

Wednesday, August 9, 2006

What lurks behind the scenes when a Member of Congress appears on a national television news show? More than meets the eye:

THURSDAY AUGUST 3:

A "booker" from Fox News calls my office to check on my availability for a Sunday morning interview on the situation on Lebanon. They'll make it easy -- rather than driving to their Manhattan studio, I can use a satellite location in West Babylon. I agree.

FRIDAY AUGUST 4, 5:00 PM

Fox emails updated information. Be at the studio at 11...Eric Shawn will host the program... Rep. Charles Dent will also appear....And the topic has been narrowed. Now it's "the UN's role in peacekeeping operations in southern Lebanon." (Knowing the topic in advance is not always helpful. On several occasions on other networks the subject has been changed, literally seconds before going live. Maybe the Mets' David Wright can hit a curve ball on national television, but I'm not quite that talented.)

SATURDAY AUGUST 5:

Late-breaking news: the U.S. and French governments announce agreement on a Security Council resolution calling for a cease-fire between Hezbollah and Israel. Now Fox wants me to focus on this development. They also request that I arrive at the West Babylon studio at 10:50 instead of 11:00 the next morning. In Washington, my staff emails everything they can compile on the new Security Council resolution.

SUNDAY AUGUST 6:

10:45-- A behemoth satellite truck occupies most of the parking spaces in front of Village Video in West Babylon, groaning in the heat. I knock on the door, and soon Bob Wolf emerges, smiling gregariously. Some people call him "Wolfie"; but I think of him as "The Wizard." The man behind the technology curtain pushes buttons, flicks switches and moves levers that will magically beam me from West Babylon, to a satellite high above us, then to Fox studios, and finally to television sets across America. I, on the other hand, can't figure out TiVo.

After a cell phone conversation with the Fox technicians in New York, Bob reports: "We're hitting at 11:10". That's when I go live. Fifteen minutes -- more than enough time.

10:50-- Bob leads me inside his building to a small, windowless room. A stool is positioned in front of a solitary camera. Oversized lights hang at odd angles from the ceiling. The "scenery" behind me includes a desk, bookshelves, an American flag and a computer monitor glowing

with the Fox logo.

I position myself on the stool. Bob attaches a microphone clip to my tie, inserts an earpiece, and adjusts the volume so that the Fox programming gushes through my ear. Then he trains the camera on my face, adjusts its angle, and switches on the overhead lights. The glare is so harsh that I can barely see the camera.

This is where it can get dangerous. Although the interview won't begin for several minutes, the satellite feed is active. Anything I do or say at this point can be recorded for posterity. Primping, preening, yawning, or humming my favorite show-tunes is not recommended. This is the stuff that TV Bloopers are made of.

11:00-- Static crackles in my ear. "Representative Israel? This is Debbie, the producer in New York. Can you hear me?"

"I can hear you fine, Debbie."

In New York, Debbie sees my lips move, but hears nothing. "Your microphone isn't on," she says with some urgency. "I'll get it fixed," Bob promises as he rushes to the satellite truck outside, his words trailing behind him.

11:05-- The interview is supposed to start in five minutes. Yet I am alone in the studio, listening to Eric Shawn in my earpiece, staring into the harsh lights, growing uncomfortably warm. Almost miraculously, Bob pops in with a bottle of cold water. "Give me a count," he orders.

"One...two..."

"Still a problem", he says, rushing back to the truck.

Then I hear Eric Shawn make a promise to America: "Coming up! Can the UN enforce a cease-fire in southern Lebanon? We'll hear from two Members of Congress...."

Except that one can't be heard.

11:10-- A lot of scrambling. In the satellite truck outside, Bob's fingers dance across buttons and levers and dials, in syncopated movements with his counterpart technicians at Fox. Meanwhile, Eric Shawn commences his own shuffle. My 11:10 interview is now with former CIA Director Jim Woolsey. Jim and I have been working together on energy security issues, so at least I can listen to his interview.

"Nice job," I email to Woolsey's Blackberry. "I'm the guest just behind you."

"Thanks," he emails me back when he is finished.

11:15 - 11:20-- "Congressman?" My earpiece crackles. "This is Fox audio in New York. Can you count to ten?"

"Can I count to ten?" I think, "Who said Congress is a hard job?"

"One...two...three..."

"We still don't hear you," the technician interrupts.

Fox now eases into a long commercial break. Bob scurries back and forth. The break ends and I can hear Shawn's voice. He introduces a correspondents' report from Lebanon. Then another. "Stall," I think.

11:20 - 11:25-- Still staring into the camera, I assume Fox will simply pull the plug on me and hand the entire interview to Rep. Dent.

Suddenly Bob reappears. "Give me a count!"

I count to ten.

He offers a relieved thumbs-up.

Then the Fox audio technicians chirp through my earpiece: "Can you hear us?"

"Yes."

"Can you give us a count?"

"One...two...three..."

"Got it," they exclaim.

The next voice I hear is the producers', offering last minute coaching: "Sorry for the technical problems. You're on after this break. The host is Eric Shawn. You're on with Congressman Charles Dent. Stand-by."

The earpiece now falls silent, as if I am listening to an ocean through a shell on Robert Moses beach. I fix my eyes through the harsh glare at the camera lens. Bob stands next to the tripod, ready to flash hand-signals. When he points at me, I know I am on camera. A closed fist means that Fox is using a different shot.

Suddenly, the triumphant swelling of the Fox theme song rolls through my ear. Eric Shawn whisks through a summary of our topic, and finally introduces Congressman Dent and me. I smile and nod my head at the glare in front of me.

Over two or three minutes, Rep. Dent gets the first question: I get the second and third; and Dent handles the fourth. Then the curtain is brought down: "Sorry we've run out of time. Thanks for coming on this morning."

I continue staring at the camera until the producer signals that I am free to leave.

11:30-- Bob unclasps the microphone from my tie, removes the earpiece, and tells me he's preparing for his next transmission in a few minutes: Rep. Peter King.

As I drive home, I wonder how the interview was received. Whenever I appear on a national news show, my office phones ring with instant feedback from across America. But today is Sunday. We'll have to wait until tomorrow to hear what messages were left.

11:34-- No waiting at all. Just as we pull out of the studio parking lot towards the Southern State Parkway, my Blackberry vibrates with this email:

"Steve:

You looked good on Fox New this morning. I agreed with everything you said (for whatever that's worth)."

It's from an uncle. In Dallas.

Posted by: SI