

In Praise of Presidential Vacations

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By Richard Miniter

The only thing worse than having a Republican in the White House is not having him in the White House. At least in the minds of the press.

None of the traveling circus known as the White House press pool seems to like the idea of President Bush's 30-day sojourn at his Texas ranch. The Washington Post called it "the longest presidential vacation in 32 years." Gasp. Post reporter Mike Allen pulled out his calculator and figured that Mr. Bush will have spent 54 days "at his parched but beloved ranch." Then he breathlessly informs us: "That's almost a quarter of his presidency."

The New York Times assured readers, even before the president's stem cell address, that the vacation was all "work, work, work." That's a relief. Read the wire reports and those toiling scribes mention the "broiling sun" and the "muggy gymnasium" that serves as their press center. They ridicule Mr. Bush's trip to his heartland ranch as "Home to the Wasteland." Reading those earnest dispatches, you might think that our correspondents are filing from a Third World war zone instead of from one of the most prosperous states in the most powerful nation on earth.

Why don't reporters like the president's vacation? For one thing, they don't like Texas, and Mr. Bush is on to them. "I know a lot of you wish you were on the East Coast, lounging on the beach But when you are from Texas -- and love Texas -- this is where you come home. This is my home. . . . I don't mind the heat," Mr. Bush told the Los Angeles Times.

But there's more at work here than a distaste for the reddest of the red states. For the past 20 years, every time a Republican president has taken a vacation, the press has clucked its collective tongue like a teacher catching a truant. Reporters sniped at Mr. Bush's father for driving his motorboat during the 1991 recession. And Ronald Reagan's trips to Rancho del Cielo, his Santa Barbara "Ranch in the Sky," were a constant source of press complaint. Reporters resented Mr. Reagan for spending 345 days -- almost an entire year of his presidency -- at the ranch.

But no amount of pressure from the press convinced Mr. Reagan to forsake his ranch. In her book, "Reagan: An American Story," Adriana Bosch quotes aide Michael Deaver recounting a conversation with the Gipper, which went like this:

"Mike, I've been looking at this schedule. And I don't see any ranch time.' And I said, 'Well that's right, sir. Every time you've gone out to that ranch, the press have made a big deal about you being away from Washington' And he put his hand up. He said, 'Let me just tell you something, Mike. You can tell me a lot of things to do, and I'll do them, but you're not going to tell me when to go to the ranch. I'm convinced that the more often I get out to the ranch, the longer I'm going to live, and I'm going to the ranch. So you might as well put it in right now.'"

Part of the press's constant carping about presidential vacations is a function of lazy partisanship. Journalists recycle the same complaints about Republican presidents: Their vacations are too long, their elections are illegitimate.

Yet presidents have been taking vacations since George Washington, who left Philadelphia and New York for Mount Vernon twice a year for weeks on end during each of his eight years in office. Thomas Jefferson appreciated the importance of long vacations too. Writing to Lafayette in 1787, Jefferson stressed the importance of leaders wandering the countryside, preferably incognito, "to see firsthand how people live. You must ferret the people out of their hovels as I have done, look into their kettles, eat their bread, loll on their beds under the pretense of resting yourself, but in fact to find out if they are soft." Indeed, Mr. Bush plans a series of trips to visit ordinary Americans across the heartland.

Jefferson considered such vacations to be vital. In 1791 he took a long vacation through New England. Jefferson had long known the importance of such a trip, in a 1789 letter he wrote: "I know only the Americans of the year 1784. They tell me this is to be much a stranger." For a leader to be in touch, he needs to meet real people outside the capital.

Presidential vacations have become an American institution. Getting out of Washington gives presidents some perspective on the problems facing the nation. Or, as Mr. Reagan put it in his autobiography, "It just seems a lot easier to sort out a problem when I'm on a horse." Some reporters, though, doubted Mr. Reagan's sincerity. Dinesh D'Souza tells this story in his book "Ronald Reagan: How an Ordinary Man Became an Extraordinary Leader":

"ABC News White House correspondent Sam Donaldson once suggested that Reagan's rustic enthusiasm was a bit of a publicity stunt and that he probably stopped cutting wood when the cameras were turned off. Reagan was clearly miffed by the report. He took photographs from several angles of a huge pile of logs he had just shredded and sent them to Donaldson, who confessed to me, "I must say, it was an impressive sight."

The public seems to like presidential vacations, which usually bring on higher approval ratings. And when school's out in Washington, the stock market seems to do better too. Eighty-nine percent of stock market gains from 1897 to 1993 occurred during a congressional recess, according to a 1997 study published in the Financial Services Review.

On the other hand, bad things can happen when policy-makers decide to stick it out in the summer heat. FDR's New Deal was pushed through because lawmakers "couldn't take the heat and humidity," Senate historian Don Ritchie has said. This suggests another reason for reporters' aversion to presidential vacations: They don't like it that our leaders might have better things to do in August than talk about the "patients' bill of rights" or "campaign-finance reform." Time off from governing seems to suggest that government isn't all that important.

Presidents usually take press sniping in good humor, but not always. When Teddy Roosevelt was vacationing in Yellowstone, his staff sternly told reporters to stay away. One determined journalist rode in on a horse with a dog. The reporter was arrested, the horse was seized, the dog was shot.

Now that's a presidential vacation to complain about.

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