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Miers' gushing notes to Bush put currying favor in the spotlight

By Robin Abcarian
Los Angeles Times

Move over Eddie Haskell. Harriet Miers could teach you a thing or two about sucking up. Papers released earlier this month by the Texas state archives show a woman who admired the boss and wasn't afraid to show it, with puppy-dog cards and flowery notes in her own hand, often added to official typed correspondence.

"You are the best Governor ever — deserving of great respect!" Miers wrote to George W. Bush in a belated card for his 51st birthday. (Which is why the puppy on the front of the card has such a hangdog look.) At the bottom of the greeting card, she added, "At least for thirty days — you are not younger than me." In a flowery thank-you card, she wrote, "Hopefully Jenna and Barbara recognize that their parents are 'cool' — as do the rest of us. ... All I heard is how great you and Laura are doing ... Texas is blessed!"

Her strong words of praise did not end after her boss attained the White House (taking her with him.) This week, lawmakers released some of her recent speeches and other public remarks. As recently as June, she told White House interns what a fantastic editor the president is: "All those editing skills and you should think the president was a lawyer himself. He works so constantly."

Can flattery this blatant work?

Can you say Supreme Court nominee Harriet Miers? "Boy, is she good," says business consultant Richard Brenner of Chaco Canyon Associates in Boston. The little aside in the birthday card about their age difference is particularly impressive, he says.

"With that personal, almost private connection between the two of them, she is building a secret little tree house where they can both sit sometimes."

As simple as it might sound, currying favor is a complicated dance. It can be fraught with danger — not just for the employee, but for the boss and the workplace. In his 2000 book, "You're Too Kind: A Brief History of Flattery," Richard Stengel has a chapter called "Sucking Up to Caesar." Yes, it worked back then too.

"We like to think that the smarter a person is, the higher she ascends up the ladder of success, the less susceptible that individual is to flattery," Stengel writes. "In fact, the opposite seems to be the case. People of high self-esteem and accomplishment generally see the praise directed at them as shrewd judgment rather than flattery."

It doesn't always work, of course. And most people in positions of power like to believe they have built in, ah, baloney detectors. But no boss is entirely immune to blandishments from underlings.

"I have been a victim of false flattery, and I have been a false flatterer," says Peter Guber, the former chief of Sony and Columbia studios. "Sometimes I recognized it after I've said it, or even when I've said it. I've basked in false praise."

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If art lies in concealing art, unfortunately in Miers' case, says Guber, "the curtain has been pulled back." Not that he judges her poorly for her efforts. "The reality is she was trying to set an emotional tone for the relationship. I don't think that's necessarily always bad. It's a question of whether it's sincere."

Bush was a famously average student and has never pretended to be part of any intellectual elite. (In fact, he has honed his reputation as a regular guy over his years in public service.) So when former White House speechwriter David Frum wrote on his blog that once he'd heard Miers describe Bush as "the most brilliant man she'd ever met," tongues across the political spectrum were set wagging: Could she really mean it? And if she was sincere, did this reflect poorly on her judgment?

In this day and age, perhaps the American centers of what social scientists call "ingratiation behavior" are Hollywood and Washington, D.C., two places where flattery is not only the coin of the realm, but even when it's an obvious counterfeit, is still valuable to the recipient.

Management professor Nan Langowitz, director of the Center for Women's Leadership at Babson College in Wellesley, Mass., takes exception to the characterization of Miers' communications with Bush as brown-nosing. She detects, as others have in the opposition to the Miers nomination, a whiff of sexism, or at least a well-entrenched double standard.

"You are seeing an example of where the professional woman is taking time to manage the relationship directly herself rather than delegating it to an assistant, but she's obviously not going to get credit for it, she's going to get slammed. I'd give her credit for writing the handwritten letter herself. Most professional men send those kinds of notes, but they often have their secretaries write them.

"Some leaders need a lot of stroking and demand it of their subordinates and they quickly figure out that's the way to get ahead: 'Gee, you shot a great golf game. Gee, you're the greatest.' What's the difference? They are both examples of kissing up to the boss. But because she put hers on a puppy-dog card as opposed to the bar after the golf game, hers is considered inappropriate."

In L.A., however, there is virtually no such thing as inappropriate flattery. "Sucking up in Hollywood is almost, you know, redundant," says Terry Press, the marketing chief for DreamWorks studio. "Getting a movie made is one long chain of suck-up," says Press, who thinks she might have gotten a little further had she been only a little more ingratiating.

Call it what you will: apple polishing, brown-nosing, boot-licking, currying favor, toadying, managing up or just plain sucking up, it can pay off. For some, though, behaving this way comes at a moral cost.

Ted Mitchell, 49, former president of Occidental College and a former vice president of the Getty Trust, is chief executive of the NewSchools Venture Fund, which invests in improving K-12 education. You can almost hear him wince as he recalls his behavior when he was an assistant education professor at Dartmouth College nearly 20 years ago.

"I remember running errands for my department chair, walking in downtown Hanover [N.H.] to buy her a six-pack of diet 7Up. I thought, this isn't right, and I am going to stop. It was kind of a moment of truth for me."

In his various jobs, says Mitchell, he has been the object of flattering behavior by subordinates. "Anybody who is in any kind of management position comes across people who really do try a variety of tactics for themselves or for their units by getting in good with the boss. What's hard as a manager or leader is to try to differentiate what is genuine affection that doesn't have an expectation of reciprocity."

In fact, says consultant Brenner, ingratiation behavior does not just fool the boss sometimes, it also creates an unpleasant work environment for the flatterer's peers.

Still, writes Stengel, "Evolution seems to have ultimately favored sycophantic weenies over self-reliant bruisers. ... Smooth talk trumps brute strength every day of the week. Survival of the fittest is not survival of the strongest, but sometimes of the most unctuous."



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