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Under the Watchful Eye: Managing Presidential Campaigns in the Television Era grew out of a three-day symposium, "Campaigning for the Presidency," that was held December 5-7, 1991, at the University of California, San Diego. A public television special was aired about the symposium, which featured a wide-ranging discussion of campaign experiences and anecdotes. Participants, pictured above, included (from left to right) Gary Hart, national campaign director for George McGovern's 1972 presidential campaign; Susan Estrich, campaign manager for Michael S. Dukakis's 1988 campaign; Joseph Napolitan, director of advertising for the 1968 Hubert H. Humphrey campaign; Horace Busby, a speech writer for the 1964 Lyndon B. Johnson campaign; John Chancellor, commentator for NBC News and moderator of the televised symposium discussion; Robert Finch, Richard Nixon's national campaign manager in 1960 and an informal adviser to Nixon's 1968 campaign; Edward Rollins, national director of Reagan-Bush '84; Richard Kleindienst, national director of field operations for the Barry Goldwater for President Committee in 1964 and Nixon for President Committee in 1968; and Stuart Spencer, chairman of the 1976 Gerald Ford campaign and a campaign deputy for Ronald Reagan's 1980 presidential campaign.

UNDER THE WATCHFUL EYE

Managing Presidential Campaigns
in the Television Era

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1988, Jesse Jackson, garnered the best press, while the most conservative of the four national party nominees, Dan Quayle, received the worst.²⁷

More essential to understanding press bias are the nonideological factors. Owing to competition and the reward structure of journalism, the deepest bias most journalists have is the desire to get to the bottom of a good campaign story. Indeed, pack journalism is more of a factor than bias in prompting all media outlets to focus on the same developing "good story" and encouraging them to adopt the same slant.

A related nonideological bias is the effort to create a horse race where none exists.²⁸ News people whose lives revolve around the current political scene naturally want to add spice and drama, minimize the boredom, and increase their audience. Runaway elections such as in 1984 inevitably find the press welcoming a new face (Hart)²⁹ or trying to poke holes in the campaign of the heavy favorite (Reagan).

In their quest to avoid bias, reporters also frequently seize on nonideological offenses such as gaffes, ethical violations, and campaign finance problems. These "objective" items are intrinsically free from partisan taint and can be pursued with the relish denied the press on "hot button," party-polarizing issues. Finally, other human, not just partisan, biases are at work. Whether the press likes or dislikes a candidate is often vital. Former Arizona Governor Bruce Babbitt, for instance, was a press favorite and enjoyed favorable coverage both as governor and presidential candidate in 1988. Conversely, Richard Nixon, Jimmy Carter, and Gary Hart were roundly disliked by many reporters and were given much unfavorable coverage.

In sum, then, press 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.³⁰

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,³¹ 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.³²

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.³³ 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.³⁴ 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.³⁵ 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."³⁶

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."³⁷

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."³⁸

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.³⁹ 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 mention-

ing 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 newsmen. "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."⁴⁰ 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

- 1989.
7. Jim Gannon, *Detroit News*, interview with author, Charlottesville, Va., September 28, 1989.
 8. David S. Broder, *Behind the Front Page* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 238-239.
 9. Ted Koppel, interview with author, Washington, D.C., January 5, 1990.
 10. Steven Roberts, *U.S. News & World Report*, interview with author, Washington, D.C., August 18, 1989.
 11. Novak interview.
 12. Mark Shields, interview with author, Washington, D.C., September 22, 1989.
 13. See the journalists quoted by John B. Judis, "The Hart Affair," *Columbia Journalism Review* 25 (July/August, 1987): 21-25.
 14. Roberts interview.
 15. Michael Barone, *U.S. News & World Report*, interview with author, Washington, D.C., September 7, 1989.
 16. American Society of Newspaper Editors, *The Changing Face of the Newsroom* (Washington, D.C.: ASNE, May 1989), 33; William Schneider and I. A. Lewis, "Views on the News," *Public Opinion* 8 (August/September 1985): 6-11, 58-59; and Robert Lichter, Stanley Rothman, and Linda S. Lichter, *The Media Elite* (Bethesda, Md.: Adler and Adler, 1986). Note, however, that the Lichter sample was probably weighted disproportionately toward the most liberal segment of journalism. See Robert M. Entman, *Democracy without Citizens: Media and the Decay of American Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 49-50.
 17. See Dom Bonafede, "Crossing Over," *National Journal* 21 (January 14, 1989): 102; Richard Harwood, "Tainted Journalists," *Washington Post*, December 4, 1988, L6; Charles Truehart, "Trading Places: The Insiders Debate," *Washington Post*, January 4, 1989, D1, 19; and Kirk Victor, "Slanted Views," *National Journal* 20 (June 4, 1988): 1512.
 18. "Roe v. Webster," *Media Monitor* 3 (October 1989): 1-6.
 19. Richard Harwood, "A Weekend in April," *Washington Post*, May 6, 1990, B6. See also David Shaw, "Abortion and the Media," (four-part series), *Los Angeles Times*, July 1, 1990, A1, 50-51; July 2, 1990, A1, 20; July 3, 1990, A1, 22-23; July 4, 1990, A1, 28-29.
 20. "Post Haste," *New Republic* 201 (December 4, 1989): 9-10. *Post* editors forbade employees from engaging in this practice after the first reported occurrence of it, but to no avail.
 21. The importance of the agenda-setting function is discussed throughout Shanto Iyengar and Donald R. Kinder, *News That Matters: Television and American Opinion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988). See especially the conclusions reached on 4, 33.
 22. David Whitman, "Who's Who Among the Homeless," *New Republic* 199 (June 6, 1988): 18-20. See also *Washington Post*, April 19, 1989, D10.
 23. David Gergen, "The Message to the Media," *Public Opinion* 7 (April/May 1984): 5-6.
 24. Patrick J. Buchanan, "Pundit vs. 'Re-pundit' on Writers' Rights and Reasons," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, December 29, 1988, A14.
 25. Michael J. Robinson and Maura Clancey, "General Election Coverage: Part 1," *Public Opinion* 7 (December/January 1985): 49-54, 59.
 26. See Robert S. Lichter, Daniel Amundson, and Richard E. Noyes, "Election '88 Media Coverage," *Public Opinion* 11 (January/February 1989): 18-19, 52; and Eleanor Randolph, "CBS Hanging Tough on Vice President," *Washington Post*, February 13, 1988, A15.
 27. See Robert S. Lichter, Daniel Amundson, and Richard E. Noyes, *The Video Campaign: Network Coverage of the 1988 Primaries* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1988).
 28. This is sometimes termed "structural bias."
 29. See, for example, William C. Adams, "'84 Convention Coverage," *Public Opinion* 7 (December/January 1985): 43-48.
 30. Dennis King, *Lyndon LaRouche and the New American Fascism* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1989). See especially 121-122.
 31. Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, "Behind Those Dukakis Rumors," *Washington Post*, August 8, 1988, A13. Reporters from six major news organizations (all three networks, the *Washington Post*, *U.S. News & World Report*, and the *Los Angeles Times*) told us they had been contacted by Bush operatives about the rumor, and they knew of colleagues at other outlets who had also been called. See also Thomas B. Rosenstiel and Paul Houston, "Rumor Mill: The Media Try to Cope," *Los Angeles Times*, August 5, 1988, 1, 18.
 32. Roberts interview.
 33. See Edward Walsh, "Dukakis Acts to Kill Rumor," *Washington Post*, August 4, 1988, A1, 6.
 34. Frank Sesno, interview with author, Charlottesville, Va., September 27, 1989.
 35. Gerald M. Boyd, "Doctor Describes Bush as 'Active and Healthy,'" *New York Times*, August 6, 1988.
 36. Kirk O'Donnell, telephone interview with author, June 29, 1990.
 37. Dennis King, in *Lyndon LaRouche*, 122, commented upon "the usual [media] reluctance to cover anything relating to LaRouche."
 38. Nina Totenberg, telephone interview with author, October 4, 1989.
 39. The network Quayle coverage on evening news shows, August 18-27, 1988, compiled from Vanderbilt University's *Television News Index and Abstracts* (Nashville, Tenn., August 1988), was as follows:

Network	Quayle stories	Quayle minutes	Lead ^a minutes	Total coverage ^b
ABC	22	49:50	35:00	85.5%
CBS	20	42:50	32:40	67.5
NBC	18	38:20	30:20	68.2

^a "Lead" means the first item on the evening news.

^b Coverage of campaigns.