

Benjamin C. West

Serving Two Masters

Personal account of the delicate balancing act performed by House Press Gallery directors in their role as mediators between the Members and the press.

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I remember we had a very colorful chairman around here by the name of Mendel Rivers, of South Carolina. And Mendel prided himself on being a southern gentleman. And one day we were having a hearing in the Armed Services Committee Room. And I knew his aide de camp quite well, Anita...again, the last name eludes me a moment. And she sort of motioned me to come up the rostrum. It's a half-hour preceding the hearing. And Chairman Rivers was there. And he knew me by name, actually. And he said, "What do you know about this reporter?" And he gave me the name. Well, the reporter had a story on the front page of the *Post* that morning, not all that complimentary of Mr. Rivers. And I've forgotten the project that was involved or the matter involved. And he says, "Well, what do you think of him?" And, well, I was always very careful about questions like that. Of course, I'm a fellow...I'm quite cognizant of the fact I'm serving two masters. And I'm definitely endeavoring to do it loyally, both directions. And I said, "Mr. Chairman," I said, "the only thing I can tell you about him is he's one of my constituents." And I had a big grin on. He says, "Well," he says, and he's pointing his finger, "I want you to know, I don't like him!" {laughter} Well, I don't know if I was supposed to evict him from the press table or not but...So it was just little duties like that, that I never anticipated this diplomatic role. I'm sort of an ambassador from one to the other.