



FEEDING FRENZY

How
Attack
Journalism
Has
Transformed
American
Politics

LARRY J. SABATO

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*How Attack Journalism Has
Transformed American Politics*



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FEEDING FRENZY

*For my Piranhas,
who remind me why
I chose to teach.*

Preface and Acknowledgments

In the course of my research for this volume, the feisty Texas journalist Sarah McClendon, a member of the White House press corps, made an observation to one of my student assistants that is worth citing at the outset:

You know, it's foolish the way all these professors write these books about something they've never experienced. You can tell him I said that. . . . What the hell is he [doing]? He knows nothing about the subject. Why doesn't he leave it to people who do know something about it? He has to come to us to get information to write his book.

In truth, any academic writing about the press is on the outside looking in, dependent on the journalistic guild for cooperation and insight. Fortunately for this professor, about 150 broadcast and print reporters plus several dozen candidates, political consultants, and campaign staffers, were willing to be helpful (including the redoubtable Ms. McClendon). Most were exceptionally frank, with relatively few exercising the closemouthed discretion of master Republican operative Stuart Spencer, who—when asked to reveal a few of his presidential campaign secrets—perhaps wisely replied, “If I had terminal cancer, I’d tell you.” I am deeply indebted to all those who so generously shared their time and memories, and, following Ms. McClendon’s advice, I have tried to let those who “know something” about the subject share that knowledge by means of this book.

A few notes about the 208 interviews conducted for this volume: All quotations in the text are taken from on-the-record interviews unless otherwise noted. Minor grammatical and structural errors were corrected, and when an interviewee specifically asked me to do so during the course of an interview, off-color language was sanitized. With the main exception of interviewees who requested that their sessions not be recorded, all interviews were taped and the tapes

have been preserved. A handful of interviewees (fewer than two dozen) agreed to talk only on deep background: No tapes were made, their names appear nowhere in this volume, and no direct anonymous quotations have been drawn from their sessions.

Those selected—sometimes serendipitously—for interviews comprise a reasonably diverse group of print and broadcast journalists, but no claim is made either for the representativeness or comprehensiveness of the chosen scribes and broadcasters. The vast majority are either veterans in senior positions who have had the opportunity to view their profession from a number of perspectives during lengthy careers or more-junior reporters who had covered one or more of the specific case studies surveyed for this book. Only about a dozen interviews that were requested were denied. A complete listing of on-the-record interviews appears in the Appendix.

I have come away from these sessions with many of journalism's best, with genuine respect and admiration for what their life's work has produced, as well as a greater appreciation for the difficulties they face in undertaking it. From the outside it is easy to romanticize journalism and equally easy to be hypercritical of it. I hope I have avoided both extremes, though I have not been shy in making observations and in second-guessing my interviewees. As a member of the only two groups of professionals—academics and authors—thinner-skinned than journalists, I can appreciate the reactions of some reporters and editors to this volume. I can only ask their forbearance if not their forgiveness for any hurtful comments it contains.

Not incidentally, I have been faced with some of the same agonizing decisions reporters and editors confront every day: Which conflicting version of events is closer to the truth? Which memories are more accurate? Which interpretations are more fair and balanced? What should be included and what excluded about the foibles of those making (and reporting) the news? Concerning accuracy, I have done my best to separate wheat from chaff, but undoubtedly I have not always succeeded. The full truth about many past political controversies seems destined to remain elusive. In my decisions about what to publish, I have tried to err on the side of caution, deleting surnames where unnecessary embarrassment would accrue and being only specific enough to make my point. On the other hand, where sources permitted and details were required to prove a significant allegation or assertion, I have not hesitated to do so.

In two and a half years of research for this book, I have benefited from the efforts, support, and guidance of many. Generous financial

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Few investigators have ever been blessed with such remarkable student assistants. My University of Virginia group called themselves the Piranhas and adopted the slogan, "We Feed on Frenzies." Their enthusiasm and hard work thrilled and delighted me. Three were especially dedicated: Leslie Greenwald, whose meticulous administrative abilities were a godsend; Katie Dunn, who expertly supervised the manuscript in its later stages; and Mark Stencel, a very talented budding journalist whose keen interviewing skills were superbly applied to this project. The other splendid Piranhas were Christopher Barbuto, Jonathan Blank, Aaron Book, Mark Brazeal, Lewis Brissman, Ned Lilly, Miguel Monteverde, Richard Strulson, and Richard Winston. I salute them all.

Many others deserve acknowledgment as well, including a number of my University of Virginia faculty colleagues, Henry J. Abraham, Michael Cornfield, Martha Derthick, Steven E. Finkel, J. J. Murray, and David O'Brien; Scott M. Matheson, Jr., for his wise legal counsel; colleagues at other institutions, Timothy E. Cook of Williams College, Robert M. Entman of Duke University, and Charles O. Jones of the University of Wisconsin at Madison; Alan Ehrenhalt, Marcus D. Rosenbaum, and Sandra Stencel, all of Congressional Quarterly, Inc.; Rossita Thomas of the Congressional Research Service; friends Jill Abramson, Wyatt G. Andrews, E. J. Dionne, Jerald terHorst, and Kent Jenkins; Glenn Simpson of *Roll Call*; Bruce Nichols of Macmillan, Inc.; Barry Jackson of the Center for Public Service, University of Virginia, who designed Figure 4.1; my patient, long-suffering secretary, Nancy Rae; champion transcriber Linda Miller and her associate Regina Rae; skilled typist Debbie LaMori; Steven Johnson and Steven Teles, who professionally scripted background papers on many of the case studies cited in this book; University of Virginia students Tao Bernstein, Greg Golladay, Charles Kromkowski, John Kirincich, and C. Gray Wheeler; Weldon and Mildred Cooper, for their usual sustenance; Jo McCleskey and Nancy Bowles for their friendship; and last but certainly not least,

Erwin Glikes, president and publisher, and Peter Dougherty, senior editor, The Free Press, whose suggestions, encouragement, and belief in the importance of this project have been instrumental in its completion, and Edith Lewis of The Free Press for her superb shepherding of the manuscript to publication.

My thanks to all for helping me find some news and commentary that is fit to print. The remaining errors unfit for publication but in cold print nonetheless are my responsibility alone.

Charlottesville, Virginia
January 1991

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Inquisition, American Style

Attack Journalism and Feeding Frenzies

I would never have comprehended the anguish visited by the "death watch" of the media. To have people surrounding our home with a real carnival atmosphere, shouting questions at you with a boom microphone and long-lens cameras, it makes one feel like a hunted animal driven to his lair.

JIM WRIGHT, former Speaker of the House¹

This is guilt by press. We might as well have hanging by the press. We [shouldn't] have Gestapo tactics by the media in this country.

ROGER AILES, media consultant to the 1988 Bush/Quayle campaign, commenting on the coverage of Dan Quayle²

It has become a spectacle without equal in modern American politics: the news media, print and broadcast, go after a wounded politician like sharks in a feeding frenzy. The wounds may have been self-inflicted, and the politician may richly deserve his or her fate, but the journalists now take center stage in the process, creating the news as much as reporting it, changing both the shape of election-year politics and the contours of government. Having replaced the political parties as the screening committee for candidates and officeholders, the media propel some politicians toward power and unceremoniously eliminate others. Unavoidably, this enormously influential role—and the news practices employed in exercising it—has provided rich fodder for a multitude of press critics.

These critics' charges against the press cascade down with the fury of rain in a summer squall. Public officials and many other observers see journalists as rude, arrogant, and cynical, given to exaggeration, harassment, sensationalism, and gross insensitivity. From the conservative perspective, their reporting is, more often than not, viewed

as evidence of blatant liberal bias, with the facts being fitted to preconceived notions. At the same time, the left indicts the media for being too hesitant to find fault with the status quo and too close to the very establishment they are supposed to check. Moreover, critics of all stripes see journalists as hypercritical of others yet vengeful when criticized themselves, quick to accuse yet slow to correct error, willing to violate the constitutional values of due process and fair trial in the Fifth and Sixth Amendments by acting as judge and jury, yet ~~insistent on wrapping themselves in the First Amendment when challenged on virtually anything~~. Especially in the post-Watergate era of institutionalized investigative reporting and "star journalism," the press is perceived as being far more interested in finding sleaze and achieving fame and fortune than in serving as an honest broker of information between citizens and government.

In the wake of recent elections and political scandals, feelings about the news media are running particularly strong. This intensity shows in the kind of modifiers that were added to the word *journalism* during the course of research and interviewing for this study:

blood-sport	peek-a-boo
character cop	peeping-Tom
cheap-shot	skinhead
food-fight	soap opera
gotcha	tabloid
hit-and-run	totalitarian
jugular	trash
keyhole	voyeur
paparazzi	

Some of these insulting adjectives came from a suspect class: politicians speared by the pens of scribes. All losing candidates naturally blame the press—politicians are never responsible for their own defeats—and surprisingly few winners have much good to say about the profession that they believe made victory more difficult. Such universal condemnation by politicians may ironically be taken as welcome proof that the press is doing its job.

Less reassuring, however, is another chorus of critics of modern journalism. A host of the most senior, respected, and experienced news professionals are themselves becoming equivocal about, embarrassed over, even repulsed by the conduct of some of their colleagues. While disagreeing with many of the criticisms leveled at reporters from outside the profession, they are nonetheless concerned about the

media's growing distortion of the political process and deeply disturbed that legitimate press inquiry sometimes gets quickly and completely out of hand. And they fear a rising tide of antipress sentiment if the excesses are left unchecked. Already, several public opinion studies (discussed in chapter 7) have revealed a dramatic decline in citizens' confidence in, and respect for, the news media: Most Americans no longer believe that the press generally "gets the facts straight," and they rate journalism among the professions with the "lowest ethical standards." Fully 78 percent in one study agreed that "the media spend too much time focusing on [campaign] things that are irrelevant, like candidates' personal lives" rather than centering their coverage on "the most important issues."³ The evidence also suggests that recent controversies have weakened public support for First Amendment press freedoms.

These thoughtful and credible practitioners, many of them interviewed for this book, are less worried about the press's obsession with scandal—a staple of news in virtually every free society and certainly for the whole of American history—than with the *kinds of scandals* now considered reportable and the *manner* in which they are investigated and reported. First of all, scandal coverage is no longer restricted to *misuse of public office*, incompetence in the exercise of public responsibilities, or some other inadequacy or malfeasance in a *public* role; it *extends to purely private* misbehavior, even offenses, some of them trivial, committed long before an individual's emergence into public life. No wise politician today dares utter St. Augustine's legendary prayer: "Dear God, give me chastity and continence, but not just yet." Even a college student contemplating a political career had best think twice about youthful indulgences, given degenerating press standards. When *New York Times* columnist William Safire wrote the following words in protest just after Gary Hart's 1987 presidential withdrawal, they seemed alarmist:

If we do not turn the tables on the titillaters, we will load future news conferences with such significant policy questions as: "Sir, there are widespread reports of your impotence; when was the last time you and your wife had sexual relations?" "Madam, how do you deal with the persistent rumors that your national security adviser is a herpes victim?" "Have you or any member of your family ever taken illegal drugs?" "Some say that you once saw a psychiatrist—exactly what was your problem?"⁴

Since Safire's predictions appeared, variations of the latter two questions have already been asked of candidates, and one wonders

only half whimsically whether fellow *Times* columnist Russell Baker's vision of "adultery disclosure forms" to be filed before the New Hampshire primary will also come to pass someday.⁵ Soon no public figure may be too unimportant for close scrutiny. Editors and reporters at several major publications are seriously considering expanding their circle of legitimate targets for private life investigations to include top aides to candidates and even people uninvolved in politics who are "in the news" prominently. Similarly, no offense may be too minor to ignore in this "bare-all" age. Journalist Timothy Noah, while at *Newsweek*, was called with a scandal tip about Republican presidential candidate Alexander Haig: He was observed parking in a spot reserved for the handicapped in a supermarket parking lot. At this rate it seems almost inevitable that a candidate will be exposed for using an express checkout lane when purchasing more than the ten-item limit.⁶

Press invasion of privacy is leading to the gradual erasure of the line protecting a public person's purely private life. This makes the price of public life enormously higher, serving as an even greater deterrent for those not absolutely obsessed with holding power—the kind of people we ought least to want in office. Rather than recognizing this unfortunate consequence, many in journalism prefer to relish their newly assumed role of "gatekeeper," which, as mentioned earlier, enables them to substitute for party leaders in deciding which characters are virtuous enough to merit consideration for high office. As ABC News correspondent Brit Hume self-critically suggests:

We don't see ourselves institutionally, collectively anymore as a bunch of journalists out there faithfully reporting what's happening day by day. . . . We have a much grander view of ourselves: we are the Horatio at the national bridge. We are the people who want to prevent the bad characters from crossing over into public office.

Hume's veteran ABC colleague Sander Vanocur agrees, detecting "among some young reporters a quality of the avenging angel: they are going to sanitize American politics."⁷ More and more, the news media seem determined to show that would-be emperors have no clothes, and if necessary to prove the point, they personally will strip the candidates naked on the campaign trail. The sheer number of journalists participating in these public denudings guarantees riotous behavior, and the "full-court press" almost always presents itself as a snarling, unruly mob more bent on killing kings than making them. Not surprisingly potential candidates deeply fear the power of

an inquisitorial press, and in deciding whether to seek office, they often consult journalists as much as party leaders, even sharing private vulnerabilities with newsmen to gauge reaction. The *Los Angeles Times's* Washington bureau chief, Jack Nelson, had such an encounter before the 1988 campaign season, when a prospective presidential candidate "literally asked me how long I thought the statute of limitations was" for marital infidelity. "I told him I didn't know, but I didn't think [the limit] had been reached in his case!" For whatever reasons, the individual chose not to run.

As the reader will see later in this volume, able members of the news corps offer impressive defenses for all the practices mentioned thus far, not the least of which is that the press has become more aggressive to combat the legions of image makers, political consultants, spin doctors, and handlers who surround modern candidates like a nearly impenetrable shield. Yet upon reflection, most news veterans recognize that press excesses are not an acceptable antidote for consultant or candidate evils. In fact, not one of the interviewed journalists even attempted to justify an increasingly frequent occurrence in news organizations: the publication of gossip and rumor *without convincing proof*. Gossip has always been the drug of choice for journalists as well as the rest of the political community, but as the threshold for publication of information about private lives has been lowered, journalists sometimes cover politics as "Entertainment Tonight" reporters cover Hollywood. A bitter Gary Hart observed: "Rumor and gossip have become the coins of the political realm,"⁸ and the *New York Times's* Michael Oreskes seemed to agree: "1988 was a pretty sorry year when the *National Enquirer* was the most important publication in American journalism." With all the stories and innuendo about personal vice, campaigns appear to be little more than a stream of talegates (or in the case of sexual misadventures, tailgates).

The sorry standard set on the campaign trail is spilling over into coverage of governmental battles. Ever since Watergate, government scandals have paraded across the television set in a roll call so lengthy and numbing that they are inseparable in the public consciousness, all joined at the Achilles' heel. Some recent lynchings, such as John Tower's failure to be confirmed as secretary of defense, rival any spectacle produced by colonial Salem. At the same time more vital and revealing information is ignored or crowded off the agenda. *Real* scandals, such as the savings-and-loan heist or the influence peddling at the Department of Housing and Urban Develop-

ment in the 1980s, go undetected for years. The sad conclusion is inescapable: The press has become obsessed with gossip rather than governance; it prefers to employ titillation rather than scrutiny; as a result, its political coverage produces trivialization rather than enlightenment. And the dynamic mechanism propelling and demonstrating this decline in news standards is the "feeding frenzy."

LIKE SHARKS IN A FEEDING FRENZY

I feel like bait rather than a senior member of Congress. [The press are] investigative sharks.

U.S. Congressman JACK BROOKS (D., Texas)⁹

The term *frenzy* suggests some kind of disorderly, compulsive, or agitated activity that is muscular and instinctive, not cerebral and thoughtful.¹⁰ In the animal world, no activity is more classically frenzied than the feeding of sharks, piranhas, or bluefish when they encounter a wounded prey. These attack-fish with extraordinarily acute senses first search out weak, ill, or injured targets. On locating them, each hunter moves in quickly to gain a share of the kill, feeding not just off the victim but also off its fellow hunters' agitation. The excitement and drama of the violent encounter builds to a crescendo, sometimes overwhelming the creatures' usual inhibitions.¹¹ The frenzy can spread, with the delirious attackers wildly striking any object that moves in the water, even each other. Veteran reporters will recognize more press behavior in this passage than they might wish to acknowledge. This reverse anthropomorphism can be carried too far, but the similarity of piranha in the water and press on the campaign trail can be summed up in a shared goal: If it bleeds, try to kill it.

The kingdom of politics and not of nature is the subject of this volume, so for our purposes, a feeding frenzy is defined as the press coverage attending any political event or circumstance where a critical mass of journalists leap to cover the same embarrassing or scandalous subject and pursue it intensely, often excessively, and sometimes uncontrollably. No precise number of journalists can be attached to the term *critical mass*, but in the video age, we truly know it when we see it; the forest of cameras, lights, microphones, and adrenaline-choked reporters surrounding a Gary Hart, Dan Quayle, or Geraldine Ferraro is unmistakable. Table 1.1 contains a list of

thirty-six events that surely qualify as frenzies. They are occasions of sin for the press as well as the politicians, and thus ideal research sites that will serve as case studies for this book. A majority (twenty-one) are drawn from presidential politics, while seven examples

TABLE 1.1
FEEDING FRENZIES: CASE STUDIES USED FOR THIS BOOK

From Presidential Politics

1952	Richard Nixon's "secret fund"
1968	George Romney's "brainwashing" about Vietnam
1968	Spiro Agnew's "fat Jap" flap
1969	Ted Kennedy's Chappaquiddick
1972	Edmund Muskie's New Hampshire cry
1972	Thomas Eagleton's mental health
1976	Jimmy Carter's "lust in the heart" <i>Playboy</i> interview
1976	Gerald Ford's "free Poland" gaffe
1979	Jimmy Carter's "killer rabbit"
1980	Billygate (Billy Carter and Libya)
1983	Debategate (Reagan's use of Carter's debate briefing books)
1984	Gary Hart's age, name, and signature changes
1984	Jesse Jackson's "Hymietown" remark
1984	Geraldine Ferraro's family finances
1985/ 86	Jack Kemp's purported homosexuality
1987	Gary Hart and Donna Rice
1987	Joseph Biden's plagiarism and Michael Dukakis's "attack video"
1987	Pat Robertson's exaggerated résumé and shotgun marriage
1988	Dukakis's mental health
1988	Dan Quayle (National Guard service, Paula Parkinson, academic record, rumors such as plagiarism and drugs)
1988	George Bush's alleged mistress

From the State and Local Levels

1987/ 88	Governor Evan Mecham on the impeachment trail (Arizona)
1987/ 88	Chuck Robb and the cocaine parties (Virginia)
1983/ 90	Mayor Marion Barry's escapades (District of Columbia)
1987	Governor Dick Celeste's womanizing (Ohio)
1988	Mayor Henry Cisneros's extramarital affair (San Antonio, Texas)
1989/ 90	Governor Gaston Caperton's "soap opera" divorce (West Virginia)
1990	Texas governor's election: drugs, rape, and "honey hunts"

Noncampaign Examples

1973/ 74	The Watergate scandals
1974	Congressman Wilbur Mills and stripper Fanne Foxe
1986/ 87	The Iran-Contra affair
1987	Supreme Court nominee Douglas Ginsburg's marijuana use (and campaign repercussions)
1989	John Tower's losing fight to become secretary of defense
1989	Speaker Jim Wright's fall from power
1989	Tom Foley's rocky rise to the Speakership
1989/ 90	Barney Frank and the male prostitute
