



Feb 23, 2007

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

Dear Mr. Sports Illustrated,
I read your final
Art and Space article
in your literary home
of 19 years. Like many
who enjoy your work,
I miss your humor,
your style, and compassion.
Please don't worry about
the mud in the West
Wing. After a lot of scrubbing,
I have finally cleaned the
mess. I enjoyed meeting
you & I wish you all the
best in your next venture.
Sincerely, *Barack*
P.S. Good luck, Steve

Seal of approval A humble columnist gets a presidential fan letter

Pen Pal

When the President writes, even fan mail turns into a political referendum

BY STEVE RUSHIN

ONE MORNING IN MARCH, WHILE pulling out of the driveway, I saw a large manila envelope bound by a rubber band to the post of my mailbox, whose broken door hangs open in a permanent expression of disbelief.

The envelope rode shotgun beside me for several miles until I opened it at a red light, using a tire-pressure gauge from the glove box, at which time my jaw, like my mailbox door, fell open in astonishment.

Pressed for posterity between two slabs of cardboard—on stationery the color of New England clam chowder—was a handwritten fan letter from the President of the United States. I was touched and flattered—my ego swelled like a self-inflating raft. But more important, the letter has served in the months since as a Rorschach test for everyone who reads it: a minireferendum on the presidency, a war in Iraq writ tiny—but legibly, and even grammatically, with impeccable spelling.

“GW Bush,” as he signed the letter, was writing to congratulate me on hanging up my column after two decades at his favorite weekly sports magazine. “Dear Mr. Sports Illustrated,” he began, consecrating me with a presidential nickname, like Turd Blossom or Pootie-Poot or the immortal Brownie. “I read your final ... article in your literary home of 19 years. Like many who enjoy your work, I’ll miss your humor, your style, and compassion ...”

I read these words to my wife, who is obstinately oblivious to my humor, style and compassion, and was surprised by her immediate reaction: “How did he get our address?” I’m sure Dick Cheney, in his undisclosed location, had no trouble finding our undisclosed location, I told her.

My wife, unblinking, said, “But seriously. We’re not listed.” I turned to our

2-year-old and said, “They can’t find Osama, but they tracked down yo’ mama.” The toddler adhered a Cheerio to my face and walked away.

What was supposed to be a celebration of my place on the President’s reading list had turned into a debate about the Patriot Act.

As the days passed, I began shamelessly showing the letter to everyone I encountered, as if I were a strip-joint leafleteer on a New York City street corner.

My father, who framed a copy of the letter, said with pride, “The President of the United States took the time to write *you*.”

But others sometimes inflected the same sentence for maximum disdain: “The President of the United States has the time to write ... *you*?” Whether this is meant as a criticism of the President or as a criticism of me, I’m never able to tell. Both, I suspect.

Many blue-staters have made the same joke, each one thinking he is the first to do so. “He can write?” they say, always followed by, “He can read?” I have now passed the letter to countless Americans and a few non-Americans—so many people that I ought to have the letter laminated, like a Waffle House menu. And the one thing that everyone agrees on—red-staters and Greenpeacers—is that he does come off on paper as funny and self-deprecating.

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“Please don’t worry about the mud in the West Wing,” he wrote to me, a reference to our brief meeting five years earlier, when I absentmindedly tracked mud from the Kentucky Derby track onto antique carpeting in the White House prior to an interview. “After a lot of scrubbing, I have finally cleaned the mess.”

I had written in SPORTS ILLUSTRATED that the President didn’t know my name during our interview (even though it was written in inch-high letters on a nameplate in front of me). And so he affixed a P.S.: “Good luck, Steve”—with my name boldly underlined to say, “I do too know your name, and I’m in on the joke, by the way.”

And while the President no doubt forgot about the note the moment he set his pen down, I’ll always remember it as a kind and humanizing gesture. And here I am, ungallantly airing it in public. For Presidents, no good deed goes unpunished.

I’ve put the letter away for now, back in its tattered envelope, where it will probably remain for the next 100 years, until some distant descendant has it appraised on *Antiques Roadshow*. However history judges this presidency, I’m confident it will be kind to me. “This was my great-great-grandfather’s,” that descendant will say to some bow-tied document dealer. “He was apparently a man of humor, style and compassion, the Shakespeare of his day.” ■