

The Washington Times

March 6, 2002

Section: LIFE

PARTY LINES

Page: B08

Leaders unite at 'Celebration'

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Article Text:

Partisan politics took a back seat to patriotism at Ford's Theatre on Sunday night when a singing New York City police officer and five Olympic champions dazzled a who's who of Washington VIPs.

President Bush and first lady Laura Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney and Lynne Cheney, and the leadership of both chambers of Congress put aside squabbling over national security issues to laugh, marvel and groove at Ford's annual gala, billed an "American Celebration."

"David Copperfield does not take requests. ... He cannot make Sen. [Tom] Daschle disappear," gala host and "Frasier" star Kelsey Grammer told Senate Minority Leader Trent Lott as he and his nemesis - who had exchanged harsh remarks over the conduct of the war on terrorism last week - dissolved into laughter along with the rest of the audience.

Instead, Mr. Copperfield pulled Mr. Daschle up to the stage to assist in a "vanishing duck" trick. The Senate majority leader was a good sport - even walking back to his seat in slow motion to the theme of "St. Elmo's Fire."

It was all ad-libbed, with nary a single rehearsal. Mr. Daschle later revealed that he had been asked to participate only moments before the show began. "I didn't even think about saying no," he said.

Mr. Lott conceded that his Democratic foe had "handled it well."

"I'm glad it wasn't me," he said, breathing a sigh of relief.

Aside from comedic comity, there was much to celebrate when it was announced that philanthropist Catherine B. Reynolds had just given the theater a \$1 million challenge grant. Mrs. Reynolds' foundation recently withdrew a \$38 million pledge from the Smithsonian Institution after months of controversy over a proposed "Hall of American Achievement" exhibit.

"A few months ago, Catherine Reynolds surprised me with the good news," said Frankie Hewitt, artistic director of the 19th-century theater-cum-shrine where Abraham Lincoln was assassinated in 1865.

"No person in American history exemplifies our heritage of individual accomplishment more than Abraham Lincoln," noted Mrs. Reynolds, whose gift will be applied to the theater's live productions as well as its endowment.

Mr. Bush appeared rested and relaxed at his second Ford's gala. After taking center stage, he praised the event, calling it "a joyous celebration of the American spirit."

The fund-raiser and post-performance dinner at the Organization of American States always attracts a long list of top politicians and business titans. Guests included Secretary of Transportation Norman Y. Mineta; Sens. John B. Breaux and Bill Frist; Reps. John D. Dingell and Thomas M. Davis III; Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Richard B. Myers; Redskins owner Daniel Snyder and AOL Time Warner Chief Executive Officer Stephen Case.

The evening also honored Walter J. Hickel, former Alaska governor and secretary of the Interior, and his special assistant Ronald H. Walker with the Lincoln medal. Both are credited with helping to save live programs at the theater in 1969 after severe financial pressures threatened their elimination.

The entertainment, which will be aired on ABC later this year, featured Mr. Copperfield, singer Stevie Wonder, "NYPD Blue" star Dennis Franz, "West Wing" actor John Spencer, actress Kristin Chenoweth, pop star and actress Mandy Moore, gospel singer Yolanda Adams, tenor and NYPD officer Daniel Rodriguez, and country rock trio SheDaisy, from Texas.

As Mr. Rodriguez's voice soared during a rendition of "This Is a Moment," the screen flashed victory images of American athletes at the Salt Lake City Olympic Games last month. Five Olympic medal winners joined him on stage to an immediate standing ovation.

At the finale, all entertainers and guests joined in "God Bless America."

Mr. Franz, who plays a tough "cop's cop" on "NYPD Blue," said he missed a close friend's 50th birthday party to participate.

"I wanted to be part of this," he said. "It is a very special year for me and for the country."

**Caption:**

Vice President Dick Cheney waved to friends in the audience. Left: Performers John Spencer, Kristin Chenoweth and Kelsey Grammer lined up to greet Mr. Bush onstage after the performance. [2 Photos by Jessica Tefft/The Washington Times]

President Bush and first lady Laura Bush acknowledged the applause of guests after arriving at Ford's Theatre "American Celebration" gala. [Photo by Jessica Tefft/The Washington Times]

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**Record Number: 200203061213440032**