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Gene Healy: White House press challenges pols with ... squirt guns? Relationship with press looking all wet these days

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Hollywood for the Ugly was in full-frolic mode a week ago Saturday, when Vice President Biden brought D.C. reporters over to the Naval Observatory for a "pool party." "There was pizza and watermelon," the Politico's Mike Allen enthused, "Supersoakers and a rock climb."

The New York Times' David Sanger was there, along with Wolf Blitzer and Ed Henry of CNN. Rahm Emanuel's a caution with a squirt gun, Henry's Twitter feed tells us: "Rahm was chasing Mrs Biden & I got caught in his crosshairs." Tee hee, OMG!

"It doesn't take much," former White House correspondent and Reagan biographer Lou Cannon once lamented. "We're like schoolgirls." If the chief of staff returns your calls, Cannon said, "it goes a long way." And if he deigns to douse you with a Super Soaker, well then, bliss it was on that day to be alive.

Is the Veep mansion splashfest yet more evidence of liberal media bias? You bet. But that bias is only one facet of a larger problem.

Lately it seems, all too many reporters are getting giddy over the romance of power. The result, as Salon.com's Glenn Greenwald puts it, is that they serve as "Royal Court Spokespeople regardless of which monarch is ruling."

That's not to deny the overwhelming evidence of Blue-Team partisanship in the press corps. In a 2008 Indiana Journalism School poll of more than 1,000 mainstream journalists, 40 percent described themselves as leaning to the left, as compared to roughly 17 percent of the American public.

A couple of years ago, MSNBC looked at public records to see which candidates and causes journoes favored. Of 143 who had given during the 2004-07 period, 125 gave to Democrats and liberal groups like MoveOn.org and just 16 to Republicans.

Even so, conservative complaints about the supposedly monolithic "Media" are outdated and smack of a victim mentality. Fox is the top-rated cable news channel, the Wall Street Journal has the largest circulation of any U.S. paper and Glenn Beck is the new Oprah, shooting Friedrich von Hayek's "Road to Serfdom" to the top of the Amazon charts last week.

We don't live in the era of three networks anymore, and it's silly to pretend that conservative voices are being shut out.

More troubling than liberal bias is the growing sense of journos' chumminess with pols and their desperate desire for "access." It has warped what ought to be an adversarial relationship between those in power and those who are supposed to keep them honest.

Jefferson warned that abusive governments keep around "a kind of standing army of newswriters" who "put into the papers whatever might serve the ministers." Greenwald notes an increasing trend toward quoting "White House officials," allowing them to pass along the administration line without any regard for whether anonymity is necessary.

For decades after the abuses of Vietnam and Watergate, a newly emboldened Fourth Estate asked tougher questions, making it harder for presidents to hide incompetence and abuses of power. A 2006 study sampling presidential press conferences from Eisenhower through Clinton found that "the Nixon era marks the beginning of an extended period of increasingly vigorous questioning" that persisted regardless whether the president was Democratic or Republican. That spirit is on the wane, unfortunately.

Rather than buying into D.C.'s celebrity culture, Beltway reporters might do better to take a lesson from the much-maligned paparazzi, whose targets are more likely to punch them in the face than ask them over for pizza and watermelon. If you're doing your job right, they'll feel like hitting you with something stronger than a squirt gun.

Examiner columnist Gene Healy is a vice president at the Cato Institute and the author of "The Cult of the Presidency."

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