



StarTribune.com | MINNEAPOLIS - ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

Last update: October 20, 2009 – 8:41 PM

Doug Stone: White House should engage Fox, not ignore it

In the latest Washington dustup between the White House and Fox News over its coverage of the administration I find myself, surprisingly, siding with the conservative network. It's not because I like their commentators—I don't. But I think the White House media mavens, who were so good on the campaign trail, miscalculated in their decision to boycott the network.

President Obama did interviews with all the networks' Sunday shows last month except Fox. His communications director told *The New York Times* that "as they (Fox officials) are undertaking a war against Barack Obama and the White House, we don't need to pretend that this is the way that legitimate news organizations behave." She also called the network an "arm of the Republican Party."

Administration officials continued to blast the network in talk shows last weekend although they indicated, according to the *Washington Post*, that members of the administration would be allowed to appear on Fox in the future.

The administration's stance struck me as rather childish, like the youngster who didn't get his way so he took his ball and went home. In Washington politics is a blood sport. The way to deal with the conservative commentators and the factual distortions and accusations that the White House so dislikes is to confront them, not run from them.

Have administration spokespeople all over the Fox airwaves, challenging the commentators with reasonable arguments, facts and persuasion. Show the Fox audience, which by the way contains at least some moderates who might be sympathetic to the President,

that Obama is not the monster he is sometimes made out to be by the right. He is, in fact, a bright, thoughtful, restrained man.

And when you have the best presidential communicator in years, put him on Fox up against the Hannitys and Becks and O'Reillys.

As David Carr of *The Times* points out, "When he (Obama) eventually sat for an interview with Fox News personality Bill O'Reilly two months before the election, it made for great television."

It is far more difficult for the Fox commentators to throw mud at the President when he is sitting with them in the White House or on the set of their show or live via satellite than when he refuses to engage them.

In my work, I have always advised leaders and officials not to say "no comment," but to engage in a discussion or rebuttal if attacked or criticized. In the modern era of 24-hour television and the Internet, failure to respond is seen as an admission that the critic is right. Officials often are resistant to such responses because they don't want to get "in the gutter" with their critics. But responses can be thoughtful, factual and persuasive. They don't have to have the same tone as the critic.

Fox, which relishes its role as the not-so-loyal opposition, has seen its ratings climb this year. The President and his aides do themselves no good by boycotting Fox and its commentators. Obama is better than that and bigger than that. And he can show the country that he is by using his own great debating and oratorical skills to engage the network which conservatives love, rather than ignoring it.

©2009 *Star Tribune*. All rights reserved.