

A Mormon in the White House
By Peter Watkins
2010 FAIR Conference

There was an article recently in one of the local papers that said FAIR conference is going to talk about two subjects that you don't want to talk about in polite society; religion and politics. And I thought, well am I committing some sort of faux pas, or this is not polite society. So I'll just assume it's one or the other, but Scott when we talked about what I was going to say several months ago, he asked me to reflect on a few experiences I had while working in the West Wing, working for President and Mrs. Bush, that would be interesting to this audience, and so I had several.

White House is one of those places that just, it's like drinking from a firehose. So many unbelievable things happen everyday that if you don't write a few down, you are going to miss something. And so one of the first most interesting things that happened to me was when I was a young sort of press liaison. My job was to make sure reporters got wherever they needed to go and traveling circumstances and we happen to be at the Vatican.

Now, so it was my job to get the White House Press Corp, the event itself was the President of United States was meeting with the Pope. It was my job to get the Press Corp into the restricted access areas where the meeting would take place. And it just so happens that I had served my mission in Southern Italy and I spoke Italian. So if you have ever been to St Peter's Cathedral in Rome, you see there is this big, beautiful edifice. In order to get to the Pope's private apartments you have to navigate a series of very narrow roads, you go behind St. Peter's and you keep kind of circling around and every hundred or so feet there is a new Swiss guard checkpoint and you finally make your way there, and every time I was navigating, I was speaking in Italian.

And this group of White House reporters were kind of curious like why is this guy speaking Italian? So we found ourselves waiting in the courtyard of San Damaso where the Pope's private courtyard is, and I found myself in a little group of people that included the Cardinal of the Vatican who is over all of public affairs, the entire Vatican, and reporters from every major paper from the United States; USA Today, Wall Street Journal, Washington Post, New York Times, blah, blah, the list went on. And I found myself, it was really strange because the conversation turned to me, and it was, Peter, why do you speak Italian? This is the good setup for Gary's speech. The Cardinal was curious because he was from United States and his Italian was not as I guess colloquial but, well let me tell you why I spoke Italian.

I served a mission in Southern Italy, and we got to talking about the Church, and I thought, you know, a few years prior I never thought I would be, when I was knocking on doors in Southern Sicily, I never thought I have a chance to speak to a Cardinal. I never thought I'd have a chance to speak to national reporters, and I never thought I would have a chance to do it at the Vatican. So it was one of those experiences where I thought wow, this is very significant.

The other sort of reflection happened when President Hinckley received his Presidential Medal of Freedom at the White House. I am sure everyone is familiar with that event. My job at the time was again working with the media and it was a wonderful event, it was in the East room of the White House, very formal an event as you can get. You had Arnold Palmer and his people and all of these famous Americans and President Hinckley. And after the award ceremony there was a reception for all of these honorees and their guests, in the state dining room of the White House.

But I had several requests from reporters who wanted to speak to President Hinckley and I thought, well I hate to ask him but I guess I'd better. President Hinckley I know you want to go to this wonderful reception, but do you have a little bit of time to talk to these reporters? Absolutely, so, and it happen to be his 94th birthday that very day. So another very surreal experience walking with President Hinckley to the White House colonnade, past the rose garden, outside the West Wing and seeing this very significant moment of the President of the LDS Church at the White House being honored by the President of the United States. The list of religious leaders who have received this award includes Mother Teresa, Desmond Tutu, and a very significant list, and it was one of those moments where I thought this is a big deal and really impressed me.

So the question is, that everyone is asking right now, can a Mormon be president? Can a Mormon get elected President of the United States? And it's a debate going on and on and on and on. We've all read these several story lines, and my answer is, well absolutely, the current President of the United States, his name Barack Hussein Obama, his father was a Muslim and he is African American. Well can a Mormon get elected? Well absolutely. I want to focus on if a Mormon is elected and give you some things to think about from my perspective of working in the White House, and working in the West Wing.

I will quickly address the elephant in the speech Governor Mitt Romney who makes this speech, relevant. I am not endorsing. I am not affiliated with Romney campaign. I am not endorsing the Romney campaign. I am more raising the issue because last 2008 election cycle he was really one of the final four candidates. And by all arguments, logical arguments he is the front runner in the Republican Nomination Process for the 2012 election, and so, that makes this speech relevant. But, I am not really going to focus on the Romney campaign. So in order to give you the perspective of what it would be like for a member of the church to be President of United States I thought I'd give you some information just to give you a sense of what the White House bubble that you hear about, actually consists of.

Everyone assumes that there are a lot of people that surround the President of United States, and those of you who've been to an event, or seen him come on TV, or to your town, know that there is just this massive amount of people. But what most people don't know is there are the core group of people that go with him wherever he goes, everyday of the week, all hours, that is there at all times. The personal aide, the person who is in charge of briefing books, and his note cards, and his thank you notes and Altoids and all of those things.

There is the military aide, who sleeps at the White House, who is responsible for carrying the famous briefcase called the "football" that contains the nuclear launch codes and is with the President at all times. He is in the elevator with the President, the one who is on Marine One with the President, etcetera. A White House doctor who is always there with the President. A White House photographer, who I believe it was Kennedy administration, is responsible for documenting everything to who is essentially at all times present A White House press aide, someone who is there, countless scores of Secret Service, and one thing that most people don't know about, is the White House press pool. Again, after President Kennedy was shot, the Warren Commission decided that at all times there needs to be a representative of the Fourth Estate to be there to independently document the activities of the President. It works both ways. It works for that documentation purpose, but also if the President needs to quickly get a message out to the world, his press pool will be there.

And so the press pool consists of four members of the television crew, a newspaper reporter that represents all of the newspapers, six wire reporters and photographers and then another print reporter, so it's about 14 people. Usually they fly on Air Force One, they ride in the motorcade, they are constantly with the President, which significantly – I will get to the significance of that in a minute. So the President wants to go fishing, people are there, he wants to play a round of golf, everybody is there, any private moment forget about it.

It's important to also point out the amount of money invested by the national media – for the world media covering the President of United States. Everywhere he goes they charter an airplane. They spend millions of dollars traveling with him. They spend a lot of money working out of the West Wing press briefing room; it's one of the only residences and offices of a head of state, the head of government in the world where the media work literally 50 yards from left from where the President is. They are there everyday, spending a lot of money. Why is that significant? Because they have to talk about something, they have to get return on their investments.

The President by all accounts is the most newsworthy person on the planet. Sure, it's front page news in the Washington Post. If he signs a major piece of domestic legislation, the healthcare bill, The Salt Lake Tribune gives a front page above the fold, the most significant placement of the story, by Germany, by Buenos Aires, and Spain and Casper, Wyoming, all of these places. Can you think of the last time a significant piece of domestic legislation from any other country was on the front page of a newspaper in your town? It isn't. He is the most newsworthy person on the planet. And frankly one of the White House reporters I talked to one time, I said why is it such a big deal? And he says, well it's simple. He is the biggest story in the world. He is everything, he's got human interest, he's got human impact, influential things that happen and that's why.

So finally, just more of the setup, we expect our President to be all things at all times. If there is a natural disaster, we want the well plugged, we want him down there touching the oil and cleaning it up, we need him operating and commanding wars on several fronts. We want him as our chief diplomat working face-to-face with other world leaders

and we want him kissing babies and hosting beer summits. It's a lot to ask of a person, right?

So, with all this as a backdrop some hard rules of political communication that happens, perception is reality. It's pretty obvious, right? It may not be true, what I hear about someone or something, goes to a lot to Gary's remarks, but it doesn't matter, if I perceive it, that's what it is. Political communication "good offense beats good defense" you see that all the time. And without conflict for a reporter, it's really hard to develop an interest in a story. So the question I've sort of wondered from working in the West Wing bubble was not can a Mormon be a President, can a President be Mormon? Can he practice his faith? Just like we practice our faith on a regular basis?

A few things to consider: In April it's customary for the President to release his tax returns to the public. We all get to know and scrutinize the list of charitable contributions that the President of United States gives to. Consider Vice President Biden's tax return when they found he – some people just assumed he didn't give enough, put this in the concept of paying your tithing, and reporting that, and the storyline that you could consider in the Washington Post in the New York Times is why is the President giving so much money to this Church?

Weekly Church services: Three hours a week. Let me just tell you that it is very significant that the President has a whole office of people who've taken scheduling requests, the office of the scheduler. It is very significant to spend 3 hours on anything in any week for the President of United States for the legions of staffing and people. The 3 hours a week of church services I guarantee you, will be a headline.

Location implications: One of the questions in Washington is, will the President of United States potentially, if you were, I said I wasn't going to bring up Mitt Romney, but if it were a Republican, would they go to church with Harry Reid? The answer is, very likely. I am not familiar enough with the exact boundaries of Washington DC area to say for certain. Okay. He said, "could they home teach Harry Reid," could they be companions?

Finally remember this bubble I was telling you about, they're going to church too. And in fact one of my jobs in the West Wing was on Sunday mornings when President Bush the famous church where most of the Presidents have gone, was across the street from the White House. It's called St. John's, and they call it the Church of the Presidents. And so we would go and my job was to be liaison for the reporters. President Bush would drive across the street and he would go in and be seated in his first pew there and I would go in with the reporters. We'd sit in the back row, and everything that was exposed to the President was written down carefully and then the print reporter would issue something, that's called a pool report. And so this is just an example of one of the pool reports that went out when President Bush went to church.

Space Jam and Jesus versions of "trash talk" were among the things of Reverend Lewis Leung's sermon to President Bush, First Lady Laura Bush, and scores of other

worshippers at St. John's church this morning. By way of explaining "trash talk", the Reverend Leung recalled the film Space Jam starring Michael Jordan and Bugs Bunny, and his own experience of hearing such talk on the basketball court from a young relative who, according to the Reverend Leung, asked him, "You want to pardon me, your cooler beliefs are proper trash talk here, go as far as "you want a piece of me".

Okay. What's the point – I mean why do we care about that information? Put it in the context of a testimony meeting. The Temple. I am giving you just practical things to think about, so hopefully no one will take too much of him. The temple will be a challenge, both from just a time commitment standpoint, but also from really a security standpoint. I am not going to be pretend to be in place of his secret service agent, but I have spent enough time traveling with them and setting up events, that I am familiar enough with some of that procedure, so I am not giving out any secrets here.

But the President doesn't really just walk around like a rock star with a couple of bouncers and they just kind of go in and it's okay. The Secret Service takes days of preparation, setting up security arrangements. They take bomb sniffing dogs and sniff through every corner of every edifice of the room and then once that secured, they post standards at very place where the President is going to be to, they say, keep it clean. How is that going to work? The other question is, well there is a sort of a natural assumption well just use Temple recommend carrier members of the Secret Service to do that. Well is there a question of potential discrimination within the Secret Service? Just a question. So, it will be a challenge absolutely, and then obviously the pool report.

Another thing I thought about is, we all know that the church leadership is under intense scrutiny when they speak publicly, but you can guarantee there will be national coverage of General Conference and much more intense interest if the President of United States is a member of the church. Also consider all of the viral things that happen now in politics and media. Maybe a member of church leadership is speaking off the record to somebody at a stake center in Brigham City, and somebody has a cell phone and it goes viral, and it's potentially contradictory to what Americans think. Just putting that out there. The White House likely will have to respond to that. There have been examples of people, Presidents of the United States, the ecclesiastical leaders getting in trouble for things they have said.

Finally satire. Everything that I have just sort of given you to think about will be – could potentially be, the subject of satire. Satire, by most comedian's standards, is something to joke on, what people generally perceive and whether it's true or not. An instance from a pool report from a testimony meeting at church, potentially being the subject of a skit on Saturday Night Live.

So, a couple of things to watch for. First of all, official Church reactions to political issues. It will be interesting to see how the public response is to this intense scrutiny. Will the White House have to create distance from the Church? And what will be the Church Public Affairs build up, consider all of the stories and reports surrounding the Church Public Affairs buildup for the 2002 Winter Olympics. That was 3 weeks. That was an

event that really the Winter Olympics, no offense but it isn't as big as the Summer Olympics, and this is so just to give you an idea of the amount of the attention and scrutiny and sort of public interest.

So I really like to see organizations like FAIR to be critical. Because in media, just they say there is a vacuum, there is a vacuum that they're going to report we have 24 hour news channels, we have reports of around the clock of things that seem uninteresting but somehow find their ways to be interesting. Organizations like FAIR have an opportunity to sort of fill that vacuum in a responsible manner, and that's why I am really glad to be here, glad to present these issues as things to think about and I really think that a lot of the comments that Gary had earlier really go hand-in-hand with some of these issues. Because the interest and the intensity of the interest will be off the charts and I am really glad to be here tonight and I am concluding my remarks, so thank you.