

His mom and Grandpa put him on the train to Washington (by himself), where he would be staying with family friends who lived in Alexandria, Virginia. He had his ticket for the Inaugural ceremony, and was so excited to be going to Washington to "help" Ike get inaugurated. Once there, he decided to go up to Congressman Curtis' office in the Cannon Building to see if any decisions had been made about his appointment as a Page.

When Bill arrived in Curtis' office he introduced himself to the receptionist, Marilyn, who promptly replied, "You're Billy Emerson from Hillsboro, Missouri?" And he replied that he was. Marilyn said that Congressman Curtis had been looking all over for him and had tried reaching him at home in Hillsboro, but of course, he wasn't there. She then took him to see Curtis in his office, and there were several other prominent Republicans in the office too. Congressman Curtis greeted Bill, and then introduced him to the others. He said, "Folks, I'd like you to meet Bill Emerson from Hillsboro, Missouri. He's my new page." And this was the very first time Bill learned that he had indeed been appointed Curtis' Page and would be able to realize his dream of "helping" Ike run the government.

Bill didn't have a chance to go home to Hillsboro before starting work as a Page. His mom cried and cried, and had to send all his clothes to him, because he began working immediately. The highlight of his career as a Page was the very first time president Eisenhower addressed the Congress at his State of the Union speech. Bill was standing along the middle aisle where the President enters the House Chamber and as the President passed him, Bill put out his hand to shake the President's, and said, "Hi, Mr. President." The President patted Bill on the head and said, "Son, I sure need your help up here." You can only imagine how Bill felt—all he had wanted to do was come to Washington to help the President and then the President actually asked him for his help. He didn't wash his hand for a week.

I've always loved the Billy Emerson story, and have told it hundreds of times over the past 23 years. I think it captures the essence of the man Bill was. A man dedicated to his country and the principles upon which our Founding Fathers formed a government of, for and by the people. A man inspired by history who wanted to preserve our system of government for generations to come. And a man who wanted to inspire young people to get involved, to understand that you can do and be anything in life as long as you're willing to work for it. It doesn't matter where you come from, the color of your skin, or how little money your family has. The only thing that matters is you, and whether you're willing to make a commitment to do everything possible to realize your dream.

Monday, June 22, marks the second anniversary of Bill's death. But Bill lives on in all of our hearts, and a day doesn't go by when we haven't reminisced about one of his many stories and life lessons. I feel blessed to walk down the same corridors he did, and feel blessed to have spent 21 years as his wife. He was an inspiration to so many, but perhaps most of all to those of us he called family. God Bless you, Bill. We sure miss you.

## PORK BARREL JOURNALISM

### HON. NICK J. RAHALL, II

OF WEST VIRGINIA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Monday, June 22, 1998

Mr. RAHALL. Mr. Speaker, the term "pork barrel politics" has been in the lexicon for many, many years and is most often used by the media to cast a negative connotation to an earmark by a Member of Congress of federal funds for a specified project in his or her Congressional District or State. It is my experience that when the media uses this term it usually has no first-hand knowledge about the project itself, and instead, relies on hearsay to support its contention that the project constitutes "pork." This is what I would call "pork barrel journalism."

I submit for the RECORD an excellent example of pork barrel journalism exposed by Steven Brill, in the August 1998, edition of Brill's Content.

[From Brill's Content, August 1998]

#### QUALITY CONTROL

A U.S. SENATOR WRITES A LETTER TO THE WASHINGTON POST CLAIMING THAT AN EYE-CATCHING STORY ABOUT HIM IS COMPLETELY WRONG. WHAT HAPPENS? NOTHING.

Last December, I noticed a curious letter to The Washington Post from Senator Robert Byrd, of West Virginia. The subject was an article that had run in the Post detailing the senator's supposed role in getting a National Park Service project funded in his state—a role the Post cited as an example of lawmakers turning the service "into their personal pork barrel."

Here are the highlights of Byrd's letter: "The very first paragraph of the article speaks of a renovated train depot . . . asking 'Why did the National Park Service spend \$2.5 million turning a railroad station into a visitor center for a town with a population of eight? The compelling reason—Senator Robert C. Byrd . . . who glides past on Amtrak's Cardinal Limited from time to time, heading to and from his home in Sophia, a few miles south.'

"Funny thing, I do not ride the . . . train to and from Sophia and I have never done so. In fact, in the long existence of that train—which does not go to Sophia—I doubt that I have ridden it more than three times, and the last time was probably a decade ago.

"Not so funny is the suggestion that the historic preservation of that building and the town of Thurmond . . . would be undertaken as a result of such whimsy. Equally ridiculous is the falsehood that I 'slipped' the New River Gorge National River park unit into federal legislation 'unwanted' The recommendation to have the New River Gorge managed by the National Park Service was made by the Interior Department . . . [B]ecause of my concern for the costs associated with this plan. . . I have not supported the Park Service proposal for complete restoration of the town of Thurmond. And in the case of the depot, I forced the Park Service to complete the project at a cost considerably less than its original estimate."

In short, Byrd claimed that the entire story was totally, even comically, wrong. To which the Post replied . . . well, it didn't Byrd's letter ran without comment. So, who was right?

Brill's Content staff writer Rachel Taylor reached Martha McAreer an editor of the Post's letters page. No comment from the paper was added, said McAreer, because "letters to the editor allow readers to voice differences of opinion."

Could it really be a matter of opinion whether the senator had actually ridden the train or "slipped" the project in "unwanted," by the federal agencies involved?

A discussion with the article's author, Frank Greve, the respected national correspondent for Knight-Ridder Newspapers, whose wire service had supplied the story to the Post was stranger still. "So what's the problem," Greve began, after having read Byrd's letter, which he told me he had not seen before my inquiry to him. "He's entitled to his opinion."

"Is it a matter of opinion that he rode the train to and from his home and that that's why the depot got funded?"

"Well, I heard he did," said Greve. "And I know he lives near there."

"Is it a matter of opinion that he slipped the bill in unwanted?"

"I was told that," Greve answered.

"Did you call him and ask?"

"Sure, I called his office," Greve continued.

"What did you ask them?"

"I told them I was calling because I was interested in the history of the project, so they suggested I call a former [congressional] staff guy because the project was so long ago. He was one of my sources."

Greve also pointed out that his original wire service article had included a paragraph saying that Byrd had cut the budget for the depot, but that the Post had cut that section from the version it had published.

But for Greve to call Byrd to say he was interested in the history of the project rather than to ask specifically about the train rides or about slipping the project into the budget unwanted, is like calling someone and saying you are doing a story about the history of his family when you're about to write that he has been accused of incest.

Greve finally urged me to call two of his sources for the story—a former congressional staffer and a former Park Service official—on the condition that I not name them.

The first "source" said he had talked to Greve "generally about the Park Service pork-barrel abuses" and he "heard that either Byrd or a West Virginia congressman had wanted to slip the River Gorge project in." But he was "not sure about who it was or even if it was either of them. . . . It was an old story everyone sort of liked to tell. . . . You know, an apocryphal story."

The second "source," the former Park Service official, said he told Greve that Byrd's involvement "sounded right," but that he had "no way of" really knowing because the park project "was way before my time."

When told of the accounts provided by his "sources," Greve sighed, and then said, in near-disgust, "Look everyone knows that this is the way the world works in Washington. What's the big deal?"

Actually, it is a big deal. Most of us think this indeed is the way Washington works, and I know I always thought of Byrd as the embodiment of all that. So a story like this piles on to our preconceived notions and makes us all the more cynical and ready to believe the next story. Conversely, when a story about how the world probably does work, written by a respected reporter, turns out to depend on an anecdote that doesn't seem to hold up, otherwise good journalism is discredited.

But what may be more important than whether Greve's story is correct, is what happened after Byrd wrote his letter. Which is that nothing happened.

Greve freely conceded that no one at Knight-Ridder ever asked him about the Byrd letter. Knight-Ridder Washington bureau chief Gary Blonston confirms that "I never heard anything about a letter."

(Blonston also notes that he was hospitalized at the time the letter was published).

As for the Post, when shown Byrd's letter two months after he published it, executive editor Leonard Downie said, "I've never seen it. . . . In fact, I must admit I don't read letters to the editor." (As the Post's executive editor, Downie is the editor to whom an aggrieved reader presumably writes; it is he who is responsible for all news coverage.)

Wouldn't Downie likely see a letter like this from a senator? "If it were directed to me personally, I think I would," He said. "But if it is just sent to the paper I don't know who would see it on the news side [as opposed to the editorial page editors like McAteer, who oversee the letters page]. I suppose we should systematize that."

It is impossible to imagine that the producer of any other consumer product, such as a car or an appliance, could or would ignore this kind of complaint about a defective product, let alone one from someone important. If only because most other enterprises would fear embarrassment in the marketplace or a lawsuit, this absence of basic quality control would be unfathomable. (Greve would win any libel suit as long as he could show he really believed the Byrd story might

be true—but that defense for a defective car or toaster would be laughed out of court.)

So what's important here is that at two of the most respected (and deservedly so) news organizations in the world, the senator's letter was a non-event.

A footnote: The original Washington Post story generated lots of editorials across the country attacking pork-barrel politics. And, two weeks after the Byrd letter appeared, one of my heroes in journalism—Charles Peters, the editor of the Washington Monthly—cited the Greve article as an example of tax dollars misspent because "the money was slipped into the budget" by Sen. Byrd. Asked how he had checked the article, or if he had called Byrd for comment, Peters, who is from West Virginia and knows Byrd, said, "It would be unheard of that this would happen without somebody's intervention. I'd be incredulous if Byrd wasn't behind it. . . . I guess it could have been a congressman, but I doubt it. But I did no checking because something like this just has the ring of truth."

"SOURCES SAY"

Let's have a contest.

I'll extend a subscription for an additional year to the reader who, by July 15, sends us the news article or transcript of a television

or on-line newscast that has the most uses per 100 words of the specific phrase "sources say." The winner and the offending author will be announced next issue.

We want to stamp out the common use of a phrase that is never defensible. At the least, a reporter can always tell us if there are two sources or 20. Surely he knows. Similarly, he can almost always provide some kind of description of the unnamed source that suggests the source's knowledge or possible bias, even if he cannot be identified.

The principle is simple and, again, it has to do with quality control for this particular consumer product: providing clear information is an achievable goal, especially when journalists ask us to trust them—and their unnamed sources.

This reminds me of one of the laziest, most duplicitous things that nonfiction authors do in their acknowledgements at the beginning of a book. Here's an example: "More than 300 people were interviewed for this book . . ." Doesn't this author know how many? Was it 301 or 33,001? Why can't he tell us? Is 300 a figure of speech? Why trust him with anything else in the rest of the book if he's this lazy with that kind of easy fact?

That's a quote from the acknowledgements page of a book I wrote in 1978.