

New York Times
~~THE WHITE HOUSE~~
WASHINGTON

January 14, 1995

Mr. Joseph Lelyveld
Executive Editor
The New York Times
229 W. 43rd Street
New York, New York 10036

Dear Mr. Lelyveld:

Thank you for your letter regarding the First Lady's recent luncheon with reporters.

I certainly understand your interest in defending the integrity of The New York Times. Likewise, I am sure you understand that I must and will defend the integrity of the White House staff.

Upon receiving your letter, I asked Maggie Williams, the First Lady's Chief of Staff, who attended the event, to provide me with a memorandum explaining the circumstances of the luncheon and responding to the issues you raised. I have enclosed a copy of that memorandum.

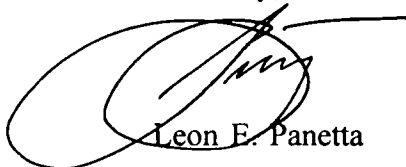
It seems clear that this was an off-the-record luncheon and discussion of which only a small portion was placed on the record by the First Lady. That was the understanding, reinforced periodically during the event, not only of the First Lady and her staff but of every other reporter attending.

I am disappointed that The Times apparently took a small off-the-record portion of this discussion and not only put it on the record but also made it appear as though it was the primary purpose of the occasion. Again, no other reporter or publication did so.

Your letter also suggests that it was comments from the White House that raised questions about the actions of The Times. As I am sure you realize, it is the comments of the other reporters, who clearly disagree with your interpretation of events, that raised these questions. The White House has not sought to bring attention to this matter; it has merely responded to reporters' questions.

I am sorry that this misunderstanding occurred. Once again, I appreciate your concerns and thank you for your letter.

Sincerely,



Leon E. Panetta

Enclosures

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

January 13, 1994

MEMORANDUM

TO: LEON PANETTA
FROM: MAGGIE WILLIAMS
RE: LETTER FROM JOSEPH LELYVELD

This responds to your request for information on the First Lady's luncheon with reporters, and The New York Times article about that event, referred to in Mr. Lelyveld's letter to you dated January 12.

Before discussing the particular issues raised in the letter, there is an important point to be made regarding the Times story on the First Lady's luncheon. The article suggests that the purpose of the luncheon was to see "how she could better make the public see her in the sympathetic, more complicated way in which she sees herself." That is just plain untrue. As the Times reporter knows, that part of the discussion, as well as the discussion of politics, occupied only a small portion of the conversation. As the Times reporter also knows, this was the second annual off-the-record luncheon of this group. This particular event was intended by Mrs. Clinton as a surprise goodbye salute to Donnie Radcliffe, who is retiring from the Washington Post. But like last year's luncheon, the broader purpose was to talk about whatever the reporters wanted to talk about.

Regarding the issues in Mr. Lelyveld's letter, the luncheon was clearly stated to be "off the record." It never went generally "on the record," as the letter suggests. The First Lady agreed to put a few portions of the conversation, including some specific quotes, on the record after being asked by reporters to do so. Most of the reporters attending took notes and switched their recorders on only where permission was granted. Only the Times reporter kept her recorder on the entire time.

The agreed-upon rule of the luncheon was clearly understood by the other ten reporters. They kept track of what was on and off the record as the session continued, as did I, Lisa Caputo, and the other staff who were present. To accept the letter's description -- that the luncheon essentially went on the record -- one would have to accept that everyone else in the room -- reporters and staff alike -- got it wrong and only the Times reporter got it right.

Some of the quotes and references used in the Times story are from sections of the session that were clearly off the record. I am attaching a copy of the story with the portions which were off the record underlined. I am also attaching an article by the White House reporter of the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette detailing what occurred at the luncheon.

Mr. Lelyveld's letter refers to a call made by The Times reporter to Lisa Caputo in reference to just one of those quotes. It is the use of all of the quotes, not just this one, which violated the rules established before and during the luncheon.

But regarding that quote, the reporter said she planned to use something from the luncheon which she believed merely restated or expanded on an idea from Mrs. Clinton's recent Newsweek article. As I understand it, she did not cite a specific quote. Lisa said she would check her tape and call back if there was a problem. She did not find the comment subsequently quoted by the Times on her tape, which indicates that the quote occurred before any part of the conversation that was on the record. However, Lisa did not get back to the reporter. That is unfortunate. She should have called back.

Nevertheless, the Times reporter never recited a quote and never received specific authority to use this off-the-record quote. Under those circumstances, it seems to me that she had a responsibility to follow the explicit and implicit ground rules of the luncheon -- permission to attribute for the record had to be given explicitly. Again, the rest of the participants operated under this guideline. And, to repeat, while the letter focuses on this particular issue, this quote was only one of several off-the-record quotes that the Times used in its article.

Please let me know if you need any additional information.

Attachments

What really happened at first lady's off-the-record chat?

Washington Journal contains analysis and commentary by members of the Democrat-Gazette Washington bureau.

BY JANE FULLERTON

Democrat-Gazette Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — A reporters' luncheon hosted by first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton earlier this week inadvertently provided an illuminating glimpse at the inner workings of Washington politics and journalism.

For those uninitiated, this is a world organized according to a strict set of rules governing what's said and what's reported. This is a story about what happens when those rules are broken.

Hillary Clinton gathered 10 journalists who generally cover White House social events — including this reporter — along with advice columnist Ann Landers for what was billed as an off-the-record luncheon Monday.

"Off the record" is one of those journalistic dictums that

Washington Journal

means what's said can't be reported.

Now, not all journalists believe this is good practice. But in Washington, it's one of the most common forms — sometimes the only form — of communication between those who make the news and those who report it.

So when the first lady's press secretary, Lisa Caputo, called to invite the reporters, she explained the ground rules. Anyone who wasn't comfortable in an off-the-record setting didn't have to attend.

That, of course, didn't stop the journalists from pressing Caputo to encourage the first lady to speak on the record — meaning her comments could be published.

At noon Monday, the 11 guests sat down for lunch with Clinton and four of her staff members. They knew the event was off the record but were hop-

ing the first lady might offer a few comments for publication.

What followed was one of the most candid encounters with the first lady that most of those on hand had witnessed. She was relaxed, chatty and forthright as she discussed subjects ranging from celebrity gossip to her family life to policy issues.

At some point, Landers and *New York Post* gossip columnist Cindy Adams initiated a discussion about how the first lady might project a similar image to the American public.

It should be noted that Clinton did not seek advice on changing or "softening" her image, nor was that the impetus for the luncheon.

On the contrary, the conversation's tone centered on how she could better project what she already is.

It also should be noted, however, that the first lady and her staff carefully listened to the ad-

vice that was dispensed.

By the time dessert was served, Clinton agreed to make several comments for the record. She discussed the failure of the White House health-care reform effort, the Democrats' losses in November and her role during the administration's next two years.

Those remarks were universally reflected in the accounts that appeared Tuesday in the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, *The Washington Post*, *The Washington Times* and *USA Today*.

The New York Times, on the other hand, had a totally different story, based in large part on comments that everyone else at the luncheon understood were off the record.

The Times said the first lady had solicited advice on how to "soften a harsh image." The story quoted her as saying she had been "naive and dumb" about national politics.

The result was a controversy over whether the *Times* had broken the rules of the luncheon by

publishing off-the-record comments.

On Wednesday, other newspapers ran stories questioning the *Times* for violating the ground rules. Columnists from the *New York Post*, *New York Daily News* and *Chicago Sun-Times* who were at the luncheon wrote columns blasting the *Times* for its story.

The *Times* stood by its story. The paper's Washington editor, Andrew Rosenthal, contended the reporter had followed the rules.

What makes the incident more significant is that in the inbred world of Washington journalism, what the *Times* reports affects what everybody else reports. So not only did it appear the *Times* had somehow beaten the other newspapers on the story, the *Times*' account — which was distributed to newspapers nationwide — generated stories elsewhere in the media.

One of the most noteworthy was on NBC's nightly newscast Tuesday. That story closely par-

alleled the *Times*' version, saying the first lady wanted a softer image and had sought journalists' advice. Ironically, the story was reported by correspondent Gwen Ifill, who only recently left her post as White House reporter for the *Times* to join NBC.

This week's incident came just days after another controversy about media ethics that revolved around the first lady. Connie Chung of CBS recently coaxed Kathleen Gingrich into confiding that her son, House Speaker Newt Gingrich, thinks the first lady is a "bitch."

The way Chung obtained the remark generated almost as much controversy as the comment itself.

These incidents provide insight into the way Washington news is reported, sometimes by bending or breaking the rules.

They also may provide a rationale for a first lady already wary of the media to not be "naive and dumb" again — and avoid future luncheons with reporters.

Hillary Clinton Seeking To Soften a Harsh Image

By MARIAN BURROS
Special to The New York Times

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 9 — Saying that she is eager to present herself in a more likable way, Hillary Rodham Clinton said today that she had been "naïve and dumb" about national politics and was to blame for the failure of the health care overhaul plan last year.

She said that she is sometimes shocked by the harsh way she comes across in news reports — as a woman that she herself would not particularly want to know. And she asked a group of female writers invited to lunch at the White House, including Ann Landers, how she could better make the public see her in the sympathetic, more complicated way in which she sees herself.

"I am surprised at the way people seem to perceive me," she said, "and sometimes I read stories and hear things about me and I go 'ugh.' I wouldn't like her either. It's so unlike what I think I am or what my friends think I am."

Mrs. Clinton added: "So I can only guess that people are getting perceptions about me from things I am saying or doing in ways that don't correspond with things I am trying to get across. I didn't get this whole image creation thing. I see what it can do but I'm not sure I get it. I have let other people define me."

In interviews last year immediately after her health care plan collapsed in Congress, Mrs. Clinton tended to say that the failure had to do with her being a woman in a male-dominated political system that found her position of authority hard to accept.

Today, speaking to a group of women who normally write about the First Lady's social functions, style, gossip and personal advice, Mrs. Clinton put most of the fault on herself.

"I think I was naïve and dumb, because my view was results speak for themselves," Mrs. Clinton told the group, the gossip columnists Cindy Adams of The New York Post, Lois Romano of The Washington Post and Jeanne Williams of USA Today. "I regret very much that the efforts on health care were badly misunderstood, taken out of context and used politically against the Administration. I take responsibility for that, and I'm very sorry for that."

Mrs. Clinton said she had thought she could reach an accommodation with the Republicans in Congress and had not sought strong political counsel. "I take responsibility for not understanding what was going on," she said. "There was a lack of politically savvy advice. No one had figured out the dynamics."

During the luncheon interview, in which Mrs. Clinton began by speaking off the record but later agreed to talk for publication, the First Lady seemed bent on find-

ing a way to counter her harsh run of publicity, which reached a peak in recent days when Newt Gingrich's mother, Kathleen, said her son, the Speaker of the House, had called Mrs. Clinton a "bitch" — a remark Mrs. Gingrich repeated in an interview broadcast

today by the television program "American Journal."

It was not the first time Mrs. Clinton had undertaken an image makeover; in the 1992 campaign, after taking her out of public view for a time, her advisers undertook to make her seem softer and more traditionally feminine as part of what they called "The Manhattan Project" to reshape Mr. Clinton's candidacy.



David Scott/The New York Times

Speaking on Welfare

At a news conference yesterday Speaker Newt Gingrich praised the role of the restaurant industry in finding jobs for welfare recipients. Greg Miller, at left, was once homeless but completed a job-training program that teaches cooking skills; he now works as a chef.

DIARY

Congressional Developments

SENATE Two Senate committees, Governmental Affairs and Budget, approved a bill that would make it harder for Congress to impose billions of dollars in new requirements like rules on health, welfare, labor and the environment on states and localities. A vote on the Senate floor is expected later this week and in the House next week. The proposal would not flatly prohibit such laws, which are called unfunded mandates, without Federal aid to compensate for them, but it would force Congress to estimate the costs and hold a separate procedural vote before considering such measures.

HOUSE A subcommittee hearing testimony on a constitutional balanced-budget amendment all day was told by the White House budget director, Alice M. Rivlin, that the proposal would force spending cuts that "boggle the imagination." This prompted Republicans to make accusations of their own. "The Administration is not only not willing to specify how you would balance the budget," said Representative Robert W. Goodlatte of Virginia, "you're not even willing to specify that you would balance the budget." Knowing that votes on the amendment are all but certainly stacked against them, critics have been striking at what they perceive to be its most obvious flaw: the programs that would be cut to provide the \$1 trillion or more in spending cuts that would be required.

And, as before, the most recent effort by Mrs. Clinton reflected the lingering confusion over the proper role for a First Lady who is not content with retiring to the social wing of the White House. Mrs. Clinton spoke in the relative comfort of an informal lunch with reporters who do not usually cover hard news.

At the same time, she made it clear in the interview that she would continue to speak her mind. This week Newsweek published a lengthy article by Mrs. Clinton in which she challenged Mr. Gingrich and the Republicans on changing the welfare system.

At lunch she elaborated: "Everyone is down on people on welfare, but the neglect of children, absentee parents is not confined to welfare parents. What I resent about what Republicans are proposing is it's us against them that everyone but the poor, the blacks, and those on welfare has great family values."

And then she added: "If I'm going to be controversial I might as well be controversial on the things I really say."

Mrs. Clinton said today that she is no longer upset by personal attacks. "At first you are sort of stunned," she said. "After a while it gets easier."

She acknowledged that she was to blame for her unfavorable public image. But she said she is still bewildered by others' perceptions of her as a tough-minded litigator who often comes across as self-righteous. Friends of Mrs. Clinton often remark on her sense of humor and her warmth.

Given her regret about the way she handled welfare and her own publicity, Mrs. Clinton was asked if she would have done things differently. "I would have done a lot of things differently, but I am confident I would have made different mistakes," she said. "There is no way in the world to figure out what it's like to live here. There is so much about it no one ever tells you about. There are little things you never would have thought of. You have to start thinking about Christmas in April."

Mrs. Clinton said that the Administration as a whole had not been much more successful than she in getting its message across. Although some of Mr. Clinton's detractors and supporters have complained that a lack of consistency is his greatest failing, Mrs. Clinton defended her husband on that score. "I am a little bit bewildered that so many of the things that did make a difference in the past two years were not understood," she said. She cited efforts to reduce the size of Government, changes in pension laws and tax relief for middle-class families.

"It's pretty obvious this Administration has trouble getting its message out," she said.

She added: "Too many things were undertaken at one time without benefit of a consistent and coherent explanation. If people disagree that is their absolute right, but I want them to know what was done."

File New York Times

14 January 1995

Hillary Rodham Clinton
The White House
Washington, D.C.

DEAR MRS. CLINTON:

What can I say? I had a thank-you note for last Monday's lunch written in the train on the way home Monday night. After Tuesday, our lunch became major headlines because some reporters viewed it differently from others.

I do thank you for a very enjoyable visit, to begin with. I had never been on the second floor of the residence. My contacts in the Reagan and Bush years were for more formal events (although my most indelible memory of Nancy Reagan is the sight of her sitting very gingerly on the lap of Mr. T dressed as Santa). It was exciting to see the Lincoln Bedroom and beautiful reception rooms, and the lunch was delicious. I very much appreciate the large-size Christmas card; the Red Room is my favorite.

As usual, the group's conversation was interesting to all, whether we were hearing off the record about your family or on the record about your view of the health-care situation. I consider all this helpful background. But I have found this week, as I took part in various talk shows about the lunch, that the public takes a dim view of such sessions by reporters. We the media don't do a very good job of explaining just how we do our jobs, it seems.

The thing that disturbed me most about the New York Times story was the reference to your supposedly asking our advice. It didn't really happen that way, as you know, and I have tried to make this clear on those talk shows. Some others, like Mrs. Lederer, did proffer advice on their own, but it's not my job to do so. I also believe that entire discussion, including the fact it happened, was off the record, and I had called Lisa Caputo later to confirm this. I would have liked to write just that it happened, not the details, but felt I could not do so in good faith.

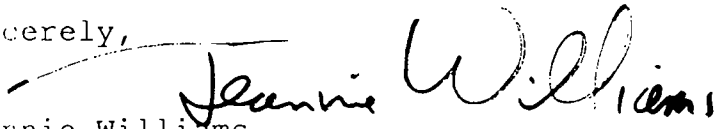
I hope this is not the end of our get-to-togethers, but I also hope we could go back to on-the-record, as the previous smaller meeting had been in New York. I also had several male colleagues ask me why they hadn't been asked, so I suppose this is another issue you may have to deal with. However, I suspect a number of such (off-the-record) meetings with high administration officials are frequently all male, and that has never been an issue for

them. If you wanted to include any men, I could suggest a couple, but in my opinion it's not necessary and doesn't suit the tone of the gatherings.

I'm sorry this all began so well and ended in a fashion that could not have been pleasant for you or your staff.

I look forward to seeing you again, and wish you and your family all the best for the new year.

Sincerely,


Jeannie Williams

USA TODAY

535 Madison Ave. 6th floor
New York, N.Y. 10022

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The New York Times229 WEST 43 STREET
NEW YORK, N.Y. 10036JOSEPH LELYVELD
Executive Editor

January 12, 1995

The Hon. Leon Panetta
1600 Pennsylvania Ave., N.W.
The White House
Washington D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. Panetta,

For the past two days the integrity of this paper has been widely questioned in various newspaper articles as a result of our use of quotes from a White House luncheon the First Lady had with various gossip columnists and journalists. The White House, in the person of Lisa Caputo, has helped to foster the impression that our reporter behaved shabbily by putting on the record remarks that were understood to be off the record. We know this is a bum rap and I want you to know how distressed all the senior editors of this paper and its publisher, Arthur Sulzberger, Jr., are over Ms. Caputo's unwillingness to respond to our requests that she say where exactly we strayed.

The facts are these and they were accurately stated in our article: The lunch, which started off to be off the record, went on the record with Mrs. Clinton's permission. Subsequently it was understood to be on the record unless particular remarks were said to be not for use. This is all quite clear on the tape, which we have heard. The conversation did not take the form of a normal journalistic session. On the contrary, most of the conversation was heavily political, with the gossip columnists airing their views about the Republican leadership of Congress and freely offering Mrs. Clinton advice in a manner that a disciplined reporter would consider to be inappropriate. Our reporter did not join in to such discussions but she did keep careful track of which of Mrs. Clinton's responses were deemed to be not for use. The one quote we used that was not clearly on the record we specifically cleared with Ms. Caputo. We pointed out to her that it

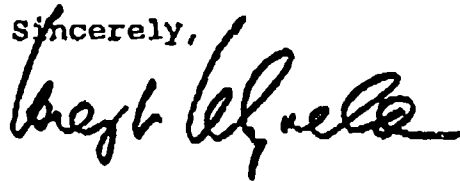
was not very different from a passage in the First Lady's signed article in Newsweek this week but said we would not use it if that was her wish. Ms. Caputo chose not to phone back on Monday evening to steer us away from use of that particular quote.

We have had a series of conversations with Ms. Caputo since the first run of articles quoting the gossip columnists who didn't use some of the quotes our reporter used and quoting Ms. Caputo as going along with their view that we had blown the ground rules. We've asked her repeatedly to tell us which specific quotes in our article were not available for fair use. Her response this morning is that she can't be bothered going over the material. We don't think that's a decent response.

Now I realize that thin-skinned journalists make an amusing spectacle, that it must be tempting to say we can dish it out but not take it. However, had we hung the White House out in the same way, we would expect to get complaints and we would act on them promptly and professionally. I think you know that. It is a major matter to us when the impression gets out that standards are slipping at The New York Times: They are what they have always been and we're determined to keep them that way.

The one error we made was in going to a lunch that was advertised as off-the-record. That won't soon happen again. In the meantime, we would be grateful for your cooperation in getting for us an acknowledgment that our reporter behaved appropriately, did her best to keep track of shifting ground rules and that, in fact, all of the quotes she used were available for use.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "David Byrne", written in a cursive style.

THE WHITE HOUSE
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Dear Mr. Lelyveld:

Thank you for your letter regarding the First Lady's recent luncheon with reporters.

I certainly understand your interest in defending the integrity of The New York Times. Likewise, I am sure you understand that I must and will defend the integrity of the White House staff.

Upon receiving your letter, I asked Maggie Williams, the First Lady's Chief of Staff, who attended the event, to provide me with a memorandum explaining the circumstances of the luncheon and responding to the issues you raised. I have enclosed a copy of that memorandum.

It seems clear that this was an off-the-record luncheon and discussion of which only a small portion was placed on the record by the First Lady. That was the understanding, reinforced periodically during the event, not only of the First Lady and her staff but of every other reporter attending.

I am disappointed that The Times apparently took a small off-the-record portion of this discussion and not only put it on the record but also made it appear as though it was the primary purpose of the occasion. Again, no other reporter or publication did so.

Your letter also suggests that it was comments from the White House that raised questions about the actions of The Times. As I am sure you realize, it is the comments of the other reporters, who clearly disagree with your interpretation of events, that raised these questions. The White House has not sought to bring attention to this matter; it has merely responded to reporters' questions.

I am sorry that this misunderstanding occurred. Once again, I appreciate your concerns and thank you for your letter.

Sincerely,

Leon E. Panetta

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January 13, 1994

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FROM: MAGGIE WILLIAMS
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The agreed-upon rule of the luncheon was clearly understood by the other ten reporters. They kept track of what was on and off the record as the session continued, as did I, Lisa Caputo, and the other staff who were present. To accept the letter's description -- that the luncheon essentially went on the record -- one would have to accept that everyone else in the room -- reporters and staff alike -- got it wrong and only the Times reporter got it right.

Some of the quotes and references used in the Times story are from sections of the session that were clearly off the record. I am attaching a copy of the story with the portions which were off the record underlined. I am also attaching an article by the White House reporter of the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette detailing what occurred at the luncheon.

Mr. Lelyveld's letter refers to a call made by The Times reporter to Lisa Caputo in reference to just one of those quotes. It is the use of all of the quotes, not just this one, which violated the rules established before and during the luncheon.

But regarding that quote, the reporter said she planned to use something from the luncheon which she believed merely restated or expanded on an idea from Mrs. Clinton's recent Newsweek article. As I understand it, she did not cite a specific quote. Lisa said she would check her tape and call back if there was a problem. She did not find the comment subsequently quoted by the Times on her tape, which indicates that the quote occurred before any part of the conversation that was on the record. However, Lisa did not get back to the reporter. That is unfortunate. She should have called back.

Nevertheless, the Times reporter never recited a quote and never received specific authority to use this off-the-record quote. Under those circumstances, it seems to me that she had a responsibility to follow the explicit and implicit ground rules of the luncheon -- permission to attribute for the record had to be given explicitly. Again, the rest of the participants operated under this guideline. And, to repeat, while the letter focuses on this particular issue, this quote was only one of several off-the-record quotes that the Times used in its article.

Please let me know if you need any additional information.

Attachments