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## Who were those guys?

### Agents posed as journalists before visit

By KAREN NELSON  
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There was a whirlwind of activity in the days prior to President Bush's arrival at a home on the beach in Gautier last week, with government officials and Secret Service scouting a location and checking the neighborhood where Bush would stop.

The reason for all the fuss was kept a secret even from the family that received Bush. They didn't know it was prelude to a presidential visit until the day Bush arrived.

But one part of the preparation for the President's arrival involved two government agents posing as journalists.

Recounting the pre-visit days for WLOX and the Sun Herald, Jerry Akins, who received Bush, mentioned that on the Friday before Bush arrived, two men approached him identifying themselves as members of the media.

He said the men told him they were with Fox News out of Houston, Texas, and were on a "scouting mission" for a story on new construction. They took pictures inside Akins' house, which is under construction and looked up and down the road in the neighborhood.

Akins said he didn't think anything more about them partly because visits from strangers

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(Photo by John Fitzhugh)

President George Bush and Governor Haley Barbour speak to the media last week at Jerry Akins' home in Gautier. At left is a federal security agent. Akins, right, said he was contacted by people identifying themselves as news reporters in advance of the president's visit. After the visit, they identified themselves as government agents.

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increased exponentially as government agents and Secret Service arrived that Saturday, Sunday, Monday and Tuesday before the March 8 visit.

But after the president left Akins' home, the two men again approached Akins and let him know they were not media after all, but were with the governmental entourage.

Akins said the two showed him blue porcelain lapel pins that contained the Presidential seal and another government official confirmed the two were with the government entourage and not the media. Akins assumed they were Secret Service agents.

But a spokesman for Secret Service, under Homeland Security, said posing as a journalist is not something the agents typically do. He did suggest they might have been with the White House staff or a branch of the military, based on the description of the pins.

Fox News had no comment.

But Aly Colon, who deals with issues of ethics for the Poynter Institute, a school for journalists in St. Petersburg, Fla., said such a scenario undermines the public's trust of the media.

"I think when individuals who are not journalists pose as journalists, it creates, at the least, some confusion in the public's minds," Colon said. "The key to journalism is credibility. So what the public wants to be able to do is trust people and organizations who represent themselves as part of the journalistic community."

He said such misrepresentations might feed any perception among the public that some news organizations lie about their political ideologies or associations with businesses.

"When they see someone blurring the lines, it sets up a doubt," Colon said. "It's like someone misrepresenting themselves as a police officer or public official to seek out information. It begins to sow doubt in the minds of the people. They ask, 'Who am I dealing with here?'"

And he said they are less likely to trust a real journalist or photojournalist who presents a valid ID while legitimately covering a story.

Akins said he saw no problem with what happened and the government agents laughed about their fooling him. In the long run, he said, he'd rather have had a visit from the president than be on a segment of Fox News, anyway.



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