

MEDIA POWER IN POLITICS

Fourth Edition

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*For Pamela et al.,
who must master media power
in the twenty-first century*

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Second, many reporters, again correctly, recognize the mistakes made under the rules of lapdog journalism and see the need to tell people about candidate foibles that affect public performance. Third, the press assumes that it is giving the public what it wants and expects, more or less. Television is the primary factor here, having served not only as handmaiden and perhaps mother to the age of personality politics but also conditioning its audience to think about the private lives of "the rich and famous."

Less convincing, however, are a number of other assumptions about elections and the character issue made by the press. Some journalists insist upon their obligation to reveal everything of significance discovered about a candidate's private habits; to do otherwise, they say, is antidemocratic and elitist.¹ Such arguments ignore the press's professional obligation to exercise reasonable judgment about what is fit to be printed or aired as well as what is most important for a busy and inattentive public to absorb. Other reporters claim that character matters so much because policy matters so little, that the issues change frequently and the pollsters and consultants determine the candidates' policy stands anyway.

Perhaps most troubling is the almost universally accepted belief that private conduct affects the course of public action. Unquestionably, private behavior can have public consequences. However, it is far from certain that private vice inevitably leads to corrupt, immoral leadership or that private virtue produces public good. Indeed, the argument can be made that many lives run on two separate tracks (one public, one private) that should be judged independently. In any event, a focus on character becomes not an attempt to construct the mosaic of qualities that make up an individual but rather a strained effort to find a sometimes manufactured pattern of errors or shortcomings that will automatically disqualify a candidate. . . .

Not surprisingly, politicians react rather badly to the treatment they receive from the modern press. Convinced that the media have but one conspiratorial goal—to hurt or destroy them—the pols respond by restricting journalists' access, except under highly controlled situations. Kept at arm's length and out of the candidate's way, reporters have the sense of being enclosed behind trick mirrors: they can see and hear the candidate, but not vice versa. Their natural, human frustrations grow throughout the grueling months on the road, augmented by many other elements, including a campaign's secrecy, deceptions, and selective leaks to rival newsmen, as well as the well-developed egos of candidates and their staffs. Despite being denied access, the press is expected to provide visibility for the candidate, to retail his or her bromides. Broadcast journalists especially seem trapped by their need for good video and punchy soundbites and with regret find themselves falling into the snares set by the campaign consultants—airing verbatim the manufactured message and photoclip of the day. The press's enforced iso-

lation and the programmed nature of its assignments produce boredom as well as disgruntlement, yet the professionalism of the better journalists will not permit them to let their personal discontent show in the reports they file.

These conditions inevitably cause reporters to strike back at the first opportunity. Whether it is emphasizing a candidate gaffe, airing an unconfirmed rumor, or publicizing a revelation about the candidate's personal life, the press uses a frenzy to fight the stage managers, generate some excitement, and seize control of the campaign agenda. Media emotions have been so bottled and compressed that even the smallest deviation from the campaign's prepared script is trumpeted as a major development. . . .

Does press frustration, among other factors, ever result in uneven treatment of presidential candidates, a tilt to one side or the other, further helping to foster attack journalism? In other words, are the news media biased? One of the enduring questions of journalism, its answer is simple and unavoidable: of course they are. Journalists are fallible human beings who inevitably have values, preferences, and attitudes galore—some conscious and others subconscious—all reflected at one time or another in the subjects or slants selected for coverage. To revise and extend the famous comment of Iran-Contra defendant Oliver North's attorney Brendan Sullivan, reporters are not potted plants. . . .

. . . [P]ress bias of all kinds—partisan, agenda setting, and nonideological—has influenced the development of junkyard-dog journalism in covering presidents and presidential candidates. But ideological bias is not the be-all and end-all that critics on both the right and left often insist it is. Press tilt has a marginal effect, no more, no less.

Two Cases of Attack Journalism in the 1988 Presidential Election: Dukakis and Quayle

Michael Dukakis's 1988 mental-health controversy is one of the most despicable episodes in recent American politics. The corrosive rumor that the Democratic presidential nominee had undergone psychiatric treatment for severe depression began to circulate in earnest at the July 1988 national party convention. The agents of the rumormongering were "LaRouchies," adherents of the extremist cult headed by Lyndon LaRouche, who claims, among other loony absurdities, that Queen Elizabeth II is part of the international drug cartel.²

Shortly after the Democratic convention, the Bush campaign—with its candidate trailing substantially in the polls—began a covert operation to build on the foundation laid by the LaRouchies. As first reported by columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak,³ Bush manager Lee Atwater's lieutenants asked outside Republican operatives and political consultants to call

their reporter contacts about the matter. These experienced strategists knew exactly the right approach in order not to leave fingerprints, explains Steve Roberts of *U.S. News & World Report*:

They asked us, "Gee, have you heard anything about Dukakis's treatment? Is it true?" They're spreading the rumor, but it sounds innocent enough: they're just suggesting that you look into it, and maybe giving you a valuable tip as well.⁴

Many newspapers, including the *Baltimore Sun* and the *Washington Post*, at first refused to run any mention of the Dukakis rumor since it could not be substantiated.⁵ But on August 3 an incident occurred that made it impossible, in their view, not to cover the rumor. During a White House press conference a correspondent for *Executive Intelligence Review*, a LaRouche organization magazine, asked Reagan if he thought Dukakis should make his medical records public. A jovial Reagan replied, "Look, I'm not going to pick on an invalid." Reagan half apologized a few hours later ("I was just trying to be funny and it didn't work"), but his weak attempt at humor propelled into the headlines a rumor that had been only simmering on the edge of public consciousness.

Whether spontaneous or planned, there is little doubt that "Reagan and the Bush people weren't a bit sorry once it happened," as CNN's Frank Sesno asserts.⁶ The Bush camp immediately tried to capitalize on and prolong the controversy by releasing a report from the White House doctor describing their nominee's health in glowing terms.⁷ But this was a sideshow compared with the rumor itself. The mental-health controversy yanked the Dukakis effort off track and forced the candidate and then his doctor to hold their own press conference on the subject, attracting still more public attention to a completely phony allegation. False though it was, the charge nonetheless disturbed many Americans, raising serious doubts about a candidate who was still relatively unknown to many of them. "It burst our bubble at a critical time and cost us half our fourteen-point [poll] lead," claims the Dukakis staff's senior adviser, Kirk O'Donnell. "It was one of the election's turning points; the whole affair seemed to affect Dukakis profoundly, and he never again had the same buoyant, enthusiastic approach to the campaign."⁸

As is usually the case, the candidate unnecessarily complicated his own situation. Until events forced his hand, Dukakis stubbornly refused to release his medical records or an adequate summary of them despite advance warning that the mental-health issue might be raised. But the press can by no means be exonerated. While focusing on the relatively innocent casualty, most journalists gave light treatment to the perpetrators. In retrospect, several news people said they regretted not devoting more attention to the

LaRouche role in spreading the rumor, given his followers' well-deserved reputation as "dirty tricksters."⁹

Overall, one of the most important lessons of the Dukakis mental-health episode is that caution must be exercised in reporting on presidential campaign rumors. "The media are really liable for criticism when we get stampeded by competitive instincts into publishing or airing stories that shouldn't be on the record," says National Public Radio's Nina Totenberg. "We were stampeded on the Dukakis story, and we should never have let it happen."¹⁰

The perils of vice-presidential candidate Dan Quayle became perhaps the most riveting and certainly the most excessive feature of 1988's general election. For nearly three weeks, coverage of the presidential campaign became mainly coverage of Quayle. Most major newspapers assigned an extraordinary number of reporters to the story (up to two dozen), and the national networks devoted from two-thirds to more than four-fifths of their total evening-news campaign minutes to Quayle. Combined with the juicy material being investigated, this bumper crop of journalists and stories produced, in the words of a top Bush/Quayle campaign official, "the most blatant example of political vivisection that I've ever seen on any individual at any time; it really surpassed a feeding frenzy and became almost a religious experience for many reporters." Balance in coverage, always in short supply, was almost absent. First one controversy and then another about Quayle's early life mesmerized the press, while little effort was made to examine the most relevant parts of his record, such as his congressional career.

It was the big-ticket items about Quayle—his National Guard service, the alleged love affair with Paula Parkinson, and his academic record—that attracted the most attention. At the convention, wild rumors flew, notably the false allegation that Quayle's family had paid fifty thousand dollars to gain him admission to the Guard. It was unquestionably legitimate for the press to raise the National Guard issue, although once the picture became clear—Quayle's family did pull strings, but not to an unconscionable degree—some journalists appeared unwilling to let it go. Far less legitimate was the press's resurrection of a counterfeit, dead-and-buried episode involving lobbyist Paula Parkinson. As soon as Quayle was selected for the vice-presidential nomination, television and print journalists began mentioning the 1980 sex-for-influence "scandal," despite the fact that Quayle had long ago been cleared of any wrongdoing and involvement with Parkinson. "When Quayle's name came up as a vice-presidential possibility, before his selection, the word passed among reporters that Bush couldn't choose Quayle because of his 'Paula problem,'" admitted one television newsman. "It was the loosest kind of sloppy association . . . as if nobody bothered to go back and refresh their memory about the facts of the case."

Some of the rumors about Quayle engulfing the press corps stretched even farther back into his past than did the womanizing gossip. Quayle's academic record was particularly fertile ground for rumormongers. By his own admission, the vice-presidential nominee had been a mediocre student, and the evidence produced during the campaign suggests that mediocre was a charitable description. At the time, however, a rumor swept through Quayle's alma mater, DePauw University, that he had been caught plagiarizing during his senior year. This rumor, which cited a specific teacher and class, was widely accepted as true and became part of the Quayle legend on campus.

Within a day of Quayle's selection as the vice-presidential nominee, the rumor had reached the New Orleans GOP convention hall. Hours after the convention was adjourned, the *Wall Street Journal* published a lengthy article on Quayle's problems, noting unsubstantiated "rumors" of a "cheating incident."¹¹ This story helped to push the plagiarism rumor high up on the list of must-do Quayle rumors, and soon the press hunt was on—for every DePauw academic who had ever taught Quayle, for fellow students to whom he might have confided his sin, even for a supposedly mysterious extant paper or bluebook in which Quayle's cheating was indelibly recorded for posterity.

As it happens, the plagiarism allegation against Quayle appears to have a logical explanation, and it was apparently first uncovered by the painstaking research of two *Wall Street Journal* reporters, Jill Abramson and James B. Stewart (the latter a graduate of DePauw, which fortuitously gave him a leg up on the competition). Abramson and Stewart managed to locate almost every DePauw student who had been a member of Quayle's fraternity, Delta Kappa Epsilon, during his undergraduate years. Approximately ten did remember a plagiarism incident from 1969 (Quayle's year of graduation), and the guilty student was in fact a golf-playing senior who was a political science major and a member of the fraternity—but not Quayle. The similarities were striking and the mix-up understandable after the passage of nearly twenty years. What was remarkable, however, was the fact that an undistinguished student such as Quayle would be so vividly remembered by the faculty. Abramson and Stewart also uncovered the reason for this, and even two decades after the fact their finding makes a political science professor blanch. Quayle was one of only two 1969 seniors to fail the political science comprehensive exam, a requirement for graduation. (He passed it on the second try.) Abramson's conclusion was reasonable: "Jim Stewart and I believed that people had confused Quayle's failure on the comprehensive exam with his . . . fraternity brother's plagiarism, especially since both events . . . occurred at the same time."¹² Unfortunately for Quayle, however (and also for the public), this explanation did not reach print, even though it might have provided a fair antidote to the earlier rumor-promoting article. Instead, the assumption that Quayle must have

cheated his way through college solidified and led to other academically oriented rumors and questions, among them how a student with such a poor undergraduate record could gain admission to law school.

An observer reviewing the academic stories about Quayle is primarily struck by two elements. First, despite the windstorm of rumor that repeatedly swept over the press corps, there was much fine, solid reporting, with appropriate restraint shown about publishing rumors, except for the original *Journal* article mentioning plagiarism and some pieces about Quayle's law-school admission. Of equal note, however, was the overwhelming emphasis on his undergraduate performance. As any longtime teacher knows, students frequently commit youthful errors and indiscretions that do not necessarily indicate their potential or future development. Thus, once again, the question of balance is raised. How much emphasis should have been placed on, and precious resources devoted to, Quayle's life in his early twenties compared with his relatively ignored senatorial career in his thirties?

Consequences

Having examined some of the truths about feeding frenzies, we now turn to their consequences. Attack journalism has major repercussions on the institution that spawns it—the press—including how it operates, what the public thinks of it, and whether it helps or hurts the development of productive public discourse. The candidates and their campaigns are also obviously directly affected by the ways and means of frenzy coverage, in terms of which politicians win and lose and the manner of their running. The voters' view of politics—optimistic or pessimistic, idealistic or cynical—is partly a by-product of what they learn about the subject from the news media. Above all, the dozens of feeding frenzies in recent times have had substantial and cumulative effects on the American political system, not only determining the kinds of issues discussed in campaigns but also influencing the types of people attracted to the electoral arena.

One of the great ironies of contemporary journalism is that the effort to report more about candidates has resulted in the news media often learning less than ever before. Wise politicians today regard their every statement as being on the record, even if not used immediately—perhaps turning up the next time the news person writes a profile. Thus the pols are much more guarded around journalists than they used to be, much more careful to apply polish and project the proper image at all times. The dissolution of trust between the two groups has meant that "journalists are kept at an arm's length by fearful politicians, and to some degree the public's knowledge suffers because reporters have a less well-rounded view of these guys," says Jerry terHorst, Gerald Ford's first press secretary and former *Detroit News* reporter.¹³ The results are easily seen in the way in which presidential elec-