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Presidential Politics and the Press

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Abstract
As the Tet offensive wound down early in March 1968 with staggering losses dealt the North Vietnamese invaders, President Lyndon B. Johnson flicked on one of his White House television sets and heard CBS anchorman Walter Cronkite declare the Vietnam war to be "mired in stalemate." Johnson reportedly turned, visibly shaken, to an aide and said, "It's all over." By month's end, LBJ announced his decision not to seek reelection, in order, he said, to devote his energies to negotiating peace in Vietnam.

No single vignette more graphically symbolizes the power of the press—or at least that of its most popular anchorman—in modern America. From the early days of the republic, however, journalists' capacity to influence political events has been more commonly asserted than documented. Today it remains debatable how, and how much, news coverage shapes public opinion, but no one doubts that from the nation's beginning, American journalists have made their presence felt, especially during presidential election campaigns. [excerpt]

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As the Tet offensive wound down early in March 1968 with staggering losses dealt the North Vietnamese invaders, President Lyndon B. Johnson flicked on one of his White House television sets and heard CBS anchorman Walter Cronkite declare the Vietnam war to be "mired in stalemate." Johnson reportedly turned, visibly shaken, to an aide and said, "It's all over." By month's end, LBJ announced his decision not to seek reelection, in order, he said, to devote his energies to negotiating peace in Vietnam.

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This essay will examine the changing role of the press in relation to American politics since the late 18th century. It will show how journalists have influenced political events, and how presidents and presidential candidates have sought to manipulate the press to shape public opinion.

Before the Revolution, when newspapers began publishing in America's seaport cities, the press was neither an independent nor an important political force. Most journalists viewed themselves as passive observers of the politics rather than as active reporters, or as advocates of a particular viewpoint. Steven Botein's pioneering research articles on this subject, an important example of which appears in The Press & the American Revolution, ed. by Bernard Bailyn and John B. Hench, have since been integrated into book-length scholarship on the American press.

Thomas C. Leonard's The Power of the Press: The Birth of American Political Reporting follows Botein in showing how American journalists assumed a new and more aggressive role beginning in the 1760s, in response to the Stamp Act crisis and other controversies between the colonists and the British government. Editors shed their reputation as "meek mechanics," and, by criticizing Parliamentary policies, helped to prepare Americans for independence.

American editors never turned back the clock. In the last three decades of the 18th century, the role of the journalist gradually became more openly partisan. Some of this transition is traceable in contributions to Newsletters to Newspapers: Eighteenth-Century Journalism, ed. by Donovan H. Bond and W. Reynolds McLeod, and to Frank Luther Mott's still unsurpassed synoptic history, American Journalism.

George Washington's two terms as president marked a watershed in US newspaper writing. Although Washington's elections were uncontested, domestic and foreign policy differences among members of his cabinet soon spilled over into Congressional disputes and, inevitably, into partisan politics at the grass roots.

From the beginning, Washington's allies used the press to build popular support for the Federalist program. A Federalist newspaper, The Gazette of the United States, began publishing in 1789 and proved to be a reliable administration organ.

Federalists did not control the press, however. A nascent opposition led by Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson and Congressmen James Madison also subsidized editors, such as Philip Freneau, who shared their resistance to the economic, social, and foreign policy stands of the Washington regime. Donald Stewart's massive The Opposition Press of the Federalist Period documents the rise of Jeffersonian journalism, while Noble Cunningham's The Jeffersonian Republicans; The Formation of Party Organization, 1789-1801 more succinctly describes the Jeffersonians' special efforts in 1796 and 1800 to establish newspapers committed to their cause. Both studies detail the increasingly aggressive partisanship of editors during the election of 1796, and the significant contributions of newspaper writings to Jefferson's narrow election victory in 1800. Lewis Leary's That Rascal Freneau offers useful information on an important Jeffersonian editor.

Roughly 100 newspapers—weekly, biweekly, and daily—were published in the mid-1790s. Mortality rates were high, but new papers were established as politicians found the money to subsidize them. A 1792 act of Congress, setting low postage rates for newspapers and permitting the free exchange of papers among editors, encouraged an expanded network of newspapers, as did the increasingly intense rivalry between Federalists and Jeffersonian Republicans.

Editors were invariably emphatic and often shrill in their advocacy. In 1800, Federalist newspapers portrayed presidential candidate Jefferson as a leveler and an atheist, while Republican newspapers assailed President John Adams for raising taxes and curbing free expression through the Sedition Act of 1798. Although there is no way to measure the impact of such polemics,

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that in a democratic society—and particularly so in a decentralized system spread over an enormous land mass—newspapers were indispensable to people who shared an interest and sought to advance it. Political parties were one among many associations that newspapers served. At a time when Americans viewed elections as critically important to their future, political newspapers wielded special influence. Allan R. Pred’s *Urban Growth and the Circulation of Information* offers a modern scholarly explication of this theme.

Directed at strongly partisan audiences, most 19th-century newspaper writing was exhortative and polemical. The newspaper press in young America functioned essentially as a cheerleader and advocate for politicians, not as a purveyor of “objective” news.

One prominent journalist, Francis Preston Blair, exemplified the best and worst tendencies of his breed. A gifted polemict who by 1831 was part of President Jackson’s inner circle of advisers, Blair was hailed by admirers as the “Toledo Blade,” a reference to his slashing style of writing. To political enemies, he gave no quarter. Blair’s career is intelligently chronicled in William E. Smith’s *The Francis Preston Blair Family in Politics* and in a more recent biography, Elbert B. Smith’s *Francis Preston Blair*. His work as editor of the preeminent Jacksonian paper, *The Globe*, is more succinctly described in Volumes 2 and 3 of Robert V. Remini’s *Andrew Jackson*.

Anti-Jacksonian editors were comparably tart, if not necessarily more successful as Blair. Choice examples of the scabrous prose leveled against Jackson in the 1828 presidential campaign are excerpted in Remini’s *The Election of Andrew Jackson*, Glyndon G. Van Deusen’s *Thurlow Weed; Wizard of the Lobby*, and in Mott’s book, previously mentioned.

Newspaper writing during the pre-Civil War era was not always combative, even in presidential election years. Almost all editors, however, acted as hired guns for the parties that helped subsidize them. Two works that describe how early newspapers acted as instruments of parties are Ronald P. Formisano’s *The Transformation of Political Culture: Massachusetts Parties, 1790s–1840s*, and Carl E. Prince’s *New Jersey’s Jeffersonian Republicans: The Genesis of an Early Party Machine*.

Prince cites the printing contracts offered to reliable journalists by parties controlling the executive and legislative branches of government, as well as the postmasterships, collectorships, and clerkships made available to needy editors who wrote the right kind of prose. Formisano shows how party politicians tied newspapers and post offices into a network of political patronage that served a sophisticated party network.

During election campaigns—particularly presidential election campaigns—editors could be counted on to highlight the stakes of the contest and champion the “true cause.” Equal time on “news” pages for the opposition was as inconceivable as criticizing the endorsed nominee. Editors were so partisan, and perceived as so essential to partisan success, that one scholar, Richard Rubin, recently observed that “the most important editors in this period were actually politicians wielding newspapers.”

Probably the best work explaining editorial partisanship on a national scale is Culver H. Smith’s *The Press, Politics, and Patronage. Robert V. Remini’s Martin Van Buren and The Making of the Democratic Party*, and the same author’s three-volume biography, *Andrew Jackson*, are also helpful in delineating the importance of editors to party fortunes.

Remini shows how Jacksonian editors made life miserable for President John Quincy Adams with their unceasing references to the “corrupt-bargain” with Henry Clay that, at least in their view, had wrongly gained Adams the presidency. Van Buren’s collaboration on Jackson’s behalf with *Richmond Enquirer* editor Thomas Ritchie—uniting the planters of the South with the “plain republicans” of the North—has become one of the most celebrated episodes of 1820s political history. Both men worked effectively to spread the Jacksonian message in new and established papers across the nation.

Once in office, Jackson continued to nurture a growing newspaper network as part of his political organization. Jackson rewarded loyal editors with printing contracts and jobs in the bureaucracy and, after breaking with Vice President John C. Calhoun, established a new and more reliable organ in Washington under the direction of Kentuckian Francis Preston Blair. As indicated earlier in this essay, Blair served Jackson well during the election of
1832, in which Old Hickory routed Kentucky's Henry Clay. Blair's *Globe* also provided essential help to Jackson during his subsequent fight for the "removal of deposits" from the Bank of the United States, and to Vice President Van Buren when he ran for the presidency in 1836.

Four years later, the Whigs turned the tables on the Jacksonians, in large measure by orchestrating an unprecedented media blitz on behalf of a retired military man, William Henry Harrison. What historians have called the first "image" campaign in US political history has been intelligently dissected in such works as Robert Gundersen's *The Log-Cabin Campaign*, Glynond G. Van Deusen's biographies of Weed and Horace Greeley, and, more recently, in Richard Kluger's *The Paper*, a superb history of the *New York Herald Tribune*.

Whigs used a wide array of gimmicks in 1840, including many special campaign newspapers, to depict Harrison as a military hero and a defender of the "old republican" cause—qualities that were not coincidentally shared by the phenomenally popular former president, Andrew Jackson. Incumbent President Van Buren was caricatured in Whig newspapers, including Horace Greeley's campaign sheet, *The Log Cabin*, as out of touch with the people, given to spending sprees on fine wines and fancy goblets at White House dinners. This, during a time of economic depression, was calculated to impress voters with the importance of throwing the rascals out. It worked; Harrison won a landslide victory.

If the press reached a kind of apogee as an instrument of politicians in 1840, it must be remembered that newspapers continued to serve as press agents for candidates throughout the 19th century. James K. Polk's election in 1844, Abraham Lincoln's victories in 1860 and 1864, and William McKinley's successful race against William Jennings Bryan in 1896 all shared at least one common quality: the winning candidate was backed by a network of partisan newspapers that did not hesitate to exaggerate their favorites' virtues or distort the opposition's record. The emergence of "objective journalism," traced in such works as Dan Schiller's *Objectivity and the News*, was not yet a predominant force in political writing.

Despite the partisanship of most papers during this period, not all newspaper writing was hackwork. As Kluger shows in *The Paper*, Horace Greeley of the *New York Tribune*, James Gordon Bennett of *The New York Herald* and others prospered in New York City by offering a better product than ever before presented to a mass American audience. In Bennett's case, changes included a new emphasis on reporting news fairly and completely, not only on politics, but also on crime, business, social life, and foreign affairs.

Probably the most celebrated editor of the mid-19th century, Greeley was a vigorous (and sometimes venomous) partisan, but he was nobody's flack. Kluger shows that Greeley pioneered a humanistic approach to journalism. He sought to enlighten, elevate, and inform readers as well as to persuade them. Greeley often let his personal views affect his reporting of the news, especially in presidential election years. Nevertheless, he offered a more serious and literate approach to the journalistic enterprise than most editors, and thereby helped push journalism forward.

Several of Greeley's competitors contributed to the transformation of the press by
downplaying partisanship in reporting news. Most of the "penny papers" that emerged in the 1830s and 1840s, according to Michael Schudson, claimed political independence. In *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers*, Schudson provides a persuasive explanation of the rise and success of the cheaper and less political papers. He also offers insights into the rise of James Gordon Bennett, perhaps the most innovative journalist of his era. Bennett's mentor and later his main rival, James Watson Webb, is the subject of a competent biography by James L. Crouthamel. Crouthamel's *James Watson Webb* is particularly good on the newspaper revolution in New York State, and on Webb's political machinations.

A press not controlled by parties made politicians nervous. Indeed, by the 1850s, as Thomas C. Leonard notes in *The Power of The Press*, the political system was increasingly stressed by sectional issues, and grew less stable because the politicians no longer managed the flow of information to leading papers. Technology's contribution to this development is helpfully delineated in Daniel J. Czitrom's *Media and the American Mind*. Politicians could no longer effectively downplay sectional conflicts, which indeed were exacerbated by sensational events and equally sensational reportage during the 1850s and the election of 1860.

Editors nonetheless remained helpmates to politicians in most of the country throughout the 19th century, albeit more commonly in small towns than in burgeoning cities. The Democratic and Republican parties subsidized many community newspapers well into the 20th century. To judge by the partisan commentary these organs provided, the parties got their money's worth. According to one account by Keith Melder, small-town weeklies (the majority of them affiliated with a party) numbered nearly 15,000 at their peak, in about 1915.

Following the Civil War, the nature of the news business evolved further, as newspaper magnates like Joseph Pulitzer took advantage of communications improvements to get more news, faster, to legions of readers in the nation's growing cities. Newspapers became less shaped by politicians than by the demands of competition for circulation and advertising, a subject treated thoughtfully in George Juergens's *Joseph Pulitzer and The New York World*. The no-toriuous "yellow press" of the 1890s reflected the intense competition between the chains of newspapers run by Pulitzer and his chief rival, William Randolph Hearst, himself the subject of an excellent biography, *Citizen Hearst*, by W.A. Swanberg.

During the Progressive Era (1900–1918), the nation's most influential papers continued to express opinions about politics and elections, but they published less partisan propaganda. As Richard Rubin explains in *Press, Party, and Presidency*, Progressive Era journalism was dominated by a war on "corruption" in business and government; allegiance to party became a subordinate concern. Except during the New Deal, voter identification with parties has steadily declined throughout this century.

Although the emergence of a more professional press (as traced in Leonard, Schudson, Schiller, and other works) is not the only factor in this development, the decline of party has created an opening for politicians to use the media in new ways—particularly to establish and reinforce an attractive image that will sway voters. In the 20th century, however, the party and press have not been the primary vehicles for that image-making. Favorable stories published in nonprofit papers, effective paid political advertising, and intense attention to stage-managing what will appear on television have increasingly preoccupied presidential contenders and their campaign managers.

One of the first presidents to recognize the power of manipulating the media for his own political purposes (and to act effectively on his presumption that what the press reported mattered) was Theodore Roosevelt. John Tebbel and Sarah Watts, in *In the Press and the Presidency*, describe Roosevelt's two terms as a watershed in presidential relations with the press.

Roosevelt felt that to enact his program he needed mass support, and perceived the press as his vehicle for achieving it. Not only did Roosevelt make a great deal of news as president, he leaked inside information to favored reporters, held prototypical press conferences, and actually ran trial balloons by reporters before publicly proclaiming his support for a particular candidate or program. The best single treatment of Roosevelt and the press is George Juergens's *News From the White House: The Presidential-Press Relationship in the Progressive Era*. For a thought-

ful if not fully persuasive argument that William McKinley deserves credit as the progenitor of the modern press-presidency relationship, see Robert C. Hilderbrand's *Power and the People: Executive Management of Public Opinion in Foreign Affairs, 1897–1921*. Both authors view the growing importance of foreign policy issues as part of a trend toward activist presidents and increasingly influential central government.

Not until Franklin D. Roosevelt's election in 1932 did the nation have another president who grasped the full potential of using the press where possible (and of going around it when necessary) to enact his program and win elections. Many sources, including the intelligent surveys of Richard Rubin, and Tebbel and Watts (cited above), have summarized Roosevelt's relations with the press. It is only in two book-length studies, however, Graham J. White's *FDR and the Press*, and Richard Steele's *Propaganda in an Open Society: The Roosevelt Administration and the Media, 1933–1941*, that a fully nuanced picture of Roosevelt's masterful leadership emerges.

White and Steele show how FDR reopened the White House doors to newsmen who had been essentially ignored during the Republican ascendancy of 1921–33. Roosevelt not only generated an enormous amount of news (and like his cousin Theodore, did not hesitate to leak information to certain reporters), he also held regular press conferences and built a vast publicity machine within the federal government. On the whole, Roosevelt had a better press than is generally recognized. He also did not hesitate to go over the heads of hostile print journalists by speaking directly to the public via radio. No president, with the possible exception of Ronald Reagan during his first term, has ever dominated a medium of mass communication as Franklin Roosevelt did.

Rubin observes that "in his manipulation of the print press, and particularly in his use of radio, Roosevelt opened new channels of political information. He established a faster, more centralized and more direct circuitry between the mass public and the presidency than possible before him and used the unique personal qualities of radio to deeply penetrate into a vast new listening audience."

Because FDR was so effective, the power of the press actually diminished—though after his death, the relationship between press
and politicians would again change profoundly.

The advent of television turned previous conventional wisdom about the press and its role in politics into mush. Television has dramatically altered the way politicians—especially presidents—connect with voters. It has undermined, as radio did not, the primacy of print in the reportage of news, and it has created a whole new arena for conveying images advantageous to political candidates.

The emergence of this new medium radically changed the political playing field—much to the chagrin of historians like Richard C. Wade. Writing in American Heritage magazine in 1983, Wade blamed television for much of what he perceives to be wrong with contemporary American politics. In “How the Media Seduced and Captured American Politics,” Wade argues that before television, political parties mattered to presidential candidates, and so did frequent contact with voters. Today, Wade says, candidates need not work their way up through the ranks before presenting themselves for high office. They need not make many speeches to traditional party constituencies or, in many cases, develop their own themes. Political consultants and media experts dominate campaigns, and their deftly contrived “pseudo-events” (to use a term coined by Daniel Boorstin in his classic work, The Image) and paid commercials dominate what voters learn about them and their views.

Wade cites the disorientation experienced by veteran political writer Theodore H. White, who in 1960 pioneered a new kind of inside reporting on presidential campaigns—and who by 1980 “left the campaign trail and went home to watch it all on television,” because that is where he concluded the action was.

Wade’s analysis has been echoed in hundreds of “op-ed” pieces, scholarly articles, and popular books. There is little doubt that television news is today the single most important influence on what Americans think about politics and political candidates. Just how dominant—and to what end—is a complex and much debated topic.

A vignette from Theodore White’s America in Search of Itself illuminates television’s increased significance in US presidential campaigns since 1950. In 1956, White recalled, there had been just seven reporters in New Hampshire on the final weekend of the Democratic presidential primary, being contested there by Tennessee Senator Estes Kefauver. (Kefauver’s main rival for the Democratic nomination that year, Adlai Stevenson, chose not to campaign in New Hampshire.) ABC sent no reporter to New Hampshire; CBS and NBC sent in television crews for a quick news bite, “but they had soon left.” Presidential politics in the 50s, as for the previous half century, were covered by a small, clubby group of reporters who were more inclined to summarize candidate public speeches than to report on their private stratagems, much less their personal feelings or indiscretions.

Twenty-four years later, during the New Hampshire Primary of 1980, the three main networks sent nearly 500 reporters and technicians to cover that event—and in 1988, the numbers were vastly increased because of the explosion of cable TV outlets and local stations with satellite hookups.

Not only did the television newscasters vastly increase their commitment to covering presidential politics after 1956, politicians came to see network news coverage as the single most important factor in achieving electoral success. White quotes one staff member from Ronald Reagan’s 1980 campaign for president: “The evening news is the ball game. That’s all there is to it.”

Numerous writers have traced the growth of this influence. David Halberstam’s The Powers That Be, a brilliant composite study of four major news organizations, includes a trenchant analysis of the rise of CBS news and the paradoxes of power. Halberstam shows that veteran CBS news anchor Walter Cronkite was so concerned about his ability to influence public opinion on politics that he imposed limitations on what he could show or say on the evening news. Among the many contributions of Halberstam’s powerful book is its inside look at how network news came to shape what politicians do to make news. The Powers That Be contains shrewd character portraits and provocative interpretations on almost every page.

Among scholars, Austin Ranney has written perhaps the most challenging work in Channels of Power: The Impact of Television on American Politics. Part of the growth of TV’s influence, Ranney explains, relates to the sheer growth of television ownership. In 1947, fewer than 10 percent

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of American homes had TV; by the 1970s, 95 percent of American homes had television sets—more than had cars, telephones, or bathtubs. Because Americans watch a lot of television in general, it does not surprise Ranney that increasing numbers of people watch TV to get political news or that, according to polls, they trust TV news more than printed news.

Unfortunately, says Ranney, television offers a kind of Plato’s Cave of political reality, in which the networks take cues from leading metropolitan daily newspapers and the wire services about which stories are current, and then provide highly selective accounts of politicians’ words and deeds. Pictures rather than thoughtful analysis “drive” television news, says Ranney, and undermine the process by which voters have access to the real story about presidential candidates. Ranney concedes that public television does better than the networks in interviewing candidates and exploring issues. He concludes fairly, however, that PBS lacks the audience or the influence of the commercial networks.

Ranney’s argument about television news as a step backward in journalism has been echoed by Martin Schram in a more readable book, *The Great American Video Game*, which focuses attention on the presidential campaign of 1984. Schram offers particular insight on the current symbiosis between television news and the people it covers. Politicians need good television coverage, and the television journalists need good “visuals” to convey to their viewers. Hence the ascendency of media events, such as visits to schools to emphasize politicians’ concern about public education, or to toxic waste dumps to certify their interest in the environment. That a candidate might actually have taken policy positions contradictory to the implications of pseudo-events arranged for the cameras (as print reporters noted about various Ronald Reagan campaign stops in 1984) seems not to matter.

One prominent political reporter, Hedrick Smith of *The New York Times*, argues in *The Power Game* that Ronald Reagan has brought the politics of image-making to new levels of sophistication and success. The press is able to note but not to thwart stage-managed campaigning; Smith sees this as a lamentable part of contemporary political reality. As evidence for his contention, Smith cites a powerful critique of Reagan’s 1984 campaign for reelection broadcast by CBS reporter Lesley Stahl. Pictures of bunting, balloons, and carefully orchestrated demonstrations were linked in Stahl’s long report with her bluntly worded account of the Reagan managers’ determination to ignore substantive issues. After Stahl’s story ran, a White House official called her at CBS—to thank her. “Lesley,” Smith quotes the aide as saying, “when you’re showing four and one-half minutes of great pictures of Ronald Reagan, no one listens to what you say.”

If Wade, Ranney, and Schram offer revealing views of television news coverage at its most superficial, Smith captures a TV journalist doing her job but coming up short. Absent from such work, according to critics, is any consideration of viewers who, as voters, usually know when they are being conned. The assumption that viewers are childlike in their susceptibility to manipulation—an implicit thesis in Keith Blume’s *The Presidential Election Show*—is simplistic and inappropriate. Choices are influenced much less by the image on the TV screen than by voters’ “comfort level” with candidates and their sense of optimism about the direction in which the country is moving. Moreover, if telegenic qualities were essential to political success, US historians would be writing about President John Lindsay, President Birch Bayh, or President John Connally, instead of such notably untelegenic presidential characters as Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, and Jimmy Carter.

Other observers, such as Philip Seib in *Who’s In Charge?,* acknowledge television’s preeminent influence in shaping voter preferences. But Seib rejects the notion that television exercises a hypnotic force on viewers. He argues that the continuing tension between opportunistic politicians and professionally ambitious journalists (both print and television) ultimately yields a reasonable version of reality for the viewer/reader/voter to absorb.

Whatever the merits of each perspective, polls consistently show that television is the primary source of news about presidential campaigns for most Americans, and that how television covers presidential politics is itself controversial.

Evidence indicates that television mattered in presidential politics as early as 1952, with Richard Nixon’s “Checkers” speech and the rather primitive television advertis-
ing campaign devised by Dwight Eisenhower's associates. It was not until John F. Kennedy's televised debates with Vice President Nixon in 1960, however, that the distinctive nature of the medium became a leading topic of discussion. Almost every account of that election cites Kennedy's effective performance in front of the cameras as critical to his narrow success in November. "Without TV," Marshall McLuhan would write, "Nixon had it made." In his pathbreaking 1964 book Understanding Media, McLuhan argued that Nixon was "too hot" for television, while Kennedy exuded a "coolness" that played well on the tube.

By launching his famous manifesto that the medium is the message, McLuhan revolutionized perceptions of what TV was and what it could do. Joe McGinniss's inside look at a more successful Nixon campaign, The Selling of the President, 1968, applied McLuhanite analysis, and in the process, vividly captured the changing nature of presidential campaign strategy. The consultants and media managers surrounding the "new" Nixon understood television as Nixon and his 1960 managers had not. They directed Nixon's successful election bid by keeping him from the rough and tumble of campaigning as much as possible, and shrewdly crafting television commercials to appeal to viewers' emotions. The national press, according to McGinniss, could not lay a glove on a presidential candidate whose every move seemed programmed.

Whether TV was the main reason for Nixon's victory over Democrat Hubert Humphrey in 1968 (which is the burden of McGinniss's book) is not clear. But it is incontestable that since 1968, politicians have made image shaping a central preoccupation during presidential campaigns.

In 1972, Nixon's Rose Garden strategy, combined with beautifully choreographed summits in Moscow and Peking, proved sufficient to crush the error-prone candidacy of antiwar Democrat George McGovern. The supposed favorite of the journalists, McGovern got much more critical copy than Nixon, mostly because McGovern was campaigning vigorously, and hence, was subject to stumbling over himself.

That Nixon in '68 and '72 enjoyed a more favorable press than did his political opponents is not an article of conservative faith.
power structure and a “quiescent mass loyalty” to middle-of-the-road politics.

A more fundamental critique of television news addresses the nature of the medium itself. Joshua Meyrowitz, in No Sense of Place, portrays television as preternaturally destructive, hence responsible for the failings of political leaders across the ideological spectrum. Because television reveals politicians, warts and all, he suggests they have lost “their ability to play many facets of the high and mighty roles of traditional leaders.” Evidently influenced by a succession of failed presidencies, Meyrowitz’s argument seems dated in the “Age of Reagan.”

Peter Stoler blames television for “selecting the sensational” and for encouraging people to think that journalists are overly aggressive and mean-spirited. In The War Against the Press, however, Stoler offers a stout defense of the print media’s work on election campaigns, and urges a more, not less, aggressive press. He simply does not like television.

Most press watchers are less interested than Meyrowitz and Stoler in bashing television news than they are in examining what journalists could be doing better. In Behind the Front Page, a thoughtful inside look into the way reporters do their jobs, David Broder suggests that journalists too often fail to portray the bigger picture behind specific campaign tactics and occurrences. He cites the specter of Watergate behind Edmund Muskie’s celebrated shedding of tears in Manchester, New Hampshire, in 1972, and the setup of George Bush by Ronald Reagan’s forces in Nashua in 1980, at a time when Reagan was pulling ahead of Bush in the polls.

Brookings Institute scholar Stephen Hess, in his most recent edition of The Presidential Campaign, is bothered more by the typical reporter’s fixation on “horse race” writing. He believes journalists should write more about issues in presidential elections. This argument also was made in a collection of substantive essays on the media and presidential politics in the ’70s. Race for the Presidency, edited by James David Barber, offers no fodder for those, like Efron, who believe that the press slants news. Rather, it suggests that the media are readily manipulated by designing candidates—a thesis that journalists stoutly reject. The essays in Race for the Presidency make other dubious assertions, including the claim that leading political journalists are not particularly knowledgeable about issues, but they are nevertheless often on target.

Another valuable collection, albeit more recently assembled and more narrowly focused, is Media and Momentum, ed. by Gary R. Orren and Nelson W. Polsby. Like the authors of Race for the Presidency, the contributors to Media and Momentum often sharply criticize the way the press defines its responsibilities during presidential campaigns. Most of the authors seem disgusted that journalists take the New Hampshire primary so seriously. (One contributor thinks it “laughable” that so small and homogeneous a state should have such an impact on the nominating process in each party.) Emmett H. Buell’s essay, a content analysis of five newspapers’ coverage of the 1984 New Hampshire primary, shows that the local press is less prone to stress the “horse race” aspects of presidential politics than the major metropolitan dailies, and thus is more likely to be fair to underdogs.

Other contributors to Media and Momentum examine how “responsible” the wire services have been in reporting on the candidates. One of the collection’s more positive conclusions asserts that, on the whole, the press provides plenty of information for voters to make an informed choice.

This is also the major judgment of Michael J. Robinson and Margaret A. Sheehan in their book, Over the Wire and On TV: CBS and UPI in Campaign ’80. The authors dismiss charges that the press is biased, or that its coverage trivializes the campaign. Their main criticism of contemporary television reporting is that the medium seems to require network journalists to provide a hook for each political story, so that campaign reports end with a catchy phrase, even if the story does not readily yield one.

Other works that reject the notion that television news is slanted include C. Richard Hofstetter’s Bias in the News: Network Television Coverage of the 1972 Election Campaign (a study undertaken in response to Vice President Spiro Agnew’s celebrated attack on the “liberal media”), and Hess’s The Presidential Campaign, cited above. Hess does conclude that the growing power of the networks demonstrates the transformation of the American body politic from a “party democracy” to a “media democracy.”

One aspect of this “media democracy” that disturbs some observers, including such veteran press defenders as The New York Times columnist Tom Wicker, is the increasing tendency of the press to focus on questions of character rather than issues or ideas. The examples of Delaware Senator Joseph Biden and former Colorado Senator Gary Hart, each of whose campaigns suffered mortal wounds in 1987 after massive press coverage of their respective pecadilloes, are often cited.

In the absence of a strong party system, however, it is not easy to see how matters could be different, or—considering the specific facts entailed in those two cases—that respectable news operations had overstepped their appropriate function. As a New York Times editorial late in 1987 put it: “The public, no longer content for the parties to present the nominees for President, wants a race, a trial by fire. When candidates are no longer vetted by professional pols, the public depends on scrutiny from the media eye.”

Whether the press is or is not investigating stories that deserve such widespread attention (and Broder’s book generally vindicates the job that the print media is now doing in presidential politics), reporters unquestionably do their jobs differently from the way they did in the past.

Dating from the rise of “objective journalism” in the early years of this century through the 1950s, political reporters tended to focus on who did or said what—not why. In 1961, reporting was revolutionized with the appearance of Theodore H. White’s first Making of the President. White’s innovation was to downplay traditional speech reportage and listings of endorsements bestowed on grateful candidates. Instead, he took readers into the meeting rooms where decisions were hammered out, and he captured the feel of the campaign as well as its more formal aspects. According to Timothy Crouse, whose The Boys on the Bus was itself a breakthrough in political journalism, White’s book “laid out the [presidential] campaign as a wide-screen thriller with full blooded heroes and white-knuckle suspense on every page.”

Although White continued to write Making of the President books, none matched the success of his first, prize-winning effort, and White himself became increasingly frustrated not only by his inability to tell a
unique story but also at the lengths to which journalist competitors were going to get inside the campaigns of presidential hopefuls. As he lamented to Crouse in 1972, “Who gives a [expletive] if the guy had milk and Total for breakfast?”

If White grew disillusioned with inside reporting, his approach to political coverage nonetheless became a hallmark in American journalism. The press not only sought to tell readers why things happened as they did, but it began to cover campaigns intensively, well before the first caucuses and primaries were held. In a sense, this was a throwback to the early days of the republic, when a new presidential campaign opened on the heels of the one recently decided. But with the increased scope of the media, and the powerful television eye focused on candidates, it seemed to at least some observers that enough was too much.

It is highly unlikely, however, that the media will ever return to the more restrained and formal reportage characteristic of the years before 1960; people want the “inside story.”

It may be wise for journalists to step back from their material and identify what Richard Brookhiser in his 1984 campaign book calls “the outside story.” This, as Brookhiser explains, consists of the themes and ideas that candidates articulate in their bid to draw distinctions between themselves and their rivals and thereby to attract voters. Image shaping and media manipulation are real, Brookhiser concedes, but he views them as less than critical aspects of contemporary presidential campaigns.

US voters may not be as informed as journalists or political scientists might wish, but they have more opportunity to educate themselves about politics than any other electorate in the world. Equally important, American voters seem fully capable of seeing through phoniness in a candidate and of making logical political judgments. This is one of the main conclusions of Thomas E. Patterson and Robert D. McClure in The Unseeing Eye: The Myth of Television Power in National Politics. The candidate’s best strategy for persuasion, they assert, is to take a clear position on issues and cogently make his or her case. Although agreeing that television’s influence is often exaggerated, Garry Wills takes a somewhat different tack in his memoir, Confessions of a Conservative. American voters tend not to be impressed during campaigns by media images or by candidates’ promises, Wills says. They look, rather, at who is in power and decide whether they want more of the same.

In such a system, the power of the press in presidential politics can not be safely ignored, but it certainly can be exaggerated.

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