

WH PRESS CORPS DEMANDS PHOTO OPS OF THEM ASKING ABOUT EGYPT

I don't see much purpose behind the letter the White House press corps just sent outgoing Robert Gibbs:

We recognize that the crisis in Egypt is a quickly evolving story and you are working to get us the information we need in a timely manner, but we are concerned about several access issues on Tuesday and now today. On behalf of the White House Correspondents Association we are writing to protest in the strongest possible terms the White House's decision to close the President's Cabinet meeting on Tuesday and his signing of the START Treaty today to the full press pool.

The START treaty was held up as one of the President's most important foreign policy priorities for almost a year dating back to the trip to Prague last spring. We are concerned that now his signing of it is open to still photographers but closed to editorial, including print and wire reporters and television cameras.

We know the President came out late last night to speak on Egypt, and we appreciate the email updates from NSC spokesman Tommy Vietor, but his emails have not gone to all members of the press corps and are not a substitute for access to the Press Secretary or the President.

Prior to the President's statement Tuesday night, the press corps had not received a substantive update from the

White House all day on the situation in Egypt. In addition, the press corps did not have an on-camera briefing, or an off-camera gaggle, with you yesterday to ask the White House about its decision-making process during this major foreign policy crisis. Now for two straight days the full press pool is being shut out of events that have typically been open and provided opportunities try to ask the President a question.

These issues are vitally important for all of our members – print, TV and radio.

We value our working relationship, and we hope you will reconsider and at least open the START Treaty signing to the full pool. [my emphasis]

Aside from the futility of demanding something from a guy on his way out the door, it's not entirely clear what the press corps believes they'll gain.

Look, the START treaty is an important victory, and if there were a chance in hell the press would make non-proliferation the focus of a big photo op, I'd be thrilled to see it. And I would love for Obama to come out with a strong condemnation of violence and support for democracy (but that's partly because of my own impatience with Obama's tepid support for democracy and human rights here in the US). I would have been thrilled, too, to see the US push Egypt harder in the past; but there's no way to go back in time and make that happen now. I also think the White House approach of canceling press conferences until Mubarak does something has put them in the very awkward position of appearing to adopt a reactive stance to Mubarak which only feeds into Mubarak's manipulation of the media.

So it's not that I think the White House has adopted the best approach to the press during

the Egyptian revolution.

Still, I don't know what the press corps thinks they will accomplish with more public opportunities to question the Administration about what's going on.

That's because, to a great extent, this is not about the United States, and certainly not about a bunch of White House reporters who know very little about Egypt. The fate of history is in the hands of the Egyptian people right now.

Moreover, I think there's zero chance that a highly controlled Robert Gibbs presser (like the one going on right now) is going to reveal anything that an equally controlled press release can't say just as well. To the extent the White House does have leverage at this point—and they undoubtedly do, most significantly through their ties to the Egyptian military—that leverage is going to be best exercised privately. If nothing else, to the extent friends of ours in the Egyptian military can influence the outcome, they're going to best be able to do that by appearing to act on their own, not in response to pressure from the US.

So to some degree, both the White House Press Corps and the Administration would be best served if they released a joint notice saying "we acknowledge the government is going to have to perform the appearance of cautious distance regardless of what we're doing behind the scenes, so let's all agree to just skip the silly theater of us doing so."

And if the WHPC is so interested in appearing on TV championing accountability, maybe they should be asking how our tolerance for and cover-up of Afghan corruption is dooming our efforts there. After all, that's something that the US **does** have direct influence over. That's something that more transparency might affect. That's the equivalent of the questions about Egypt the press corps should have been asking for the last 30 years.