Hint: fill in the _____ with "press conference"

Author : michaelbloomer

On October 23rd we got to see FEMA's real world take on that old hypothetical, "What if you gave a _____ and nobody came?" when they populated their California wildfire press conference exclusively with FEMA employees posing as reporters. That's right, the agency still healing from the self-inflicted wounds of Katrina decided to fake a news conference. Clearly thinking on all cylinders, they caused a hurricane strength disaster, this time within the walls of FEMA HQ.

Predictably, when the agency's Deputy Administrator, Vice Admiral Harvey Johnson took the podium, the placid questions lobbed at him by the ersatz "press corps" evoked memories of church picnic softball, and the Vice Admiral's answers soared like a dozen FEMA home runs. Yet, before the first champagne bottle was uncorked in the post-game locker room, the reality-based world of card carrying reporters uncovered the ploy, and the jig was up. The game was forfeit. Casey had struck out. As always, managers and players were quickly blamed; owners simply walked away whistling "Strangers in the Night."

Like Casey Stengel desperately asking his 1962 Mets, "Can't anyone here play this game?", one *is* left wondering just who's in charge at our nation's primary emergency management agency. The political tone deafness of faking a news conference, particularly at *this* agency, approaches the profound; are we going too far to wonder if FEMA could successfully call a tow truck for a broken down Volkswagen?

Clearly, that *would* be going too far. Let's pull back a bit and remember FEMA's huge improvements since their disastrous handling of Everything Katrina. The agency's heavy lifting since then has produced positive results, particularly given their ignoble starting point as Brownie's Clubhouse. Indeed, their hard fought progress showed well in their handling of the California wildfires, and this makes their bone-headed press conference even more baffling. After all, here -- *finally* -- was something to point to with agency pride.

And so we're left with the usual question, "What were they thinking?" Were they worried that the press-credentialed class would embarrass them with questions about a few episodes of ineptness in California, or revive again comparisons with a certain hurricane? Perhaps. Let's face it, after Katrina the agency has an understandable fear of anyone carrying a press card. Yet the news reports of FEMA's wildfire performance were primarily upbeat. Here was an agency on the mend. And why didn't FEMA reschedule the press conference so that adequate notice to the press was possible? The 15 minute warning they provided leaves an almost inescapable impression of trying to circumvent the press. Their explanation that

they were in a hurry to get the news out rings hollow -- would a few hours delay to allow the press to attend have made any meaningful difference? And finally, if in the end you were making it all but impossible for the press to attend in person, why not provide them with two-way telephone access? As it was, any journalist who was able to call in was only able to listen, not to ask questions.

What were they thinking? FEMA's bizarre explanations leave only one logical answer: not much. It's true, of course, the agency and its p.r. folks were distracted by the real need to put out real fires. I'm inclined to believe them when they label this affair a mammoth failure of judgment caused by exceptional pressure. Still, the Bush administration habit of creating false news has been among their more noticeable negative achievements. A list would include downright payola to journalists in exchange for happy news about administration programs such as No Child Left Behind; faked news videos pushing Bush priorities; a fake newsman in the White House press room gently tossing Dubya prefabricated questions. This administration's habit of knee-jerk dishonesty has infected everything, and perhaps it explains how casually FEMA went ahead with its *faux* news conference and felt quite literally "O.K." It's nothing new, really.