P.S. to the NEWS
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THE NEED FOR POLITICAL CLEARANCE

William Raspberry, the black columnist whose essays are always interesting and usually perceptive, has commented on the performance of Ben Vereen, the black who danced at the Frank Sinatra Gala the night before Ronald Reagan's Inauguration. The show played to a full house of 15,000 Republicans, plus national television.

Vereen's act was ye old time stereotype of the black-faced vaudeville dancer-singer, the only way blacks were allowed to perform for white audiences in the olden days. Expressing the reaction of most blacks, Raspberry was harshly critical of the way Vereen's act evoked memories that are better forgotten.

Vereen denied that his act was a put-down of blacks. He said "television sabotage" was the reason the TV audience saw only the black-face act itself but not his explanation of why he did it (which was to give a profound lesson in American history and to pay tribute to Bert Williams, the black performer who died in 1922).

Raspberry, who saw the show only on television, said Vereen should apologize (which he did) for his "out-of-context performance." Then Raspberry stuck the knife into Reagan supporters. What the TV audience saw, he said, was "a throwback darky, singing, grinning and cutting a rug to the unrestrained delight of rich, powerful white folk."

Raspberry's criticism of Vereen was well placed, but Raspberry's criticism of the Gala spectators was wrong. They weren't delighted by Vereen's act; their reactions ranged from embarrassment to incredulity.

Naturally they applauded Vereen. What did Raspberry expect them to do -- boo him? What else could a civilized white audience do but applaud after a talented black dancer finished his act?

But the audience was embarrassed and ill at ease. Typical audience comments were "what was the point of Vereen's act?" to "I sure was nervous all during that black minstrel act." Vereen's act was even more offensive to the live audience who saw it at first hand than it was to the television audience who saw only half of it out of context.

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How did it happen that the entertainment Gala of the official Inaugural ceremonies, sold to the faithful at $50 to $200 a seat and nationally televised at exorbitant prices, could have included such a political blooper?

The mistake was caused by the peculiar assumption of the decision-makers around Reagan that jobs can be turned over -- without regard to ideology -- to those who are professionally competent. Reagan and his associates brag that political beliefs will have no place in his administration.

So the Gala was turned over to Frank Sinatra, an entertainment professional, who produced a competent song-and-comedy show featuring star performers. The show was not accountable to any ideological oversight committee, and so the technical perfection of (for example) Grace Bumbry's voice was not a big enough fig leaf to conceal the political stupidity of Vereen's dance.

A Reagan-Republican clearance official should have had the authority to veto Gala segments which were politically inappropriate and to include segments which were relevant to the occasion. After all, the Inauguration festivities were first and foremost a political (not a social or business or show biz) event.

A smart oversight committee, for example, would have known that there was something radically defective when the only patriotic number was Frank Sinatra singing America the Beautiful. Even the most ardent Sinatra fans would concede that that song is not his style. Meanwhile, the magnificent Naval Academy choir sat silent, permitted only to join with the crowd in singing the National Anthem.

The failure of the Reagan Administration to require Frank Sinatra and Ben Vereen to make sure that their entertainment was in harmony with Reagan ideology is, unfortunately, only the mirror of similar mistakes in staffing the government itself. Reagan and his principal aides have bragged that politics will not be a factor in appointments.

They are making a fatal mistake. Running the government is not solely a business or professional job any more than the Inauguration Gala was solely an entertainment job. The political consequences cannot be ignored. If the Reagan Administration is staffed by those who think they can do their job isolated from ideology, then the Vereen mistake will be an unfortunate harbinger of more serious mistakes to come.

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