

Talon News "reporter" lobs Bush another softball; is Talon a news organization or an arm of the Republican Party?

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During President Bush's January 26 White House press conference, Jeff Gannon, Washington bureau chief and White House correspondent for the self-described conservative news outlet Talon News, asked the president the following question:

Thank you. Senate Democratic leaders have painted a very bleak picture of the U.S. economy. [Senate Minority Leader] Harry Reid [D-NV] was talking about soup lines. And [Senator] Hillary Clinton [D-NY] was talking about the economy being on the verge of collapse. Yet in the same breath they say that Social Security is rock solid and there's no crisis there. How are you going to work -- you've said you are going to reach out to these people -- how are you going to work with people who seem to have divorced themselves from reality?

Although Gannon is a regular at White House press briefings and Talon News claims to be a news organization, Talon appears to be little more than an arm of the Republican Party. Talon News' editor in chief, Bobby Eberle, is a Republican activist who served as a delegate to the 1996, 1998, and 2000 Texas Republican Conventions and to the 2000 national Republican Convention. In 1999, Eberle "was recognized with a unanimously approved resolution of commendation by the Republican Party of Texas for service and dedication to the Republican cause." His biography on Talon's website notes: "Bobby has devoted considerable time and energy to the Republican effort" and "Bobby is a member of Texas Christian Coalition and Texas Right to Life."

Eberle is also the president and CEO of GOPUSA.com, a "conservative news, information, and design company dedicated to promoting conservative ideals" that carries articles and commentary by Gannon and Talon News. GOPUSA is also affiliated with MillionsofAmericans.com, a conservative advocacy organization run by Bruce Eberle, a relative of Bobby Eberle and a conservative fundraising consultant. Gannon's articles for Talon News frequently appear on GOPUSA.com (for example, here, here, and here). Bruce Eberle and his company have made extensive financial contributions to Republican Party candidates and committees.

Gannon identifies himself on his personal website as "A Voice of the New Media" and "a conservative journalist embedded with the liberal Washington press corps." The top item on his website reads:

NOTE TO MY LIBERAL COLLEAGUES: Bush is here for another 4 years. Get over it!

You threw everything you had at him, even phony documents and he still beat you. Give up.

WashingtonPost.com "White House Briefing" columnist Dan Froomkin noted in his February 19, 2004, column, "Within the press corps, Gannon is known for asking softball questions." Froomkin has cited examples of such softballs.

From Froomkin's February 19, 2004, column:

Here's an example from yesterday. [White House press secretary Scott] McClellan was fending off hardballs about whether the president should be held responsible for the job-growth predictions when he nodded to Gannon.

"McClellan: I think we've been through this issue. [Nod to Gannon] Go ahead.

"Gannon: Scott, when you talk about the unemployment -- or the jobs being created, is that based on the payroll survey, or the household survey? Because there's -- because of the tax cuts, there's been a tremendous increase in the number of entrepreneurs that have started their own businesses, and those numbers aren't reflected in the payroll survey.

"McClellan: That's correct, yes. The household survey is different from the payroll survey. And the household survey showed that some -- an increase of 496,000 jobs in January alone. So there are different numbers that you're talking about there. And we can look at both. But, again, you're getting into -- you're getting into the numbers here. The numbers that the President is interested in is the actual numbers of jobs being created and the policies that we are taking to create an even more robust environment for job creation."

In his March 10, 2004, column, Froomkin indicated that Gannon has served as a useful lifeline for McClellan amid hostile questioning from less compliant reporters:

But he [Gannon] does keep lobbing those softballs. Sometimes he even brings props. And press secretary McClellan seems to appreciate it.

Yesterday, for instance, McClellan was getting hammered with questions about the 9/11 commission and the possible inappropriate juxtaposition of a visit to a 9/11 memorial with a fundraiser on Thursday.

It was getting ugly. "I'm not even going to dignify that with a response," McClellan said in response to a jibe. (See the full text of the briefing.)

Then he saw daylight:

"Go ahead, Jeff."

Gannon: "Thank you. First of all, I hope the grand jury didn't force you to turn over the wedding card I sent to you and your wife. (Laughter.) Do you see any hypocrisy in the controversy about the President's mention of 9/11 in his ads, when Democratic icon Franklin Delano Roosevelt's campaign issued this button, that says, 'Remember Pearl Harbor'? I have a visual aid for folks watching at home."

McClellan: "You're pointing out some historical facts. Obviously, Pearl Harbor was a defining moment back in the period of World War II, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt was strongly committed to winning World War II and talked about it frequently."

Gannon: "So you think it certainly is valid that the President does talk about it and --"

McClellan: "Yes, he addressed this this weekend, when he was first asked about it. September 11th was a defining moment for our nation. We all shared in that experience. And it's important that we look at how we lead in a post-September 11th world. And that's an important discussion to have with the American people, and to talk about the differences in approaches to winning the war on terrorism and preventing attacks from happening in the first place."

Newsday reported on March 6, 2004, that when the federal grand jury investigating the leak of the identity of CIA covert operative Valerie Plame subpoenaed White House records on contacts with

many journalists, Gannon was among them. Froomkin explained in his March 10, 2004, column that "the reason Gannon is on the list is most likely an attempt to find out who gave him a secret memo that he mentioned in an interview he had with Plame's husband, former ambassador and administration critic Joseph Wilson." Froomkin continued:

Gannon asked Wilson: "An internal government memo prepared by U.S. intelligence personnel details a meeting in early 2002 where your wife, a member of the agency for clandestine service working on Iraqi weapons issues, suggested that you could be sent to investigate the reports. Do you dispute that?"

According to a December Washington Post story by Mike Allen and Dana Milbank, "Sources said the CIA is angry about the circulation of a still-classified document to conservative news outlets suggesting Plame had a role in arranging her husband's trip to Africa for the CIA. The document, written by a State Department official who works for its Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), describes a meeting at the CIA where the Niger trip by Wilson was discussed, said a senior administration official who has seen it."

On top of being secret, CIA officials said it was wrong.

On March 9, 2004, Talon News also reported that it "learned that one of the journalists being targeted [in the federal grand jury investigation of the Plame leak] is Jeff Gannon." According to that article, Gannon told Talon News that the memo he cited in his interview with Wilson "did not come from inside the administration." "I don't know why I'm on the list of journalists being called before the Grand Jury," Gannon said. "I have been an outspoken critic of the leak probe and an aggressive questioner of the motives behind it. That seems to have drawn the attention of someone with the authority to issue subpoenas."

Gannon's syndicated column, "Jeff Gannon's Washington," appears on his website. RIGHTALK, which airs radio programs "from leading conservatives and organizations," and bills itself as a "conservative web alternative to National Public Radio," airs Jeff Gannon's Washington weekly.