

International Affairs Forum Interview:

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By **Jasen Zubcevik**



Deputy Press Secretary B. Jay Cooper

Mr. B. Jay Cooper, former White House Deputy Press Secretary and Deputy Assistant to President Bush Sr. and President Ronald Reagan, shares his experiences and views with International Affairs Forum.

International Affairs-Forum: What were some of your primary duties at the White House? What were the upsides and the downsides of your work?

Mr. B. Jay Cooper: My responsibilities as a Deputy Press Secretary were to explain the President's policies to the media, make sure that the Press Secretary was up to speed on the issues of the day, brief the President before any interviews and press conference, and handle the press briefings of the White House when the Press Secretary was not there. The upsides were to work for the President on some of the most important world issues. It is a very dynamic work. You actually see the results of your work on a daily basis, whether you did a good job or a bad job. And the downsides ...you knowthere aren't that many downsides. It is such a great honor that its hard to say there is a downside. Maybe the travel. The travel is both a plus and a negative because of its intensity.

IA-F: How about the pressures and the challenges that came with your responsibilities at the White House?

Mr. Cooper: There is a lot of pressure but that goes with the job. It didn't bother me that much. When I would brief the White House Press Corps, to me, that is the greatest challenge in this business. You have to be very careful to do your work and not make mistakes. When speaking on behalf of the country and the President you have to do things right first hand. You can't guess, you have to know the President's policies, you have to explain them correctly, and there are bunch of different audiences you have to worry about. So if you think about all these things too much, from the stress you wouldn't move. You just have to get beyond that.

IA-F: What steps, if any, should be taken for better White House Press Corps communication?

Mr. Cooper: Every president has a different style on how to do things. I worked for two presidents with two different styles. President Reagan relied more on giving speeches. He was very effective on communicating that way. He did big press conferences because he was good in that. President Bush, the father,

was quite different because he was not such a good public speaker. He was however, very good in smaller group communication. He was good in communicating with the reporters one-on-one so we designed programs for him that involved more day-to-day contact with the reporters. I think President George W. Bush, like his father, is very good at one-on-one relationship with the press. He is very personable. A straight talker. So I think smaller press groups instead of large press briefings are better for him.

IA-F: What were the differences/similarities in the White House communications during President Reagan and President Bush senior?

Mr. Cooper: They were two different presidents in two different times. They faced different issues. I think they were both good for the time. Before Ronald Reagan was elected president, the economy was in shambles, foreign policy was not effective, and there was a lack of public confidence in the country and the government. President Reagan came in time when he had to help in the recovery of the economy and the recovery of the country as a whole. He had confidence and leadership. People may have not agreed with his vision but he had a vision. He believed in small government, low taxes, and strong defense.

When President Bush, the father, became president, it was a different time. The conditions were pretty good. So, he had the opportunity to put a new face on the Republican party to more socially moderate.

IA-F: How do you view the current public perception of the White House communications?

Mr. Cooper: Wellit depends which public we are talking about. If we are

talking about the public in the borders of Washington DC, they probably don't like it. President Bush is doing things differently. He doesn't go to the White House Press Core every day. His people generally don't leak information to the press. They are loyal to the President. The public in Washington DC likes it better when there is more information by both the President and his cabinet members.

I think however, the greater American public is fine with it. They allow their President to get the job done in a way he chooses to do it as long as it does not hurt anybody. I think the American people are much more tolerant and probably don't think day-to-day about what kind of communication he is doing. They are thinking more about things that affect them day-to-day. I don't think they care about the president's communication style.

IA-F: How do you view the world press coverage in regard to the current White House administration?

Mr. Cooper: I don't see a lot of it, but from what I've seen, it has not been good. With the kinds of things that have been happening in Iraq including the newly released photos of the abuse of Iraqi prisoners, the world press is treating us pretty poorly, and we deserve to be treated poorly.

IA-F: Because of the abuse of Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib?

Mr. Cooper: The abuse of Iraqi prisoners is terrible! There is no excuse for what happened in that prison. Not by this country! We went to war to stop such acts not to do them. We are just not raised that way. Hopefully, we will find out the truth from the ongoing investigations. I don't think the military told the accused guards to commit those acts, but even if

that were the case, forget what the military may tell you to do. People in this country and many other countries were not raised in a way to put a rope around someone's neck and strip them naked. This is just beyond comprehension.

IA-F: How has the Iraq situation overshadowed other issues such as the economy?

Mr. Cooper: It clearly "sucks the air out" of every other issue. The press in this country and other countries focus on the situation in Iraq. This does not leave enough room for other issues. I think the governing apparatus is sort of consumed by the war. In regard to the American people, the war has clearly grasped their attention but they still have to feed their kids every day, get them to school and get healthcare. They cannot put their lives on hold while the President deals with Iraq. Next year the government will have to start focusing more on domestic issues that people care about.

IA-F: Recently, President Bush gave interviews to several Arabic televisions. Do you believe this should be done more often in the future?

Mr. Cooper: I do. But it's hard. The leading Arab network is Al-Jazeera which is not very friendly to us. This is where the majority of people in the Arab world get their information from. I don't know if it is possible for an American to freely give interviews while at the same time being treated in a fair way. The President gave interviews to several Arabic televisions in the wake of the Abu Ghraib prison abuse to alleviate the rising hatred but many in the Arab world don't like this country to begin with. Our cultures and perceptions are so different. I believe that the administration is also coming up with

other ways to communicate with the Arab public. We will also have to proceed with tougher measures. For instance, I believe that the Secretary of Defense may have to resign as a demonstration that we are not going to put up with the abuse of prisoners.

IA-F: How can the United States improve the relations with its European allies, particularly France and Germany?

Mr. Cooper: We have to start talking to them more and be less confrontational. While the countries who joined the coalition should have the advantage in Iraq because they put the lives of their soldiers on the line, there also needs to be a lot of discussion with France, Germany and Russia. It is going to take a lot of time to rebuild our relationship with the European allies. I think Colin Powell would be good for this job. I also think that the U.S. should not be put in the position to beg the French or the Germans to do certain things. Discussion and diplomacy however, are very important.

IA-F: Would you consider joining President Bush's administration if he is reelected in November?

Mr Cooper: I don't think anyone could refuse such an offer. When the President asks you do something, it is hard to say no.

IA-F: Thank you so much for your time.

Mr Cooper: Thank you!

