

# Remote & Controlled



*Media Politics  
in a Cynical Age*

**Matthew Robert Kerbel**

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in a Cynical Age*

**Matthew Robert Kerbel**  
*Villanova University*

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## *Preface and Acknowledgments*

IT PROBABLY SHOULDN'T have surprised me. After all, I knew doubts about government ran fairly deep. Still, I couldn't quite shake the memory of the response I got from the students in my introductory American Government class when I asked how many of them trusted politicians, at least some of the time. No hands went up. Not one. And this was a fairly talkative group. For the most part sophomores, they had concluded by age twenty that little good could be expected from people who had made a career of public service. The verdict was unanimous. And they are not alone. Surveys show that their opinions mirror larger national attitudes, albeit to an extreme degree. It wasn't always like this. Why is it now?

Shortly thereafter, "Meet the Press" hosted Bush White House Chief of Staff Samuel Skinner. Things were not upbeat in the Bush administration at the time. Nor were they pleasant on the Sunday program, as Skinner was pelted with acerbic questions of dubious value to anyone outside the administration. Were his views on key social issues different from the president's? How could he claim to be competent when the White House was so disorganized? Why were people in the administration saying nasty things about his capability behind his back?

The reporters asking these questions know better than anyone that administration officials were undermining Skinner because the White House is staffed by people with huge egos, a variety of personal beliefs, and their own agendas. There is always disorganization, and people backbite. The presumption underlying the reporters' questions troubled me as much as the reaction to politicians I had gotten from my sophomores. Do we really want perfection to be the standard against which journalists measure our politicians and political organizations? Show me an institution that does run smoothly, where everyone is of like mind, where all motives are pure. A university, perhaps? A television newsroom?

Reporters could say that government is different, that public officials should be held to a higher standard, given how their actions affect hundreds of millions of people in this country and potentially billions abroad. That is precisely why exchanges like the one on "Meet the Press" are so disconcerting. High standards are important, but impossible standards can foster an endless, dubious, presumptuous dialogue between reporters and political figures that makes it easy to tear down politicians in the name of protecting the rest of us.

I kept thinking about my sophomores. They didn't have to watch "Meet the Press" to get the message—it's pervasive. In newspapers and on broadcast and cable television, on talk radio, even on computer conferences, it is hard to escape the idea that politicians are not to be trusted, that politics is played primarily for self-gain, that no one is any good. This seemed to me more than the reflection of a healthy cynicism of the sort with long roots in our rebellious culture. I began to wonder about the relationship between these two things, between my turned-off sophomores and "Meet the Press," about how it is possible for us to educate ourselves to the ways of government without acquiring the journalist's cynical pose. After all, democracy is problematic without knowledge. But it is equally problematic without participation. Is there a way to survive the bombardment of cynical coverage and still feel the desire for political involvement?

The purpose of this book is to explore the dilemma confronting those who might wish to learn about the system without being repelled by it, given how national politics is conducted and covered in the 1990s. *System*, it turns out, is an important word, because how politics gets covered is inseparable from how it is conducted. Important changes—particularly in technology and institutional reform—have made political actors into free agents and brought the rough-and-tumble of politics to the fore. Press coverage is best understood in this context, particularly if we seek intelligent solutions to the dilemma, for it is insufficient and simplistic to say the media should change. This is not another media-bashing book; there are enough of those.

As this work nears production, I would like to thank those who generously contributed their time and ideas so that a manuscript could become a book: Karen O'Connor, John Bibby, Craig Rimmerman, Ruth Jones, Diana Evans, Ronald Rapoport, Nelson Polsby, David Canon, Linda Fowler, Larry Sabato, Hugh Jones, and John Coleman. Through their invaluable editorial supervision, Sandy Maisel and Jennifer Knerr helped to develop and shape core elements of this project while giving me their constant encouragement. At Westview, Eric Wright and Brenda Hadenfeldt worked tirelessly to move this book through production. And, as always, Adrienne Adler Kerbel lovingly offered unending patience, support, and editorial guidance. Although I maintain full responsibility for the contents of this book, it is a far better work because of their efforts than it otherwise would have been.

Matthew Robert Kerbel  
Villanova, Pennsylvania



Contents

List of Illustrations IX

Preface and Acknowledgments XI

1 Introduction:  
Under the President's Clothes 1

.....

How We Respond to the Message 6

Where We Get the Message 9

How We Feel About the Political World 11

Of Politics and Governance 13

Conclusion 21

2 Two Hundred Years  
of Politics and Reporting 25

.....

From Party Press to Penny Press 29

News Managers: Press or Political Figures? 32

Congress—Live 52

Harry and Louise 53

Conclusion 55

3 A War of Words: Coverage of Politics  
and the Politics of Coverage 59

.....

Political Parties: Missing in Action 65

Campaign Advisers: Soldiers of Fortune 80

Reporters: The Pen as Sword 86

The Public: Prisoners of War? 90

Conclusion 94

|          |  |     |
|----------|--|-----|
| <b>4</b> | <b>Presidential Governance<br/>and Other Fantasies</b> | 95  |
| .....    |  |     |
|          | The President: Impotence Despite Omnipotence           | 100 |
|          | Congress: Gridlock Amid Posturing                      | 115 |
|          | Interest Groups: Bargaining for Self-Gain              | 120 |
|          | Conclusion   | 123 |
| <br>     |  |     |
| <b>5</b> | <b>What About Us?</b>                                  | 127 |
| .....    |  |     |
|          | Real Variety or More of the Same?                      | 130 |
|          | Incentive to Change?                                   | 137 |
|          | Conclusion   | 142 |
| <br>     |  |     |
|          | <i>Discussion Questions</i>                            | 145 |
|          | <i>Glossary</i>  | 149 |
|          | <i>Notes</i>   | 153 |
|          | <i>References</i>                                      | 157 |
|          | <i>About the Book and Author</i>                       | 163 |
|          | <i>Index</i>   | 165 |

## *Illustrations*

### *Boxes*

- 5.1 Themes and guests featured on major network and cable news programs, October 15–16, 1992 135

### *Figures*

- 1.1 Trustworthiness of television and newspapers compared, 1959–1992 12  
1.2 Decline in public trust in government, 1958–1992 14  
1.3 Perceived honesty and ethical standards of media and government officials, 1992 15  
  
3.1 Distribution of CBS news coverage by type of contest, 1980 64  
3.2 Newspaper presidential election stories about campaign politics, 1968–1980 70  
3.3 Length of television sound bites of presidential candidates, 1968 and 1988 87  
3.4 Comparison of “bad news” and “good news” coverage of presidential candidates in magazines, 1960–1992 91

### *Photos*

- FDR’s strategic use of radio gave millions of listeners an unprecedented sense of access to the presidency 34  
Through the camera lens, the somber Richard M. Nixon seems a drab alternative to the vigorous John F. Kennedy 43  
Television emerges as a powerful force in international policymaking when it personalizes the Vietnam War for the U.S. audience 46  
President Clinton acts as “Donahue-in-chief” as he assumes the role of talk-show host during a nationally televised town meeting on health care 110  
Contemporary legislative leaders like Newt Gingrich aggressively play to cameras and reporters 117

# 1

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## **Introduction: Under the President's Clothes**

The exchange between the young woman and the president of the United States went like this:

Woman: The world is dying to know: Is it boxers or briefs?

The President: Briefs, usually.



.....

**W**ITH THAT, PRESIDENT CLINTON revealed his underwear preferences, both to the seventeen-year-old questioner and to anyone in the country who happened to be watching. Because this dialogue happened in a television studio, was broadcast on MTV,<sup>1</sup> and was subsequently reported on television and in the newspapers, countless millions of Americans became privy to information about the president's drawers.

Two things are remarkable about this exchange: that it happened at all, and that it occurred in such a public manner. Today, we may assume as our birthright access to the most personal information about our political leaders. But the entire underwear event—both the question and the forum in which it was asked—would have been unthinkable just several years ago.

Until very recently, the manner in which politicians made and reporters covered the news precluded such a public discussion from happening. Media, for the most part, came in four traditional forms: newspapers, magazines, network television, and radio. A typical news consumer in 1975 probably could select among a local newspaper (and, if ambitious, a paper from a business or political capital, such as the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post*), a news-magazine like *Time* or *Newsweek*, local and network television news programs, and possibly a newsradio channel. These sources would present the news in varying degrees of detail, but none would report what the president had on underneath his pants.

Consequently, it is hard to imagine a head of state twenty years ago addressing a forum in which intimate questions might be asked. In fact, it is difficult even to imagine what such a forum would have looked like: Before MTV and before the proliferation of cable channels, there was no **medium** through which an elected official could submit to direct public questioning of the sort President Clinton faced from his young audience.

But times have changed. The number of information outlets has exploded, and each additional forum has produced new opportunities for politicians to reach out to constituents, sometimes in unconventional ways. In one version of the new media, political leaders like President Clinton face the public di-

rectly, without benefit of reporters; this type of arrangement produced the underwear discussion. The forum was Music Television—a cable channel developed for amusement, not politics. That a president finds MTV a worthwhile vehicle for reaching a slice of the electorate is as indicative of the changing shape of media politics as is the fact that MTV regularly presents its own news reports, from which a large share of people under thirty get their news.

The opportunities provided politicians by new information vehicles like MTV have redrawn the parameters of political activity—and political coverage. The volume of information available to us is staggering. Politicians now seem to be all over the place, at one minute appearing on a television talk show, the next minute beaming their likeness via satellite for a brief appearance on your local newscast. News reporters keep pace, digesting material from this highly charged political world and presenting it—quickly—in a summary form that contextualizes it for viewers and readers.

We might think the availability of all this information would make people feel closer to Washington and in tune with public officials. After all, if Americans wish to learn about government, partake in political discourse, or even become political junkies, there has never been a period in our history in which proximity to politics was any more convenient. Just turn on the television, power up the computer, or pick up a newspaper. Ours is a world where easy access could mean ready involvement and the tremendous sense of efficacy that comes from playing a role in a representative system.

Clearly this is not happening. To the contrary, large numbers of Americans feel detached from those running the country. As a nation, we are skeptical of the motives of government officials and cynical about the possibility that they can perform admirably. Trust in government lingers at an all-time low, and politician is a dirty word. If anything, familiarity with the political system appears to breed contempt.

Why is this? After all, the exercise of power that is and always has been an essential component of self-governance need not be regarded as a manipulative enterprise, even if it contains manipulative elements. For centuries, advancement of the collective good has occurred as a product of self-interested individuals exercising influence. In this respect, power politics is more aptly described as necessary and important than as good or bad. But that is not how many people regard it.

Public reliance on television has climbed as trust in government has fallen, so it is convenient to say that the media should be blamed for this decline in trust. But that response is overly simplistic. In fact, we will see how a host of players contribute to a steady supply of cynical messages about contemporary

politics. Political actors in the executive and legislative branches, candidates who would like to serve in those branches, interest-group representatives, and the press all benefit from newfound opportunities for the advancement of self-interest made possible through changes in how presidents govern, how Congress operates, how national campaigns are run, and how the press covers politics. This condition makes the self-serving nature of politics more paramount than it was in the past and presents the public with good reasons to feel turned off to government.

For a sense of this, just look at the mediated messages about politics and politicians that encrust objective information about what happened to whom, where, and when. The news we receive is replete with cynical doings once known only to insiders. For instance, on the same day as the underwear encounter, the *Los Angeles Times* ran a story about rumors claiming White House Chief of Staff Thomas F. "Mack" McLarty was in danger of being replaced—a sign of administration weakness in the world of Washington. The piece quoted Clinton aides as saying they had undertaken a "quiet effort to counter perceptions" that McLarty lacked the knowledge and authority to perform his functions effectively. The story straightforwardly recounted efforts that could be considered manipulative ("trying to show off McLarty's firm side") or even deceptive ("promoting news stories that portray McLarty as asserting stronger control over staff operations"). Power politics, of course, is not new. But detailed attention to such internal posturing was once not provided to those looking on at home. Something has changed, bringing once-private actions to the center of public attention.

The media are accurate to question the motivation of the political figures they portray, but self-promotion is only one of a variety of apt perspectives for politics. It may alternatively be described as a noble profession, in which difficult decisions are made in the effort to govern large numbers of people. Whereas *politician* is an ugly word to many, *statesman* has a far more admirable ring. But how many people do we see depicted as statesmen on television? The politicians who provide the daily staple of media coverage seem to spend much of their day maneuvering others to maximize personal interests. This is because they are frequently depicted in terms of the gritty, problematic process of running for office or passing legislation—a process that has become far more accessible and visible in recent years and that, like sausage making, can be an unpleasant thing to watch closely. Reporters watch it all the time—and fill in the gory details.

If such ungainly news items were simply one aspect of what we heard about major league politics, this still might be an insignificant matter. But there is a



larger problem: In order to help us make sense of the vast quantities of information conveyed every day, the media supply us with a framework much like the theme of the McLarty story for understanding what politics is about and how government operates. We are prompted to think about the political system as the reporter tells us about it, as a place filled with people of dubious character bent on image manipulation at all costs. It becomes a challenge for us to sort out political information in the news from messages about the political system conveyed along with the facts—to learn about politics without acquiring an attitude. To seek political data in the midst of the information revolution is often to find wary messages about the people who run our democracy.

This causes a dilemma: Given how the media portray political information, how can we expect to be informed without feeling alienated? Assuming we wish to be knowledgeable about politics and government, how can we wade through the bundles of information available to us without succumbing to the distrustful messages that often accompany it? We will explore this dilemma by looking at how politics and government are portrayed by the media in general and by television in particular. In the process, we will uncover the intricate set of relationships between reporters and the political figures they cover, each of whom contributes to how news is reported. We will try to discern the reasons political information is distilled by the doubts of those who report it—reasons that reach far beyond the press to include elected officials, political institutions, and quite possibly those of us in the audience who consume the news.

## How We Respond to the Message

Strong claims will be made in the pages that follow about the political messages found in the media. If the messages are to be of concern to us, we first need to establish how they affect their intended audience, the mass public. There is evidence of several types of influence. One widely accepted consequence of watching television news and reading newspapers is the tendency for people to begin to think about the things addressed in the media. In other words, if news reports focus heavily on the subject of crime, people who pay attention to those reports may find themselves thinking about the issue of crime and believing that it is an important concern. This effect is called **agenda setting** because the impact of the media is felt on the makeup of the public agenda, the things we are aware of and think are significant.

Evidence supporting the agenda-setting effect of the mass media has been around for a long time, although some media scholars have called into ques-