



Shot In The Dark
Politics and current events in Minnesota and beyond

September 17, 2004

Thursday

This may be a first in the blogosphere; I got to MC a rally with President Bush. Last Saturday, after the NARN broadcast, I got a call from a member of Bush/Cheney 04's Minnesota team, asking if I would be interested in MCing the "Focus on Healthcare with President Bush" rally. I figured, "how many times does a guy get to do this?", and I agreed.

The day didn't start out especially well; I went to the dry cleaners to pick up my suit - they'd lost the jacket. I hate that shirt and tie look, but that's what I did. I'd only been to Blaine (a north 'burb of Minneapolis) once or twice in my life, and I'd never been to the National Sports Center - a huge complex of soccer fields, running tracks and an olympic-caliber Velodrome - and was amazed to see that the immense facility had a little two-lane exit from Highway 65. Traffic was backed up for miles by the time I got there, and I was early. It took some fairly aggressive driving to get there in time.

The nice thing about being the MC, though, was that was the last line I waited in. I walked past the long line of ticketholders and straight to the Special Services table, went through the Secret Service screening, and got into the building fairly effortlessly.

The building held about 4,000 people, and it was jammed to a sweaty, noisy capacity. My job was to MC the "Pre-program" - all the speakers and events designed to keep the crowd awake and on-message while we waited for the President to come down from his first appearance of the day, in Saint Cloud. One early highlight - I introduced myself as "Mitch Berg, from the Northern Alliance Radio Network, at AM1280 The Patriot...", expecting a small smattering of applause, if anything. The station actually got a bit of a rousing round of applause and cheers - very heartening for the little station that could.

I introduced:

Mac Hammond, local evangelist, for the invocation

Charlie Hemler, local first-grader and future governor, who said the Pledge

Debbie Kennedy, the wife of District 6 congressman Mark Kennedy

Saint Paul Mayor Randy Kelly

District 3 congressman and fellow Jamestown, ND native Jim Ramstad

I think that was it!

Lucky break of the morning - the campaign guys hadn't typed the name of the person singing the National Anthem on my agenda. Or the person's gender or anything else. I said "And now, for the national anthem by..."...

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I looked around, hoping some inspiration would whack me upside the head. Finally, I saw a woman waving at me from the first row, pointing at herself. Well and good - but I still didn't know her name. "Ah, here we go - the national anthem, sung...by..."

The woman stood, so I could see the name placard on the back of her seat. "...Helen Thul!"

She was amazing, by the way.

I wrapped up the pre-program, which led to about half an hour of piped-in music and frantic searching for concession stands with water - the arena was very hot, and I could see I wasn't the only person with cottonmouth.

Finally, the president arrived.

The campaign has developed quite a sense of theatrics over the years; at Bush's rally in August, the president pulled into the arena in a bus to blaring music. This time, the PA announced Governor Pawlenty - who entered to deafening waves of applause - and then, just as that was dying down, the President. The President



came down the ropeline, shaking every hand and kissing every baby offered (and it was amazing how many babies were arranged along the ropeline.

That's me shaking hands with the Prez (photo courtesy of Laura Hemler).

The topic was healthcare; the forum was a panel discussion. There were three people on the stage; a woman from a community health center, an older guy on medicare, and a

working stiff with a medical savings account. Each spoke a bit on their topics; the President staged it in the form of a conversation, riffing on the panelists' comments, frequently to great comedic effect. I was sitting very close-by offstage right, and I could see the President seemed to genuinely enjoy the give-and-take of the format.

The panel was bookended by standard stump speeches on the economy and, afterwards, the war. It was interesting - you could tell when the President was on-script and when he was winging it. When he was on-script, or when he was interacting with the panelists, he was a very effective speaker. In that area in between - where he was extemporizing - he was less effective, sometimes halting, visibly sorting about for the right phrase. Still, the guy knows how to give a stump speech that can reach people; I've seen him speak twice in person, now, and he has a genuine gift for making you feel he's talking right to you, the speaker's technique of making eye contact with everyone in the room.

The campaign seemed upbeat and energized - I'd imagine good polling numbers will have a good effect on people.

All in all, a very good day.

Posted by Mitch at September 17, 2004 07:29 AM

