

SECTION

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DIANA GRIEGO ERWIN

Questions follow first lady's visit

I just about to leave McClatchy High School late Thursday afternoon when I ran into a well-known Capitol figure standing in the hallway. First lady Hillary Rodham Clinton was long gone by then, but the excitement of her visit to the 1,930-student campus still electrified the air.

I just jotted down an overheard conversation in my notebook. One mother told another with pride: "She reached over some other people and shook her hand. She wasn't even up front, but Hillary just reached for her hand."

Near them stood Sean Walsh, Gov. Pete Wilson's spokesman, shaking his head and looking like the Secret Service in his impeccable navy suit. I was genuinely surprised to see him there, having never pegged him as a big Hillary fan.

"Hey, Sean," I said, toying with him a bit. "What are you doing here?" Then: "Well, so what did you think?"

Perfect question, as it turned out.

"I can't believe she could get up there with an anti-drug message when her husband, Bill Clinton, has the worst drug record of any president in history," Walsh said. "It just smacks of hypocrisy."

Walsh rattled off some statistics I didn't quite catch, showing the president to be Manuel Noriega himself. Then he handed me a 16-page document by the conservative Family Research Council called "On Drugs: The Clinton Administration's Curious Surrender."

I promised to read through it and call him the next day. That night, Walsh watched the television coverage of Hillary Clinton's visit and apparently slow-boiled a little more. "All they did is show Hillary and all these happy faces," he complained the next day. "There wasn't one word

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of the Office of National Drug Control policy to make good on a campaign pledge to cut the White House staff. He pointed out that Clinton's vague drug policies have been a disappointment to many Democrats, Republicans and drug experts from the get-go.

And although drug use has declined among young adults during Clinton's watch, it is up significantly among adolescents ages 13 to 18. In 1994, for instance, 40 percent of California 11th-graders admitted to using marijuana at least once within a six-month period, up nearly 10 percent over two years before.

But an op-ed piece written by Gov. Wilson himself makes the point best. In the May 18 column, Wilson charges the Clinton administration with failing to crack down on drug smuggling along the U.S.-Mexico border.

Working off a Los Angeles Times article the Times later admitted contained many serious factual errors, Wilson reported that one in four suspected Mexican traffickers was freed at the border under policies overseen by Alan Bersin, Clinton's designated "border czar."

"In his first three years in office, President Clinton has slashed the staff of his drug office by 83 percent, decreased the number of DEA agents and cut funding for drug interdiction efforts," Wilson wrote. "How long are we going to allow drug-running thugs who are arrested at the border to go free after attempting to smuggle drugs into this country?"

The Times correction took some of the steam out of Wilson's outrage, but the point still remains, Walsh pointed out, that some alleged smugglers are expelled into Mexico instead of being prosecuted.

Clinton's drug czar, as well as his predecessors — former U.S. Attorneys William Braniff and Peter Nunez, like this policy. Despite contrary political leanings, all three have gone public saying that yanking green cards is a better deterrent in some minor smuggling cases than seeking convictions, which I just can't figure. C'mon, everyone who's lived a day in California knows if you release them, they just sneak back in.

Nonetheless, the question from the Governor's Office is whether Hillary Clinton should be lecturing school kids on drugs when her husband's administration hasn't done enough in the war on drugs.

"You have to admire them for their clear, unadulterated, Machiavellian style of politics," Walsh said. "On one hand, Hillary Clinton comes to McClatchy High School and says, 'We don't want any negativity here.' But the reality of the situation is it's become a national joke of sorts about the president who didn't inhale. Kids think it's a big joke."

Point made.

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