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What were they thinking?

By Betsy Rothstein

Former President Bill Clinton recently lost his temper during an interview with Chris Wallace on "Fox News Sunday" in which Wallace questioned the former president about not having caught Osama bin Laden.

Joe Lockhart, former White House press secretary under Bill Clinton, founding partner with The Glover Park Group, a media relations firm: "Nine times out of 10 in politics it pays to stay above the fray and not stoop to the level of your accuser. This was the one in 10 that made sense. Sometimes a good verbal zinger can make the purveyors of partisan misinformation think twice before their next serving."

Democratic press secretary: "Just like George McFly standing up to Biff Tannen, Bill Clinton finally confronted his Republican bullies. He wasn't going to be pushed around the playground any more. Off camera, apparently Clinton was heard telling Chris Wallace, 'You mess with the Bill, you get the horns.'"

Republican press secretary: "[Clinton is thinking], 'If I don't rustle my feathers on this, I will never be a strong first lady.'"

Jonathan Grella, v.p. of public affairs, Edelman Public Relations; former press secretary to ex-Rep. Tom DeLay (R-Texas): "My sense is that he tried to kill two networks with one tantrum. He felt defensive about the ABC docu-drama and probably figured he'd get some mileage out of using Fox as his foil. He also is aware that, despite his stale status, his theatrics still drive coverage, not unlike Mrs. Spears-Federline."

C. Stewart Verdery, lobbyist, Monument Policy Group : "I hear that President Clinton has never liked the Wallace family: Chris, Mike, Rusty, Rasheed and especially that cousin Gromit."

Omarosa Manigault-Stalworth, former White House aide and former "Apprentice" star: "Outburst? That was not an outburst; that was passion!!

There is a difference. Howard Dean's famous yelp, that was an outburst. Clinton getting in Chris Wallace's face -- priceless!"

Samantha von Sperling, Manhattan-based etiquette and image consultant: "It was unfortunate that President Clinton lost his composure on national television. It is important to remain in control when doing interviews so that people continue to listen to the content of our thoughts rather than the tone of our voice. However, I admire his courage and unwavering conviction under scrutiny."

Jessica Cutler, a.k.a. Washingtonienne; former aide to Sen. Mike DeWine (R-Ohio): "I wouldn't call it an 'outburst.' It's basic PR 101: Answer the [expletive] question. If he had been evasive or tried to talk his way around it, he would have drawn even more criticism. Better to be perceived as defensive than look as if he's hiding something. That was the lesson we all took away from the Monica Lewinsky scandal."

Rick Fiori, political satirist: "First Tom Cruise jumping all over Oprah's couch, and now this. There is that old Christian saying that goes: A smart man knows the Bible is not true, but it takes a wise



man to believe it. It's the same thing with the Clinton legacy: a smart man knows most of it is not true, but it takes someone special to believe it. And Clinton really believes everything he says. Clinton's attempt to defend his legacy is a lot like communism -- on one level it sounds like a really good idea, but at the end of the day it's just not very practical."

Jack Quinn, president, Cassidy & Associates; former New York GOP House member: "Bill Clinton is thinking this is the last time that Rupert Murdoch tricks me into doing an interview with Fox ever again! He's thinking: Chris Wallace and the rest of these Fox News reporters are really foxy. I mean foxy as in cunning."

David Magleby, dean of College of Family, Home and Social Sciences; political science professor, Brigham Young University: "Time to fight back. I think his perception was Democrats generally and his administration specifically had been criticized on national security issues and it was time to fight back. So he was given a waist-high fastball and he swung at it."

Michael Goldman, political science professor, Tufts University; radio personality, Bloomberg Radio: "This was a contest between Fox and sly as a fox. As usual, the sly fox wins. I think [Clinton] knew exactly what he was doing. I think the whole thing was planned. It was brilliantly done."

To recommend an idea for "What were they thinking?" please contact Capital Living by phoning Betsy Rothstein at 202-628-8516 or send an e-mail to Betsy@thehill.com.