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Turning the lens on White House photographers

Brian Fannin; THE WASHINGTON TIMES

"The toughest place to be a fly on the wall in the White House is in the Oval Office," explained Jeffrey Tuchman, director of "The White House: Inside with the President's Photographers." "There are no corners to hide in." At Thursday night's screening of the High Definition Television production at the American Film Institute, Mr. Tuchman's efforts to capture the White House photographers as they captured the president seemed very successful. The images are striking and clear, and all the dignity of the office comes stirringly alive in the juxtaposition of the expert photographers' work with the behind-the-scenes chronicle by the filmmaker who directed the Clinton biography, "The Man From Hope." You might ask why the AFI was putting on a TV show. Truth is, HDTV's clear, concise images look a lot like film. But it's not. Barry Rebo, of REBO Studio, was on hand to explain that HDTV is "the third generation of TV, after black-and-white and color. It has the resolution and visual impact of 35 mm film, but it's done completely electronically." He then went on to reveal that his studio is working on a documentary about Doctors Without Borders, the French group working at refugee camps in Uganda and Azerbaijan. Chronicling the history of a presidency is an important thing, and more technology can't hurt. But what about the subject?

Most guests at the reception following the screening were unflinchingly loyal to the chief executive. Partygoer Phil Blando summed up the feelings of the crowd with his comment that "the product sells itself. Anything with Bill Clinton in it is good." On a more speculative note, chief White House photographer Robert McNeely was grateful for "the total artistic freedom" he enjoys on the job. He started out "to get Bill Clinton elected," he said, but "went to the White House for the freedom to shoot what I want." The job does take its toll on the photographers' personal lives, Mr. McNeely noted, pointing out that the White House photographers weren't able to attend the screening because they were in Miami shooting the Conference of the Americas. "I've got to take a plane tomorrow morning to catch up with them. We've been all over the Mideast, Jakarta, Budapest, campaigning here. It keeps us busy. "But it wasn't bad to be taped in action. When you're a White House photographer, you're used to being around people and cameras all the time. It was even good because I love to ramble about photography, so doing it in front of a TV camera was no problem." "The White House staff," added Mr. Tuchman, "really went out of their way to help us." And the result, in clear, glorious not-film, is quite a success.