

Party Lines: *people, places and politics*

Bush loyalists add clout to Kuwaiti dinner

BY KEVIN CHAFFEE
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“I could program my show for the next six months with the people in this room,” master of ceremonies **Charlie Rose** said at the Kuwait-America Foundation’s dinner Wednesday night, indicating the presence of **Laura Bush, Condoleezza Rice, Karl Rove, Joshua B. Bolten, Samuel W. Bodman, Elaine L. Chao, Stephen J. Hadley, Michael Chertoff** and **Carlos Gutierrez** among other administration heavyweights in the crowd.

“This leaves me wondering,” the PBS chat show host joked, “just who is having dinner with the president?”

The brief moment of levity broke the ice for Bush loyalists who turned out for the long accepted, confirmed and reconfirmed gala event hosted by Kuwaiti Ambassador **Salem Al-Sabah** and his wife, **Rima**, arguably the capital’s most plugged-in diplomatic hosts.

It was clear from the taut faces and somewhat grim looks that few felt like partying in the wake of the conviction of I. Lewis “Scooter” Libby Jr. on perjury and obstruction of justice charges the previous day, to say nothing of attendant “fall guy” and pardon talk plus the brouhaha over fired federal prosecutors and the embarrassing medical care scandal at Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

“We’re not supposed to be saying anything about [the Libby case],” one nonetheless “disappointed” high-ranking White House official said, off-the-record. “The president doesn’t want us to.”



Photographs by James R. Brantley/The Washington Times

Kuwaiti Ambassador Salem Al-Sabah (above center) posed with first lady Laura Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice at the Kuwait-America Foundation’s dinner at his embassy Wednesday night. Project Hope President Dr. John Howe III is at right. Below, Rima Al-Sabah chatted with singer Randy Travis before his performance.

Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. **Peter Pace** didn’t flinch when asked if substandard care received by wounded Iraq war veterans at Walter Reed might be more widespread. “I don’t know, but we’re going to find out,” he said. And if it is, he added, “We’ll fix it.”

Political types without current portfolio had less problem speaking their minds in re Libby.

“I feel really sorry for him,” said **Fred Malek**, a former Nixon appointee. “It would have been better if he had taken the Fifth Amendment instead of talking.” Asked if that wouldn’t have looked like an admission of guilt, Mr. Malek remained adamant: “Better to be presumed guilty than what happened to the poor guy.”

Soothing lights, sumptuous flowers and gourmet fare (lobster, foie gras and veal piccata followed by a pink grapefruit meringue timbale) helped



ease tensions, as did the bipartisan and humanitarian cause: helping Basrah Children’s Hospital in Iraq with a \$1.5 million donation for equipment and

training overseen by Project Hope.

High-level corporate benefactors made up the lion's share of the non-political guest list and were rewarded with the best seats for their five- and six-figure gifts. **Rex W. Tillerson**, chairman and chief executive officer of ExxonMobil Corp., secured a place of honor next to Mrs. Bush. Dow Chemical chief **Andrew Liveris** made nice with Miss Rice as top executives from Chevron, Shell Oil, Conoco Phillips, Marathon Oil, Fluor and other companies spread out at tables alongside administration officials and other VIPs that included Justice **Anthony M. Kennedy**, Sen. **Ted Stevens**, Rep. **John D. Dingel** and D.C. Mayor **Adrian M. Fenty**.

"It's been 29 years, almost a generation, since a hospital has been built in Iraq. The country doesn't have a single state-of-the-art pediatric hospital," Mr. Al-Sabah told the crowd. Childhood cancer rates, he added, are "eight to 10 times higher than in the West."

A hush descended as Project Hope President **Dr. John Howe III** described the "chilling" health care catastrophe his organization hopes to alleviate in Basrah. "There are only two registered nurses in a hospital with 200 children," he said. "No IVs or lab tests are available. The cure rate for childhood leukemia is only 8 percent versus 92 percent in the West."

Mrs. Bush and Miss Rice added to the sense of urgency in their remarks as well.

"When our children aren't well we need the best health care available," Mrs. Bush said. "In Iraq, when children are sick, they need to get well in a hospital close to home."

Such scenarios are part of the "daily cost of tyranny on the lives and health of the children" of Iraq, Miss Rice noted before embarking on a defense of U.S. military presence there. "Staying the course," she said, "is a sign that we have not abandoned them, a sign we believe in their future."

After dessert the mood lightened once more when Grammy award-winning singer **Randy Travis** took to the stage to sing "Heroes and Friends" and other hits (never mind those lyrics about hookers and 18-wheelers in "Three Wooden Crosses"). "This place looks nothing like the Strawberry Festival where we played in Florida last night," he said with a wave to the black-tie guests in the splendor of the embassy's mosaic-filled Fountain Room.

The big surprise of the night came when Mr. Travis asked Mr. Bolten, who has a night-time guitar gig with a band called the Compassionates, to "come up and play something" with him.

"I'll do it if you tell me the chords," the momentarily flustered White House chief of staff said gamely enough before bounding up for a turn at "Forever and Ever, Amen" with girlfriend/band mate **Dede McClure** induced into joining in on vocals.



Photo by James R. Brantley/The Washington Times

Supreme Court Justice Anthony M. Kennedy and his wife, Mary, (above) were among the VIP guests picking up place cards at the entrance. White House Chief of Staff Joshua B. Bolten (below right) surprised guests and perhaps himself with an impromptu appearance with Randy Travis' band.



Photo by Vicki Pombo / Special to The Washington Times

"He didn't have a clue," Mr. Travis said after the applause died down. "Rima wanted me to put him on the spot, and he did a good job."

"We plotted it right at our table," Mrs. Al-Sabah affirmed. "I knew Josh was a terrific guitar player and he's a good sport as well."

Even Mr. Rove seemed buoyed by the surprise tour de force, though he pointedly refused to admit he needed any cheering up.

And perhaps it was true. As Mr. Bolten put it: "Karl Rove never needs cheering up."