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Bush's Stealth Attack

Surprise Medals for Gulf War Architects

By Laura Blumenfeld
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The Persian Gulf War may be over, but President Bush is still launching surprise maneuvers, this time on his closest aides.

The leading civilian architects of the gulf war, national security adviser Brent Scowcroft, Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney and Secretary of State James Baker, said they were shocked yesterday morning when Bush called them to the podium in the White House East Room to receive the Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian award.

"They kept it pretty tight, didn't they?" said an unusually effusive Baker after the ceremony. "No leaks! No leaks! [I had] no idea."

One observer said Baker was so dumbfounded that his wife, Susan, nudged him with her elbow so he would get up and accept the award.

Bush made the surprise announcement after he bestowed the Medal of Freedom on Gen. Colin Powell, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf, whose names appeared on the program. He also conferred the Presidential Citizens Medal on eight advisers who played key roles during the gulf crisis.

The president grinned and said the ceremony would not be complete without honoring three additional Americans who contributed to the success of the war.

Then he fastened the gold medals around the flustered trio's necks.

"As the president was putting the medal on, he said to me, 'Surprised you, didn't I?'" Cheney said as he

filed out of the room with his wife, Lynne. Lynne Cheney said she was in on the secret but didn't let on because the president asked her not to.

Cheney allowed that he had been getting "all these weird messages." He and Scowcroft put their heads together on Monday to try to figure out what the president was up to.

They failed to uncover his stealth plan.

"I was astonished," said Scowcroft. "I'm going to wear [the medal] all day. Forever."

White House Press Secretary Marlin Fitzwater said the president thought it would be a "personal and intimate" way to honor his top advisers.

Before the ceremony, a four-piece Marine band greeted some 250 military officers, diplomats, advisers and family members in the White House entrance hall. The ambassadors from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia sat together, beaming, in the second row. Baker turned around and cracked a joke that sent up a whoop of laughter from the two ambassadors and their allied coalition colleagues from Egypt, the United Kingdom and France.

This was homecoming day for the Persian Gulf War all-stars.

"I think history will show that we had a great team here, at the Pentagon, out at Langley and in many other departments of this government," said an upbeat, tan Bush. "It was a team effort and I will always be grateful to those who were at my side."

The president was also clearly grateful to have his wife at his side.

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After Bush fumbled with Powell's medal, he handed his gold-rimmed glasses over the general's head to Mrs. Bush. She donned the presidential specs and fastened the ribbon. The crowd erupted in laughter.

The president had his serious moments too. He said this Fourth of July will take on special meaning as Americans celebrate the return of their sons and daughters from the Middle East.

"The young men and women we've welcomed home from the gulf returned to a nation far different than the one they left. They come home to a country that is confident and proud, an America that is sure of itself and strong," Bush said.

Recipients of the Presidential Citizens Medal, awarded for exemplary deeds of service to the nation, were: Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger; Deputy Secretary of Defense Donald Atwood; Deputy National Security Adviser Robert Gates, who is also Bush's nominee to head the CIA; Richard Haas, special assistant to the president for national security affairs; Adm. David Jeremiah, vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; CIA Deputy Director Richard J. Kerr; Undersecretary of State Robert M. Kimmitt; and Undersecretary of Defense Paul D. Wolfowitz.

The liveliest recipient in the room was Schwarzkopf, who bounded up the stairs to receive his medal.

"Well done, Norm!" the president said as Schwarzkopf returned to his seat, the medal swinging close to his broad neck.

After the ceremony, Schwarzkopf flashed a thumbs-up sign as he left the White House grounds. He rode off into the hazy sun in a white Lincoln.