

CHAPTER EIGHT

Campaigns: Who's in Charge Here?

THE cream of the nation's political press corps descended on a motel between Orlando, Florida, and Walt Disney World in November 1979 for a special Florida Republican Party convention. Ostensibly they were there to gauge the prospects of the field of 1980 presidential hopefuls with the state's GOP activists before the March 11 primary, when the national convention delegates would be elected.

It was a peculiar contest. About one fifth of the 1,326 delegates were party warhorses, being rewarded for their past labors. The others had backed one of the 1980 candidates and won their seats in lotteries at special county conventions. Despite the artificial format, and the fact that nothing was at stake but bragging rights, at least four of the candidates—Ronald Reagan, George Bush, John Connally, and Philip Crane—made major efforts to recruit and influence delegates, Connally doing so lavishly in the hope of denting Reagan's claim to the South.

But their efforts were modest compared to those President Jimmy Carter's operatives launched at a similar state Democratic convention to crush a possible upset by Senator Edward M. Kennedy, who was not yet a candidate. Once again, nothing tangible was involved, but with Kennedy poised to challenge, it became a high priority for the President to avoid a psychological reverse in his home region.

Even before the county caucuses where the delegates to the October state convention were chosen, the Carter campaign had dispatched at

least twenty operatives to Florida and had raised a quarter-million dollars. Federal projects had rained down on Florida cities. "It's idiotic," Carter's White House press secretary Jody Powell had complained on the eve of the county caucuses. "It is not democratic, and it's hard to know exactly what it means, and it's a hell of a way to run a railroad."

Nonetheless, Powell was at Carter's Orlando headquarters, so eager to claim victory in time for the first editions of the Sunday papers that even before the results were known in Dade County, the state's largest population center, he announced a two-to-one Carter win. (In a rare twist, that call was conservative; the final margin was three to one.) Reagan's win was smaller, but enough to dampen Connally's hopes.

(What was it all about? In one sense, there was no harm in the October and November extravaganzas. They provided pleasant weekends for the delegates and Florida excursions for several dozen reporters who might otherwise have been home raking leaves. (Though these straw votes showed the candidates' early if inconclusive standings in that state, the real prize was the headlines and television coverage they commanded.) The Carter and Reagan wins were related in page-one stories in the *Washington Post*—the work of five reporters.

One of those reporters, Nicholas Lemann, focused on what he called the "spectacle of symbiosis—the chicken-and-egg game—between politicians and the press." (The Florida party chairmen concocted the straw votes specifically to exploit the press's hunger for a scoreable contest, even though nothing tangible was at stake. The candidates, because they knew the press would cover these nonevents, spent time and money out of all proportion to their significance.) * we

Each side blamed the other for the excess. "It's not us who are making a big deal out of it," Henry W. Hubbard, then deputy chief of *Newsweek's* Washington bureau, told Lemann. "It's the candidates." But Jay Hakes, head of the Carter operation in Florida, disagreed. "The press was heavily involved before I was," he said. "We're just responding to a heavily publicized challenge."

But Jack W. Germond and Jules Witcover wrote a column defending the press and television concentration on the Florida straw vote. "What would the public reaction have been if the press had ignored the Florida caucuses or given them short shrift? . . . Once candidates or their backers choose to make a test of their organizational abilities, as was

the case Saturday, the news media's job is to cover it. . . . Undoubtedly a sense of proportion is lost in the process. But that's part of politics as practiced in the era of mass communication."

Whoever was to blame, the Florida straw votes were a classic example of what many critics regard as the press's unhealthy tendency to create campaign news, rather than just reporting or analyzing it. And not only outside critics agree. Charles B. Seib, who became the *Washington Post's* in-house critic or ombudsman after retiring as managing editor of the *Washington Star*, wrote the week after the caucuses: "Whoever won—if anybody did—one thing is sure: if this sort of thing continues, political news may be hazardous to your mental health."

Ever since Lincoln Steffens acknowledged that he had created a crime wave in New York simply by publicizing each day one or more gaudy examples of the commonplace violence there, press critics have often found evidence that inventive reporters will happily fill any vacuum. (Television strictly prohibits staging events for the cameras, but newspapers seem to bear no stigma for inventing plots.)

Anticipation (Anticipatory stories are not confined to governmental and political beats.) If the sports pages were limited to reporting contests already played, they would be far smaller (and drabber). (Anticipation is part of a good journalist's equipment, closely linked to the desire to be first with the news.) Except for the obituary pages, where there is a distinct disadvantage in being premature, journalism is heavily oriented to the scoop. If they are going to announce it tomorrow, most editors will say, we have every reason to break the story today.*

The inclination is so deeply embedded that there is no sense complaining about it. In most instances, it serves the public well. When a new President is elected, people *do* want to know who his cabinet members will be, so reporters fiercely compete to smoke out his choices and let the public in on the secret.

But complaints about the press's intrusiveness in campaigns are so loud and come from so many quarters that they cannot be ignored. (At every stage, it is said, television and the newspapers do not just report the story but directly influence the dynamics of the campaigns.) Reporters blow up an early and essentially inconsequential event like the Florida straw poll into something more significant than it is. Early

polls that measure little but name familiarity determine media coverage in ways that cripple less well known candidates in the competition for supporters and financing.

(When the voters begin to make their choices, the press interprets the results, sometimes hyping a tiny plurality win and sometimes decreeing that the actual winner was a loser because he fell short of expectations set by the press. Pack journalism inclines reporters to build up a candidate one week and savage him the next—for no other reason than keeping the story alive.)

(Later, the party convention halls are converted into giant television studios, with cameramen and correspondents elbowing delegates out of the way and hordes of print reporters scouring the aisles and the bars, searching for or promoting fights that keep the party from delivering the message it wants to deliver to the country.)

And, it is said, television and the press distort the tone of the general election campaign by focusing on slips and gaffes, by egging the candidates on to attack each other, and by ignoring the policy proposals. Once again, those incessant polls drown out all serious debate and prejudice the voters' decision. (Finally, on Election Day, the impatient media snoop out the trends with their exit polls and broadcast those phony, media-made "results" into areas in the West where people have not yet cast their ballots.)*

(In short, what ought to be the supreme exercise of citizen sovereignty in a republic has been twisted by the almighty press and television into a game where they are almost the only winners—and certainly the most important players.)

So goes the indictment. And they can summon expert witnesses on their behalf. John E. Merriam, president of a private Washington firm that predicts emerging public policy trends by monitoring the media, wrote in a 1984 monograph that in campaigns, "the media themselves become the major actors, controlling the streams of information among all players. No longer are they observers, but central movers and censors of public knowledge." What Merriam called "the awesome power of the national media" was demonstrated by the week-to-week trackings of favorable and unfavorable stories, which he said "predicted and probably determined the outcomes of major races" in the Democratic nomination contest.

(Similarly, William C. Adams of George Washington University wrote in *Public Opinion* magazine that at every stage of the 1984 Democratic nomination race, “media content changes were followed by changes in public opinion.”) He cited evidence that in the pre-presidential year, poll rankings had determined the allocation of coverage on the networks and in the *Post* and the *Times*, and that after each caucus or primary, the press and television reshuffled the coverage deck in a way that determined who did best in the next round

IF you think I am going to plead guilty to the whole indictment, you are wrong. But neither do I think the press can hope to see the charges dismissed.

In this age of mass democracy and mass media, when millions of people participate directly, not just by voting in the general election but by selecting the candidates for both major parties, it is not surprising that many resent the way reporters intrude on the process. (Voters are not dumb.) They can see that we are privileged characters. Any voter who goes to a political rally will likely leave hating the press and TV. The voters wait long past the announced starting time. Their first signal that the event is really beginning is a stream of reporters and camera crews marching to their reserved spaces, scrambling for the best vantage points fronting the stage. The voters suddenly realize that all they are going to see are the backs and behinds of some self-important journalists. Do they despise us? Believe it.

It does no good to tell them that their candidates have decreed this arrangement because the national audience for the nightly television news shows is more important than the few thousand gathered in River City. They don't want to blame their candidate. They blame the damned press. But it goes deeper. (Most of the campaign is out of the voters' sight.) Some voters may glimpse a presidential candidate for a half hour in their hometown, but most will get almost everything they know about those candidates indirectly through the media.) Small wonder that they are suspicious—and resentful—of our power.

There is no escape from this situation, unless we return to a system whereby the candidates are selected by a few score bosses, professional politicians, influential givers, or interest-group leaders. That is

not likely. (In fact, I would guess I am one of the few reporters who even remember that kind of system.)

I grew up in Cook County, Illinois, and my earliest knowledge of a nominating system came from the Chicago papers' descriptions of the slating sessions of the Cook County Democratic organization. Whether Mayor Ed Kelly, Col. Jake Arvey, or Boss Dick Daley presided, the procedure was always the same. An aspirant for the Senate or sanitary commissioner presented himself to the assembled party chieftains, offered up his credentials (usually in terms of apprenticeship in lower office and loyal service to the organization), and was judged worthy or unworthy. After that, it was routine. The organization carried the slated candidates through the formality of a primary and did its utmost to elect them in the general election.

I was never bothered by the press sticking its nose into the smoke-filled room where the slating decisions were made. It gave me my only picture of what was going on. The Chicago system seemed perfectly normal to me. But in the postwar United States, big-city machines all but disappeared. (The young men who had returned from the war, finished their educations, begun their careers, and moved into local politics were strongly disinclined to bow to the whims and wills of the political bosses.)

In the 1950s and 1960s, American politics demanded individual entrepreneurship: you picked the office you wanted, organized your campaign, raised the money, hired your own polling and advertising consultants, recruited your own volunteers—and went for it. John F. Kennedy first brought this new approach to presidential politics. He was a junior (and not terribly distinguished) senator when he set his gaze on the presidency. He traveled the country extensively for four years before he was nominated in 1960, and his operation became the pattern for other ambitious men of his generation.

So many leaped at the opportunity that some weeding out of the presidential field became necessary. (With the bosses no longer in charge, that responsibility fell to the voters in the states with presidential primaries.) But in the 1960s, there were few primaries: Kennedy competed in only seven in 1960, and in only two—Wisconsin and West Virginia—did he face serious opposition. As the field of aspirants grew larger and they copied Kennedy's tactic of the long prepre-

Old
style

New
style

mary campaign, the small group of reporters from newspapers, magazines, and networks who worked full-time on national politics became, willy-nilly, a sort of informal screening committee.

I wrote about this phenomenon in the first issue of the *Washington Monthly* in 1969:

At any given time in this country, there are several hundred persons who are potentially candidates for nomination as President or Vice President. They are Senators, Representatives, governors, Administration officials, mayors, military men, scientists, businessmen, educators, astronauts, and other assorted celebrities. (Who is it that winnows this field down to manageable size? The press—and particularly that small segment of the press called the national political reporters.)

Russell Baker [the *New York Times* columnist] has given us the concept of The Great Mentioner, that mysterious Someone whose existence is implied when we read that so-and-so “is being mentioned for President or Vice President.” He works in clandestine ways. The Great Mentioner mentioned George Romney as a presidential possibility before Romney made his first race for governor of Michigan. The Great Mentioner has mentioned Mark Hatfield for Vice President every four years since Hatfield turned 30, and he never seems discouraged by Hatfield’s failure to win the job. . . .

The reporter’s job makes him a constant traveler in the political community; he is uniquely well positioned to detect the early intimations of greatness, to discover these statesmen in embryo, and bring their rare qualities to the attention of a wider public.

But, alas, it is not quite that simple—or noncontroversial. In his function as a talent scout, the political reporter not only puts some men forward, he rather ruthlessly bars the door to advancement for other men. Martin F. Nolan of the *Boston Globe* has compared the national political reporters to a band of traveling drama critics, covering the new political acts at their out-of-town openings in Sacramento or Lansing or Harrisburg. Their reports, like those in *Variety*, are frequently make-or-break. “No talent,” they will say of one man, and his name is forgotten. “Promising,” they’ll say of another, and he is booked into the Gridiron Dinner [an annual white-tie affair for journalists and politicians which has become an important showcase for ambitious office-seekers] or *Meet the Press*. It’s a formidable power, and one that the screening committee of reporters is thoroughly conscious of possessing.

It is important at this point to say something about the members of this

screening committee. . . . The group is small. It probably includes a couple of dozen members, representing news organizations with a commitment to coverage of national politics year in and year out, in dull seasons as well as exciting times. . . . The political reporters for these organizations, plus a few syndicated columnists who cover politics along with other subjects, comprise the screening committee.

(Not only is this group small, but its characteristics make it a highly atypical group of Americans.) Its members are all Easterners, by residence if not by birth. They are college graduates. They all enjoy, despite the low-paying reputation of newspapers, incomes well over the national median. Not one of them is a Negro. Only two are women. More of them vote Democratic and fewer of them regularly attend church, I would guess, than in a random sample of the population. None is under 30, and few, except for the columnists, are over 45. I am deliberately not commenting on their social, political or ethical views, but I think I have said enough to indicate that they—or we, I should say—represent a narrow and rather peculiar slice of this society. . . .

(Nonetheless, the fact is that the reporters do function as a screening committee for aspirants to national office. . . . And whether their standards are good or bad, whether they are characteristic or eccentric so far as the society is concerned, they make their standards stick.)

Romney was a notable victim of the system I described. Although he had been a successful executive in both the auto industry and in state government, he was relatively unsophisticated on national and international issues and surprisingly inarticulate in discussing them. The press scrutiny of his views on the Vietnam War in 1966 and 1967 proved excruciatingly difficult. Instinctively he was opposed to the United States intervention, but politically he wanted to avoid being linked to the antiwar demonstrators, so he tried artlessly to hedge. When Romney told a radio interviewer in Detroit in the late summer of 1967 that he had been “brainwashed” by American authorities during a visit to Vietnam, it seemed to epitomize his ineptitude. The ridicule grew so great that Romney—once the front-runner—withdraw from the presidential race on the eve of the 1968 New Hampshire primary.

ALTHOUGH few people in politics realize it, the press’s screening power has declined significantly since the 1960s. Two things have

reduced it. The number of presidential primaries has multiplied because of the rules changes or "reforms" instituted by the Democratic Party after its tumultuous and crippling convention of 1968. Fifteen states held presidential primaries in 1968, twenty-one in 1972, twenty-seven in 1976, thirty-seven in 1980, twenty-six in 1984, and as many as thirty-one are tentatively scheduled in 1988. The portion of delegates chosen in primaries rose from two fifths to a peak of four fifths.

Secondly, the campaign finance law passed in 1974 largely eliminated the ability of a few fat-cat big givers to launch a presidential candidacy and sustain it through its takeoff period. With individual contributions limited to \$1,000 and a Federal matching premium for contributions less than \$250, all aspirants were forced early on to seek dollars as well as votes all across the country.

Those two changes began the era of the perpetual presidential campaign, the "marathon" of which Jules Witcover wrote in his book by that name about the 1976 election. In the summers of 1974, 1978, and 1982—two full years before the nominating conventions—anywhere from eight to fifteen "presidential campaigns" existed. No news organization could conceivably monitor all those activities, nor was there any market for them—even among the political news-junkie readers of the *Washington Post*.

While local press and radio and television often covered the candidates, the networks and the national press rarely did. Some candidates were frustrated by this lack of early attention and complained to us. (But they began to realize the advantages of the long period of relative obscurity. They could test their themes and practice their speeches without the press's flyspeck scrutiny, which had proved so damaging to Romney and others.) I'm sure, in some cases, they were able to fine-tune their messages for the immediate audience, without making them jibe exactly with what they had said a half-continent away. The absence of the pack of accompanying journalists facilitated the kind of person-to-person campaigning critical at that stage, when candidates are seeking not massive numbers of converts but hard-core, committed supporters in key states.

Finally, they could burst upon the national scene, with the primary season drawing near, as candidates with "surprising" campaign skills and organizational support. Jimmy Carter, George Bush, Gary Hart, and others ignored Washington and the other national media centers on

their travels. They knew they did not need national coverage or a strong showing in the polls. The dynamic had changed: in the new game, you built your strength quietly, surprised the press in an early caucus or primary in Iowa or New Hampshire, and then sat back and reaped the publicity bonanza. George Bush spoke for many others, in the wake of his Iowa upset, when he said, "I started off as an asterisk in the polls. . . . It was the impossible dream."

People like political consultant John P. Sears have argued in seminars on the nominating process that journalists should more assertively become "the new bosses" by publicizing their recommendations on who has "the right stuff" to be President. But most of us shake our heads, "No, thank you." We are relieved to be rid of our screening committee responsibilities.

(But some critics say the press does covertly what Sears urges us to do overtly. One set of complaints comes from the candidates and their managers, who contend that the preoccupation with polling—particularly the very early polls—makes it difficult, if not impossible, for less well known candidates to compete for attention on the basis of their programs, their records, and their personalities.)

Not only are such candidates hurt among the voters, but fund-raisers I know attest to the crippling effect of a bad poll in the early stages of a candidacy. Furthermore, there is plenty of reason to distrust early polls: just ask Ed Muskie and Ted Kennedy, who started out ahead and fell behind before they knew what had hit them. (Early polls reflect name familiarity and not much more.)

Why do we print polls like the ones the Harris and Gallup organizations did in April and July of 1985, showing George Bush leading for the Republican nomination in 1988 and Edward M. Kennedy out in front of the Democratic pack? The answer, once again, is clique journalism. (The political junkies can't wait until autumn 1987 to get their first fix on the 1988 presidential race. They need some numbers for their conversations and speculations. And we junkie journalists supply them.)

We won't stop, but we could use our early polling more sensibly than for measuring a horse race not yet begun. We could, for example, measure real support against familiarity and thereby distinguish between the widely known candidate with "high negatives" and the lesser-known candidate who might have potentially broader support.

We can frame questions that supply information about lesser-known candidates and report the voters' reaction.

We need to remind readers that experience shows that the standings will change after the early caucuses and primaries. We also need to place circuit breakers in our own minds between the rankings in those early polls and the rationing of space and attention to the various contenders.

That is not easy to do, but we have learned at the *Post* that it can be done. (In the last three national elections, we have deliberately not covered the presidential contest until Labor Day of the prepresidential year.) Before that date, we have limited the stories to announcements of candidacies, legitimate campaign developments—endorsements, hirings or firings of campaign managers, etc.—and major policy statements. When an issue has popped into the news, we have run solicited comments from all the aspirants side by side.

Our first big effort after Labor Day is the set of candidate profiles, each involving weeks of reporting on the candidate's background, political and governmental history, record and reputation and approach to policy. We do this for all the contenders, long shots as well as front-runners.

We also try to see how the candidates are handling the political challenges coming at them. In 1983, for example, we covered the Democratic contenders at policy forums in New York, Iowa, and New Hampshire and measured their abilities as campaigners, the quality of their local organizations, and the character of their support.

(At this point—the autumn and winter before the first caucuses and primaries—it is primarily a newspaper story.) The networks and news magazines have not begun to devote as much time and space as we do, and paid television advertising has not started. We rely mainly on old-fashioned techniques, paying much more attention to what we see and hear in interviews with candidates, managers, activist volunteers, and voters than to the intermittent polls. If any candidate has a real advantage, if anyone is moving or stalling, this is when our senses and skills will disclose it.

(This is also when our judgments begin to have some impact, in two ways. We begin to sort out the field and to focus on those who seem to have something going.) And we begin to share those findings with readers, as I did in the early 1972 stories raising doubts about the

effectiveness of Muskie's New Hampshire organization and as so many of us did with similar questions about the John Glenn operation in 1984. At this point the campaign managers start getting miffed with the press. They claim, and rightly so, that most voters have not yet become familiar with the whole field or heard them present all their views, and therefore cannot make an informed judgment.

(The candidates would really like us to suspend judgment and let them use the news columns and the precious moments television devotes to the campaign to expound their ideas.) Our view—or at least mine—is that we have a responsibility to communicate their views on major issues, as we do by covering the debates and policy forums, but that the job of delivering their message to the voters is primarily theirs, by dint of campaigning, organizing, fund-raising, and advertising.

(AFTER the first caucus and the first primary, we are off on a steeplechase in which the best thing candidates or reporters can hope for is to avoid being thrown off into the dirt.) The process has a mad momentum beyond anyone's ability to slow it down. Some days we are so wearied by the travel, the deadlines, the flackery, and the pressures that we want to say, "Stop the world. I want to get off." But we can't.

(The candidates now complain that our emphasis on the winner in the early contests foreshortens the selection process and denies laggard candidates an opportunity to catch up and voters in the later primary and caucus states a chance to make their judgments have an impact.)
* (No question, the early caucuses and primaries get a disproportionate share of coverage and therefore have an exaggerated impact on the whole process.) In 1976 and 1980, the New Hampshire primary in late February had much more importance than the California primary in early June, even though California's population is twenty-five times that of New Hampshire.

Michael J. Robinson and Margaret A. Sheehan, in their book *Over the Wire and on TV*, a study of 1980 coverage by CBS News and UPI, reported that "Iowa and New Hampshire on average attracted 74 news stories per election on 'Evening News' and the day [UPI] wire combined. The nine states holding their primaries in June averaged fewer than six stories on CBS and UPI. Iowa caucus voters got sixty times as much news attention per vote as people casting their ballot in the late

California primary. Presidential politics and campaign media are front-loaded and grow increasingly more so with each passing election."

This front-loading distortion is partly because we have more time to spend in Iowa and New Hampshire than in almost any other primaries from March until June of the presidential year. (But it is also a result of the journalistic desire to get the news first. First events always draw coverage, whether it is the opening of a show or a flight to the moon.) R. W. (Johnny) Apple, Jr., a top-notch political reporter on *The New York Times*, won honors for his coverage of the 1976 campaign, in part because of his careful attention to Jimmy Carter's victory in an early straw poll taken at a Democratic fund-raising dinner in Ames, Iowa, on October 27, 1975.

(Every four years the Democratic Party debates what it should do to reduce the exaggerated impact of Iowa and New Hampshire and to eliminate the artificial straw polls which come even earlier.) So far, states' rights have largely prevailed over the national party's attempts to rationalize its process. Other states, notably in the South, have pushed their 1988 primary dates forward, but a more effective change would be to implement Representative Morris K. Udall's suggestion that primaries be held only on the first Tuesday of March, April, May, and June. With his plan, later states could receive the kind of in-depth coverage that only Iowa and New Hampshire now enjoy.

But the impact of the undoubted media bias for first events should not be exaggerated. In 1972 McGovern lost New Hampshire; in 1980 Reagan lost Iowa; and in 1984 Mondale lost New Hampshire; but all three won their party's nomination. The twists and turns of the competition between Mondale and Gary Hart brought much more press attention to the Illinois, New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio primaries, and even carried long-denied mass coverage to the closing contests in California and New Jersey.

(The focus on firsts also influences who gets covered. Thomas E. Patterson wrote in *The Mass Media Election* that the winner of each week's primary in 1976 drew about 60 percent of the coverage—even if his "victory" was barely visible.) In the Iowa precinct caucuses that year, "uncommitted" delegates won 37 percent and Carter finished second with just under 29 percent. (But, as Patterson noted, that did not prevent Roger Mudd from saying on CBS that "no amount of bad-mouthing by others can lessen the importance of Jimmy Carter's fin-

ish. He was the clear winner in this psychologically crucial test. With thirteen projected national convention delegates [of the 1,505 needed for nomination that year], almost 28 percent of the total, he has opened ground between himself and the rest of the so-called pack."

But that was small potatoes compared to his plurality victory in New Hampshire the next month. Though Carter received just over 28 percent of the vote in a nine-person field, exactly 4,663 more votes than the runner-up, Udall, NBC's Tom Pettit said, "Carter emerges from New Hampshire as the man to beat," and *Newsweek* proclaimed him "the unqualified winner." The New Hampshire victory, Patterson noted, put Carter on all three networks that night and the next morning, and the following week on the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek*, with 2,600 lines of coverage, compared to Udall's 96.

(Why the emphasis—the overemphasis—on the winner?) Patterson suggested that the answer lies in Walter Lippmann's observation that "the function of news is to signalize an event," to alert the reader to its most obvious aspect, not its complexities. That may be right, but it is not a wholly satisfactory response. The outcomes in Iowa and New Hampshire could have been "signalized" accurately by news leads saying, "Democratic voters were divided in their presidential preferences, with no one approaching majority support." But that is not exciting.

Two experiences in that 1976 campaign led me to think something more powerful was at work. On the night of the Iowa caucuses, Jules Witcover (then with the *Post*) was in Des Moines and I was in Washington. When his story came in, the night national news editor said something like, "Witcover says Carter's winning Iowa. What kind of a head [headline] do you think that deserves?"

I considered the percentages and the number of uncommitted votes compared with those for any candidate, and said, "Don't go overboard." He did not. He put the story at the bottom right-hand corner of the front page with the modest headline "Carter Takes Early Lead in Iowa." But Carter's victory was not only big news on the next morning's TV shows, it was the banner headline in the first edition of the *Washington Star*, an afternoon newspaper, and from that point on, it was off to the races. Witcover's careful second-day story said Carter "has gained early momentum" but called his victory "far from decisive." Our competitors had been far less cautious. Ultimately, the ban-

ner headlines and television fanfares drowned out such rare notes of prudence.

* {The single most troubling letter I received criticizing our coverage of the 1976 campaign came from a Maryland Democratic leader who, after pointing out that his party had barred winner-take-all presidential primaries after 1972, wrote, "You in the press have in effect imposed winner-take-all on us, by the way in which you have chosen to report and interpret the results of our primaries. You have done so to the point that I, as a supporter of Senator Henry Jackson, was put in the ridiculous position of having to vote for Governor Jerry Brown—a man I do not want to see as President—in the Maryland primary, simply in order to deny Jimmy Carter another 'unearned publicity dividend' as the winner of the Maryland primary.

"How do you in the press justify such behavior?" }

I could not deny the facts he cited or the effect of the kind of coverage he described. "My only question," I replied, "is whether your argument is with us in the press, or rather with the whole American value system, embodied in Vince Lombardi's famous saying, 'Winning isn't everything. It's the only thing.'"

Because the press is shaped by, and even contributes to the shaping of, the values of society, we cannot report the results of primaries and conventions without emphasizing who won. Does that distort the process? Absolutely. (The winner of the early contests gets a big megaphone with which to say, "Look at me, folks. Am I not wonderful? Are you not lucky to have me as your candidate?") Horse-race journalism does everything the critics say. It short-circuits the system, denies voters in the later primary states an equal voice, reduces the chances of detecting a fraud, and lessens the likelihood of pausing for second thoughts before the nomination.) *

These considerations argue for changing the nominating system and decreasing the number of primaries. But it is important to remember, at this point, that the primaries grew, not from the press, but from rule changes by a group of Democratic Party leaders. Reporters will cover the process any way the parties conduct it—open or closed. (Candidly, I prefer, as a print reporter, conventions and caucuses, where a single reporter, with nothing more than a notebook and pencil, can slip in closer to the action than the camera crews and TV correspondents.) *

Richard L. Rubin in his book *Press, Party and Presidency* argued

that while journalists did not promote primaries, television especially has "legitimated" them "as the proper, democratic and 'American way'" to choose nominees. (No question, television loves primaries because they provide a real-life Tuesday night serial. Primaries are out in the open, with candidates campaigning in scenic settings, which television values.) *

Despite the TV preference for primaries, many of us political reporters recognize that the more closed system of the past provided greater suspense and greater rewards for journalistic enterprise. In 1960, for example, I recall no press complaints about the fact that John F. Kennedy did not secure the votes he needed for nomination until Pennsylvania and Illinois delegates caucused in Los Angeles the day before the convention opened. TV folks might grumble in advance, but if the parties went all the way back into the smoke-filled room, when the bosses came out of the hotel suite with the name of the nominee, they would be greeted by a small wall of cameras and a horde of Sam Donaldsons. We would adapt.

THE indictment does not stop with the primaries. (According to many politicians, reporters—especially the television stars—have converted the political conventions into showcases for their competitive egos and ambitions.) *

I suspect I take this complaint more seriously than do some of the people who object to the aisles being cluttered with correspondents and cameras. Many of these delegates enjoy being on camera as much as any other aspect of the convention. Much of their reward comes not from participating in the choice of a possible President but from having folks back home say, "I saw you on TV. You looked great."

o (It can be argued that the convention's only function is to provide raw material for television because the nominee has been predetermined in the primaries. (The platform is written in advance and the floor fights over amending it tend to be forgotten by the next day. The dwindling TV audiences and the networks' decision to cut back their coverage indicate that voters know that nothing much happens.)

(Persuasive as that may be, I don't buy it. The four-day conventions are the only time a national political party exists. The convention is legally its ruling body, and the convention period defines whether—

and on what terms—the diverse party factions are prepared to work together during the campaign and, if successful, to govern. When the Democratic and Republican parties meet, their surface shenanigans should not disguise the seriousness of their task. That work deserves our respect, and they don't get it today, not with us crawling all over them and doing our damndest to take over their conventions.)

The national party conventions are the greatest clique gatherings the press has. What brings us there in such numbers—twelve thousand accredited journalists at the 1984 Democratic convention in San Francisco—is partly the story but mainly the chance to be part of the scene.

(Much that news organizations do at conventions is to impress each other, the politicians, and the officials.) The networks are the most ostentatious, with their fancy anchor booths slung from the ceiling, dominating the convention hall. But they are not alone. All the major news organizations throw elaborate parties and entertainments. The schedule is carefully negotiated, so *Time* and *Newsweek*, the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *USA Today* each has its allotted hours to shine. (The *Post* is invited to *Newsweek's* function, instead of having its own.) The competition for star guests is fierce, and people keep score.

They also compete in other ways. (Newspapers make extraordinary and expensive efforts to deliver each day's edition to the convention hotels and, if possible, to the doors of the delegates and the other journalists.) Newspapers report on the network battles for scoops and audience shares and, in recent years, some of the networks have graded the performance of the major newspapers and individual reporters.

Reputations are made or unmade at conventions. (No one forgets that the classic Huntley-Brinkley team was forged in the 1956 convention anchor booth, or that both John Chancellor's and Dan Rather's careers were boosted by keeping cool) when overzealous security men hassled them on the convention floor.) Being assigned to the floor is a career breakthrough for a TV reporter, and those who do well in that elbows-out environment—as Sam Donaldson did in 1976, for example—see their fortunes soar.

WHAT gets lost in this superheated, ego-inflating atmosphere is the basic journalistic discipline of delivering news to readers or viewers in a form they can use. (Newspaper coverage is excessive. Reporters have to justify their presence and expenses. But television's coverage is worse. It probably puts on more hours of live political "news" during the convention weeks than during the entire fall campaign. Covering the scene live, and trying to keep the audience interested, the networks often create stories or hype them beyond belief. One spectacular example was the Reagan-Ford "dream ticket" fiasco of 1980.)

The one thing uncertain as the convention began was the identity of Reagan's running mate. Early on, there had been speculation about a Reagan-Ford ticket, but it had dropped off in early June when Reagan called on Ford in Palm Springs and Ford repeated his view that Reagan should find another running mate.

But the speculation revived on Monday when Ford told the convention, "this Republican would do everything in his power" to elect Reagan, "so when this convention fields the team for Governor Reagan, count me in." Bill Moyers wondered in a CBS commentary what would happen "if Ronald Reagan called up Gerald Ford after the session tonight" and then made a public plea to the convention delegates "to draft him."

* (Lou Cannon of the *Post* and I learned from people close to Ford that the Reagan side had made fresh overtures but that Ford was determined to resist them—and was so aggravated that the platform had dropped support of the Equal Rights Amendment that he might leave Detroit before Reagan was nominated.) Cannon, who had given the Reagan campaign its definitive coverage and who was determined that no one would scoop him in Detroit, wrote Tuesday night that Ford had recommended Bush to Reagan. The story ran Wednesday, the day Reagan would be nominated, and quoted unnamed Reagan aides as saying that the choice was tipping in Bush's direction.

(I too expected Bush to be the pick and had said so when Jack Germond, Tom Pettit, and I did our daily NBC *Today* show stint that Wednesday morning.) But after the *Today* show, I got a surprise from a chance meeting with a Republican party official who had been in the Ford administration (and who was also an old friend). "I think we're going to get Ford on the ticket," he told me. He said he was serious, and described a late Tuesday night meeting which was now reconven-

ing. A number of top party and congressional officials were lobbying Ford to take the number two slot and were urging Reagan to make the job more attractive to the former President.

I was dumbfounded. But he was a good source and could not be playing games with me. I hurried back to the *Post's* work space, where Cannon and I got on the phone and soon confirmed that such efforts were under way and that there was a good chance of their succeeding.

As it happened, Ford was scheduled to have lunch that day with *Newsweek* editors and reporters. At lunch, he strongly suggested that he was intrigued by an arrangement in which the President would be the chairman and chief executive of the government and the Vice President the chief operating officer. His description of the role the Vice President would have in appointing other officials, in setting up White House staff procedures and determining the flow of paper to the President showed that these clearly were not idle speculations.

(*Newsweek* and the *Washington Post* are owned by the same corporation, but the relationship is one of intense rivalry, not cooperation.) This was a *Newsweek* lunch, to which *Post* reporters were not invited. But there are no secrets in a group of that size, and within an hour, friends at *Newsweek* were telling us—with glee—that we were going to have to “eat” the Bush-for-Vice-President story, because Ford was all but signed on for the job. All afternoon, the “dream ticket” story preoccupied us, and the story Cannon and I wrote for the first edition of the paper said that the speculation was rife but that it was speculation.

The network evening news broadcasts, which went on the air as we were finishing our first-edition story, took the same cautious approach. John Chancellor said on NBC, “a mighty effort is under way tonight” to draft Ford. “The former President is still listening, but his position is that he doesn’t want to run.” Dan Rather, reporting for CBS at Reagan headquarters, described the negotiations on an enhanced role that Ford might play as Vice President but said, “there is no final answer.” He quoted an anonymous congressman: “I’d still be amazed if Ford did it. I personally think it’s going to be Bush, but Reagan isn’t kidding. He really wants Ford.” (These quotations, and others, come from Jeff Greenfield’s excellent summary of the evening’s television transcripts in his book *The Real Campaign*.)

At this point, the TV news was accurate and restrained. But soon,

as the news programs finished and TV began reporting live, the pattern changed. (As the live prime-time coverage began at 7 P.M., Ford came to the CBS anchor booth for a long-scheduled interview with Cronkite.) * (He had already done interviews for the other two networks.) As a lead-in, Cronkite went back to Rather, who reported that there was still skepticism that Ford would accept, but “until he doesn’t say a final no [sic], that Ronald Reagan isn’t going to consider anybody else.”

Cronkite then asked Ford, “Can you verify that Dan’s reporting is accurate today? Now, you’re not going to go back on Dan?” (The question, though asked in a jocular tone, suggested that already CBS had become proprietary about the story.)

Ford said he could not comment. When Cronkite next asked him about a theoretical convention-floor draft movement, Ford stopped fencing and told the world that his answer would depend “on the arrangements that I would expect as a Vice President in a relationship with the President. I would not go to Washington, Walter, and be a figurehead Vice President,” but would insist on “a meaningful role across the board in the basic and the crucial and the important decisions that have to be made.”

“It’s got to be something like a co-presidency?”

Ford did not demur. “That’s something that Governor Reagan really ought to consider.”

Everyone in our work booth at Cobo Hall was astonished that Ford had made these discussions public. Reagan, we would learn the next day, had been equally nonplussed. As we scribbled frantic notes, someone phoned Washington to say that the first-edition story would need a quick rewrite.

Meantime, Ford was still rattling on in his cheerful way about other aspects of such an arrangement, even as he cautioned Cronkite, “Don’t jump to the wrong conclusion now.” “Well,” Cronkite replied, “we’re going to jump to conclusions all over the place tonight.”

◦ (And indeed television did.) Barbara Walters of ABC intercepted Ford as he was leaving the CBS aerie and, as Jeff Greenfield has reported, “close to tears, begged Ford for several minutes, in near-hysterical terms, to grant her an immediate interview.” Ford agreed.

At the same time, every reporter in Detroit was scurrying to find his best sources. As quickly as TV correspondents hunted them down, they were put on the air to broadcast the latest conjectures. The rumors

came thicker and faster. (The "mays" and "mights" became "wills" and "woulds," until finally, at 10:10 P.M., Cronkite said, "CBS News has learned that there is a definite plan for Ronald Reagan and the former President of the United States, Gerald Ford, who will be his selection as running mate, . . . to come to this convention hall tonight to appear together on the platform for Ronald Reagan to announce that Gerald Ford would run with him.")

NBC and ABC stopped a step short, with various correspondents or interviewees saying there was "substance" to the report that Ford was on his way with Reagan, or, in another version, already in the convention building, awaiting Reagan, for their grand entrance, but adding that it was not confirmed. Douglas Kiker, the NBC correspondent with Ford, raised the caution flag so high with his network anchors that NBC contributed relatively little to the hysteria.

For another hour and a half, as the ritual of Reagan's nomination was carried out, there was no confirmation. Print reporters were also nervous because our major edition deadlines were now on us. A number of papers put the "dream ticket" story in the headlines. So did the Associated Press.

Our editors back in Washington were calling us to find out why we were not "hardening up" the story. Cannon and I checked signals again. (During the day, each of us had established contact with sources we trusted in the top-floor hotel suite where the discussions had been taking place. They had agreed to call us when they could and to try to keep us from being scooped or suckered.) They were our ultimate checkpoints in the rumor-filled madhouse.

Earlier, at about 8:30, my source had given me one crucial bit of information. "There's a deadline on this," he had said. "If it's going to be done at all, it's going to have to be done in the next two hours. We can't let this go on overnight."

So by 11 P.M. I figured the negotiations had probably fallen apart, but I could not be sure, since obviously I could not call my source out of the meetings and he was quite possibly too busy or preoccupied to call me. We decided on a course of caution and avoided error.

(What had happened, as we learned the next day, was that once again television's coverage had not only distorted but altered the course of events.) The same TV reports that fed the rising speculative fever on

the convention floor forced Reagan's hand and possibly changed the outcome of the discussions.)

(The spectacle of Ford publicly describing to Cronkite the possible division of powers with Reagan forced the presidential nominee to face up to the impossibility of such an arrangement.) So long as the discussions had been private, it had been possible to fuzz over the reality—and absurdity—of setting up twin power centers at the top of the government. As the implications of that arrangement became clear, only one of two outcomes was possible: either Ford would go on the ticket, on terms that would be virtually impossible to explain or to live with, or he must refuse, thus disappointing the delegates who had been primed by the TV rumors to believe the Reagan-Ford deal was set.

(By about 11 P.M., both Ford and Reagan recognized the impossibility and danger of the situation. Ford finally took himself out of the picture and Reagan made the long-delayed call to Bush.) A few minutes before midnight, calls went from the Reagan suite to Joe Louis Arena, saying Reagan was on his way over to tell the delegates he had picked Bush. Those in our work space—unlike those on the convention floor and in the TV anchor booths—were relieved but not surprised. My first reaction to the "dream ticket," fifteen hours earlier, had been "That's crazy." It struck me as an inherently unstable personality mix and as a division of labor that could not work. It also struck me as a political time bomb, which would plunge Reagan into immediate and continuing controversy and would keep him from making his own planned attack on Carter's weaknesses. I remember saying to a political consultant at midday, "That ticket [Reagan-Ford] would blow up as fast as McGovern-Eagleton. It wouldn't last until Labor Day."

Later, having seen how close it came to being, I realized that my initial reaction was dangerously wrong. But not as dangerously wrong as television's riding the rumors it helped spread—riding them right over the cliff.

(LIKE a lot of other bad journalistic habits, this kind of convention coverage seems impossible to break, given the competitive pressures.) Knowing it would not be accepted, I have nevertheless offered every incoming Republican and Democratic chairman for the last twenty

years a suggestion that would move both the parties and the press-TV practices in the right direction. The party chairmen would say in a joint statement: We are holding our conventions next July and August. We invite you ladies and gentlemen to cover us. We will extend every courtesy and help we can, but we think that what we will do in those four days is as important to our party and our country as, say, the Super Bowl or the World Series. Therefore, you will have excellent views of the proceedings, good camera angles and plenty of opportunity to interview the people you want to interview. (But, just as in the Super Bowl or the World Series, the playing field should belong to the players. And therefore, you will not be allowed on the floor when the convention is in session)

* (What would that do? First of all, without all of us in their way, the status of the delegates would change. They could talk with each other more easily—something party leaders from different states rarely have a chance to do, and something that can, in fact, contribute to the health of the parties.)

Newspapers and news magazine reporters would be inconvenienced, but not seriously. Our contacts ought to be good enough that we can, from our seats overlooking the convention floor, signal people and ask them to step off the floor for an interview, as we do regularly with House and Senate members.

Without access to the convention floor, television would be less inclined to continue its extensive live coverage. Instead, the networks would treat the convention as a news story, carrying the genuine news live and handling the rest on their regular news shows. C-SPAN could provide gavel-to-gavel coverage for the junkies, but the whole thing would be kept in better proportion.

* EVEN that radical a change would not quiet those who argue that during the autumn campaign, the press and TV, with their endless score keeping and obsession with hidden motives, actually interfere with the public's decision making. For instance, they point out that in the presidential debates, no sooner have the candidates completed their closing statements than the airwaves are filled with interpretations and analyses, the pollsters are on their phones, and people like myself are furiously typing our reactions.

(Each candidate's "spin patrols" understand that the journalists' verdict can significantly influence who the public perceives as the winner of the debates.) Therefore, they hover at our elbows, telling us how successful their man was at achieving his strategic objectives and how flawed his opponent's performance was. Snap judgments, rendered on the scene and with deadline pressures, are often off the mark. In a biting commentary, two days after the Carter-Reagan debate in 1980, Robert Kaiser wrote in the *Post*:

On the basis of our scant national experience with this art form, instant analysis of it is usually worthless. After the Reagan-John B. Anderson debate [earlier in the autumn of 1980] the analysts said Anderson held his own, but within days the polls showed Anderson sinking like a cold soufflé. The instant analysts missed the significance of Nixon's makeup [in 1960] and misread the electoral consequences of Ford's Polish slip [in 1976].

He's right. Of the three general-election debate "instant analysis" pieces I have written, only the last—after the second Reagan-Mondale debate in 1984—was on target.

* (A reporter has to jump three hurdles to handle the debate assessment well.) We are trained to make a balanced judgment, so we score the debate by rounds, as if it were a prize-fight: we say A did well on Points 1, 4, 6, and 7, but B probably came out ahead on Points 2, 3, 5, and 8. As a result our verdicts tend to be cautious and fuzzy.

(Second, being somewhat familiar with the issues, we are inclined to give some weight—perhaps undue weight—to the candidates' accuracy and skill in answering policy questions. Ironically, our performance as instant analysts is handicapped by qualities our critics say we lack: a desire to be fair and an interest in substance.)

(The third point—which took me a long time to understand—is that our overall assessment of the debate must be based on who seems more in command. That is the test.) And if you realize that television news shows will quickly capsulize the whole debate into that moment or two when one candidate or the other takes command, your attention can focus on recognizing that moment and can put it into the context of the campaign situation.

Before each debate I have covered, I have forced myself to write down—based on what I have learned from the two camps and my own

sense of the strategic situation—what will constitute success or failure for each of the candidates.

For example, in 1980 Reagan had to do very little to beat Carter; he just had to be a reasonable, nonfrightening alternative to an incumbent whose record appeared so bad that most people wanted a new President. Using that criterion, my lead said that “Jimmy Carter accomplished almost every objective except the most important one: the destruction of Ronald Reagan’s credibility as a potential President.” But overall the story was so balanced that even the headline writer missed my verdict and wrote, “Carter on Points, but No KO.”

In the first 1984 debate, Mondale needed a spectacular showing, and my lead said he “did his part as well as his managers could have hoped.” But my reaction to Reagan’s unexpected ineptitude was not as sharp—perhaps because it was so unexpected and perhaps because my brain was dulled by just having watched my team, the Chicago Cubs, blow the fifth and final game of the National League playoffs to the San Diego Padres.

Finally, on the second 1984 debate, I got it right. Referring to Reagan’s rejoinder on the age question, I said, “There was a huge laugh, in which Mondale joined. But it may well have been that the biggest barrier to Reagan’s reelection was swept away in that moment.”

(I would like to think my on-target analysis of the second Reagan-Mondale debate means I have at last learned this art form. But the serious question, once again, is why we bother calling the debates?)
 Why not just summarize the exchanges and explore the accuracy of the candidates’ claims, their competence on the issues, and whatever policy implications emerged?

We do all those things, but we cannot ignore that these debates are major campaign events, not university seminars. They test the candidates’ skills, and we must judge how well they meet that test. The campaign organizations do that even during the debate. (In 1984 Reagan’s pollster, Richard Wirthlin, seated a “focus group” in a television viewing room equipped with simple hand levers linked to a computer, which would indicate their degree of approval, disagreement, or discomfiture as the debate progressed. The group’s collective responses were integrated by computer on a running graph, which, when superimposed onto a tape of the debate, let Reagan’s managers see, moment by moment, the political-emotional response to the confrontation.)

That seems appropriate to 1984 in the Orwellian sense, but news organizations also pursue instant reactions from the public. ABC News was criticized after the 1980 debates for setting up two 900 numbers, where for fifty cents people could call in their verdict. The network flashed running totals of calls that got through on their post-debate broadcast and found Reagan winning two to one. Kaiser in the *Post* said the gimmick “set a new standard for pernicious irrelevance,” but the news organizations, including the *Post*, have continued to take and publish post-debate polls as quickly as we can.

WE are, in fact, saturated with polls. At the American University post-election forum, Ann Lewis, the political director of the Democratic National Committee during 1984, described their battering-ram effect:

Here we have ABC News on September 1—September 1 is relatively early in the campaign; some of us thought we were in there fighting—saying, “There is more bad news today for Mr. Mondale. A new ABC poll published today . . . [shows] President Reagan as of now appears to have a whopping lead in five key states.”

Moving right along, here we have the *L.A. Times* on September 3 saying, “A *Los Angeles Times* poll released today”—September 3 is Labor Day; some people think the real campaign begins on Labor Day; the media was telling us it was over—“shows the President 27 points ahead of Mondale, and Reagan’s huge lead does more than lift Republican spirits.” It certainly does. It wipes us out from trying to talk about the fact that there is a campaign going on.

Certainly the polls have been given exaggerated importance at times. When Nelson Rockefeller belatedly challenged Richard Nixon in 1968, he based his candidacy on the contention that he would be stronger in the general election. But a Gallup poll released just as the delegates were gathering in Miami Beach showed Nixon slightly stronger against Hubert Humphrey. The Nixon camp was jubilant, the Rockefeller camp crushed. Three days later, Lou Harris reported exactly the opposite and the sentiments reversed. Finally, the two pollsters issued a statement saying that both polls showed “a steady gain in public support” for Rockefeller. The delegates nominated Nixon.

This illustrates the danger of journalists' or politicians' believing that the polls have a life of their own. Rockefeller had not run in the primaries. He had relied on a late advertising and speechmaking campaign, hoping to move the polls and sway the delegates. But Nixon had won the primaries and had gained commitments from key party leaders that were far more powerful.

o (Generally, complaints about polls constitute a classic example of "blaming the messenger.") In 1984 the root of the problem for Ann Lewis and other Democrats was not the polls but Ronald Reagan's tremendous political strength and the liabilities Walter Mondale had displayed during the long primary season. But it is always easier to blame the press.

o (Another, less easily dismissed complaint is that we are so preoccupied with tactics and strategy during the general election campaign that our reporting tells voters, you are being manipulated.) At the Harvard conference on television and the election process, campaign consultant John Deardourff said that there is a "constant tension . . . between our interest in having people hear what the candidate has to say and the news media's interest in telling us more about why he or she is saying it at that particular time and place." Several other journalists agreed, including *New Yorker* magazine writer Elizabeth Drew, who said, "I believe very strongly in being skeptical . . . [but] I wonder if sometimes the sum total of the coverage doesn't tip over to the point where the process is robbed of any sense of majesty, inspiration . . ."

The late Frank Reynolds, anchorman for ABC News, said that since a campaign is basically "an attempt to manipulate" the media, "reporters have to inject some reality . . . that may not be at all in conformity with the image that the advisers wish to project." But Robert MacNeil of the *MacNeill/Lehrer Newshour* and Tom Brokaw of NBC both agreed that television has a problem of tone in its treatment of politics. MacNeil said that in a couple of sentences at the end of their pieces, TV reporters seek "to express their detachment and distance" from the story. And in so doing, they "compress into a very few words what, I think, could easily be interpreted as cynicism." Brokaw said that TV correspondents so often feel that the candidate's publicists are dictating scenes and stories and even camera angles that "the way to get back is to go out there and jab him quickly right at the end . . . get one quick shot and go."

The conflict will not likely be resolved. (Candidates always want to be taken at face value and to have us report their words just as they deliver them, without interpretation, analysis, or comment, even when they and their agents have obviously glossed their own product and denigrated the opposition.) And the press is sometimes guilty of seeking secret motives and stratagems even where none exist, and of reporting campaigns as if they were all tactics and no substance. Both sides—the press and the candidates—are too conscious of each other and not mindful enough of the third parties outside our clique—readers, viewers, voters.

THE final indictment concerns the use of exit polls to declare a winner while the polls are still open on Election Day. (In 1980, NBC caused a furor when it called the election at 5:15 P.M. Pacific time, almost three hours before the polls closed in California and other Western states. Despite the outcry and congressional hearings and editorials, in 1984 the first network call came in at 5:01 P.M. Pacific time.)

The networks cite figures purportedly showing that these early calls did not reduce turnout below expected levels, and therefore cannot have altered the outcome of some close local races—as the politicians in that area contend. They argue that as journalists they have "no right" to withhold news.

(I disagree and I am in good company.) Eric Sevareid, the distinguished retired CBS commentator and correspondent, said in a 1984 Harvard lecture, "I never could understand the passion to know how people voted before the returns were in. Why can't we wait a couple of hours? I can wait.) We've gone through a couple hundred years in this country waiting. It's not a strain on me." Few journalists are so patient, or detached. The public wants to know the winner as soon as possible, and we have the capacity to tell them, based on the exit polls.

The exception, in this case, validates the rule that we report whatever we know. Just as the freedom of the press must yield, in some cases, as when it conflicts with the right to a fair trial, so, in this instance, should the natural journalistic instinct to get the story out fast. (The evidence that projections affect turnout and alter election outcomes is very shaky. But that is not the issue.) The mystique of the

Jacksonville

voting act is central to the process of democracy. It is a feeling worthy of protection. Rationally, any individual knows that the likelihood of his vote deciding the election is infinitesimal. But we still believe our individual vote counts. In those few moments we are in the voting booth, we are exercising our sovereignty as citizens over those who seek to govern us; we feel that we hold their fates—and, in a way, the country's fate—in our hands. Yet that feeling is very difficult to maintain when you have been told by your favorite anchorman, "The presidential election has already been decided."

The Canadian solution is appealing. (On federal election nights, the broadcast networks are activated by time zones, starting early in the evening with the Maritime Provinces and Quebec, moving westward to pick up audiences in Ontario, the Prairie Provinces, and finally British Columbia.) That kind of forbearance would not infringe on the First Amendment rights of our networks any more than their routine delay of the evening news until supper time in the Mountain and Western states, two or three hours after it aired in the East.

(But the Canadians enforce their system by law, which I would hate to see our government do.) Also, our situation is complicated by time zone lines bisecting some states, by variations in poll closing times within a single time zone, and by satellite Super-Stations and competing news media. (As an earnest of good faith, the networks promised after the 1984 election no longer to use their exit polls to characterize voting trends across the country or in particular states on their regular evening news shows, while voting is continuing.) But they insisted on their journalistic right to project results using exit polls once the voting ended in a particular state. They urged Congress to mandate a uniform poll closing time across America, and the House voted such a bill in 1985. Passage by both houses in 1987 would go a long way toward a solution.

WHILE I don't agree with some of the specific criticisms of campaign journalism, I do share many of the misgivings expressed about our modern election process. (Communication from the candidates is increasingly controlled by professional campaign consultants—polling and media experts.) Sometimes their personal or political bonds to the

candidates extend beyond Election Day, but most of the time their responsibility ends when the votes are counted.

Lyn Nofziger, a former newspaperman, a former Reagan press secretary, and now a government relations consultant, explained at the American University forum after the 1984 election why he thought Reagan had been right in 1984 to reject press demands for fresh speeches on substantive issues and press conferences:

The media would like us to run a campaign . . . that makes it possible for them to write stories and cover things. For example, the media will demand a press conference. . . . They will demand that maybe you have a new speech every week. . . . (And they do not understand that they have a job to do, which is to cover a campaign, but the people in the campaign also have a job to do, and that job is to win an election). . . . And winning an election does not mean catering to the press. Winning an election means doing the things and having your candidate do the things that he can do most effectively and that will influence the most votes.

(I reject the Nofziger thesis.) The campaign is not the candidates' personal property. It is the public's hour of judgment. While I admire the consultants' skills and value them as sources, I worry about their lack of accountability. Some of them have become cynically skillful at manipulating the electorate by exploiting the power of the incumbency or the emotional impact of demagogic appeals while carefully secluding the candidates from reporters and voters. In a column, I once described a consultant in a particular mayoral campaign as a "hired gun." A friend of his reacted with pain and anger to the labeling, and he made a point that struck me very forcibly:

"You, Broder, criticized John for coming in from out of town, running a campaign for a guy he did not really know very well, using some ad themes and suggesting some speech ideas that struck you as inflammatory. You said that he was doing a job, pocketing his money, not worrying whether the guy he was helping really deserved to win this election, and then walking away, knowing that he would not have to live with the consequences, that someone else's city would bear the scars of the campaign and the consequences of this guy's victory."

That was a fair summary of what I had written.

"Well," he continued, "how different is that from what you do? You

The War Room!

come in from out of town, representing the *Washington Post*, and write whatever you want about these candidates, the kind of campaign they're waging, and the enmities and divisions you say it is bringing to the surface of the city—all this stuff about how polarized the public is, and all that. You get to know these candidates damn well, but you never say who you think should be mayor, or how the city is going to be put back together again. You just go back to Washington, knowing that you, too, will not have to live with the consequences."

He made me realize that a large percentage of what the public sees and hears in any campaign is generated by people who disavow any personal responsibility for the outcome. The ads, speeches, and letters are composed by people hired to help a candidate win, whether or not they think he deserves the office. The news stories and television pieces are produced by people like myself who are hired to report the campaign without injecting our own views.

(As members of the insiders' clique, reporters and consultants have more in common than we like to admit.) In the introduction to *Television and the Presidential Elections*, Martin Linsky said that at the Harvard conference,

for all their quarrels, the politicians and the network people seemed to be more like colleagues and symbionts than opponents. . . . The politicians and the networks need each other, use each other, and are obsessed by each other's businesses (The politicians are media junkies and the network journalists are political junkies.) They talk in codes that only fellow insiders—other politicians and their staffs, consultants, and other political reporters—can fully decipher. . . . Viewers and voters are excluded.

I am skeptical about recasting the rules of political journalism and certainly do not welcome any redefinition of my own role. When I am charged, as all journalists are, with "letting so-and-so get away with murder" by not exposing a candidate's alleged hypocrisy, or of "writing off the chances" of someone we know has sterling qualities, I demur. I'm not his advocate, I say. (Professionally, I can't give a damn who wins or loses.)

I should hold my distance, but I worry that this journalistic detachment can be a crutch for avoiding responsibility. The rules—and our roles—are not quite as clear as we might pretend. Obviously, we know these contenders better than most voters possibly can. Clearly,

we have some obligation to share whatever insights we have gained. But what kind of obligation? Jack Germond, one of the best political writers I know, believes that the candidates the reporters most admire rarely get nominated. Is that a sign of our failure to communicate what we know and believe, or a praiseworthy proof that our reporting is not tilted?

I thought two of the men eliminated early from the Democratic field in 1984—Governor Reubin Askew of Florida and Senator Ernest F. Hollings of South Carolina—should have been seriously considered for the presidency. As a columnist, I freely made that point—but not so frequently or insistently that I sounded like Willy Loman's wife, standing on stage, shouting "Attention must be paid" to this man. But as a reporter, I felt obliged to report what I saw—that their campaigns were falling flat—even though such reporting further burdened their candidacies.

Such ambivalence is part of the baggage any journalist takes into the campaign, and acknowledging it is better than trying to conceal it. Cover-ups don't work for journalists any better than they do for Presidents. (Our critics will always suspect that we are slanting, in any case, and if we are honest, we have to acknowledge that our values, opinions, and prejudices do have some effect on the way we do our work.) It is time to turn to the question of bias in the news.