country is jumping, and job creation is rising. However, whenever the economic picture is discussed by the elites, there's always the "but factor:" ...but Harvey in Ohio lost his job to Ramal in Calcutta. What about that?

I think Bush has done a good job on the economy, especially since we are smack in the middle of World War III. The terrorist attack on 9/11 set back any dramatic economic recovery years. Let's be honest about that.

By November, most Americans will have a republican-driven picture of the economy. The Bush people have nearly 200 million dollars to buy ads trumpeting their economic achievements. Talk about an uptick in spending!

But Iraq is quite something else. Americans are not going to go for another Vietnam. A war of attrition is not going to cut it, especially since the removal of Saddam was sold as a quick, surgical action with overjoyed Iraqis at the end of the rainbow. That obviously has not happened.

So the race is on to stabilize Iraq, and fast. The terrorists know Mr. Bush is up for reelection and, interestingly, it seems like they want W out. An increase in terrorist activity would signify that, wouldn't it?

The President does have a fighting chance, however. Osama bin Laden could be caught, and the Iraqi fanatics could be beaten to their knees. If those things happen, Bush wins. But if the terrorists remain the aggressors, say hello to First Lady Theresa Heinz Kerry.