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Talon News reporter "Jeff Gannon" lobs White House spokesman Scott McClellan a question at a Feb. 1, 2005, press briefing.

Fake news, fake reporter

Why was a partisan hack, using an alias and with no journalism background, given repeated access to daily White House press briefings?

By Eric Boehlert



Feb. 10, 2005 | When President Bush bypassed dozens of eager reporters from nationally and internationally recognized news outlets and selected Jeff Gannon to pose a question at his Jan. 26 news conference, Bush's recognition bestowed instant credibility on the apparently novice reporter, as well as the little-known conservative organization he worked for at the time, called Talon News. That attention only intensified when Gannon used his nationally televised press conference time to ask Bush a loaded, partisan question -- featuring a manufactured quote that mocked Democrats for being "divorced from reality."

Gannon's star turn quickly piqued the interest of many online commentators, who wondered how an obvious Republican operative had been granted access to daily White House press briefings normally reserved for accredited journalists. Two weeks later, a **swarming investigation** inside the blogosphere into Gannon and Talon News had produced all sorts of damning revelations about how Talon is connected at the hip to a right-wing activist organization called GOPUSA, how its "news" staff consists largely of volunteer Republican activists with no journalism experience, how Gannon often simply rewrote GOP press releases when filing his Talon dispatches. It also uncovered embarrassing information about Gannon's past as well as his fake identity. When Gannon himself this week confirmed to the Washington Post that his name was a

pseudonym, it only added to the sense of a bizarre hoax waiting to be exposed.

On Tuesday night, the reporter who apparently saw himself as a trailblazing conservative "embedded with the liberal Washington press corps" abruptly **quit his post** as Washington bureau chief and White House correspondent for Talon News, that after earlier taunting those digging into his past that he was "hiding in plain sight." Contacted by e-mail for a comment, Gannon referred Salon to the message posted on his **Web site**: "Because of the attention being paid to me I find it is no longer possible to effectively be a reporter for Talon News. In consideration of the welfare of me and my family I have decided to return to private life. Thank you to all those who supported me."

The Gannon revelations come on the heels of the discovery that Bush administration officials **signed lucrative contracts** for several conservative pundits who hyped White House initiatives and did not disclose the government's payments. The Talon News fiasco raises serious questions about who the White House is allowing into its daily press briefings: How can a reporter using a fake name and working for a fake news organization get press credentials from the White House, let alone curry enough favor with the notoriously disciplined Bush administration to get picked by the president in order to ask fake questions? The White House did not return Salon's calls seeking answers to those questions.

The situation "begs further investigation," says James Pinkerton, a media critic for Fox News who has worked for two Republican White Houses. "In the six years I worked for Reagan and Bush I, I remember the White House being strict about who got in. It's inconceivable to me that the White House, especially after 9/11, gives credentials to people without doing a background check."

Gannon reportedly did not have what's known as a "hard pass" for the White House press room, which allows journalists to enter daily without getting prior approval each time. Instead Gannon picked up a daily pass by contacting the White House press office each morning and asking for clearance. Mark Smith, vice president of the White House Correspondents Association, says it's up to White House officials to decide whom they want to wave in each day. "They don't consult us." If they had, Smith says, he would have been "very uncomfortable" granting Gannon the same access as professional journalists.

And the association never would have backed a reporter using an alias. Says Pinkerton: "If [Gannon] was walking around the White House with a pass that had a different name on it than his real name, that's pretty remarkable." Smith, who covers the White House for Associated Press radio, says he "could have sworn" that he saw credentials around Gannon's neck with the name "Jeff Gannon" on them.

"Somebody was waving him into the White House every day," notes David Brock, president and CEO of Media Matters for America, an online liberal advocacy group that led the way in raising questions about Gannon and Talon News.

Earlier this week, when asked about Gannon's access, White House press secretary Scott McClellan essentially threw up his hands and said he has no control over who is in the press room and whom the president calls on during his rare press conferences. "I don't think it's the role of the press secretary to get into the business of being a media critic or picking and choosing who gets credentials," he told the Washington Post.

"That's like [McClellan] saying, 'I'm chief of staff at a hospital and when a patient dies in surgery and it turns out the guy operating wasn't a doctor ... [it's] not my business to be a medical critic,'" says Ron Suskind, a former Wall Street Journal reporter who has **written extensively** about the inner workings of the Bush administration. "Nobody is asking him to be a media critic. They're asking him to make sure people in the press room -- the ones using up precious time during extremely rare press conferences -- are acting journalists, honest brokers dealing with genuine inquiry to get at the truth."

Suskind questions the White House's explanation that Bush had no idea who Gannon was when he called on him during the press conference. "Frankly, my sense is that almost nothing happens inside the White House episodically. They are so ardent with their message discipline. It all happens for a reason."

And it's not as if finding out the connection between Talon and GOPUSA was difficult. The Standing Committee of Correspondents, a group of congressional reporters who oversee press credential distribution on Capitol Hill, did just that last spring when Gannon approached the organization to apply for a press pass. "We didn't recognize the publication, so we asked for information about what Talon was," says Julie Davis, a reporter for the Baltimore Sun who is on the committee. "We did some digging, and it became clear it was owned by the owner of GOPUSA. And we had asked for some proof of Talon's editorial independence from that group ... They didn't provide anything, so we denied their credentials, which is pretty rare," says Davis. She adds, "There's limited space, and particularly after 9/11 there's limited access to the Capitol. Our role is to make sure journalists have as much access as possible, and to ensure that credentials mean something."

Talon's unusual access to the White House has upset journalists at other small outlets who don't enjoy the same privileged connections. "We're a weekly newspaper with a circulation of 22,000 and I'm pretty sure we couldn't get a White House press pass," says Mike Hudson, editor of the Niagara Falls Reporter in Niagara Falls, N.Y. "How does Gannon, which isn't even his real name, get past security?" Hudson wrote to Rep. Louise Slaughter, D-N.Y., asking her office "to look into how a partisan political organization and an individual with no credentials as a reporter -- and apparently operating under an assumed name -- landed a coveted spot in the White House press corps."

Slaughter, a vocal critic of the administration's pundit payola practices, wrote to the White House on Monday urging Bush "to please explain to the Congress and to the American people how and why the individual known as 'Mr. Gannon' was repeatedly cleared by your staff to join the legitimate White House press corps."

Until this week, what little was known about Gannon was vague. But several Web sites he is connected with provide some possible clues. Introducing himself to readers of his ConservativeGuy.com Web site, Gannon once wrote, "I've been a preppie, a yuppie, blue-collar, green-collar and white collar. I've served in the military, graduated from college, taught in the public school system, was a union truck driver, a management consultant, a fitness instructor and an entrepreneur. I'm a two-holiday Christian and I usually vote Republican."

When the recent controversy erupted, Gannon positioned himself as more of an ardent right-winger, not to mention ardent Christian. On JeffGannon.com he wrote, "I'm everything people on the Left seem to despise. I'm a man who is white, politically conservative, a gun-owner, an SUV driver and I've voted for Republicans. I'm pro-American, pro-military, pro-democracy, pro-capitalism, pro-free speech, anti-tax and anti-big government. Most importantly, I'm a Christian. Not only by birth, but by rebirth through the blood of Jesus Christ." Posting on the right-wing FreeRepublic.com, Gannon, while working as a White House reporter, once urged fellow Freepers to stage a demonstration outside Sen. John Kerry's headquarters and chant Jane Fonda's name and throw DNC medals, a reference to the Vietnam ribbons of honor Kerry threw away during an antiwar demonstration in the early 1970s.

As a would-be reporter, Gannon often copied entire sections from White House press releases and pasted them into his stories, according to an analysis done by Media Matters. This despite the fact he once ridiculed legitimate journalists for "working off the talking points provided by the Democrats."

According to his bio on Talon's Web site (which has now been removed), he's a graduate of the "Pennsylvania State University System," which could mean anything from Penn State to a much smaller state-run school such as West Chester University. He also noted that he's a graduate of Leadership Institute

Broadcast School of Journalism -- which is a two-day, \$50 seminar run by Morton Blackwell, a longtime Republican activist who co-founded the Rev. Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority and has said that those on "the ultra left harness hate and envy in their quest for unlimited power." Blackwell's journalism seminar aims to "prepare conservatives for success in politics, government and the news media," according to the institute's Web site. The classes are also designed to "bring balance to the media."

It was Blackwell, serving as a Virginia delegate to the GOP convention this summer, who handed out purple bandages in an effort to make fun of Kerry's Vietnam War wounds. They read: "It was just a self-inflicted scratch, but you see I got a Purple Heart for it?" Blackwell also served as a mentor to a young field organizer who is now Bush's deputy chief of staff. (Karl Rove called Blackwell just days after winning the 2000 election to thank him for his help.)

What likely forced Gannon to quit Talon News Tuesday were the revelations uncovered by bloggers such as [World O' Crap](#), [AmericaBlog](#), [Mediacitizen](#), [Daily Kos](#) and [Eschaton](#), along with their readers, about Gannon's past. For instance, bloggers uncovered evidence suggesting that the person and company that own the Web site [JeffGannon.com](#) also registered the gay-themed sites [hotmilitarystud.com](#), [militaryescorts.com](#) and [militaryescortsm4m.com](#). And according to this online research, that company, [Bedrock Corp.](#), is owned by a man named Jim Guckert, leading to speculation that Guckert and Gannon are one and the same. [Bedrock](#) is based in Wilmington, Del., where Gannon apparently is from.

As for Talon, its Web site says it is "committed to delivering accurate, unbiased news coverage to our readers." The site is run by Bobby Eberle, a Texas Republican Party delegate and political activist who also runs [GOPUSA.com](#), which touts itself as "bringing the conservative message to America." As [Media Matters](#) documented, "In addition to Eberle's dual role as the head of both entities, both domain names [TalonNews.com](#) and [GOPUSA.com](#) are registered to the same address in Pearland, Texas, which appears to be Eberle's personal residence. The [TalonNews.com](#) domain name registration lists Eberle's e-mail address as bobby.eberle@gopusa.com ... Talon News apparently consists of little more than Eberle, Gannon, and a few volunteers, and is virtually indistinguishable from [GOPUSA.com](#) ... [GOPUSA](#)'s officers and directors show a similar lack of journalism experience, but plenty of experience working for Republican causes." After [Media Matters](#) highlighted the background of Talon's "news team," Talon quickly yanked their bios from the site.

There is evidence that ownership of both Talon and [GOPUSA](#) changed hands Monday, just as the Gannon controversy was growing. More recently, many archived stories, including some dealing with the issue of homosexuality and defending the ban on gay marriage, were scrubbed from the Talon site. Eberle at Talon and [GOPUSA](#) did not respond to calls seeking comment.

Last year Gannon and Talon made a blip on the Beltway radar over an interview Gannon did with former U.S. diplomat Joseph Wilson, whose wife, Valerie Plame, was exposed as a CIA agent by conservative columnist Robert Novak. That potentially illegal disclosure prompted an independent counsel investigation. Gannon apparently attracted investigators' attention when, in the interview with Wilson, he referred to an unclassified document that may have been distributed to conservative allies in the press to bolster the administration's case that it was Wilson's wife who suggested he be sent to Niger to investigate the claim that Iraq tried to purchase uranium, or yellowcake, from the African nation.

It's likely Talon and Gannon would have remained obscure had the swaggering reporter not popped his now famous question to Bush. The details surrounding the Jan. 26 press room incident are telling, as they highlight the elasticity Gannon and other partisan advocates often use in their "reporting." Gannon asked Bush, "Senate Democratic leaders have painted a very bleak picture of the U.S. economy." He continued, "[Minority Leader] Harry Reid was talking about soup lines, and Hillary Clinton was talking about the economy being on the verge of collapse. Yet, in the same breath, they say that Social Security is rock solid

and there's no crisis there. How are you going to work -- you said you're going to reach out to these people -
- how are you going to work with people who seem to have divorced themselves from reality?"

Reid never made any such comment about soup lines.

That afternoon conservative talk show host Rush Limbaugh crowed that Gannon's question was "a repeat, a rehash, of a precise point I made on this program yesterday." However, Limbaugh conceded that Reid had "never actually said 'soup lines.'" That was simply Limbaugh's exaggerated characterization of Reid's concerns. Gannon either heard that phrase on Limbaugh's show or read it in Limbaugh's online column and then inserted it into his loaded question to Bush. On Feb. 2, with Gannon under fire for his lack of journalistic ethics, Limbaugh suddenly flip-flopped and told listeners that Gannon's question about Reid and soup lines "was an accurate recitation of what the Senate Democrat leaders had said." Then, in a Feb. 7 article in the Washington Post, Gannon finally conceded the quote was made up, but suggested he had nothing to apologize for.

All of which begs the question, "Who are they issuing credentials to?" asks Hudson at the Niagara Falls Reporter. "Could a guy from [Comedy Central's] 'The Daily Show' get press credentials from this White House?"

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By Eric Boehlert

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