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ON WASHINGTON; Beached

By MAUREEN DOWD
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It was cold and rainy as the Normandy invasion started, and nothing was going as planned.

As we hit the beaches, Helen Thomas was in the lead, charging off the aircraft carrier George Washington with toothbrush and tape recorder. Sam Donaldson provided air cover in a Chinook helicopter hovering over the English Channel. "General Hillary," as a British paper dubbed her, arrived on the field of battle with her hairdresser, Sylvan.

Never mind destiny. President Clinton had a rendezvous with Wolf Blitzer.

The boys of Pointe du Hoc scaled their cliff under German fire in bad weather on June 6, 1944, but the boys on the bus never made it to Pointe du Hoc at all on June 6, 1994. The White House press corps missed the President's speech because their helicopters turned back because of bad weather and the backup buses did not leave in time to get up the coast from the landing site at Le Havre.

The reporters, stranded at Colleville-sur-Mer, were in a panic. The Clinton lieutenants, who pride themselves on their high-tech virtuosity, said calmly that they would play a tape of the Pointe du Hoc speech. But when they put the tape in and Clinton began to speak, no words came out. "The sound," a White House official explained helpfully, "is coming later by bus."

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The fog of war had given way to the fog of White House amateurism. As yuppies retraced the steps of heroes, one thing was certain: Midway into the first term, the Clinton White House has not yet gotten the knack of smoothly moving around hundreds of grouchy journalists, who pay handsomely to be ferried by the Government.

With comic timing worthy of Waugh, the White House kept losing people. Tom Brokaw said he was two hours late for an interview with the President because the Army helicopter pilots delivering him, Sam Donaldson and Harry Smith to the aircraft carrier, where Clinton was spending the night, got lost and could not find the largest ship in the world. After flying aimlessly over the English channel for 45 minutes, the pilots got low on gas and had to return to the airstrip in Deauville, call the ship for coordinates and start again. (The Navy was vastly amused.)

Another day, the White House marooned 24 reporters and staffers in the misty British countryside for 12 hours, unable to figure out a way to get our group 100 miles from Cambridge to Portsmouth, the next stop on the President's schedule.

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A furious A.P. radio reporter was filing reports on a President he could only see on the telly in the Churchill pub, where the press had been dumped. White House aides paced the Tarmac, scanning the skies for a missing helicopter, and screamed into cellular phones with dying batteries.

I tried to call my boss in Portsmouth to warn him I would miss my deadline, but the instructions on the pay phone were in British. Sipping the Champagne ordered by the Paris Match reporter, I fantasized about replacing the corner dart board with the head of one of Clinton's prepubescent press-minders.

Things were no better in Paris. After the state dinner at the Elysee Palace, the photographers were told that there would be a photo opportunity by a bridge, where the First Couple would stroll "hand in hand" and gaze at the Eiffel Tower at midnight. (Take that, Paula Jones.)

But when the Clintons got out of their limousine near the Pont des Arts, it was not exactly an intimate moment. They were surrounded by about 40 people -- Bill staffers, Hillary staffers, the Secret Service and the French police. Security did not allow the American photographers off the bus, thus stymieing the scheme of the White House advance team to bathe the Clintons' bruised partnership in a little Paris moonlight. After a few confused seconds, the Clintons climbed back into the car and motored off for a tour of the Louvre.

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With the exception of the First Lady, a tidy traveler, the Presidential operation has the smell of a dormitory about it, with everyone crashing for exams. Each White House reflects the personality of its leader, and this President, immune to punctuality and discipline, will always have a Pigpen cloud of chaos around him.

What you see traveling with the Clintons is what you already know: He is learning. She is searching. He is learning to be Commander in Chief. She is searching for a personal style, and for a way to blend old rituals with new power.

At the end of the day in Normandy, Bill Clinton walked down to the beach with three veterans of Omaha Beach -- Joe Dawson, Walter Ehlers and Robert Slaughter. The tableau was appealing: the young President enjoying the company of the aging heroes. But suddenly the President's aides began tugging the veterans away, mid-conversation, so that Clinton could walk off at sunset down the beach in his dress shoes and have a preplanned meditative moment, with the bluffs on one side and the sea dotted with warships on the other.

Originally, the White House told photographers they were considering a "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" moment, where Clinton and children would throw flowers into the sea.

But they settled on "a moment of solitude." The President knew he was supposed to look reflective for the three cameras and dozen photographers who joined him. But after looking

soulfully out at the ocean for a moment, he seemed at a loss for what to do next, according to a photographer on the scene, who was scared that Clinton was about to mouth the words "What do I do now?" But then, spying the stones at his feet left by his advance staff to show him where his camera mark was, the President crouched down and began to arrange the stones into a cross. He gathered more stones to finish the cross, and then bent his head as though in silent prayer.

The White House aides were ecstatic. "Wasn't it great?" they asked reporters.

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