

Tales from the beat



Philip
Dine

Perhaps the vignettes below will offer useful insight into a journalist's thinking, and challenges, as you get our message out. Maybe they'll simply provide entertaining summer reading. Let me know.

The military helicopter contains an Army pilot, State Department counter-narcotics coordinator and me. We're flying low in southern Afghanistan's Helmand Province, a lawless region with a lunar-like landscape where Osama bin Laden planned 9/11. I'm reporting on the illicit drug trade—turning poppies into opium into heroin—that's funding the Taliban.

The pilot points out the window and tells me, "That's a poppy field down there. Would you like to land and take some pictures?"

"That would be great."

"All right. You have two minutes on the ground."

"Why two minutes?"

"Because al-Qaeda's watching these fields."

"Two minutes will be fine, Sir."

It's the first Teamsters convention where delegates, not the Mob, will choose the national officers. The Florida hotel's crawling with Feds, to ensure rules are followed.

The new trappings of democracy are reflected in competing chants for the candidates. But old habits die hard. When Joe Trerotola, New York's top Teamster, walks through the hallways, a unified staccato of "Joe T, Joe T" takes over; a sign of respect. He's 82 years old, 5-foot-5 and 130 pounds, but he is, let's say, connected.

As a new labor reporter in St. Louis who's talked my editors into sending me here, I'm under pressure to produce. One day, Joe T passes by, and I see my chance.

"*Giuseppe, come stai?*" I greet him in Italian learned from a lifeguard stint. Joe, who usually just glides by, makes a rare stop. "*Bene, bene, grazie.*"

The hallway hushes.

It's now or never.

I ask if he's a kingmaker; he gives me a colorful, detailed response. I can't pull out my notepad, lest he stop talking.

Teamsters are staring intently at me, wondering who the heck I am. What I'm wondering is, if dozens of reporters are watching but none speaks Italian, is this an exclusive?

I ask Joe T if the union made a devil's pact long ago with unsavory forces. His fabled anger flashes; that's my exit cue. I race to my room to write it all down before I forget it.

I'm in Albania covering the war in neighboring Kosovo. Albania's long rivaled North Korea as the world's most closed and mysterious country.

I've been here before, when it had a Stalinist president and

overflowing labor camps. I've learned some Albanian and I'm confident I know my way around.

One day, story already filed, I try the hotel's seafood buffet, filling my plate with fish and shellfish. It tastes really fresh, logical since Albania's on the Adriatic. When a waiter passes by, I gesture to my empty plate to check that the food was sufficiently cooked.

"Sir, the seafood is raw. In fact, some items are still alive. Once you've selected, you're supposed to bring it to the kitchen for cooking."

"Whoa! Are you kidding? They should put up a sign."

"I suppose they could. But Sir, you're the first person who's ever done that."

The union, unnamed here, is a great union, but I'm wonder-ing why I got on the roof with these guys.

Before its national convention in San Diego, I'd been tipped off that it was booking hotels being picketed by hotel workers. When I called union headquarters for comment, I was told to drop the story; no one would care.

Well, someone cared, because the wires picked my story up and newspapers splashed it across Page One.

Now, at this high-up reception, some burly delegates are muscling me toward the roof's edge. If they really disliked my story, I'm thinking, wouldn't a letter to the editor have sufficed?

As I'm wondering how this ends, a Midwest regional officer walks by and greets me by name. The men back off and I make a beeline (detect a pattern here?) for my hotel room.

In a dozen years of covering Congress, funniest thing I saw occurred after Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-MS) set up a panel of three senators to investigate the Clinton administration's handling of the deadly Waco incident. He wanted to bypass the Judiciary Committee, led by a too-moderate Republican chairman.

Addressing a roomful of reporters, to justify his selections Lott extensively praises each man's legal background before introducing Sen. Charles Grassley (R-IA) for initial remarks.

Grassley begins: "Senator, I'm not a lawyer."

Lott looks stunned. "You're not?"

"No."

Holding out hope, Lott presses him, "Well, what were you before you came to Washington?"

"I was a farmer."

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