

WHITEWATER

Garrison Keillor: On the president and the press ...

Appearing Wednesday before the American Society of Newspaper Editors meeting in Washington, President Clinton declined to grade the news media. But he urged the editors to read humorist Garrison Keillor's barbed comments about the press, made in an April 12 speech by Keillor to the Radio and Television Correspondents' Association in Washington. Here are excerpts from Keillor's speech, which was made available to the St. Paul Pioneer Press.

By Garrison Keillor
SPECIAL TO KNIGHT-RIDDER NEWS SERVICE

I didn't want to come down here and talk about Whitewater, but as long as the president has brought it up, I'll say a few things. I know that if I don't talk about Whitewater, some of you will think that I know something about it. I could say that I've never been in Arkansas in my life, but some of you might ask: Why didn't you say that a month ago?

All I know is what I read in the papers, so Whitewater is a complete mystery to me, as is most of what goes on in Washington. But one can get along pretty well in this country without knowing much about Washington. There are people in America who don't know the names of elected officials, and they still are able to sit up in the morning and take nourishment and do useful things.

It's a big country, and there is more to life than politics. Rush Limbaugh voted in a presidential election for the first time in his life in 1988. I'm amazed by that fact. I guess it took him a while to figure out what he thought, and if I thought what he thought, I'd still be puzzled by it.

So I'm way behind on developments in Washington.

I'm still astonished to have a president who is younger than me. For so long, it seemed that the country was run by old jowly guys in baggy brown suits who peered at television cameras like they were bombs.

And then suddenly to have a president who was young enough to be as stunned by President John Kennedy as I was, who was young enough to have the same draft problems I had, who not only knew who Aretha Franklin and Ray Charles and Otis Redding and Roy Orbison and the Coasters were, but who could have worked in their bands.

To realize that the country is now in the hands of people our own age is a profound moment of truth: Does this make us more confident or less? Not that there is a choice — the supply of jowly old guys in baggy suits is running low.

I'm not particularly high on my generation these days. The generation I admire is my parents, which got out of school during the Depression and fought the war and remade the country and enjoyed the fruits of the '50s. To me, in 1960, they seemed smug and complacent, sitting on their patios and watching the flames in the barbecue grill, but now I think maybe they were just happy how everything had turned out.

My generation strikes me as self-absorbed. You hear them at the grocery store deliberating the balsamic vinegar and the olive oils, the cold-pressed virgin olive oil vs. the warm-pressed experienced olive oil, and you think, "These people probably subscribe to an olive-oil magazine, called *New Dimension*."

They are people with too much money and very little character, people who are all sensibility and no sense, all nostalgia and no history, the people my aunt Eleanor used to call "a \$10 haircut on a 59-cent head" — people I would call yuppie swine.

Whitewater is their kind of scandal. It's carbonated, and it's less about what's real than it is about perceptions. It's all surface. But people of my generation are into surface. That's why they are so easily disillusioned by politics. It doesn't look pretty.

I like this president. He's full of soul and he doesn't check out. I like

him, even though I didn't go to his church. I'm a Northern liberal, one of God's frozen people, and we Northern liberals tend to be a stiff and sour bunch, who are in favor of humanity in principle but don't love anybody in particular. We're not comfortable with Southern politicians. We associate warm climate with lack of intelligence — our way of justifying living where we do.

But I like this president, and I think the country does. I admire his love of politics, the pleasure he takes from being in crowds, looking at people, shaking hands, and his great love of talk.

This president has been nothing but bold in bringing major divisive issues into the public forum and declaring himself on them. He's gone into open forums on radio and television that a president could very well hold himself above, and he's done it with dignity and humor — despite his difficulties.

I haven't had a month as tough as the month he just had since I was 16 years old, and it was one of the main reasons I decided to grow up.

When I was 16, my parents were like the Washington press. They felt that they were entitled to know a great deal more about my life than they knew. They were watching me at all times and, whenever they saw anything unusual, they always read something dark into it.

The presence of matches always indicated the use of tobacco, for example, even though — as I tried to explain to them — a teenage boy might also use matches for other purposes, such as to light candles with. But, to my parents, the use of candles indicated the presence of Catholicism, which was even worse.

They were journalists: You just couldn't talk to them because they kept dragging down the conversation to new depths of suspicion. They said, "Just tell us the truth," but the truth was complicated, and they had already made up their minds.

Nobody blames the press for enjoying its work, or for enjoying stories about an administration in panic, White House staffers thimblep and pale in public, all because of hard-hitting reporting, though the stories may not be exactly true. I'm not saying you do this, but you may have gone to school with people who do.

Sometimes, in the news business, people create cliff-hangers where there are no cliffs and write about events in a tone of urgency that has no basis in fact. I'm not saying that you do this, but you may know people who do. And that is why some journalists' credibility depends largely on the forgetfulness of the American people.

There is a great danger when the press wanders from the facts. If you do, you will be held to a different standard than the one you're used to. Journalists are held to a standard of truth, which is demonstrable, at least over the long run.

But when you slip into the field of fiction and entertainment, then you will be expected to be fascinating. This is going to shorten your careers. Nobody can be fascinating for long, but people can be accurate and responsible for an entire career. And I wish all of you long and distinguished careers.

