



Society of Environmental Journalists

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Beth Parke

April 8, 2014

Hon. Terrance W. Gainer, Sergeant-at-Arms, U.S. Senate
by e-mail terrance_gainer@saa.senate.gov

Dear Mr. Gainer:

The Society of Environmental Journalists is a professional group representing some 1200 members active in reporting on environment and energy. We are writing to express our deep concern about the March 28 incident in which Bloomberg BNA reporter Ari Natter was briefly detained in the hallway of the Russell Senate Office Building.

We certainly do appreciate your prompt apology for this incident, and we take it as an acknowledgement that this kind of thing should not happen and goes against the protocols of openness and civility that have long characterized the relationship between the Capitol and the working press.

We respect the right of public officials to decline to answer questions. We also understand that in the confusion, there may have been differing view of what actually happened. But several of our members or colleagues were actually eyewitnesses, and we believe the net effect could be a chilling effect on legitimate newsgathering. Hence this letter. It is extremely important that this kind of event be rejected and that it not become a norm.

Properly credentialed members of the House and Senate Press Galleries should not have to undergo ad hoc "background checks" -- much less be detained for trying to do their jobs of reporting the news. An ad hoc "background check" serves only to suggest that the Capitol Police might have been lax when they credentialed the reporter in the first place.

The Capitol Police normally do a fine job of keeping order -- and we know that can often be hard. Journalists want civility as much as the Capitol Police. Reporters should be able to go about their work confidently when they follow protocols, and not have to do so in fear of being detained when they have done nothing wrong.

These events take place in the context of an ongoing debate about the openness of government -- not only the legislative branch, but also the executive branch, as was the case in this incident. It is worth noting that the halls of the Capitol



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are one of the few places where reporters and officials can meet on equal grounds. It is one of the few remaining opportunities for journalists to have unfettered access to officials.

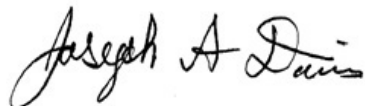
We hope you will do all you can through training, discipline, and directives to keep it that way.

Sincerely,

Beth A. Parke, Executive Director, SEJ



Joseph A. Davis, Director, SEJ Watchdog Project



CC:

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