

ARI FLEISCHER CALLS FOR A RETURN OF JEFF GANNON

Remember Jeff Gannon? He was the gay sex worker who invented a news outlet that joined the White House on daily press passes for two years. He would routinely bail press secretaries Ari Fleischer or Scott McClellan out of tough jams. He was (literally) exposed after he asked President Bush a question about working with Senate Democrats that invoked a fake Rush Limbaugh attack on Harry Reid and had the punch line, "How are you going to work – you've said you are going to reach out to these people – how are you going to work with people who seem to have divorced themselves from reality?" People started looking into him, his media outlet, and the graphic advertisements for him on line to understand why such a prop was part of the White House press corps. That led to discoveries that White House visitor logs showed him not checking out overnight (though Gannon denied any sleepovers) and allegations of plagiarism.

In short, Gannon is an example of the kind of poor vetting that happens with a press office tries to set up more puff coverage for itself.

Well, Ari Fleischer wants Gannon back.

Less than two months ago, Fleischer (who was investigated for his role in the leak of Valerie Plame's CIA identity) argued, of Trump's threat to jail Hillary, "Winning candidates don't threaten to put opponents in jail. Presidents don't threaten prosecution of individuals. Trump is wrong on this."

A month later he attempted a last minute, chronologically-challenged self-rehabilitation, claiming he would not vote for Trump.

I was supposed to be a delegate to the
GOP convention, but I decided not to go.
I'd vote for Trump, but I wasn't going

to sing his praises. It felt rude to go to Cleveland and say negative things about him on the air. I watched from home, and I said at the time that I still wanted him to win but doubted he could.

Then Trump lost control of himself and his message. He veered recklessly off track, attacking an American judge for his Mexican heritage, criticizing a war hero's family, questioning the legitimacy of the election and otherwise raising questions about his judgment. If this race were about change, Clinton or policy, Trump could win it. But he made it about himself. Because he is one of the most unpopular people ever to run for president, that was a big mistake.

[snip]

I will vote for Republicans up and down the ballot. But when it comes to the presidency, I'm going to leave my ballot blank.

Now Ari's back, calling on the Trump White House to admit more Jeff Gannons.

The briefing room itself, the place where reporters sit, and the adjacent space in which they are provided offices reflect the power of the mainstream press, based largely on the media-consuming habits of the American people from decades ago. The Associated Press, ABC, NBC, CBS, CNN and Fox News, for example, sit in front-row seats that have their names on them. The Wall Street Journal, New York Times, the Washington Post and NPR sit right behind them. While approximately 750 reporters hold White House credentials, the briefing room holds 49 seats, and they are occupied overwhelmingly by mainstream media reporters, with barely

any assigned to the new dot-com world.

The White House press secretary used to decide who got what seats, but this authority was given to the White House Correspondents Association in the middle of the George W. Bush administration. Nothing prohibits the incoming administration from taking it back. The valuable West Wing real estate occupied by the White House press corps isn't the property of the press. It belongs to the U.S. government.

Note, this seems to be an outdated notion, as outlets like Yahoo, HuffPo, Politico, and BuzzFeed are respected members of the White House press corps.

Ari goes on to suggest the dot-com problem is really an ideological one.

It isn't only Trump who is complaining. A September Gallup poll showed that trust and confidence in the mass media "to report the news fully, accurately and fairly" had dropped to its lowest level in Gallup polling history. An October Pew poll showed that only 5% of the public report they have a "great deal" of confidence in the news media, while 61% have "no confidence" or "not much confidence," a level surpassed only by the low regard the public has for elected officials.

Reporters are aware of these surveys, but they don't change. They remain mostly liberal and largely made up of the same elites who couldn't imagine Mr. Trump winning the nomination, let alone the presidency.

Interjection: it pains me, because I graduated from the same elementary school as Fleischer, that he doesn't realize that if only 5% of the public has confidence in the press, then the

problem is not that they are too liberal or are mean to Donald Trump. Here's Ari again:

Too many live in a bubble in which they talk mainly to similar-minded journalists. They fail to understand that the combination of ideological bias and the loss of public confidence makes them vulnerable to the changes President Trump might seek.

In every era, the nation needs a fair and vigilant press to check the power of the president. Presidents might not like it, but it serves the country well. The daily briefing by the press secretary has long been a TV show, not a serious briefing, but it is still worth the effort. The mainstream media have a role to play, and so do a lot of other outlets. But when the press is too liberal or unfair, the media themselves put what they do at risk.

I don't know what changes President-elect Trump will make, but he has extraordinary latitude. If he decides to go around the press entirely, abolish the daily briefing, give seats to different reporters, appoint a combative press secretary, or not take a press pool with him to dinner, the reason he'll be able to get away with it is because the mainstream media lost the trust of the American people.

The push for the White House to reclaim authority granted to WHCA around the time Gannon was exposed is the most ironic aspect of this call from Fleischer.

But the utter lack of self-awareness is the most important.

After all, one of key reasons no one trusts the media anymore is because the media's credulity about Iraq War claims – helped along by “combative press secretary” Ari Fleischer –

led to their discredit. It's not so much no one trusts the media because they are liberal, to the extent that is true. It has more to do with the fact that the last Republican Administration to inhabit the White House did so much to turn the press into willing collaborators.