

Immigration Speech Nearly Upstaged by Clamor Preceding It

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"Tonight I will make it clear where I stand," George W. Bush said early in his 19-minute speech last night on immigration problems, conceding with almost absurd understatement that "we do not yet have full control of the border" between the United States and Mexico.

Although he was, in fact, seated, not standing, at his desk in the Oval Office, Bush did make fairly clear his positions. On the matter of amnesty for all illegal aliens (a term he avoided) already in the country, for instance, Bush said succinctly, "I oppose it."

Neither the president, in his customary pale blue tie, nor the network commentators, for the most part, answered other questions that hung in the air if not on the airwaves: Was the speech really prompted by the urgency of the immigration issue, or by the severity of Bush's low ratings in popularity polls? Was the real purpose to spur debate on immigration, or to push Iraq out of the spotlight for the next few days, while pundits ponder immigration on op-ed pages and cable news networks?

The White House made certain it was Immigration Day in Washington and the nation yesterday by leaking the major points of the speech very early, so early that it dominated virtually all the day's newscasts. The speech itself was like an anticlimax, a mere technicality positioned amid the clatter and clamor that preceded and followed it -- and will continue to follow it perhaps for the entire week.

Anchors and commentators tended to play along, concentrating on the issue with their usual grim faces and behaving as if there were no other news in the world -- except perhaps for that contained in the headlines that ticker-tock across the bottom of the screen.

At one point, Bush addressed himself to the members of both houses of Congress, calling for an immigration bill to be sent to his desk in the near future. Deal, or no deal? That question was soon being asked on NBC, but not about legislation. NBC rushed madly back to regular programming -- in its case the simple-minded game show "Deal or No Deal?" -- almost immediately after the speech ended, with only the most cursory comment following.

As for the Democratic response to the speech, anchor Brian Williams told viewers that if they must see that, they could tune to MSNBC, a sister cable network. NBC had May-sweeps money to make. The trigger fingers in control rooms at ABC and CBS were just as itchy, returning to scheduled programming with little of the usual postmortem pontification.

MSNBC did have the liveliest pre-speech show, thanks partly to guest Pat Buchanan -- who, whether you like what he says or not, has a refreshing habit of getting to the point -- and host Chris Mathews. Mathews was the only anchor to include in his commentary something Ernest Hemingway once said to Rita Hayworth, "Don't confuse motion with action."

CNN's approach to the speech was the most quixotic, though partly by accident. The speech was preceded by a program on which host Wolf Blitzer welcomed guest Lou Dobbs, and followed by a program on which host Lou Dobbs welcomed, among others, guest Wolf Blitzer. As for the low-rated "Paula Zahn Now," usually seen in the 8 p.m. slot, it was rerouted to oblivion.

But there's more on the itchy-trigger front. The president's speech was also preceded on CNN by -- the president's speech. CNN accidentally aired part of Bush's rehearsal of the speech live, after someone mistakenly pushed the wrong button.

The gaffe lasted for only 16 seconds but, said media magpie Matt Drudge on his Web site, it "captured the president starting and stopping his message, then looking at the White House media advisor for direction." An embarrassed Blitzer materialized and told viewers the mistake had been made by "the network pool," though there were no reports of it appearing on other networks.

Another Web site said that an NBC producer, in charge of the pool for the night, erred in removing the presidential seal from the screen too early; it was supposed to remain there until just before the speech began. When CNN technicians saw the shield vanish, they assumed the speech was about to start.

Whatever, the mistake probably boosted circulation of the president's appearance, since the goof had been captured on tape and was soon playing on media-watchdog Web sites.

CNN may be in for criticism, in addition, for using Dobbs to anchor the post-speech show (a "special edition" of "Lou Dobbs Tonight") because Dobbs regularly and vehemently attacks U.S. immigration policy on his nightly CNN program. Although he called the speech "a bold attempt," he also complained that it was "long on rhetoric and short on specifics."

Commentator Bill Schneider, among CNN's guests, disagreed with Dobbs and called Bush's speech a "very cautious" one. But then another guest, Republican strategist Charlie Black, declared, "The fact is, it was a bold speech."

Good grief, it was like a new version of video pong. Whether bold or cautious, the speech was delivered competently and confidently, with Bush coming across as "reasoned and respectful," the two adjectives he used to describe the tone he hopes will prevail as immigration policy is debated in the days ahead.

The next time Bush makes a speech, however, the White House might consider breaking with its policy of leaking the talking points so far ahead of time. Back in the 20th century, administrations traditionally waited until an hour or two before air time to pass the speeches around to the media. Since what Bush said last night must have already been familiar to millions of those watching, they might have suspected it was all a rerun.

Of course, if they were watching CNN, the *deja vu* was doubly dizzying. Perhaps we should be grateful for the mistake, since it was the only thing lending an element of surprise to the occasion.

