

## Letter From Air Force Two

## In Texas, Gore Tests His Messages

Vice President Gore was in the middle of a town meeting in San Antonio the other day when one of the participants got his tongue twisted while trying to describe a local after-school program for kids. The vice president, who knows what it feels like, jumped in to ease the embarrassment.

"You were probably up late watching Michael Jackson play basketball," Gore said in mocking reference to his own blunder two weeks ago when he confused the pop singer with the world's best basketball player the morning after the Chicago Bulls won the NBA title.

When you are the man who put "no controlling legal authority" into the political lexicon, it often doesn't take much to impress an audience with your sense of humor. But it was clear from the reaction of the audience that the people in the local YMCA enjoyed the moment almost as much as Gore himself.

The politician-with-a-sense-of-humor was just one of the personalities on display as Gore rambled through two days of events in Texas late last week that are part of his continuing education for the moment when he steps out of President Clinton's shadow and stands for the presidency on his own.

There was, of course, Gore the vice president, whose mere arrival in distant cities commands the kind of media attention that none of his potential rivals for the Democratic nomination in 2000 can begin to match. This Gore travels in a presidential style, flanked by administration officials (Labor Secretary Alexis M. Herman and Deputy Attorney General Eric Holder joined him at different stops) who rarely fail to say how much the president relies on him. Gore always attempts to appear humble when praised by subordinates.

The value of traveling on Air Force Two was evident at every stop. Banks of television cameras recorded his events in Houston, El Paso and San Antonio and appearances were timed to provide live coverage on the early evening news. His overnight stop in El Paso generated a banner headline in the El Paso Times, half a dozen stories and a front-page picture of Gore at an outdoor rally in 100-degree heat. Never mind that the story described the crowd as "surprisingly small." It's the pictures and headlines that count.

There was Gore the party cheerleader, who roused Texas Democrats at their state convention in San Antonio with what has become his standard political stump speech. The speech combines humor and sarcasm (aimed at the Republicans) with a partisan review of the past six years and a call to arms for the battles ahead. It is designed to show that Gore is not as stiff and wooden as his reputation (even though he long has been animated in his campaign oratory; his stiffness shows up in other settings). While the speech produced the reaction he and his aides had hoped for among party activists, Jay Leno and David Letterman may have more influence in defining Gore for the general population.

There was Gore the dispenser of federal largess. In Houston, he announced \$14 million in juvenile justice grants for the state and a couple hundred thousand for

the mayor's office, and pledged federal assistance "for the duration" for Texas agencies fighting wildfires throughout the drought-ridden state. In El Paso, he promised \$45 million for dislocated apparel workers and left the impression that the administration was giving Texas the funds to underwrite \$1.9 billion in school construction bond funds, even though the GOP-controlled Congress has not approved the program. In San Antonio, he announced more than \$80 million in grants for job training and welfare-to-work programs. Some of these grants for Texas had been announced, others aren't even ready to be dispensed. But to hear the vice president describe them, it's as if the checks are in the mail.

Befitting the politics of Texas, there was Gore the conservative Democrat who popped up at opportune moments. "God's hand has been on the United States of America," he said at one stop. At another, he spoke of the spirituality of the country and responded warmly to the apparent success of a "job-readiness ministry" that combines computer literacy with Bible study to help welfare recipients in San Antonio—the kind of program advocated by many conservative Republicans.

In brandishing his more conservative side, Gore conveniently left out some unpopular administration initiatives in the fight against crime. In Houston, he began to describe a "controversial" step the administration had taken. Gun control? Hardly. It was the administration's support for a significant expansion in the kinds of crimes that could draw the death penalty. As for the ban on assault weapons and support for the Brady Act to discourage handgun sales, Gore somehow managed to leave out those administration accomplishments.

Then there was Oprah Gore, the genial host of policy-oriented town meetings on crime, education and welfare reform. These were pioneered by Clinton in his 1992 campaign and Gore is using this period to hone his skills in a forum that combines serious talk about policy with the opportunity to show a relaxed and intimate style with potential voters.

The town meetings produced some of the most compelling moments of Gore's Texas tour, thanks in part to the participants themselves. One after another offered inspiring stories about efforts to reduce juvenile crime or transform their lives from welfare dependency to full-time employment. Their stories showed how far beyond the narrow partisanship of the debate in Washington many communities have gone in dealing with these difficult issues.

These town meetings also gave Gore ample opportunity to display a human and humorous side, something he and his aides have been working on intensively. In San Antonio, one mother struggling to stay off welfare spoke glowingly about the programs a local Boys and Girls Club provided for her children, including a field trip that day to see the vice president. "I've never been a field trip," Gore said. In El Paso, a young woman talked about a special program on robotics at her school that had given her classmates a chance to participate in a "robot rally" in Washington. "I'd have fit right in there," Gore joked.

—Dan Balz

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