

# Press Conference

*Brad Linaweaver*

The President of the United States is sometimes referred to as the most powerful man in the free world. Yeah, sum.

They used to joke that after he was elected President, he'd wish he were back in the Senate where he could wield some real power. He'd taken that sort of thing in good humor. After all, it was only a joke...then.

He was a student of history, wasn't he? He was well versed in, the imperial presidency—the accumulation of power in the executive accelerating in the 20th century. Every war had helped. The speed of modern communications had done its part. Ever since Truman, the CIA was in there pitching. Sure, there were frustrations. He still had to deal with an unwieldy, vaguely democratic system. He didn't really mind. When it came right down to it, he didn't object to anything that was part of the natural order, as he saw it. In common with many predecessors in the office, he was that peculiar kind of human being who thrived when dealing with political parties, special interests, other nations with their special requirements, and lawyers! He could juggle priorities with the best of them.

He talked about reflecting the will of the people, and he said it with a

profound sincerity. Hell, he was good at his job. But the President of the United States had not been prepared for the sudden appearance of The Two. No one in his right mind would have constructed such a scenario. And like all good politicians, the President prided himself on being in his right mind.

Only one month ago the universe had still made sense. It didn't seem all that long ago. Then The Two had come out of nowhere, sharing a nightmare between them as two monsters might suckle a malignant spirit. The world had held its breath, waiting for the last superpower on Earth to *do* something. That meant the President of the United States was expected to perform a miracle. Being a little short on burning bushes, he elected to hold a press conference instead.

And so here he was. The reporters waited for him, eyes wide, mouths wider, under a forest of arms swaying under the lights. What had happened to protocol? Where was his introduction, and "Hail to the Chief" blaring over the speakers? The organizational structure of the White House had gone to hell, along with everything else. On the plus side, every network was carrying him, not just CNN and C-SPAN. Even hundreds of little local stations across the fruited plain were interrupting their game shows and reruns of sitcoms. It had been a long time since a President had received this much audience share.

Gazing up and down the usual row of anxious faces, the President was overwhelmed by his usual emotion toward the fourth estate—contempt. The terror gripping the nation had done nothing to bring out the finer qualities of the White House press corps. Not even the prospect of imminent doom could alleviate their rudeness.

He actively disliked the woman from National Public Radio, so he let her have the first question. Best to get it over with. She didn't disappoint him: "Mr. President, what steps are being taken to deal with the crisis?"

Watching thin lips moving in her pinched face put him in mind of a fish out of water. He thought how this was the same person who had criticized every covert policy and overt military action he had ever taken. Now she wanted action.

Willing himself to be polite, he rattled off the official answer: "Our best experts are working on this problem night and day. Dr. Gerber has taken over from Dr. Shooter, who retired after his theory was exploded..."

"Why did Shooter claim it was a hoax?" the NPR reporter interrupted. *That counts as her follow-up*, thought the president.

"He wasn't the only one," explained the chief executive. "The last doubts were not dispelled until the destruction of New York City. Now mankind is united on one thing at least. Next question!"

A pasty-faced man from CBS wasted no time hitting him with: "What about the charges that both of these... creatures resulted from a secret government project in genetic research?"

"We categorically deny it," the President shot back,

"So do I!" a voice boomed from behind the President, who slowly turned around to see a man—what appeared to be a man—standing regally with a purple cape wrapped around his muscular frame. A tight, black mask covered his head except for huge goggles over the eyes. Already Secret Service agents were closing in around the President, although a sense of futility pervaded their actions.

The President tried to sound brave but he came off like a ten-year-old making a careful inquiry about the rules: "What is this about, Captain Prism?"

The man in the cape answered: "I'm here to protect you, of course. *He* plans an attack on this very conference. Never fear, he will never prevail while I am guardian of the world." The President had a sinking feeling in the center of his chest. The speaker declaimed some more: "There is no limit to the evil of Mr. Focus. He would enslave the human race with no regard for your free and representative institutions. In fact, the first place he plans to attack is this room! Now, by the cosmic powers at my command, I will move you to the Rose Garden."

"No, wait!" the President started to say, but it was too late. The low, humming noise and glowing lights in the goggles could only mean one thing. In a flash they had been transported to the Rose Garden. It was late in the morning, and a cool breeze made the hot day more bearable. The sky was as clear as an IRS agent's conscience. Everyone was temporarily disoriented, but there was no hysteria. God help them, but they were getting used to this sort of thing.

The President took a quick inventory. The bad news was that, although

the television cameras and sound recording equipment had been transferred as well, there was something wrong with the hook-up and the press conference was temporarily off the air. The good news was that Captain Prism was gone... for the moment.

A black woman from CNN was first to break the silence. "Mr. President, to your knowledge have they ever deliberately hurt anyone?" While the technicians were busily trying to restore the link, the President relaxed for a moment—put at ease, in part, by the naturalness of the question.

"No, Monique," he said, happy to remember her name. "Even what happened in New York seemed to be an accident, a side effect of their battle. Apparently they'd aimed their beams of force at each other. Neither intended for Wall Street to evaporate. And the way things escalated after that..."

"Mr. President," a voice spoke from behind a camera. "We're ready to go back on the air."

Taking a deep breath, the leader of the free world—well, they didn't call it that any longer, since the New World Order—the leader, then, exchanged glances with his press secretary. Time to give it another try. Except they never got that far.

The blue sky suddenly grew dark as the light breeze became a fierce wind tearing papers out of everyone's hands, the fluttering shapes having the appearance of white doves escaping as swiftly as a peace dividend. The other one had just arrived. He was a full head taller than the cowering sound man who had the misfortune of standing next to Mr. Focus.

If anything, Mr. Focus was even more theatrical than his erstwhile foe. He wore an old-fashioned, broad-brimmed hat, as black as the heavy overcoat that was draped over his lanky frame. Although he wore no mask, his dark glasses made one, long strip of unbroken lens bisecting his face. What could be seen of his stern features did not inspire confidence that the rest of the day would be uneventful.

"He's been here," said Mr. Focus, seeming to detect traces of his enemy's presence in the very air. "You've been told the usual pack of lies, I'm sure."

The President was about to respond but he found his already shaky sense of authority further eroded by reporters directing their questions to the interloper. Mr. Focus took over the press conference with the consummate ease of a politician. He answered the red-haired man from ABC, whose question was: "Captain Prism says you're the bad guy. Do you have any response?"

Mr. Focus was clear: "That's typical of my hatred-eaten foe. You know, of course, that he acquired his powers by accident from a stray meteorite, whereas I, through a combination of sheer genius and dogged determination, made myself into what I am today." He paused as if expecting applause, but had to settle for the fear that was palpable in the air.

"That doesn't really address the issue of which one of you is the villain," the red-haired man followed up.

The reply was a bit testy: "The point is that Captain Prism—and in what army does he hold his rank, eh?—is a megalomaniac, out to conquer the world. I'm out to save it."

"Yeah, but what about..." someone began but never finished. With a bolt of jagged blue light emanating from his glasses, the cross section of humanity that made up a Washington press conference found itself transported to the oval Blue Room. No one was really disposed to appreciate the French Empire decor, although they were situated very close to a splendid table right next to one of the long windows. That they were standing on the table may have had something to do with the diminution of their aesthetic sense, along with everything else. They had been reduced in size.

The President of the United States, now exactly six inches tall, was the first to realize the drastic change. "God damn it," he said, oblivious to whether the recording equipment was working. It was a sure bet that no broadcast would be going out in the immediate future. "This has got to stop," he went on.

"No need to thank me," boomed the voice of the now gargantuan man in the slouch hat. "Captain Prism won't expect to find you here. You weren't safe in the Rose Garden."

"That's what you think!" boomed an equally titanic voice. The other one

was outside one of the ornate windows. Naturally, he smashed through the window. There was no good reason for this, as The Two could pretty much materialize wherever they pleased. But both of them occasionally liked to smash through things.

If the little figures scurrying around on the table had been asked their opinion, they almost certainly would have voted against the dramatic method of entering the room. As it turned out, they were almost showered with broken glass, the size of which pieces would have proven fatal to a large number of the victims. They were saved by Mr. Focus disintegrating the glass fragments with another of his beams.

"This is exactly what I mean," gloated Mr. Focus. "Captain Prism would have killed you all."

"I didn't see you poor, tormented people," said Captain Prism, picking himself up from the floor and addressing the table.

"It's a wonder you can see anything through those stupid goggles," was Mr. Focus's retort.

Captain Prism wasn't about to miss his turn: "So who shrunk them down in the first place, risking their lives in the bargain?"

The dialogue went on in this fashion for some time. Finally, the enigmatic figure men call Captain Prism decided on a course of action. With a blast of crackling energy, he restored everyone to their natural size; and there is simply no denying that the President was grateful for the restoration of his original dimensions. The only small quibble was that, as no one had been removed from the table, most of them suffered minor injuries as they fell to the floor or through the broken window. The President, in fact, landed squarely on what his political opponents referred to as the most representative portion of his anatomy. His lower back didn't fare too well, either.

"I told you he was the villain," crowed Mr. Focus, addressing the room. "The agonies you suffer today are but a foretaste of a grim future."

"Scoundrel!" replied Captain Prism. "Please, my friends, do not be taken in by his malevolent ruses. This fiend will not rest until..."

"*Shut up!*" screamed the President of the United States. "Will both of

you just shut up?" The ensuing silence was the first evidence of executive authority anyone had experienced in some time.

Captain Prism and Mr. Focus glared at each other (at least one could assume they were doing this beneath their respective head appliances). Neither would be first to speak in yet another battle of their mighty wills. The lovely silence continued. The press corps was quiet, too. Some of them were preoccupied with their own pain; but there was no one present who didn't appreciate the tenuous nature of their respite. Who would be first to break the silence?

The President basked in his momentary victory. Standing up, straightening his tie, he felt a smile creeping onto his face. *This is the moment*, he thought. *If I can just bring these superpowered lunatics under control, if they will follow my orders just one time...* Gathering what remained of his personal resources, putting on the tattered remnants of his father-knows-best charm, he formulated his position. He opened his mouth. That's as far as he got.

An explosion rocked the room. Where before there had been a wall there was now a gaping hole; and stepping through this ragged opening was a tall, athletic, beautiful woman with the single most remarkable figure the President had ever seen (this side of the budget deficit). She looked just like a living Barbie doll, an anatomical implausibility living and breathing, definitely *breathing* only a few short feet away. Her close-fitting red jumpsuit was like a second layer of skin. Her honey-blond hair swirled around her head as if a halo, accentuating the pleasant fact that she wore no mask.

For one brief moment, the President allowed himself to appreciate her beauty and confident bearing. Then the higher levels of his brain kicked in again, analyzing the new data: explosion, hole in wall, someone in a funny suit. Two words began to hammer in his brain: *Oh, no.*

"I am Lady Lightning," she announced, "of the sisterhood division of the Fabulous Fifty, a loose confederation of teenage mutants whose maturity of thought exceeds the angst of a troubled adolescence."

"Oh, no," said Captain Prism.

She kept right on: "We have chosen this time to make our existence known to the world. We are here to save mankind from this diabolical

duo."

"Oh, no," said Mr. Focus.

"The first thing we will do," she said, "is thwart the machinations of these power-crazed villains by coming to your rescue. I will place a protective shield around each of you individually in which your bodily functions will be temporarily suspended. It's the only way."

The President's last thought before he screamed was how much he would miss the military-industrial complex despite its current impotence. At least his emotional display wouldn't cost him with the electorate. They'd never know. And the best part was that the reporters were screaming, too.