

Eye on Washington by Nicholas F. Benton

White House spars with press on drugs

In a heated parlay with the White House press corps here Sept. 9, White House spokesman Larry Speakes put the burden of responsibility for the success or failure of President Reagan's anti-drug initiative on the shoulders of the national media.

Needless to say, the press corps reacted violently. ABC's loudmouth, Sam Donaldson, epitomized the reaction to the idea of playing a positive role in the war on drugs by shouting, "Our responsibility is not to be on your team."

Speakes challenged the press to cover the President's anti-drug offensive fairly, rather than fixating on what he called the "scare tactics" of "waving the red flag" over mandatory drug testing.

The explosive exchange began when Speakes reported that Reagan would announce an executive order pertaining to testing of federal employees in "sensitive" job positions. "I want to caution those of you in this room who really have the power in your own hands not to make this an issue of drug testing."

Immediately the sparks began to fly. Speakes said, "I don't mind teeing off on you publicly about it either, because you will be doing a disservice to a nationwide effort that the President is trying to start if you try to boil it down to mandatory testing and wave that red flag in front of the American people, and particularly among public and private unions to whom we are going and discussing this, because that

is where a major part of our program is going to be, in the workplace, and it will rest on the cooperation of unions.

"I'm talking about the emphasis you tend to put on it and the scare tactics you've tried to put on it in here," Speakes added.

"I'm telling you that in this room right here, more than in your own offices or anywhere else, is going to rest a lot on the success or failure of our being able to motivate the American public. All I ask you to do is to be fair and not to sensationalize and not to overplay this business, because you did it a couple of months ago when this came up and I would ask you to please treat this in perspective and not try to boil down what is a comprehensive, well thought-out, bi-partisan cooperative legislative and executive branch program. . . ."

CBS's Bill Plante protested, "You seem to be suggesting that if we don't write or talk about mandatory drug testing that people who are going to be tested won't be quite as upset about it."

Speakes shot back, "Plante, you well know, if you look back on what I've said in the last five minutes, I did not tell you not to write on it, I said, 'emphasis.'"

Plante retorted, "I said you're suggesting that if we don't get them stirred up, they won't be as upset."

Speakes answered, "That's true. That is exactly true." He cited the provocative stories in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* that came out when Reagan first announced his anti-drug drive, reporting the costs of testing 1.1 million federal workers, when no decisions on testing had actually been made.

Then UPI's Helen Thomas complained. Speakes reiterated, "This is a problem the White House treats with a great deal of gravity, and we are approaching this matter so that you

should not overemphasize certain parts of the program. . . . I'm trying to tell you that there is an enormous responsibility within this room to see that we are able to accomplish what we want to accomplish in drugs."

Then came the howls from the press:

- "No, our responsibility is to tell what the program is. . . ."

- "People can think for themselves."

- "They can't think for themselves?"

- "These people [referring to Speakes] think the American public is stupid."

- "I don't think they think the American people are very smart. And their presence here [the fact that Reagan was elected] suggests they may be right." This crack came from Sam Donaldson.

After more sparring, Speakes said, "I'm trying to stress to you that there is responsibility with the privilege. With the First Amendment comes responsibility."

The confrontation ended when this reporter asked Speakes, "Wouldn't it be fair to say that really what you are asking for today is the same kind of cooperation from the national news media that the President is asking of the motion picture industry, that Mrs. Reagan is asking of the professional sports industries? All you've really done here today is to ask for the same kind of cooperation from the national news media. It seems to me that maybe that's the most important thing you said."

Speakes responded, "I couldn't have said it better myself. Well put," and moved on to another subject while the press started redirecting its insults toward me. Thus, the issue was clear. In its first drug test, the White House press corps flunked—especially Sam Donaldson.