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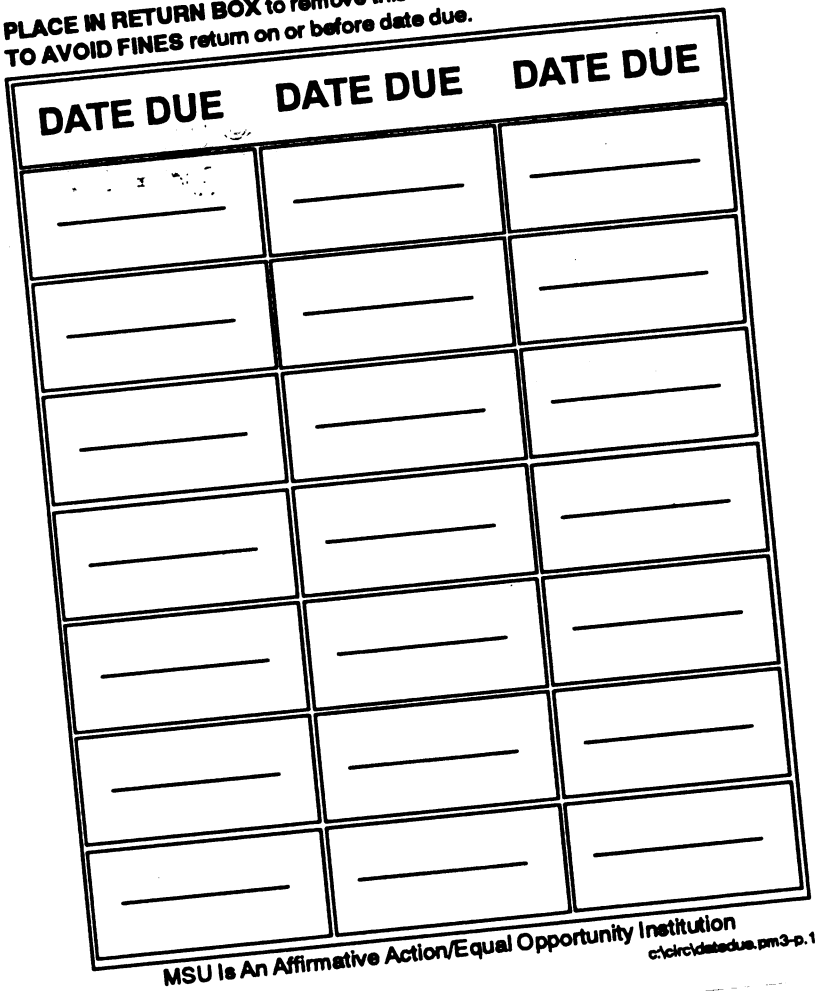

THE DISTORTED POLITICAL PERCEPTIONS OF FOUR NATIONAL NEWSPAPERS IN THE 1988 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

By

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ABSTRACT

THE DISTORTED POLITICAL PERCEPTIONS OF
FOUR NATIONAL NEWSPAPERS IN THE 1988 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

By

Steven Santz Harmon

The press's failure in the 1988 presidential campaign was its adherence to distorted perceptions--based on a preoccupation with strategic over policy analysis. Despite the public's longing for a substantive dialogue, the press provided Republican candidate George Bush a set of expectations acquitting him of the need to address issues, primarily because his "aggressive approach" apparently resonated in the polls more successfully than Democratic candidate Michael Dukakis's more cerebral approach. Many critics of the 1988 campaign contend that the Republican campaign "manipulated" the media, usurping media routines to its own ends. The press, however, had the power to shape campaign coverage independent of these "manipulative" efforts. Alternative critiques were available to the press that would not have taken a departure from traditional routines, such as a reliance on public opinion polls and elite sources. That the press did not explore alternative critiques suggests a conservative ideological undertow to its efforts.

To the grandfather I never knew, Owen A. I. Roche,
a poet-journalist (and spy!) whose legacy looms

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A familiar Republican refrain--on the national media's reputed liberal bias--accompanied the Grand Old Party's loss of the presidency in 1992. Party leaders regarded their claims to be particularly justified in the final week of the campaign, when the press reported new revelations about President George Bush's knowledge in the Iran-Contra affair while serving as vice president from 1980-to-1988. Democratic candidate Bill Clinton's lead in some public opinion polls had dwindled from double digits to 6 percent by October 30 when a federal grand jury released a 1986 note written by Caspar Weinberger that contradicted statements by Bush surrounding his knowledge of the affair (Pincus and Lardner October 31, 1992: A1; Devroy November 4, 1992: A21).

Bush's aides contended the note was nothing new and complained that the timing of the release, four days before the election, was politically motivated. They worried that Bush's apparent momentum in the polls would be slowed, and that he'd have to spend the last few days of his campaign answering to the charge rather than focusing on his opponent. Bush had pulled into a virtual tie, according to the Republican campaign's internal tracking. "We really were moving until this happened," said one aide. Bush displayed less restraint, calling the new accusation a "Democratic witch hunt." He assailed Clinton for relying on a "last-minute smoking gun" to win, and told CNN talk show host Larry King there was something "suspicious" in the timing. Republican officials called the release of the note a

calculated political "low blow" that affected the dynamics of Bush's campaign. "It amounts to a dirty trick," said one aide (Yang November 1, 1992: A18; Devroy and Pincus November 3, 1992: A10).

Washington Post writer Walter Pincus detailed Bush's "credibility problems" on Iran-Contra, which had "roots" in a 1987 interview with the Post and Bush's 1988 campaign autobiography. Bush stated he was "out of the loop" on the decision to sell arms to the Iranian government in exchange for the release of hostages and on the diversion of funds to Nicaraguan Contras, but later made contradictory remarks suggesting he thought the U.S. was merely creating diplomatic channels with moderate Iranians. Since the 1988 presidential campaign, Bush, wrote Pincus, had been "able to ignore the new material or supply a response that muddied the issue" (Pincus November 2, 1992: A13). Now, apparently, the press was not about to allow any further hedging by Bush. They would push the issue and hold him accountable for an answer.

Why did Bush face heat on Iran-Contra in 1992 and not in 1988? Is an issue damaging only by sudden, shocking revelation, in which fresh gunsmoke appears on the press's radar screen? When is a potentially damaging issue politically motivated and when is it fair game during campaign coverage? It appears that the press was handed more fortuitous circumstances in 1992 than in 1988 to deal with such questions. In 1992, the press couldn't be credited or blamed for the timing of the release of the Weinberger document. But the fact that the media seized on the document as a campaign issue and forced Bush to answer to it marked a departure from their timidity on the same issue four years earlier. In 1988, the press played it safe with Iran-Contra, effectively eliminating a key trump card from the Democrats' campaign. Why Bush curried less media favor in the 1992 campaign than in 1988 may rest with the weakness of the United States economy, a standard opening for press criticism. But the more exacting coverage may have also had to do with a wide recognition within the press corps that they had somehow failed in the 1988 campaign to

force an intelligent discussion of issues, including leadership implications attached to the Iran-Contra scandal.

In 1988, Bush and his advisers carved a strategy revolving around the press's tendency to focus on campaign tactics, personality issues, national polls and dramatic visuals. Bush profited from an insulated campaign, patterned after the Reagan presidency, in which contact with the press was at best superficial, and exploration of issues insubstantial. A less adept Democratic strategy failed to capitalize on the above stated press's tendencies while attempting to lay out a program challenging the previous eight years of Republican rule. Democratic candidate Michael Dukakis's deficiencies in media strategy (failing to successfully maneuver through such press prerequisites as sticking to simple messages and providing powerful visuals) overshadowed the substance of his campaign. One distinguishing mark of the press's 1988 campaign coverage was how the question of strategic flaws became translated into a perception of a candidate's weaknesses as a potential president. The press's preoccupation with this perception became a guiding force in its coverage, eclipsing awareness of non-strategic factors that determine a candidate's qualifications for the presidency.

The dynamics of a campaign based on this type of coverage required that the press reproduce events at variance with, or in lieu of, competing versions of reality. The wider failure of the press in 1988 was its adherence to a set of flawed, or distorted, perceptions--based on its preoccupation with strategic analysis over policy analysis. This thesis will trace these flawed perceptions to the ultimate conventional wisdoms they emerged as, with the full definitional powers of derailing the Dukakis candidacy. The earliest distortions derived from the insularity of Bush's campaign and the national media's inability or reluctance to challenge that insularity, while Dukakis remained accessible and open to press scrutiny. This reached a critical peak during a three-week period following the GOP convention, determining a tone that would favor the Republican candidate for the remainder of the campaign.

POPULAR CRITICISM

Critics charged that George Bush's election to the presidency in 1988 rode the crest of no mandate because his "lowroad campaign," long on "hot button" issues, did not address substantive problems; nor did it indicate what political direction Bush intended to take the country in the next four years (Martz September 5, 1988: 33). At the same time, the national media were criticized for failing to steer Bush away from his negative campaign and failing to provide a full airing of relevant issues like health care, the economy, education--or leadership. Ultimately, critics charged, citizens went to the polls without the necessary clarity and perspective needed to make informed decision.

Critics contended that the disposition of the 1988 election orbited around the national press's obsession with political strategy. Political mechanics were "the only area of the campaign where the informal rules allow the press to be judgmental," wrote Jonathan Alter. But even in analyzing the process, journalists still had to operate within the principle of balance, so that judgment focused on the effectiveness of the process rather than the value or substance of it. "By any standard, Bush slung several tons more [mud] than Dukakis ... [but] misguided ideas of fairness required that reporters implicate both equally, lest they be viewed as taking sides. Bush aides understood this principle could be exploited to make it seem that each bore equal responsibilty" (Alter November 21, 1988: 24-26). Reporters rewarded candidates for "successful tactics and flawless stagecraft," wrote Fred Barnes, in a piece titled, "Unwitting accomplices," and punished candidates for not having them. "The tacit analogy is that the candidate whose campaign is better run would make the better president" (Barnes November 7, 1988: 14-16). Television networks were particularly vulnerable to Bush's manipulations. Correspondents sounded like "theater critics," filling the airwaves with stories on the campaign "stage managers," as well as the mechanics of the campaigns. Fifty-two percent of network stories were devoted to "theater criticism," in the 1988 campaign, compared with 6 percent in 1968. Networks allowed these "handlers"

to act as authorities in the field of campaign strategy, providing their own analysis of the effectiveness of tactics, which were mainly geared for television coverage. In effect, they became "media gurus not only for the candidates but for the networks as well" (Adatto May 28, 1990: 20-23). Columnist Meg Greenfield lamented three weeks before the election that, indeed, the media had conspired in their own manipulation. "Everybody is complaining these days about the management, the propaganda-like quality of political news, including ... many of those in the press who contributed hugely to the management they profess to deplore ..." (Greenfield October 17, 1988: 102).

The national print media also apparently considered Republican "handlers" as more authoritative than Democrats. A study by the Gannett Center for Media Studies at Columbia University, a liberal-leaning institution, showed that the print media overwhelmingly relied on Bush representatives and spokespersons as sources by a margin of nearly 2 to 1, countering "claims by conservative critics who argue that the news media have a liberal bias and are more likely to quote liberal news sources," said GCMS director Everette E. Dennis (Radolf November 26, 1988: 17).[1]

The media's reliance on Republican sources, combined with news standards of "fairness," was further exacerbated by the disparity in media access to the two candidates, critics contended. Control of images and access to Bush was the key to the success of the Republican strategy. Roger Stone, a senior Bush adviser, admitted a couple weeks before the election, "We are running a campaign that is designed for network TV. That means only one message a day. ... It means not allowing anything unplanned" (Reich December 5, 1988: 21-22). Washington Post television writer Lloyd Grove asked in a September 10 analysis, "Are networks rewarding a campaign that limits the candidates' exposure to reporters in favor of tightly choreographed set-pieces and punishing the campaign that

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[1] The Gannett study used a computer-aided analysis of major national media--only print sources were used. The four networks were not included because they are not on the Nexis database. The survey was conducted from February to October, including all mentions of campaign managers, press secretaries, chiefs of staff, image makers and others who were not candidates, and found that Bush aides had 64 percent of all press mentions to Dukakis's 36. "Clearly, Bush and his people knew what messages would sell. This is significant because the organizations from which these data were derived are 'agenda setters' for other media organizations, especially broadcast," said Dennis.

makes its candidate available?" (Grove September 10 1988: A1). ABC News Executive President Roone Arledge said the problem lay in the prepackaged and controlled nature of campaigns. "It's very hard to get the political process through the filter of TV ... if the people [in control] don't want the American people to know what the issues are" (Broadcasting November 21, 1988: 58-60). Arledge's lament did not exonerate those on the print side of the media, who did not have to remain beholden to Bush's image-oriented campaign. One member of a panel hosted by the International Press Institute thought that the press bore responsibility for allowing Bush to set the pace. "If we don't force a candidate to address the issues, there's certainly nothing in the internal dynamics of a campaign to force them to do it," said Gerald Seib, of the Wall Street Journal. Bush's campaign managers assumed it was "within the right of a candidate not to discuss what he would do [once in office]. They were right in assuming he would get away with it. ... One of the worst sins [was that the press] punished the candidate who gave us access and rewarded the one who shut us out by writing lots of stories about how clever [his aides] were" (Radolf November 26, 1988: 16). Veteran syndicated Washington Post columnist David Broder, speaking at a panel on "Press Coverage of the 1988 Presidential Campaign," said the only way to examine issues is through news conferences that would permit the candidates to engage in a "continuing dialogue." To force Bush to hold more press conferences, Broder suggested a news boycott (Broadcasting September 26, 1988: 69-70).

Critics remembered the Reagan administration's ability to restrict press access. Reagan, according to the Commission on Presidential News Conferences, met with the press an average of six times a year, compared with an average of 12 for his predecessors. "George Bush campaigned precisely for the job Reagan is now leaving. His campaign was a microcosm of the redefined presidency--insulated from the press, carefully staged and scripted for the evening news, immune to real issues," wrote Robert Reich. Reagan held no press conferences after mid-June in the 1984 presidential campaign (December 5, 1988: 21-22).

Were critics' accusations fair? A study by the conservative Center for Media and Public Affairs concluded that the networks' overall coverage "was notable for its balance, toughness, focus on the issues." The report did include data that showed certain moments of imbalance, including a 10-day period--August 19-28--in which television network coverage overwhelmingly tilted in favor of Bush. Bush, the report conceded, received favorable coverage in 75 percent of the stories from August 19 to August 28, compared with 26 percent "good press" for Dukakis in that same period. Beyond that, in the three weeks following the GOP convention, the study found that 44 percent of the TV evening news reports were favorable to Bush and only 26 percent of the stories were favorable to Dukakis. Though the authors, S. Robert Lichter, Daniel Amundson and Richard E. Noyes, conceded this imbalance, they also dismissed it as irrelevant. "By exceeding expectations he briefly dominated the field as a highly visible, viable and desirable candidate. ... His media image and poll ratings soared in tandem as he kicked sand into his rival's face. It was a textbook demonstration of the power of positive viewing. So, did television give Bush an unfair boost after all? We think not, unless the canons of media fairness are interpreted to require balanced coverage during every week of the campaign ..." (Lichter, et al 18-19, 52). The CMPA study failed to ask several critical questions to test its content analysis. What effect did the accessibility differences have on the campaigns? How important was this period of coverage in determining the outlook of voters? One post-election survey showed that two-thirds of the voters asked had decided who they would vote for more than a month before the election (Public Opinion January/February 1989: 27). Did the coverage dictate the tone for the rest of the campaign, and did it set the terms of debate that would reign thereafter?

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Research for this thesis found a pattern of Republican dominance in source usage similar to Gannett's findings among the four national newspapers in question in the three-week period following the GOP convention, although only as extreme in the first week of the sample period. Between the Washington Post, the Los Angeles Times and the Chicago Tribune in the first week, 65 percent of sources used were Republicans, 35 percent Democratic. The disparity dropped off (53 percent Republican sources to 47 percent Democratic) in the final two weeks. The New York Times had similar results, giving overwhelming access to Republicans in the first week (68 percent Republican sources to 32 percent Democrats), but tailing off dramatically in the final two weeks, quoting Democratic sources 56 percent of the time to the Republicans' 44 percent. Nuances of imbalance, however, existed beneath the apparent level playing field. Although stories included Democratic sources with more frequency than in the first week, they commonly portrayed the Democratic sources in deprecating contexts, often supporting Republican viewpoints with defensive or self-critical remarks. In one story, for instance, Democrats made five disparaging remarks and only one positive about fellow Democrats, while Republicans made no negative but five positive about their own campaign (Taylor September 5, 1988: A1). In another, Democrats were portrayed as making five negative and one positive against their own campaign, while Republicans made three negative and two positive about their own. Typically, these sources were used to evaluate how their campaigns were going. In the same story, a Republican source would say of Bush: "He's become a different candidate. He's just a lot stronger," while a Democratic source said of Dukakis's seeming unwillingness to take advice or change tactics: "There's a real arrogance there" (Margolis August 31, 1988: 1).

TABLE 1

Republican to Democratic sources used

Publication	Aug. 21-27	Aug. 28-Sept. 3	Sept. 4-10
Chicago Tribune	15-7	10-16	17-11
L.A. Times	23-12	26-22	36-39
Washington Post	24-14	35-24	37-30
New York Times	37-17	30-32	27-40
	99-50	101-94	117-120

(Sources are all non-candidate partisans, such as campaign aides, advisers, surrogates, party consultants, and party leaders. The number of sources does not indicate the frequency with which they are referred to in a single article)

The lamentations of Dukakis's advisers frequently complemented the positive spin Republican aides gave for Bush. "Everybody who was a player in the Republican presidential race--all the candidates for the nomination--is in the Bush campaign, but Democrats just seem to have an aversion to planning this kind of cohesion. Bush is using all kinds of surrogates on the campaign, but Dukakis just isn't doing it," complained an unidentified Democratic adviser. In the same story, Republican pollster Richard Wirthlin was quoted at a breakfast meeting with Washington reporters as saying, Bush has "owned the dialogue" of the campaign since the GOP convention and polls show him surging all over the country (Nelson and Lauter September 8, 1988: 20). Wirthlin's "information" alone contained an inherent bias, given his Republican background, but Washington journalists like the Los Angeles Times' Jack Nelson treated him as a credible source, and thus employed Wirthlin's comments to help create the impressions within a supposedly objective context. The fact that a Democratic source was used to support Wirthlin's thrust gave even greater weight to the impression, which could have had an entirely different complexion had a Democratic rebuttal been used.

METHODOLOGY

Though broadcast media have borne the brunt of much of the criticism for the media's 1988 campaign conduct, this study attempts to show that the print media made their own contributions to the campaign's distorted qualities.[2] This thesis samples four leading national newspapers, beginning with the three-week period after the Republican national convention, and ending with the coverage of the second debate in mid-October. The New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times and Chicago Tribune--four of the top seven newspaper circulation leaders (Wright 248)--were chosen for their respective reputations as national media trendsetters, as well as for a rough regional representation. The New York Times is regarded as the august arbiter of "all the news that's fit to print." The Washington Post is known as a voice inside the "beltway," its investigative prowess, independence and proximity to national politics, and has been accused of favoring a liberal tilt. The Los Angeles Times is representative of a diverse Southern California populace, aggressive in its reporting, but responsible to a large conservative Orange County readership. And the Chicago Tribune is a leading Midwestern voice regarded for its conservative editorial stance.

This is tangentially a study about objectivity, so it primarily excludes material from the opinion and editorial pages. Several columns and editorials are included, not for analysis *per se*, but to provide context when helpful. The "op-ed" pages provide a forum for free-flowing thoughts and ideas, forcing a burden of proof on the news sections for objectivity. Hence, this study, in an attempt to put that burden to test, is derived primarily from "hard news" stories and "analyses" in the news sections of the newspapers, as one way to measure their performance in objectivity. Additionally, material for this thesis encompasses news stories only identified as campaign-related. It does not include

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[2] A word on distortion: No campaign coverage--or for that matter, no form of communication--will ever be reflective of the total "reality," which exists in dimensions that remain beyond the reach of human capacities. Distortion here refers to the disparity between perceptions that are readily available. Which accessible bits of reality were elevated at the expense of those left unexplored?

coverage of issues that may have otherwise influenced voters--such as separate reports on the economy, though economic reports were often incorporated into campaign stories--but were not a part of the newspapers' campaign package. This thesis does not purport to assume that the strict news coverage of the campaign is the most influential in determining votes. The scope of this thesis is not to determine the effect of the national print media's coverage on voters, nor to place a higher value on news and analysis over commentary or off-campaign news, or even interpersonal communication. The task of this thesis is to attempt to understand the role the press determined for themselves, the coverage rules by which they abided, the perception-shaping function they performed. A focus on strict campaign news coverage--and its accompanying analysis--provides a window to a newspaper's guiding standards, to its outlook on such issues as source usage, story selection, and story angle selection. This thesis also does not assume that the media are a monolith: it examines four national newspapers as separate entities, from different regions and editorial histories. From this point on, the phrases "the media," "the press," and "national print media" will be used to refer to the four newspapers in this study.

The primary task of this thesis is to explore the media's performance during the 1988 campaign, and to attempt to understand some of the reasons behind their editorial choices. What follows this introductory chapter, in chapter two, is an overview of two theoretical positions that provide a framework for possible explanations of the press's performances; chapters three and four delve into a crucial three-week period following the GOP national convention that illuminates how the press established some perceptional distortions alluded to above (chapter three examines the Washington Post, Chicago Tribune and Los Angeles Times in this period; chapter four examines more closely how the New York Times framed their stories from strategists' language and outlook in that same period); chapter five explores how some conventional wisdoms began to solidify as the campaign headed toward the first debate; chapter six shows how faithful the coverage of the two presidential

debates were to the expectations the press built into the debates; and chapter seven offers a concluding statement.

CHAPTER II

THEORY

This chapter is designed to provide a glimpse into the philosophy outlining, though not governing, the research of this thesis. The forthcoming theoretical principle is not intended to serve as the denouement for this thesis, but should be viewed as one of several possible explanations for the national press's conduct during the 1988 presidential campaign. Perhaps the most useful purpose of this theory chapter is the alternative explanations it promotes. Not only does this thesis question one of the prevailing assumptions about the 1988 campaign--that the media were "manipulated" by superior Republican political tacticians--but, perhaps more important, it asks what other choices the press could have made in story selection, poll analysis, story angle, source usage, and others.

The theoretical framework of this chapter scans two approaches to media and cultural studies--media-routines and ideology theories. The former identifies some of the real-world, practical dilemmas journalists face, and the latter is employed to demystify some assumptions about the origins behind media practices in campaign coverage. Shortcomings of some elements of media-routines theory will be covered, not as a way to dismiss its many other salient and useful features, but as a progression into an explanation of ideology theory.

Media coverage of the 1988 campaign revealed patterns consistent with media routines theory findings--an inclination toward horse-race coverage (who is up, who is down in the

polls), personality or character conflicts, campaign strategy, a focus on the trivial and an aversion for the substantive. The media-routines theory provides a sound foundation for the understanding of professional restrictions journalists face. Ideology theory provides clues to a fundamental question facing scholars of media studies: What currents lay behind the media's seemingly inexorable drift toward their final product? The research material in this thesis is not presented as proof that ideology *per se* lay behind press conduct, but that the rationales behind crucial choices made by the press contained value judgments, an intrinsic, though not wholly definitive, component of ideology.

Although the two theoretical approaches can appear to have competitive and unreconcilable positions, this chapter, in part, attempts to show their complementary features. What follows first is an overview of some elemental features of media routines theory. Next, an examination will be made of principles behind the ideology view, which incorporates the notions of political economy and hegemony.

MEDIA ROUTINES THEORY

Media routines represent a set of constraints that bind and restrict a journalist's ability to pursue news in a way that would provide citizens with proper information needed to make informed political decisions. The structural stringencies that inhibit the work of a journalist have "profound effects on the perceptions people form" (Graber 168). The effects of these routines are "usually unintended" and are "hardly comprehended" by elites, the public, or even media practitioners, who may bring many common cultural assumptions to their work (Paletz and Entman 6). The distorted perceptions are the unfortunate but unavoidable result of media organizations' need to present the news in manageable, clear and attractive form. News is produced according to "practical considerations." Routines function to "improve efficiency" of news production. "The job of these media organizations is to deliver, with

time and space limitations, the most acceptable product to the consumer in the most efficient manner" (Shoemaker and Reese 87-88).

Media routines are the "unquestioned premises that guide reporting" (Chomsky 12) that stem largely from the media's attempt to appeal to "the limited attention and interest of the audience" (Shoemaker and Reese 91). Outcrops of routines include "horse-race coverage" in national campaigns, personalizing and sensationalizing news, "pack journalism,"[3] and neglecting trends to focus on daily events (Entman 7). In a study that analyzed the 1968, 1972 and 1976 presidential campaigns, the print and broadcast media devoted more than 60 percent of stories to "campaign hoopla," and the horse-race aspects of the contest; they slighted political, social or economic problems facing the country and said little about the merits of solutions proposed, unless these issues were made exciting and visually dramatic. Political journalists rarely investigated neglected issues on their own, i.e., they relied on sources to provide the impetus to pursue certain issues. In these three campaigns, stories of "campaign incidents" dominated; a majority of stories consisted of familiar names and "widely salient events" that required little background information, and had the potential for easily-arranged "pictorial coverage." Social problems such as poverty and the plight of the elderly lacked novelty and were too complex to describe, involved controversial and emotionally charged policies that both candidates and the media wanted to avoid "for fear of alienating large segments of the public," the former wary of losing votes, the latter fearful of losing audiences or readership. The routines model posits that journalists' work regimen forces them to internalize such news values or norms as the avoidance of economic issues like unemployment, inflation and taxes because they are "hard to explain and dramatize." The public instead demands political information that appeals to their interest in personality characteristics, which are "far easier to evaluate" (Graber 178-180).

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[3] Timothy Crouse popularized the term in The Boys on the Bus: "A group of reporters were assigned to follow a single candidate for weeks or months at a time, like a pack of hounds sicked on a fox. ... they all fed off the same pool report, the same daily handout, the same speech by the candidate; the whole pack was isolated in the same mobile village. After a while, they began to believe the same rumors, subscribe to the same theories, and write the same stories" (7-8).

Reporters, guided by rules of objectivity, limit their interpretive work to "strategic terms," eschewing interpretation of policy views or previous policies; they rely on symbolic content--like "gaffes"--to extrapolate "defects" from candidates, "which journalists find difficult to expose and report in any other way" under the conditions and constraints of their work (Paletz and Entman 50-52). "The use of vague, simple and culturally resonant symbols serves journalists' needs. It conserves space or time ... simplifications enhance audience understandings" (Paletz and Entman 202). All of the above elements are driven by the "internal logic of media organizations and personnel" (Paletz and Entman 24). The effect is that election coverage "legitimizes the political system," while at the same time the entire electoral process is denigrated by the presentation of surface conflicts rather than an examination of systemic weaknesses (Paletz and Entman 53). Voters perceive campaign issues to be irrelevant to their lives, which leads to consistent decreases in voter turnout. "The lower the voter turnout, the more politics is left to the 'haves' ... and the less influence the 'have nots' can expect. As voting levels drop, power is redistributed toward elites" (Paletz and Entman 236-237).

Peter Dahlgren writes that the media, guided by their routines, unintentionally and unconsciously help maintain

> moderate levels of formal political participation ... non-interference with the powers of capital to shape the basic contours of society ... acceptance of the prevailing social definitions to interpret their experiences and define their needs; and lack of genuine political power to challenge the dominant social arrangements (qtd. in Paletz and Entman 252).

Media-routines theory acknowledges that the "perceptual environment" of a national campaign is shaped by media interpretation, that "newspeople shape national election outcomes by molding the images of political reality" (Graber 188). Media content is a product of a market competition process. Journalists present certain "images of political reality" because the public demands it. Economic pressures shape the values guiding the creation of news: brevity, simplicity, predictability and timeliness (Entman 19). The nature

of the market demands that "news organizations have to respond to public tastes." A limited demand for "first-rate" journalism causes news organizations to avoid it.

A "vicious circle of interdependence" between public taste and the economic needs of the media sustains and exacerbates the paucity of "first-rate" journalism. Because mainstream media do not supply quality political information, Americans "have no practical source of the information necessary to become politically sophisticated. ... [I]t would take an informed and interested citizenry to create enough demand to support top-flight journalism" (Entman 17).

Entman places the "origin of the vicious circle" in the "unsophisticated" mass audience. The "unsophisticated mass audience demands or accepts current news formats, or in many cases wants no news at all; the dearth of informative 'accountability' news perpetuates an unsophisticated audience" (Entman 21). Some media-routines theorists describe media content as an "inescapable result of competition" (Entman 11). It is not the media that are to blame, media-routines theorists say. Broadly speaking, the media do provide sufficient campaign issue coverage. "When voters are poorly informed, it is because elections aren't important enough" to them. To the average voter, complex issues are time-consuming and difficult, especially when expert views clash. What voters can judge, based on a "long-range, cumulative reservoir of general impressions and politically significant feelings and attitudes," is a candidate's "general ability and integrity." Issues of trust, integrity and competence are salient to voters, so the content that the media provide "most plentifully is geared toward such decision making" (Graber 186-187).

The driving forces behind media routines are minimizing organizational costs and generating profits for media owners and stockholders, say media-routines theorists. One of the least expensive ways to satisfy mass audiences is to rely upon "legitimate" political elites for most information. Reliance on official sources reduces the need for costly and time-consuming research. Paletz and Entman define elites as comprising:

> [L]ess than 1 percent of the population, they are the people who make public policy or whose preferences directly influence government. Public officials, corporation heads, major interest-group leaders, a few notorious professors and think-tank denizens, even some celebrated journalists are in this category. They generate most original policy proposals in reaction to problems and events. Their views define the conventional wisdom and structure the public debate about politics (185-186).

Additionally, by attributing news content to elite sources, journalists can provide both legitimacy of and detachment from content. Elites provide a cultural legitimacy by virtue of the value that Americans attach to social status, economic position and political influence (Herman and Chomsky 19). Reliance on political elites is embedded in the concern for profit, say media-routines theorists. "If using other news sources were significantly more profitable, it is doubtful the media would be nearly as dependent on elites as they are" (Entman 18). Journalists additionally attach significance to elite sources out of their need to fulfill their norm of objectivity, which gives them a sense of neutrality. Neutrality connotes a value-lessness. Objectivity lends credibility to news organizations, which maximizes their audience appeal, hence securing "their monopoly position in the marketplace," i.e., adding to their profitability. "If the news were to be reported in an overtly political or ideological manner, the market would be ripe for competition" (Soloski 207-228). But objectivity "confines" reporters, "in most cases unconsciously," within narrow thematic boundaries. These boundaries are shaped by pervasive, or shared, cultural values, beliefs and assumptions. According to some routines theorists, journalists, elite sources, and the public are unaware of the shaping force of these cultural boundaries (Paletz and Entman 22).

Those shared assumptions originate from the perspective of the elite and receive repetitive treatment from the press. "... [E]lites crystallize and define issues ... they substantially influence, if they do not establish, public opinion." The mass media, through its newsgathering procedures, which include heavy reliance on official sources, become "unwitting handmaidens of the powerful" and transmit content that legitimizes and sustains the dominant social understandings. The media, as a "routine outcome" of their work, stabilize social perceptions defined from the elite perspective. "By granting elites

substantial control over content, emphases and flow of public opinion, media practices diminish the public's power" (Paletz and Entman 184-194). This reliance on elite sources becomes magnified during national campaigns, when stories about the "palace court intrigues" and campaign strategies are a prominent feature. "... [O]ften the press reported more of it than some would have liked. ... But the press tended to confine its naughtiness within relatively narrow limits. It was not inclined to step outside the mindset of the authorities it covered" (Hertsgaard 75).

Another practically institutionalized routine in campaign coverage is news organizations' reliance on opinion polls. The trend in poll-driven stories reached peaks in 1984 and 1988, when more than a third of poll stories led television newscasts. The Los Angeles Times doubled its polling activities between 1984 and 1988 (from 17 surveys in 1984 to 34 in 1988). In 1988, the New York Times teamed up with CBS to conduct 31 polls, producing 35 stories exclusively from poll data; another 135 integrated polling data into more general political stories (Lavrakas and Holley 79). Newspapers and broadcast news organizations teamed up during the 1980s to conduct their own polls in "drumbeat" fashion, ostensibly to answer the question apparently lingering in the public's mind: who's ahead? Polls also provided "something to report"; they include questions on a wide array of issues of public concern. And they helped reporters gauge "how things are going." Washington Post Pulitzer Prize winning political reporter David Broder said, "the reporters on the candidates' planes are probably in the worst position to see how the race is going" so polls provide welcome perspective. But polls are increasingly being seen as subverting the electoral process rather than complementing it. Los Angeles Times Poll Director I.A. "Bud" Lewis conceded after the 1988 election that "it is arguable that public opinion polls ... were often co-opted, made to be a tool of campaign manipulation rather than a mirror of public will ..." (Lavrakas and Holley 14). Extensive use of polling data is a fairly recent news routine, the result of "competitive pressures" that began in earnest in 1980. Their use can also be seen as a result of pressures to conform to the norm of objectivity. Polling data

provides "a reference point of interpretation" that rules of objectivity prohibit in other areas of political reporting (Cantril 86).

Professional norms of journalism and the economic interests of their news organizations govern the slant of the news by guiding the decisions on lead stories, space or time allocation. Media have scant incentive or ability to elevate truth over other news values, so the safest bet is to stand behind the label "objectivity" and all other routines that descend from this professional norm. These practices limit the ability of journalists to offer audiences explicit assessments of truth, distortion and falsehood (Entman 7-38).

Paletz and Entman conclude that media ultimately help preserve the legitimacy of America's political, economic and social system through socialization and status quo adjustments. Media routines--the goals, practices and limitations--both act as agencies for the maintenance of the socio-political system and are guided by cultural assumptions that uphold the system. "Automatically, stories omit, disparage, or dilute proposals and critiques that undermine the American ideology" (Paletz and Entman 250-252). The media's impact on the relationship between elites and the mass public--perpetuating elites' position as primary arbiters and interpreters of social issues and events--stems from the sustained attention the media endow to elites and their failure to seek other perspectives as equally valid. Journalists view the world from the perspective of elite sources, say Paletz and Entman, because it is "expedient," and derives from news organizations' need to fuel the twin engines of capitalism, efficiency and profit (Paletz and Entman 19-20).

This critique is useful in demonstrating practices and limitations of the press, ostensible, subjective realities driving their practices, and effects on social relations. It stresses that the news industry has had to keep pace with the audience in an inexorable tilt toward less sophisticated, less intellectually challenging forms of political news. The news industry has had to alter the shape of its product so it fits more easily into the cultural environment. Earlier media-routines theory critiques were sociologically rather than economically based. From this perspective, journalists' professionalism--routines--and decisions flowing from

their professionalism, serve organizational interests. The "classification system of newsworthiness"--priorities often viewed as news slants or biases --is created out of deadlines and "rhythms of work." The media, in this view, operate as "complex organizations subject to certain inevitable processes." In short, news is a social institution, an "institutional method of making information available to consumers ... a product of newsworkers drawing upon institutional processes and conforming to institutional practices" (Tuchman 1-4, 12). The later critique relies on a natural law of economics logic, the inevitablity of market forces. It also positions media as a helpless organism "straitjacketed or handcuffed by its own routines," and subject to manipulations of those cognizant of those routines (Shoemaker and Reese 112). The failure of this critique is in its faith that routines descend from the goal of profit--that news values are shaped by the press owners' desire to maximize their audience, hence profits--and in its neglect of the political implications of profit-seeking. Capital accumulation is a concept that requires ideological mobilization, given its historically uneven distribution. Gabriel Kolko, in The Triumph of Conservatism, claims this to be the "dominant fact" of American society in the 20th century. Kolko argues that the growth of the corporate sector during the "Progressive" period was a result of "political rather than economic power"; that a rapid growth of the capitalist market required the "intervention of something more decisive than long-term impersonal natural economic processes." The crucial factor in the American experience, writes Kolko, "was the nature of economic power which required political tools to rationalize the economic process, and that resulted in a synthesis of politics and economics" (290-301). Thus, the goal for profit requires active, conscious ideological input. The process of screening out alternative views and legitimizing elite views then, although systemized through routines, should be seen as a political act, however removed the forces behind it.

The limitations of media routines theory--just as for other media influences, such as organizational, external and individual--rest in the failure to place accountability in the media's role in political socialization:

> ... [E]vents identified as newsworthy represent a statement of not only what sells or what will fit the confines of a report, but also of what is seen to be of importance or interest in a culture that requires selling and that mandate product conformity to the broadest appeal as demanded by commercial interests (Rachlin 12).

Rather than serving as explanations for flawed campaign coverage, the constraints resulting from media routines should be viewed as a predictable outcome of ideological requirements. The ideological critique views these routines as positive mechanisms for the reproduction of the dominant value system. The assumption, in media-routines theory, is that journalists internalize constraints and do their work within a framework of limitations intended to maximize the attractiveness of the product. This theory contends that the product is being manufactured and tailored to the tastes of the consumer, that media content merely reflects the tastes of its consumers. It also assumes that the values are agreed-upon and organic; that is to say, that the tastes and values originate in the public domain. This gives full ideological autonomy to the public and divests media (or more to the point, media owners) of responsibility for shaping the content of the news. It takes a leap of faith to say that an institution in and of a broader cultural continuum is somehow above and distinct from those cultural or political forces that shape it.

Conflicts inherent in the media-routines argument can be found in reporters' use of official sources. It is difficult to ascribe anything other than an ideological imperative to the way journalists handle competing elite interests. The 1988 campaign, as will be shown in the next chapter, provides evidence of journalists placing heavier value on Republican-source opinions than on Democratic. One justification used by journalists to explain this imbalance was that Republican sources were considered more "professional"; they understood the needs and processes of the media more than Democrats, so they were rewarded accordingly. The omission or denigration of alternative political views, however, requires a value placement by journalists. Journalists often locate this value in their

interpretations of the public mood (they choose their elite sources based on their perceptions of the public mood). But, as stated below, public opinion can be skewed and misrepresented, and is more often driven by elite definitions of social events. A whole construction of meaning must often precede the public's opinion formulation. This requires an initial choice by the media, an activation of elite-source opinion. Hence, the value of sources is, at best, less determined by the public than routines-theorists might contend. At worst, journalists (driven by the internalized value-system of their organization) are wholly responsible for determining the value of sources, of choosing which elites contain "permissable views," and which are in the minority. This returns us to the basic argument of this thesis: the choices made by the media are based on which group they perceive to adhere closest to the political-economic system. Journalists' 1988 campaign post-mortem expressions of frustration over being manipulated--and having no control over it--are steeped in the media-routines assumptions: Republicans were able to manipulate them because of the GOP's familiarity with the media's professional requisites. This thesis, however, will try to show that the Republican ability to essentially control the media's agenda had little to do with the media's failure to resist manipulations, but more to do with their willing--conscious or not--acceptance of Republican definitions of campaign issues. This willingness was driven by ideological rather than professional considerations. As Chomsky writes, "Divisions among elites are reflected in media debate. If policy fails, or is perceived to be harmful to powerful interests, media will contest government policy and urge different ways to achieve unquestioned assumptions and goals" (75). Chomsky's thought can be taken to the next level: if a national candidate's views are viewed to be "harmful to powerful interests," that candidate will be urged "different ways to achieve unquestioned assumptions and goals."

IDEOLOGY THEORY

Analyzing the media's political-economic relationship to the American power structure--rather than merely the economic--frees us of the notion that the press can be analyzed independent of social and cultural forces; it locates the press within an overall framework of American culture and forces us to acknowledge their relationship with the elite power structure's ideological imperatives. The press's interest in preserving the larger liberal-capitalist system locks them into the function of helping to maintain the boundaries of acceptable political discourse (Reese 390-409). If it is understood that the press is a corporate actor--rather than merely playing an unconsciously supportive role--the stakes become clearer and more understandable.[4] Ideology or political economy theory starts with the assumption that

> [i]t is [the media's] function to amuse, entertain, and inform, and to inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behavior that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society. In a world of concentrated wealth and major conflicts of class interests, to fulfill this role requires systematic propaganda ... (Herman and Chomsky 1).

Ideology theory places the origin of cultural values in the hands of a dominant, or elite, class, borrowing from Karl Marx the idea that the production of material as well as cultural goods is controlled by those with means of production (Parenti 60). Farrell Corcoran writes, in "Ideology and Consciousness," that Marx defined ideology as a "relatively formal and articulated system of meanings, values and beliefs ... a systematic orientation of thought ..." that speaks for a particular group. It conceals, disguises and mystifies its subject matter to shape feelings, illusions, habits of thought and conceptions of life (qtd. in Thomas 6). From a "late-capital" perspective, the reach of the postwar expansion of corporate power has extended into, among other things, the "visions that sustain a people." Corporations' widening economic role has been accompanied by a parallel expansion of its

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[4] See Herman and Chomsky's breakdown of the major media's corporate interests (3-14).

cultural and political role. "The growth of private corporate power is seen as the prime contractor in the construction of contemporary bounds to expression" (Schiller 3-4).

Political economy or ideology theory is compatible with media routines theory in its contention that the ideological imperatives of "higher power centers in society" are embedded in the processes of media production of news. These ideological imperatives are served by and determine media routines. In media routines, news is gathered and presented in a way that seems structured by shared cultural or political assumptions and values-- derived from the "common coin of society." But ideology theory states that these "shared" assumptions are actively organized by values commensurate with the dominant capitalist ideology. The world is presented in a way that the power elite structures it, which is favorable to their political and economic interests. Money and power are positive, active elements serving to "filter out the news fit to print, marginalize dissent, and allow the government and dominant private interests to get their messages across to the public" (Herman and Chomsky 2).

The point of conflict between the ideology and media-routines perspectives centers around the degree of autonomy the public has in making cultural decisions. The ambiguity of the media-routines view is its postulation of the "vicious circle" informing media content: The public taste apparently dictates content at the same time the content dictates the public taste. Ultimately, content originates in the public taste, media-routines theorists claim, because the media's quest for profit depends on public consumption of their product. This view coincides with the notion that the audience produces equal or greater meaning to/than media content; people bring their own experiences and values into their interpretations, overriding meanings produced externally. One routine media use in campaigns to affirm the audience's (or readership's) role in determining content is the use of polling and surveying data. But, studies show that polling often serves a political or social function rather than merely reflecting social climates. Public opinion has often been distorted, and later shaped by the distortions. Paletz and Entman demonstrate that the media kept up a

sustained portrayal of the public's "conservative mood" despite data that showed the opposite. After ten years of such claims--facilitated by the interepretations of elites, the public mood began to show signs of shifts toward conservatism (Paletz and Entman 196-213). "Insights into the public's actual, complicated collective opinions available from surveys, election data, and scholarly analysis of voting patterns rarely altered most journalists' portrayals of public sentiments as unambiguously conservative." Being the routines-theory critique with which this pattern was treated, Entman ultimately argued that the roots for such distortions lay in journalists opting for "simple symbols" (for example, applying labels such as conservative vs. liberal, instead of exploring the shadings between the two) to describe trends, rather than ideology (Entman 86-87).

In the ideological argument, media content originates in the dominant sphere; cultural power exists within an entire "apparatus of domination" that includes the media, but also includes other cultural institutions--governmental, religious, educational--that purvey the values, norms, attitudes and beliefs of those in charge of those cultural insitutions (Schiller 151). Marx's "superstructure" serves as a literary, political and ideological mechanism for the elite to maintain power (Altschull 92-93). The public's "predispositions" are partly, if not largely, shaped within the framework of the dominant ideology. Various interacting cultural forces and institutions, or "socializing agencies" shape outlooks, but are also shaped by the media. "... at least some of our internalized political predilections derive from the dominant political culture that the press has a hand in shaping ..." (Parenti 21). So, while a cultural product (news) requires saleability, the very consumer mindset that ensures a product's saleability is shaped by the values produced from the dominant, elite, or corporate sector.

The press's misrepresentations "are not usually accidental ..." Distortions, "not due to chance or to the idiosyncratic qualities of news production or newspeople," are "repeatable and systemic--the product not only of deliberate manipulation but of the ideological and economic conditions under which the media operate" (Parenti 1). So, while the media--as

an institution serving the financial interests of owners--do function to maximize profits, they could not do so without fulfilling their ideological role. Schiller contends that the corporate sector views communications and culture to be profitable as well as politically expedient (46); that corporate control over public expression is a necessary "key lever of power" that enables the corporate economy to maximize profits (28). The dominant ideology is a function of capitalism and capitalism is a function of the dominant ideology. The two are inseparable. An example of corporations taking positive action with media content is reflected in the growth of corporate-sponsored media-monitoring institutions that function in pressure-applying roles. Organizations such as The Media Institute, the Center for Media and Public Affairs, and Accuracy in Media operate under corporate funding and produce reports that concentrate on the media's portrayal of economic issues, the business community, and politics. Their studies regularly conclude that the media are liberal institutions, as upholders of a faith in government and suspicion of private enterprise, a prevailing conventional wisdom whose broad acceptance has ostensibly kept news organizations on the defensive. The media's ready acceptance of their conclusions and the access they provide these organizations' views (on editorial pages, through interviews, etc.) disproportionate to the views of liberal organizations like Fairness and Accuracy in the Media--which is "regularly excluded from debate and ... refused publication"--is one indication of the active role corporations have in shaping media content (Herman and Chomsky 390). Other indications are the techniques used by news organizations to control the behavior of their employees, such as the hiring and firing practices alluded to below (or the insistence by news management that those with non-mainstream values keep them out of news accounts); and the implicit pressures advertisers bring to bear (Reese 390-409; Herman and Chomsky 2; Altschull 254). Ben Badgikian writes that not only are most mass media outlets under corporate control, but outside corporate interests bear "relentless" pressure on these outlets to ensure the predominance of their worldview:

> Business had special advantages in its attack on the media. It had priviliged access to media executives through common corporate associations and lobbies, and it could produce large-scale advertisements to counter antibusiness news and, increasingly to use as threats of withdrawal against hostile media ... (Bagdikian 56).

Ideology theory places cultural institutions, like the media, squarely within the dominant domain, as transmitters of a cohesive ideology "that serves to reproduce and legitimate" the dominance of the ruling elite--which in turn produces conditions favorable to economic needs of the elite. Educational, religious, popular, economic and political institutions all contribute to the process of shaping societal values commensurate with the dominant ideology, all feed into a "diet of systemic values ... they are commodities and ideological products, embodying the rules and values of the market system that produced them" (Schiller 33). The press not only repeatedly reproduces images supportive of existing social and economic relations, but its consistent performance in that count must be seen as tantamount to performing a specific role. Parenti asks: "Is the selectivity one that struggles against the limitations imposed by time, space and official manipulation? Or is it an ideological selectivity that uses these conditions as an excuse to stay away from more unsettling information and opinion?" (Parenti 55-57). Herman and Chomsky conclude that the national mass media act as

> effective and powerful ideological institutions that carry out a system-supportive propaganda function by reliance on market forces, internalized assumptions and self-censorship, and without significant overt coercion. This propaganda system has become even more efficient in recent decades with the rise of the national television networks, greater mass-media concentration, right-wing pressures on public radio and television, and the growth in scope and sophistication of public relations and news management. (306)

News production is not a "purely autonomous process, responsive only to its own internal imperatives." The methods used to sustain the dominant ideology are active, not passive. One of the most prevalent forms of ideology-sustaining methods is omission, that is, deliberate decisions to refuse space or time to divergent views. When those divergent views do find their way into the media, they do not receive the kind of sustained media treatment required to create political awareness. Where the official view may frequently appear with little or no counterview, the divergent must almost always face the

countervailing elite position. Subtle differences in the kind of treatment--hostile or vigorous questioning versus friendly or respectful--also diminish the positive impact of divergent views. This is called false balancing (Parenti 191-199).

A Gramscian interpretation of this ideological framework concedes relative autonomy to both the media and consumers of media products. The ruling powers do not directly oversee the media's cultural production, but the implicit rules and values of the dominant culture work in a regulatory fashion so as to obviate the need for direct intervention. Media owners allow their employees enough latitude to present a "tolerably realistic portrayal of the world" (Herman and Chomsky 303), a function of absorbing potentially disruptive social tensions and conflicts. This is the hallmark of hegemony theory. Hegemony, writes Raymond Williams, "does not passively exist as a form of dominance. It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended and modified" (qtd. in Shoemaker and Reese 194). Prevailing social and political customs are not perceived as dominant constructs, but as being arrived at by negotiation, contradiction, tension, debate, trial and error. "Hegemonic ideology represents not simply a dominant view, but a world view that is seen as 'natural.' ... The tools we use to understand our world are provided for us within a social context. These tools serve to reinforce the stability of the social context. In this way, the tools must be considered to be political in nature" (Rachlin 24). Koch describes a "textual pattern" that represents a "narrative form" in news accounts and forms the perceived social realities. These narratives lie within the "accepted social context"--stories that continually refer to central images of the American experience, such as the "rugged individualist" story (Koch 20). Deviance is similarly a part of the narrative; much news is about the "violation of values" (Gans 40). Change through revolutionary tactics, or dissent, for instance, is described in condemnatory language (Gitlin chapters 2-7). News accounts remain loyal to and consistent with the "social context," which is based on a "cultural history ... (and) material and cognitive realities (Koch 20). Gramscian theory concedes that "subordinated groups" (non-elites) form their own histories and traditions, hold their own distinct values.

They define much of their own social realities through their own popular forms of entertainment and political and social institutions (Borgatta and Borgatta 1493-1494). It is through these "collective forces and social arrangements," however, that the power structure administers its dominant ideology. Power relations, according to the hegemony theory, are "understood to be infused into the fabric of a social system" (Rachlin 23-24). The ruling-class ideology is not monolithic; great debate occurs over the means--even among elites--but ultimately those varying means converge toward a single end: the economic stability and perpetuation of the capitalist system, which can be translated to mean the interests of those in control of the country's productive capacities.

In order to avoid appearances of exerting plutocratic control, media owners allow for appearances of autonomy. Dissent is permitted, and, in some circumstances, even encouraged, but only if it remains within "acceptable ideology" (Altschull 272). The institutional process, or what Reese calls the "news paradigm," is one of the conduits through which the dominant ideology is controlled. The texture and direction of news are constrained in part by hiring and firing practices, a system of built-in penalties and rewards, and the organizational socialization of journalists (Reese 390-409). Journalists' "relative autonomy" results in occasionally uncomfortable stories for the ruling interests; mostly, they are done in ways that target individual blemishes as isolated and atypical rather than systemic problems (Parenti 221-222).

The producers of the news may not be fully aware of their role as "purveyors" of cultural myths, values and legitimating viewpoints; of how they misrepresent, slant, and omit the news. Reporters and editors may be simply products of the same "political socialization," as are media owners and political leaders. But the product of the news--the content--finds its conduit through the systematic mechanisms at the disposal of owners: ideological controls, such as hiring and firing practices, from which descend some of the above-stated professional norms (like anticipatory self-editing). These controls may be internalized and unstated, but they are results of overt, conscious, deliberate decisions

made by media owners who "treat information and culture as vital instruments of class power" (Parenti 225-226). Members of the elite class have perfected methods of maintaining social, political and economic relations "by using the media to generate support, compliance, and just plain confusion among the public" (W. Lance Bennett, qted. in Herman and Chomsky 303).

APPLYING THEORY TO THE 1988 CAMPAIGN

The 1988 campaign contained pro forma elements for a classic media-studies case. It provides a preponderance of issues that fit into the pattern of previous campaigns around which media-routines and ideology theories have gained their basis. The 1988 campaign raises questions such as: How were certain campaign issues elevated or suppressed? How prevelant was the media's focus on the conflictual? How prevelant were strategic issues? What context was used to frame stories? What long-term images emerged out of the story frames? In what ways did the media rely on official sources? In a national campaign, with competing elites' interests being battled over, how did the media decide which of the two main groups is to be elevated as the more credible?

Perhaps the single, overarching issue encompassing the dispute over the media's role in the 1988 campaign circles around the notion of autonomy. The common complaint by media practitioners themselves was that they were helpless, unable to handle the adroit campaign of Bush handlers; that they were manipulated by Republicans, who had developed a public relations expertise through the Reagan years designed to manage news by the very rules that dictated media practices. Republicans had fed the media what they wanted: aesthetic, photogenic images; snappy, controversial, conflictual text. They provided guidance for a sharply divisive campaign in what might otherwise have been a dull match between a pair of candidates who failed to inspire the nation's interest. This notion of media compliance implies that media practitioners possess a basic autonomy that

somehow was violated. It overlooks the possibility that media routines--thus, the political discourse that is produced--are a construct of dominant interests, and that indeed, practitioners, or journalists, have little autonomy outside of the ideological framework that is provided them. As Alan Rachlin states,

> We can best understand how the press serves the needs of democracy--or fails to do so--[by going] beyond the organizational and journalistic issues ... and place the examination of the press in a social context beyond individual organizations or the journalistic profession ... (3).

One purpose of this thesis is to suggest the role of political economy as one explanation of the press's conduct in the 1988 campaign; the press's framing of campaign accounts could have been derived from (mostly unconscious) ideological perspectives. This thesis contends that Republican expropriation of media routines had less to do with the "manipulation" of the press than to do with the press's built-in readiness to accept such expropriation. In other words, Republican "manipulation" could not have been achieved if not for their ideological symmetry with the interests of the corporate sector, in which the media hold a central place. The manipulation critique can be tested by questioning some of the assumptions that guide media routines. If the media had made moderately alternative "news judgments"--decisions not guided by media routines, or by some and not others--what other contextual frames might have emerged? What patterns of suppressions, shadings and emphasis emerged? What general agenda or tone emerged? By proposing alternatives and examining the choices journalists made, the following text should demonstrate how the built-in assumptions of the media routines tended, in the 1988 presidential campaign, toward ideological needs of elites in power; that the media indeed acted as "agents of power," rather than as independent institutions operating in the "moralizing manner of the crusader ..." (Altschull 122).

CHAPTER III

POST-GOP CONVENTION COVERAGE

GOP TARGETS EARLY ATTACKS

The Bush campaign clearly strived to make an early impact on the race. Most Bush strategists targeted the period immediately following the Republican convention as the time that the campaign would capture the attention and sentiments of voters. This idea was borne from traditional voting habits, which showed quadrennially that most voters decide on their choice at least a month before the election. The strategy was borne out: in a 1988 exit poll, 67 percent of the 11,645 voters who responded said they'd decided on their choice earlier than in the last month of the campaign (Public Opinion January/February 1989: 27). One pollster said intense pre-Labor Day campaigning was a new prerequisite to modern national politics. "The idea that presidential campaigns start after Labor Day is an old notion. It has changed. Huge sums are raised early now and it burns a hole in the pockets. The campaigns don't wait" (Love Aug. 31, 1988: 15).

The Republican strategy was to divert the public from issues that had driven Bush's negative ratings as high as 41 percent--the highest negative rating for any major party's presidential candidate after nomination in 30 years (Taylor June 12, 1988: A1). The Pentagon defense contract scandal, the Iran-Contra affair and the legal troubles of Attorney General Edwin Meese, as well as his toady, or "wimpish" image, rated high in the minds

of voters as a reason to dislike Bush. "He got out front on the defense contract thing, but there's no question that Iran-Contra and other things have damaged him and impacted on his credibility. If it weren't for that, he'd probably be even with Dukakis in the polls," one senior Bush adviser told the Los Angeles Times' Jack Nelson. The success of Bush's strategy rested on shedding the "disadvantages of incumbency" (ethical failures of the Reagan administration with which voters associated Bush) and vesting Bush with the advantages of incumbency, peace and prosperity, said Bush's pollster Robert Teeter (Nelson January 25, 1988: 1). Another tactic was to frame Bush's transformation around the media's definition of Bush as a "wimp." One voter, 73-year old retired businessman Lloyd Iback, summed up the view that Bush stood in Reagan's shadow: "Bush is not the man Reagan is. He can't get the people enthused like Reagan could" (Dionne June 3, 1988: A14). All Bush had to do was to stand tall and defiant to turn those negatives around. Attacking was a way to project a clear vision and leadership.

Indeed, Bush already laid the groundwork for momentum before the GOP convention with scathing attacks on Dukakis in the first week of June that included criticism of the Democrat's furlough program, in which convicted killer Willie Horton's story became a familiar campaign theme; criticism of Dukakis's veto of a bill requiring teachers to recite the Pledge of Allegiance; and a rumor floated by Republican surrogates--picked up by the press without substantiation--that Dukakis sought psychiatric treatment after his brother's death in 1973 and his own defeat for renomination as governor in 1978. Republican strategist Lee Atwater rationalized the early attacks by saying that issues like the Pledge of Allegiance and Willie Horton were "so unbelievable that if we waited until October, voters would dismiss it as a typical campaign smear. These things need time to work their way into the public's consciousness" (Taylor June 12, 1988: A1). The furlough and flag attacks already showed signs of effect by midsummer, as Dukakis's negatives began to rise and his lead over Bush shrank. "Dukakis's grounds were so shaky," wrote Time magazine's Laurence Barrett, "he was vulnerable" when Republicans floated the psychiatric rumor in early

August (September 12, 1988: 20-21). Though the rumor was put to rest within two days, the damage was done: in one poll, Dukakis lost 10 points off his 17-point lead going into the GOP convention. A Newsweek poll of 948 registered voters had Dukakis leading 55-38 (Martz August 1, 1988: 14-17); Dukakis led by 12 points in a late July Washington Post-ABC News poll, but only three points just prior to the convention (Peterson September 1, 1988: A1). Another factor in Dukakis's descent was that his lead was not "hard" or insurmountable to begin with, which both undermines the argument that Bush's attacks were the sole determinant in Dukakis's drop in the polls and the perception that Bush had come from so far behind. The Post's David Broder and Paul Taylor wrote: "[In] the judgment of knowledgeable politicians in both parties ... despite a succession of early polls showing Dukakis more than 10 points ahead of Bush ... neither has really connected with ... the swing voters" (June 5, 1988: A1). Ironically, late-June reports showed that Bush's attacks were not effective--Dukakis maintained a 51-to-39 percent lead over Bush on June 20--and Bush's campaign began to worry "that repeated harsh attacks by Bush would backfire," though they still planned to use surrogates for the "heavy-hitting" charges (Hoffman June 22, 1988: A5). Some aides worried that Bush would never define himself: After eight years of standing in Reagan's shadow, wrote the New York Times' Gerald Boyd, "now he is having difficulty defining himself because of the belief that he must tear down the positive image of Mr. Dukakis before it grows" (June 22, 1984: A1). Three days later, Bush "ignored widespread criticism ... in escalating his rhetoric" (Peterson June 25, 1988: A6). The first indications that Bush's attacks were paying off was in a poll published June 30, showing Dukakis's lead down to 46-to-41. "The race is tightening, as Bush and other Republicans have started highlighting what they see as Dukakis's vulnerabilities" (Hoffman June 30, 1988: A14).

BUSH OVERTAKES DUKAKIS

It was during the three-week post-convention period that Bush overtook Dukakis in the polls, a lead Bush never relinquished. Bush defined himself in this interval as a man of convictions, relishing the media's descriptions of him as a "pit bull." Compared with earlier, less flattering depictions, the new image fed into the overall perception of his momentum. Bush's sudden rise in the polls during the three-week period following the Republican convention ran in conjunction with the media's portrayal of Bush as a changed candidate. David Gergen, one of the architects of Ronald Reagan's image-driven presidency, wrote, "Politically, Bush has been running a superb campaign in the past three weeks, showing a much keener instinct than Dukakis for capturing the public air waves. ..." (September 12, 1988: 76). Dukakis's campaign within this span was pockmarked with missed opportunities and blunders. Many in his own party derided Dukakis's delayed reactions to Bush's attacks, his uninspiring stump style, his tendency to stray from his own "theme of the day," and particularly, his "hopelessly lawyer-like thrust" on his stance on the Pledge of Allegiance imbroglio (TRB September 26, 1988: 4; Love and Weinstein September 6, 1988: 14). Dukakis's mistakes, however, might have been regarded as harmless if he'd been operating under less lopsided circumstances stemming from accessibility differences. The press also gave Bush license to define Dukakis as a Jimmy Carter-style liberal, without offering any serious challenge to Bush's record in the Reagan administration. In the end, the contributions of the press in this period allowed Bush to seize the agenda and forced Dukakis on the defensive.

During this crucial period, the press rebuffed repeated efforts by the Dukakis campaign to gain coverage on equal footing with the Bush campaign. Dukakis waged no fewer than six major issue thrusts in this span, but the press repeatedly portrayed Dukakis as on the defensive, as idle, and as having no game plan; Bush reportedly controlled the debate. In fact, if it weren't for the structure of media coverage--geared toward day-by-day coverage

and driven by a fascination with "revelation" and the newness of news, which fit cozily into the Republican "message-of-the-day" tactic--Dukakis's campaign would have been seen as far more aggressive and issue-oriented than it was. Other factors that may have driven Dukakis into a perceived defensiveness: the press's growing inclination to play it safe with Republicans (avoiding the familiar charge of liberal bias); the press's news values, which leaned heavily on "neutral" subjects such as campaign strategy and tactics, focused on the candidates' daily behavior, and avoided policy issues. The press was guilty of lacking perspective, relying on symbols over substance; choosing the simple over the complex; and focusing on the charge-countercharge pace of the campaign without forcing a true dialogue.

CHICAGO TRIBUNE*LOS ANGELES TIMES*WASHINGTON POST
AUGUST 21-27

By August 21, Bush glowed from the press's new estimation of him, thanks in part to a post-convention "bounce," that catapulted Bush to a nine-point lead in a Gallup poll (Martz August 29, 1988: 16-20). Described as sharp in style, freshened in his speeches, Bush was now a "different candidate from the one plodding across the nation for months, greeted by folks who rarely offered more than polite response ... [he has] delivered more enthusiasm than at any time in his run for the presidency" (Decker August 21, 1988: 23). The fact that Bush made the decision on his own on Dan Quayle as his running mate now superceded the choice itself, which was still considered, even by Republican party regulars, a blunder. "But it was Bush's decision," wrote the Chicago Tribune's Charles Madigan. "He made it clear at a luncheon last Thursday that he would stick with it, and he also resolved any question about who was in charge. It seemed a new George Bush. ... No waffling. No mumbling. No gaffes. He took off his glasses and fixed his gaze on the

gathered Republicans and told them how it would be: '... I'm going to set the agenda' " (August 21, 1988: 26).

Apparently, the media wanted to be "ahead" on this angle, so stories began to assert that Bush, delivering fiery speeches in defense of Quayle, who apparently "damn sure didn't burn the American flag," may be "turning the corner on Quayle" (McNulty August 23, 1988: 12). Headlines reiterated Bush's claim that the Quayle storm was a "tempest in a teapot." At the same time, the media began to question whether Dukakis's campaign was fully engaged. On August 22, Philip Lentz used the quotes of several Democratic sources to show that Dukakis's standard message--"on economic opportunity and leadership for the 90s"--was "losing its force." Lentz's story gave a glimpse of the conditions of press coverage under which Dukakis operated: "Reporters are looking for news every day. When the candidate doesn't generate news in his speeches--invariably he doesn't--reporters try to pry some out of him at news conferences. That's how candidates find themselves on the defensive." Democratic political consultant David Axelrod said correctly, "Given the voraciousness of the news media, if you don't make the news, someone else is going to." The story did not point out that Bush did not face the same prying (Lentz August 22, 1988: 4).

Meanwhile, the only way Dukakis could enter the fray was to fend off false Republican charges that he used influence to avoid the Korean War. Finally, on August 24, Dukakis got through the post-convention Quayle ruckus by trying to turn Bush's Pledge of Allegiance issue on its head. Dukakis drew an analogy between what he called Bush's disdain for constitutional law that forbade forced pledges and a "pattern" of broken or ignored laws in the Reagan-Bush administration. The Los Angeles Times saw Dukakis's comments as a "signal to go on the offensive while Bush remains mired in the controversies surrounding" Quayle (Lauter August 24, 1988: 16; Love and Decker August 25, 1988: 1). The Tribune's interpretation differed: "While Dukakis forcefully defended his position, the pledge controversy marked the second day in a row he has been forced to

respond to GOP charges. In fact, Dukakis has been on the defensive for most of the last month, a development that worries Democratic strategists" (Lentz August 24, 1988: 1). The terms of the debate over the state of Dukakis's campaign were thus defined: Was he on the offensive or not? The loser in that debate would be Dukakis's message.

The winner was Bush, whose campaign structure allowed only the picture of a candidate on the attack. Bush responded to Dukakis's charges on his own terms, painting the pledge issue in a patriotic scheme, rather than legal. "What is it about the Pledge of Allegiance that upsets him so much?" Bush asked rhetorically. Bush could ignore Dukakis's reference to "patterns" of broken or ignored laws because no reporter pressed him during a rare press conference on Aug. 24. The questioning corps saw fit only to fetch Bush's stance on the constitutionality of a Pledge of Allegiance bill, which Bush bravely said he would sign. At this point, a Gallup poll indicated that Bush was maintaining his lead over Dukakis, 48-44 percent; Bush's "negative" ratings had dropped from 42 percent to 33 percent, and his favorable rating rose from 51 percent to 60 percent (Los Angeles Times August 24, 1988: 15).

A day later, August 25, Dukakis was back on the attack, this time spelling out a clear line of argument on the Reagan-Bush administration's ethical standards. He called the administration's dealings with Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega "criminal," and derided the administration's anti-drug efforts as "ridiculous" and "absurd." "How can we ask our neighbors in Latin America to crack down on drugs when we have an administration that's in bed with one of the biggest thugs on the continent?" (Lauter August 26, 1988: 15). It was fiery language intended to draw out the most incredulous in Bush. White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater initially rebutted the charges with a ream of achievement-oriented statistics, and a challenge for Democrats: "Are they willing to take sanctions against people who use drugs? That's the issue we face" (Lentz August 26, 1988: 5). Bush responded with his "sharpest attacks" yet on Dukakis, on August 26, accusing Dukakis of insulting drug enforcement officers killed in the line of duty.

What followed was a peculiar sequence of coverage. The Post's Bill Peterson, in an August 27 story, juxtaposed Dukakis's actual comments against Bush's rhetorical manipulation of his words. Peterson reported that "Bush ... did not respond to the substance of Dukakis's attack," but instead implied that Dukakis was calling the efforts of the drug enforcement officers absurd. Peterson corrected Bush, writing, "Dukakis said it was absurd that the U.S. spent twice as much money trying to overthrow the government of Nicaragua as it did in the war against drugs, and that the administration's relationship with Noriega, under indictment for drug trafficking, was 'criminal'." Peterson also reported Bush's misrepresentation of Dukakis's stance on gun ownership (August 27, 1988: A10).

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The very next day, Peterson wrote a front-page analysis on Bush's campaign full of praise for its effectiveness, while avoiding the issue of questionable tactics the reporter had raised August 27:

> Bush has rarely performed better during a quarter century in politics, according to those who have watched him over the years. [His] speeches have been crisp and forceful; his message tough and direct ... Bush has finally emerged as a formidable presidential candidate, not to be underestimated by the Democrats. ... Bush called himself a 'pit bull' and acted like one. He questioned Dukakis's background in foreign affairs, his record as 'liberal governor of Massachussetts,' his values as a 'liberal and 'member of the ACLU,' and even his patriotism, for vetoing a 1977 bill [on the Pledge of Allegiance].

Peterson arrived at this conclusion with the aid of Bush intimates, quoting one of his most "loyal aides," a supporter who had followed Bush since his failed 1964 bid for the Senate, his son, George W. Bush, and senior adviser Charles Black, who said that Bush's handling of the Quayle crisis had added to his stature: "He showed real leadership," said Black. Peterson "substantiated" Bush's leadership by writing that the vice president had personally written the Quayle defense he used before the VFW convention ("at least he didn't go to Canada, he didn't burn his draft card, and he damn sure didn't burn the

American flag"). "Pointing to his heart, Bush told reporters on Air Force Two, 'that part came right from here,' " wrote Peterson. Where a day before Peterson balanced Bush's statements with contrary or qualifying evidence, on this day, Peterson would let stand unimpeded Bush's statement on the flag. The fact that it was effective apparently overrode the insidiousness of Bush's suggestion that Dukakis had burned the American flag, or, minimally, approved of the act. Peterson also had adjusted his standards of evaluation. A day after taking Bush to task for using words out of context for rhetorical impact, Peterson now contended that Bush had faltered "only twice," stumbling when interrupted by hecklers and his "poor performance" at a Hollywood gala where he'd appeared with Reagan. Peterson wrote:

> Bush has been plagued by three problems. Blind loyalty to Reagan, his lack of concrete accomplishments during two decades of government service, despite an impressive resume; and public uneasiness about his character or stature. In short, Bush has not looked in command. This began to change in New Orleans and continued last week (Peterson Aug. 28, 1988: A1).

Peterson's story reflected in part how driven by polls the media are: on the day of this story, polls released showed Bush rising in conjunction with the public's negative views of how the press handled the Quayle controversy. As Jonathan Alter wrote four years later, "the real fault of the press is not that it leads too much--tells the public whom to vote for--but that it follows too much; it wires itself to the polls, then reverberates with an amplified impression of what it thinks the public already believe" (Schwartz and Grove August 28, 1988: A17; Alter November 2, 1992: 59). But it also reflected the areas in which reporters felt qualified to evaluate and offer interpretation. Stage presence and performance were apparently analogous to the notions of character and stature. It also was an example of how a reporter's story could structurally stand as objective while it substantively reflected the bias of partisans.

The press continued to portray Dukakis as drifting, losing focus and dropping out of sight from the public as the campaign moved into the second post-convention week. Despite the Quayle controversy, which most observers contended should have been a boon

for Dukakis without factoring in the backlash factor, Dukakis was "on a downslope." The only target Dukakis seemed to aim for--the Iran-Contra scandal--had a blurry center. "... [A]s those stories have faded from the headlines, they lack the punch they once" had (Taylor August 29, 1988: A1). In fact, Taylor was contributing to a political reality for which the press itself had direct responsibility. Iran-Contra had "faded from the headlines" by virtue of the press's self-censorship. News organizations did not want to be seen as politicizing the issue, for fear of being seen as pursuing their own or the Democrats' agenda. The story had already been done--in the initial 1986-87 onslaught of coverage unleashed by the original breaking story; and in the early months of 1988, when Bush's Republican primary opponents raised the issue. After the Republicans--led by Alexander Haig--raised it as a campaign issue, the press produced its second round of scandal coverage, this time almost exclusively related to the issue of Bush's complicity: What did George know?

Bush's association with the Iran-Contra issue was raised to a pitch during the infamous confrontation between Bush and CBS anchorman Dan Rather in late January. Bush scored public opinion points with his rehearsed ouburst against Rather's irascible questioning, and though the issue stayed active through late May, Bush's outburst may have resulted in ultimately chilling further questioning.

Another explanation for the press's reluctance to cover Iran-Contra in the fall was Haig's assertion that by raising the issue in the primaries he forced the press to seize upon it early, preempting a later round of intense coverage once Dukakis broached it in the fall. "[Bush] may not recognize it, but I know I was trying to do the Republican party a favor because this is an issue that should be bled in the primary season and not in the fall campaign," Haig said in early February. "And it's having that effect." Haig maintained that some news organizations wanted a Democrat for president, so were holding back to keep the most damaging links between Bush and the Iran-Contra scandal "in their quiver" for maximum damage later (Campbell February 11, 1988: A14).

In late January, the Los Angeles Times juxtaposed the Iran-Contra issue with Bush's "boast" of "broad foreign policy experience." To the Los Angeles Times' question provided to Bush in advance, "... how, given his background, he did not see the plan for what it was," Bush responded: "That is for the American people to judge. We took risks here, and just as the President accepts his responsibility, I'll accept mine" (Decker January 31, 1988: 1). Ironically, the same type of memo that some thought doomed his 1992 candidacy had already surfaced in January, 1988. National Security Director John Poindexter provided a 1986 memo that indicated Bush "was more knowledgeable of and played a more active role in the arms-for-hostages deals than he has acknowledged" (Balzar January 9, 1988: 1). Ultimately, Bush would not have to face voter judgment on Iran-Contra in 1988, given the press's reluctance to retread on what it felt was an already trodden path.

The most obvious disparity between the coverage of the two campaigns in this three-week span was the candidates' accessibility. Though this may have been the single most important issue around which all other questions of balance revolved, it was rarely addressed. Bush's inaccessiblity forced the Bush press corps to rely on two sources of information that severely restricted its ability to conduct independent reportage: the content of Bush's speeches and the "spin" of Bush campaign aides. Yet, reporters played this hand as if it were the rule rather than the exception. This fed into the ongoing fascination with the manner in which the campaigns were run--the mechanics of the campaign; and the increasing influence of campaign "handlers" on the tone and direction of stories. Given the Republicans' expertise in media relations, polished during Reagan's administration, the advantage inherently tilted toward Bush in the area of campaign mechanics. A feature on Bush's top campaign strategist, Roger Ailes, is instructive of the near-gushing admiration Ailes inspired, and the respect generally accorded to Republican strategists. Flattering adjectives engulfed the feature:

> "freedom fighter," "battle tested," "shrewd," "keeper of the candidate's flickering image," "mature professional," "the Old Fox," "master communicator," possessor of "blue-collar moxie," "decidedly meat and potatoes," his style "crisp and hard edged," "wily," and "will crawl out of bed to sleep on the floor with a sick dog ..." (Grove June 29, 1988: B1).

The liabilities of Dukakis's press accessibility came to the fore when the Democratic campaign rescheduled a press conference it had canceled only 30 minutes earlier on August 29. The Dukakis camp, after reviewing the previous two weeks' television coverage, concluded that the image of Bush's carefully rehearsed stump comments against Dukakis's impromptu reactions depicted Dukakis as defensive and driven by Bush's agenda. "In many cases," Dukakis adviser Kirk O'Donell explained to members of the traveling press corps, "the Bush campaign or his surrogates launched an attack in the morning and by the time of the Dukakis press availability, that dominated the dialogue (Cawley August 30, 1988: 5). Additionally, Dukakis's speeches were getting short shrift. Television had created an artificial dialogue that increasingly depicted Dukakis on the losing end, dropping Dukakis's stump speech material in place of Dukakis's juicier responses to the press's questions. Yet, reporters put up such a hue and cry to the cancellation--threatening to make the cancellation the news of the day--that Dukakis reinstituted the press conference. The issue ironically did become the news of the day, and wound up being depicted as yet another example of a vapid campaign. The Los Angeles Times' David Lauter justified his focus on the press availability story by writing that the speech was almost entirely a "rehash of themes--the need to bring economic development to backward areas, to improve education and to expand the availability of health care--that Dukakis has been talking about for months, in some cases, years ... The speech received generous applause but generated no obvious enthusiasm ..." (Reid August 30, 1988: A6; Lauter August 30, 1988: 12).

A window of opportunity to create news did open for Dukakis August 30, when Dukakis tied his Iran-Contra theme to the announcement of a newly published book, Men of Zeal. Dukakis opened a two-day assault on what he called a failure of leadership from Bush on the Iran-Contra scandal and the administration's ties with Noriega. Dukakis called

the sale of arms to Iran for the release of hostages "one of the worst foreign policy disasters of the last decade." Curiously, the Post's T.R. Reid wrote that Dukakis "changed course sharply," with his line of attack, though Dukakis had made two major previous recent efforts to spell out the same issue (August 24 and August 26). Ultimately, the story turned to questioning Dukakis's tactics. "One line of analysis in political circles is that the Iran-Contra affair is a 'stale' issue that was extensively aired in the primaries by Bush's Republican opponents. The Democratic campaign feels otherwise" (Reid August 31, 1988: A1). What political circles were Reid referring to? To whom was Reid attributing this sentiment? If the Democratic campaign felt "otherwise," the only logical alternative was that Republicans comprised the political circles that judged Iran-Contra as "stale." Drawing the cues from "political circles" that excluded Democratic campaign opinion put at least the Post's Reid in partisan alignment with Republicans. Three days earlier, the New York Times' E.J. Dionne used precisely the same language--"stale"--in referring to the Iran-Contra issue, suggestive of the possibility that the New York Times wielded at least some influence in determining national journalists' outlooks.

On the same day that Dukakis railed against Bush's involvement in Iran-Contra--August 30--Bush visited a defense plant to highlight several elements of his candidacy: economic growth and jobs, training, industrial competitiveness, patriotism, "and even his own war record." "Bush's frequent visits to defense plants, military facilities and veterans' groups," wrote John Balzar, "are designed to appeal to the patriotic streak in conservative voters. ... This summer's round of allegations of vast corruption in the defense industry hardly seemed to affect Bush's defense plant strategy. He has consistently supported the industry, although certainly not its alleged wrongdoers" (Balzar August 31, 1988: 12). Timothy McNulty stated that "defense has served [Bush] well as he punched his way out of the controversy over [Quayle] that threatened to overshadow his own candidacy" (August 31, 1988: 11). Bush's patriotism strategy ran on a completely different track of coverage than the Pentagon and other foreign policy scandals. The double standard on candidate

accessibility had no small part in contributing to these coverage tendencies. If reporters had access to Bush, they would have had the opportunity to take some of Dukakis's questions about Bush's foreign policy leadership and apply them to Bush's claims to superiority in that field.

The media's failure to match the two campaigns' foreign policy themes did not result from lack of opportunity or convenient news angle. While Dukakis leveled a steady diatribe against the Reagan-Bush foreign policy scandals, Bush waged a parallel theme based on his foreign policy expertise. These two images could have collided as the major clash of the campaign, but instead existed on entirely separate planes, as if they were unrelated to each other.

Though the press was clearly disinclined to report the Iran-Contra issue, Dukakis provided reporters with the "news" element for their September 1 editions. The authors of the newly published Men of Zeal appeared at a press conference with Dukakis. Senators William Cohen, R-New Hampshire, and George Mitchell, D-Maine, who were members of the Senate Investigative Committee on the scandal, claimed Bush knew all along that the Reagan administration was trading arms for hostages. Dukakis said: "The American people would like to know the answer to an important question, Mr. Bush; you sat through five meetings ... How can you say that you did not know this was a straight arms-for-hostages deal?" But, the two-track campaign coverage ensured that Bush would not have to answer to Dukakis, and allowed Bush to divert the media's attention with an issue of his own: the environment. On the same day of the Men of Zeal press conference, the Bush campaign informed reporters that Bush planned a trip the next day to Boston to focus on the polluted harbor.

Skepticism toward Dukakis's persistence on Iran-Contra didn't help matters: "Dukakis and his top advisers have been struggling for three weeks to regain the initiative ... for media attention," wrote Reid. "The Democrats have fallen back on one of their tried and true issues, but in today's news conference ... the Democrats' scenario was at least

partially upstaged by Bush's decision to come [to Boston] Thursday." By the end of Dukakis's press conference, he was responding to questions about Bush's impending trip and defending his environmental record (Reid September 1, 1988: A16). Interestingly, the Los Angeles Times led that day's issue with a story on Dukakis's first "direct statements" on Quayle, obtained in an interview, making only passing reference to the Iran-Contra/Mitchell-Cohen press conference (Balzar September 1, 1988: 1), while covering Bush's opening environmental salvo from Michigan: "I am an environmentalist," Bush declared. The Tribune did not cover the press conference, having covered Dukakis's previous day's Iran-Contra "attack"; but it did cover Bush's Michigan appearance, which promised the next day's Boston Harbor sojourn. All but forgotten by the September 1 editions were Dukakis's aggressive remarks on Iran-Contra. In contrast to articles that had pointedly remarked on Dukakis's strategic ploys as the basis for his press conference, Bush's push on the environment was treated as a natural foray into a substantive issue. The Tribune's McNulty wrote: "[Bush] broke ranks with the Reagan administration ... on reducing acid rain pollution and he endorsed a number of other clean air and water proposals" (McNulty September 1, 1988: 1). The Post's Peterson had a nearly identical lead: "[Bush], attempting to separate himself from [Reagan] on environmental issues, said today if he is elected, he will work to reduce acid rain, speed the cleanup of toxic wastes, beef up enforcement of federal pollution regulations and bring a new 'conservation ethic' to the White House." The spin of one Bush supporter followed, maintaining the tone of the article: "It's a whole new ballgame. It comes through in the flavor of the speech, and the commitment" (Peterson September 1, 1988: A1). None of the three papers mentioned the strategic value of abruptly switching gears from foreign policy to environment at a time Dukakis was turning up the heat on the Reagan-Bush foreign policy record. His comments were merely "designed to show greater environmental sensitivity" than might be expected (Balzar September 1, 1988: 1).

Television held the print medium captive at Boston Harbor. Newspaper reporters would have to respond to the requirements and standards of a telegenic event as a political reality, no matter how staged they knew it was. "It was a near-perfect made-for-television invasion, complete with pictures of the beautiful harbor and plenty of conflict" (Peterson, September 2, 1988: A4). Bush aides made no bones about touting the Boston Harbor stop as a story for TV. One aide told the Los Angeles Times' John Balzar that "Campaigning always comes down to pictures. If you can do all your groundwork in laying out your positions on issues, which we've been doing for the last three months, then pictures can credibly reinforce things and create a stronger image at a time when people are really starting to pay attention" (Balzar September 3: 24). Bush was even able to transform this offensive into a defensive counteroffensive--using the now-familiar Republican formula of feigned indignation, as if to imply his campaign was unfairly besieged: "I mean, you get beat around the head by a man whose record is as abysmal as this, then I'm not going to stand there and take it. Inasmuch as I hear a lot of sludge coming out aimed at me by a person that's been a part of the problem here, I have to defend myself and point out the difference" (McNulty, September 2, 1988: 20). In truth, he had avoided any damage at all from Dukakis's statements because he never had to answer to them.

A flurry of press releases by a "string of Massachussetts Democrats," condemning Bush for "hypocrisy" did not deter Bush, nor the media's reaction to the Boston Harbor ploy. The Tribune's September 2 lead story, a five-column banner story, "Harbor taints Dukakis's record on pollution," was precisely the type of print reportage for which the Bush campaign could have hoped. Though five paragraphs into the story reporter Casey Bukro noted that a national environmental group ranked Massachusetts tied for first with Wisconsin for "overall environmental effort," the thrust of the story was that "the harbor problem ... provides Republicans with a strong political issue" (Bukro, September 2, 1988: 1). To reconcile the notion that a governor is politically vulnerable on an environmental record that is rated as the nation's best requires a leap in political logic that

can only fall under the heading of distorted realities. By the end of Bush's blitz on the environment, which continued the next day in New Jersey, Balzar had this to say about Bush: "With his 72-hour campaign thrust, Bush has been as sharp a campaigner as many have ever seen him" (Balzar September 3, 1988: 24). That Bush had twisted the record and diverted attention from an issue Dukakis was attempting to enlarge, went unrecorded.

SEPTEMBER 4-10

Dukakis's plaint on accessibility had little or no effect on how the media would conduct themselves for almost another month. Bush's rare press conferences seldom produced the kind of news that emanated out of Dukakis's press conferences. Bush hosted an informal press conference/barbecue two days before the traditional Labor Day campaign kickoff on September 3, in which he fielded "more than a dozen questions." Though issues ranged from nuclear power, unemployment, jobs, the environment, upcoming debates and "narcotics," reporters generally stayed away from politicizing the questions (for instance, one reporter asked about the increase in narcotic smuggling during Bush's tenure as head of interdiction efforts without making the natural reference to Dukakis's charges about Bush's relationship with Noriega). Two papers' stories devoted their leads to Bush's comments on the debates, and the third on his input on environmental policies. "... George Bush was decidedly upbeat at the beginning of Labor Day weekend ... with the bravado that has become a new characteristic of his campaign, Bush praised Dukakis as a 'better campaigner' " (McNulty September 4, 1988: 5). The Los Angeles Times' Balzar wrote playfully: "Is he being candid or coy? Worried or just teasing? It was hard to tell Saturday as George Bush wrapped up a news conference on the lawn of his home by praising the debating skills of his Democrat opponent, Michael Dukakis" (Balzar September 4, 1988: 19). The Post's David Hoffman made only passing reference to Bush's debate comments, after focusing on Bush's responses on the environment: "Bush said he had 'many times

expressed my concerns ...' [but] did not offer examples" (Hoffman September 4, 1988: A10). Bush's continual rise in the polls may have been the overriding factor that emboldened the Bush campaign and humbled the press. By Labor Day, a new poll showed Dukakis's negatives soaring from 22 percent to 33 percent, and Bush's abating (Taylor September 5, 1988: A1).

In any case, Bush gave no press conferences for the next week, finishing with two for the entire three-week period. Finally, on September 10, one reporter called attention to Bush's inaccessibility. The Post's Hoffman wrote, "Bush ... refused a request from reporters for [a press conference] to clarify his views ... Bush also ignored shouted questions from reporters, part of a strategy to avoid anything that could distract from his prepared speeches. Bush has also resumed using a technique from the primaries of granting interviews to local reporters while restricting contact with those who travel with him" (Hoffman September 10, 1988: A10).

If the media were waiting for a fresh angle and symbols to tie in the concepts Dukakis had tried to connect between Bush, foreign policy and ethical failure, they all came to the fore on September 8, when on the same day of a Bush foreign policy speech, a Knight-Ridder story broke about ties several Bush aides' had to Bahamian government officials suspected of trafficking in drugs. The Tribune carried the Knight-Ridder story, while the Post waited until September 9 to run its own piece. The Los Angeles Times did not make a reference to it until September 10.

Based on a 23-page 1984 memo released by Ohio Congressman Edward Feighan, the Knight-Ridder story implicated Lee Atwater, Charles Black, Paul J. Manafort and Roger Stone as the campaign officials associated with the firm that promised, for an $800,000 fee, a "back-channel relationship" between the Reagan administration and the Bahamas at a time when U.S. officials suspected Bahamian leaders of accepting payoffs from drug traffickers. A Bush campaign spokesman said, "That is such horse manure. Is this the best the Democratic party can do? Trot out some no-name congressman from Ohio to level

charges which have no merit, no basis in fact? This is scuzzball politics." Meanwhile, Bush, stumping on defense, was spelling out the "litany" of differences with Dukakis and unfurling one of his favorite lines: "After all, if my opponent doesn't want to modernize his snowblower, that's his business ..." The range of "issues" they differed on were limited to the technical: deployment of the MX and Midgetman missiles, the construction of two new aircraft carrier task forces and deployment of the Strategic Defense Initiative (Locin, September 8, 1988: 23). How the media could separate the concepts of "strong defense" from the ethical questions emanating out of the Pentagon procurement scandal is baffling enough. Confronted with the symbolism and newness of a fresh story on a possible foreign policy ethics scandal, the media still failed to make the connection.

The Post held back until it produced its own investigation, which yielded a neutralizing story that implied that Democrats were in the same business of courting unsavory foreign clients. Post writer Michael Isikoff warned that the issue could "embarrass" both parties, pointing out that a Democratic political consultant and associate of a Dukakis media coordinator, had provided "assistance" to the Republican firm that worked with Noriega. The Democratic political consultant, David Sawyer, said his association with Republican Stuart Spencer's firm's Noriega account was a "non-issue" because the "goal of both firms was to persuade Noriega to restore civilian authority after Noriega had fired Panama's elected president, Nicolas Ardito Barletta." How Sawyer's view of his Noriega involvement as a "non-issue" absolved the Republican firm of Black, Manafort, Stone and Kelly from its association with the Bahamian government is puzzling, particularly in view of the embarassing memo.

The firm proposed that it would mount a "counteroffensive to [Prime Minister Lynden O.] Pindling's critics" and improve his "sullied image" in the United States--at a time when U.S. officials were reporting Pindling's ties to drug traffickers. The Knight-Ridder story carried in the Tribune provided details of the memo language that the Post paraphrased or omitted, and pointed out that the firm "appears to impugn the motives of the Drug

Enforcement Administration and U.S. Treasury officials critical of the Bahamas ... The memo skirts the problems of drugs ... [and] only mentions the 'negatively charged atmosphere' in Washington. It mentions the displeasure of Treasury and DEA, but doesn't give as the reason the view that Bahamas were a haven for drug trafficking and money laundering. The blame lies with 'Pindling critics using the Miami Herald as well as other Eastern Establishment media outlets ...' " (Knight-Ridder September 8, 1988: 13).

Describing the revelation as a "seemingly made-to-order Democratic campaign issue," the Post's Isikoff gave Bush adviser Charles Black an open forum for his own defense:

> We didn't work for Pindling, we worked for the government of the Bahamas. They came to town and said they wanted to improve their relations with the U.S. and we told them, if your goal is to be cooperative, we can help you. We accomplished a lot in furthering the war on drugs. The reason all this is coming up is this is a political campaign and the Democrats don't have issues they can work on so they're taking cheap shots at the people working for Bush.

Black also dismissed the firm's memo as a "sales pitch. ... [F]rankly, it had some hyperbole in it and wasn't as carefully edited as it might have been had we known it was going to be a public document." Accepting at face value Black's explanation, the Post pursued the issue no further. Isikoff also failed to mention that Bush campaign manager Lee Atwater had ties to the firm at the time it approached the Bahamian officials (Isikoff September 9, 1988: A6).

The Los Angeles Times waited until September 10 to make reference to the Bahamian story, Bob Drogin slipping into his story the fact that "news reports detailed the allegations this week." Though Dukakis's speech centered on the Bahamian connection to focus on Bush's "judgment," the Los Angeles Times story emphasized Dukakis's charge that Bush was emulating "McCarthy tactics" in questioning Dukakis's patriotism over the Pledge of Allegiance issue. The Los Angeles Times' Drogin expended 20 paragraphs before invoking Dukakis's Bahamian comments (Drogin September 10, 1988: 1).

SUMMARY

These samples provide a glimpse of how the national print media conducted themselves over a crucial period of time in which decisive campaign impressions were formed. The three newspapers all exhibited the same failures for which the media at large were criticized after the election. They failed to make clear the disparity in access between the two campaigns; they neglected to pursue the issue of ethics in an otherwise heightened climate surrounding character and leadership; and they brandished excessive emphasis on campaign strategy, which detracted from substantive issues and artificially fed into the notion of momentum (lost or gained).

No one paper was less immune than another to the prevailing climate of imbalanced coverage. But the Post most consistently deferred to the Republican version of events on the campaign. The Post relied on Republican sources at a much higher rate than the other two news organizations, quoting Republicans 59 percent of the time, Democrats 41 percent within the three-week sample period. This reliance certainly affected the outcome of the coverage. The Post participated in reshaping the parameters for evaluating a candidate, and were in no small way aided by Republican sources to construct this reality. Bill Peterson's piece that portrayed Bush as a stronger, "more formidable" candidate "on his own" drew from such standards as performance, manner and presence. Peterson's piece--via the comments of Bush intimates--defined leadership by the way he handled the Quayle "crisis." Ensuing coverage would draw from the outlook of this piece, whose premise held that Bush only needed to "look in command" to be taken seriously. The Post consistently depicted the Dukakis campaign as defensive and reactive, but failed, until late, to point out how his accessibility and Bush's inaccessibility contributed to that perception. Each time Dukakis asserted himself in an aggressive manner, he was depicted as "changing course sharply," which, by implication, meant he was at the mercy of Bush's agenda. And, each time Dukakis raised the Iran-Contra issue, the Post denigrated the strategy as "stale." By

contrast, Bush's thrusts did not get the same strategy scrutiny. For instance, when Bush changed course from foreign policy to the environment, the Post ignored the strategic turn (which came at a time when Dukakis was assailing Bush on foreign affairs) and focused instead on Bush's departure from Reagan policies. Of the three news organizations, the Post produced the only staff-driven investigative piece on the Bahamian connection, but its reliance on the central maligned figure to dispell the charges severely debased the objectivity of the piece, and ultimately preempted sustained and possibly damaging coverage. Only on September 10 did the Post's David Hoffman mention Bush's evasion of the press and the press's growing disenchantment with his inaccessibilty. But by then, Bush could not be bullied into changing his campaign style--the public, at least indicated by the polls, was behind him.

The Tribune's post-convention coverage hinged on the "bounce" Bush received, and could be traced to an August 21 story ("On his own at last, the real George Bush stands up") that gushingly depicted Bush's decisiveness and resolve. The Tribune's disinterest in the question of foreign policy ethics often bordered on the oblivious, and reflected the desires of Republican aides, who were quoted 55 percent of the time in this study's three-week span. After one Dukakis quote on ferreting out "all corruption at the Pentagon," the Tribune's Charles Madigan followed with a paragraph on whether the Bush campaign was "ready to turn the corner on the Quayle controversy" (August 21, 1988: 26). The Tribune failed to push the Bush campaign on issues Dukakis pressed, but willingly pressed Dukakis from the Bush campaign's perspective. For instance, when Dukakis called the Reagan-Bush war on drugs "ridiculous," the Tribune used quotes from Reagan press spokesman Marlin Fitzwater, but nothing from Bush's campaign. Bush's insularity could have become an issue at this point, but the Tribune appeared satisfied with Fitzwater's responses and Bush's carefully prepared response in his speech the following day. On the other hand, the Tribune bit hard on the Bush campaign's Boston Harbor bait. On the same day that the Tribune decided not to cover Dukakis's press conference on the publication of

Men of Zeal, it ran a story on the GOP campaign's announcement that Bush would be campaigning at Boston Harbor to "talk about the dangers of ocean dumping" (McNulty September 1, 1988: 1). The next day, the Tribune ran an unfavorable masthead story on Dukakis's environmental record, and another inside on Bush's comments at the Harbor, while a Dukakis story on education may have seemed lost in the wake of the bluster. The Tribune did run the Bahamian story first among the three news organizations, albeit a wire story on page 13. But this was a one-day run that, except for Dukakis's speech references, would not gather any steam from Tribune energies. Two days later, after Dukakis incoporated the Bahamian news into a speech, the Tribune's Philip Lentz wrote, "Dukakis's comments ... reflected his aides' judgment that he has been hurt by Bush's constant attacks on the Pledge of Allegiance and defense issues ..." (Lentz September 10, 1988: 1).

The Los Angeles Times' reliance on Republican sources was the least lopsided (54-to-46) of the three, but still resulted in material imbalance. The Los Angeles Times came closest to spelling out the connections between Bush's foreign policy candidacy and his association with Reagan administration failures ("Bush uses defense plants to stress campaign stands"), but only with an ephemeral reference, and certainly not with the topical fervor that accompanied the Quayle, Pledge of Allegiance and Boston Harbor stories. Its attention to Dukakis's response on Quayle's selection (September 1) overshadowed a major Dukakis thrust on Iran-Contra, illustrating its views of what constituted news. The Los Angeles Times attempted to provide perspective to its news section with analyses of the media's coverage of Quayle, Bush's appeals to patriotism, and television's impact on the campaign. It also gave some glimpses into Bush campaign tactics. But Los Angeles Times reporters were beholden to the spin out of the Bush campaign, framing many of their stories around Bush aides' quotes. As early as August 21, Cathleen Decker described Bush as a "different candidate," during his response to the Quayle conundrum, the common refrain from Republican aides since the GOP convention. The Los Angeles

Times' performances after Bush's Labor Day weekend press conference and when the Bahamian story broke (They did not run a story specifically related to the Bahamian connection) indicated a civility based on cozy relations, intimidation, or skewed news standards.

The effect of the Bush campaign's eagerness to divulge campaign strategy was to give reporters a sense of insiderism, which may have subtly exacted a debit of gratitude from the journalists. The press was now a participant in the insider game. Having access implied trust, which may have obligated journalists to a less critical view than if they had been left completely outside. Focus on strategy led to demystification, which ultimately deflated any sense of incredulity that might have arisen with, say, Boston Harbor. Had there not been the phalanx of advisers and aides applying "spin" to events in Boston, the media might well have drawn more critical conclusions than they did.

The irony, of course, is that the GOP campaign deprived the press of the kind of access to Bush that could have altered the landscape of the campaign. The Bush campaign's isolation had an incalculable influence on the outcome of the election. The media's failure to smoke Bush out was their most flagrant indiscretion in this period. Without equal access to the campaigns, all coverage carried the taint of imbalance. And much future coverage descended from assumptions formed in this period carried the taint of distortion, as the next two chapters will show.

CHAPTER IV

NEW YORK TIMES: AUGUST 21-SEPTEMBER 10

This chapter, will focus on how the New York Times added to the sum of flawed perceptions that resulted in the lowest level of voter participation--50.16 percent--since 1924 (Wright 89). By focusing on the Times, this thesis does two things: First, it analyzes the individual traits of a news organization's coverage, avoiding the media-as-monolith critique. Second, it accepts the notion that the Times is perceived to be one of the nation's most established and reputed purveyors of the national "record." Major news outlets treat the Times as the "professional standard setter," writes Herbert J. Gans. "When editors and producers are uncertain about a selection decision, they will check whether, where and how the Times has covered the story." National journalists must have a strong defense for interpretations conflicting drastically with the Times (Gans 180). Though it can be said that the Times did not wield the agenda-setting prowess it has held in previous campaigns, its contribution to the general tenor of the campaign can be viewed minimally as a legitimizing agent, considering its national prestige and reputation as an agenda setter. The period--three weeks following the Republican convention--is crucial because a dominant image emerged and crystallized: of Republican tactical superiority, inferring Democratic inferiority. The Times' emphasis on tactical explanations of the campaign--which consistently implied the hint of Republican superiority--buried Dukakis's message and virtually ignored versions that ran counter to increasingly accepted constructs of the

campaign. The Times framed Dukakis's campaign within this dominant image during this period, helping to create and then reinforce an overriding perception that eventually prevailed for the entire campaign, even in the face of evidence that showed Dukakis as on the offensive. It was a frame Dukakis found impossible to escape, which haunted his campaign staff, and which fueled their demise.

The Times did little to counter the national trends of this three-week period, instead adding to the critical mass. The Times, as an integral player in a broader media community, increasingly adopted the tone of what Adatto called "theater critics." The Times allowed strategists to assume a central position in their stories, shaping much analysis around tactical comportment rather than points of policy.

DUKAKIS ON THE DEFENSIVE

The Times' August 31 story, "Dukakis and Bush trade fire in heavy barrages," typified the general approach of its coverage during the period between August 23 through September 10. It announced that "Mr. Dukakis's barrage of criticism ... reflected a tactical shift in his campaign ... Today Mr. Dukakis joined the fray." Two central characteristics of the Times' coverage shape this passage: one, the portrayal of Dukakis as perpetually trying to regain initiative, and, two, the Times' unrelenting focus on campaign tactics. The Times simply could not overcome the *sine qua non* of the 1988 campaign, a pattern that portrayed Michael Dukakis as passive and on the defensive against Bush's torrent of charges, the appearance of which continued to grow with each comment on tactics. It all added up to a conventional wisdom that fed on itself, and which Dukakis could not escape.

The danger of conventional wisdoms is that they don't adjust easily to events that don't conform to the pattern. The Times often framed Dukakis's combative remarks as dramatic departures from a mostly docile campaign, when they could easily have been shown to be part of an aggressive pattern. Robin Toner's August 31 story relayed Dukakis's use of the

publication of a new book, Men of Zeal, written by two senators, that tied together his theme of leadership and foreign policy failures of the Reagan administration. Dukakis focused on the Reagan administration's complicity in the Iran-Contra scandal and its ties with Panamanian strongman Manuel Noriega, then under indictment for international drug trafficking violations. Dukakis called the sale of arms to Iran for the release of hostages "one of the worst foreign policy disasters of the last decade." Toner wrote that "the newly aggressive Mr. Dukakis was unveiled ... [in] his campaign's scramble to adjust to the fiercely competitive race ..." (Toner August 31, 1988: A1). But it wasn't the first time Dukakis had displayed a fiery stance on the issues of leadership, foreign policy or Iran-Contra. In addition to Dukakis's attacks in June,[5] twice in the previous week Dukakis brought foreign policy ethics into his campaign rhetoric as a central theme. On August 23, Dukakis attacked Bush on the Pledge of Allegiance issue, saying Bush's stance indicated a lack of respect for the Constitution, and suggested that a "series of incidents" occurred in the Reagan administration "where laws were broken or ignored, and I don't know if this is part of a pattern." Times correspondent Andrew Rosenthal wrote, "Mr. Dukakis ... used the issue for new ammunition in his assault on the ethical standards of the Reagan administration, a theme he has pressed throughout the campaign" (Rosenthal August 24, 1988: A1). Two days later, August 25, Dukakis again denounced the ethics of the Reagan administration, in particularly harsh language. He declared the Reagan administration's drug policies as "criminal" and "absurd," making, in Rosenthal's words, "his strongest appeal yet on an emotional issue that has been central to the 1988 presidential campaign." Referring to Bush's role as the head of the Reagan administration's "war on drugs," Dukakis asked, "Why, after seven years of task forces and policy boards and grandiose claims, have cocaine imports tripled, drug-related deaths doubled and heroin imports risen

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[5] See, for example, Walsh, Edward, and T.R. Reid. "Vying to be Toughest on Crime, Drugs." Washington Post June 16, 1988: A26.

By August 31, Dukakis's once formidable lead--17 points in one poll on July 24--had vanished into a three-point deficit, which in part dictated how news organizations tended to frame stories about Dukakis (Goldman and Mathews 420). While Dukakis's campaign was portrayed as stalling, Bush rode the tide of public opinion, which gave his campaign a sense of momentum--and perhaps the attitude that he could dictate things on his own terms. Bush reacted to both of Dukakis's late-August missives on ethics in a way that avoided addressing the substance of Dukakis's charges. The Times' August 25 story noted how the Bush camp "relished the chance to reply to Mr. Dukakis's suggestion ... that Bush 'was not fit to hold office.' Bush's response understandably dodged the dicier questions of broken laws and ethical scandals; instead, he stayed fast to the issue that had given him so much political mileage since before the Republican convention: "What is it about the Pledge of Allegiance that upsets him so much?" (Roberts August 25, 1988: A1). Two days later, Bush's response to Dukakis's charges against the administration's drug policies was more vociferous, but equally specious. Bush stayed on the Pledge of Allegiance attack, mixed in a reference to Willie Horton, and finally "taunted Dukakis" for his comments on Reagan's drug policies. "He should not use the words 'criminal' and 'absurd' when it comes to that kind of action, for he is the governor who vetoed mandatory sentencing for drug dealers ... and he fought tooth and nail to keep that outrageous furlough program that let murderers, rapists and drug dealers out of jail." The Times story allowed Bush's stump statements to stand without contextual interpretation, except through the viewfinder of strategists. "Mr. Bush has been pursuing this line of attack as part of a strategy to portray Mr. Dukakis as out of the mainstream of voter opinion ... " (Boyd August 27, 1988: A6). A broader question above that which asks why Bush didn't respond directly to Dukakis's charges-- for he has an interest and a political prerogative not to--is why the Times didn't use these charges as a thematic opportunity to delve into some of the scandals of the Reagan-Bush administration, particularly given Rosenthal's earlier claim that these charges were central to the presidential campaign.

An answer may lie in E.J. Dionne's August 28 front-page analysis, arguing that the ethical issues Dukakis was pursuing were "stale." Dionne put some distance between himself and the idea by writing, "For some Democrats ... Dukakis's ... emphasis on stale issues were symptomatic of the difficulties his campaign is having in figuring out how to fight Bush." Issues like the troubles of ex-Attorney General Edwin Meese and Noriega had been "helpful" to Dukakis "earlier this year." But they were now "gone from the front pages" and the "shifting nature of news" severely limited their effectiveness, Dionne suggested, when Dukakis attempted to "resuscitate them" in the previous week. Ironically, Dionne cited the Iran-Contra affair as a factor in the continuing low rate of Republican Party identification, which stood at 38 percent in a Times/CBS survey taken from July 31 to August 3--a strong indicator of the issue's relevance (August 28, 1988 [sec. IV]: 1). When Toner wrote three days later that Dukakis was making a "tactical shift in his campaign," (see above) in raising the Iran-Contra issue, she suggested Dukakis was finally breaking from the dry message of economic opportunity "that has changed little in recent months and was getting little attention." So, on the one hand, the Times reproved Dukakis for spending too much time on "stale" foreign policy ethics questions, and on the other, the Times creditted Dukakis for finally getting off the unsexy subject of economics and onto a juicier item, Iran-Contra. The editorial policy of the Times may have revealed itself on September 1 when the Times' only reference to a second Dukakis press conference on Iran-Contra was a photo caption that read that Dukakis "discussed the Iran-Contra hearings" at a Boston news conference.

The Times' repeated reassertion of the same idea--that Dukakis was only now breaking through a stagnant phase in his campaign--may have been a reflection of subtle forces that drove the campaign other than stump rhetoric. A conventional wisdom may have been gathering momentum--based on polls and insiders' views. The national media had an "inevitable inclination to see campaign developments through the prism of poll findings" (Germond and Witcover 57) and were equally reliant on political strategists, who, by 1988,

"had moved in en masse as filters between candidate and reporter. The 'spin patrol'--the dispatching of campaign operatives to put the most self-serving interpretation on a candidate's words and actions--had become a standard phenomenon on the campaign trail ..." (Germond and Witcover 51).

INFATUATION WITH TACTICS

The Times' reputation for providing analysis and interpretation to its news presentation did not abate during the 1988 campaign. But the form of the Times' analysis fit the standard that was being repeated nationally: an infatuation with campaign tactics, strategists' "spin." The Times projected the campaign from the insiders' perspective and judged campaign performance by strategists' standards: was Bush's message effective, never mind accurate? In some cases, the Times rebuked the strategists. The Times flawlessly handled one of the most noted of the staged events from the Bush campaign, Bush's foray into Boston Harbor on September 1. The Times depicted Bush as unabashadly unleashing a "steady stream of one-liners," and provided space to the Dukakis campaign to offer its take on Bush's trip. "Facts are stubborn things, as the President says," quipped Dukakis aide Mark Gearan. "George Bush has consistently attempted to undermine what has always been an historic commitment to environmental perservation. This administration twice vetoed the Clean Water Act ..." (Toner September 2, 1988: A16). But by and large, the Times implicitly adopted a mode of analysis safe in its detachment from issues that may have proven divisive.

The desire to stay ahead of public opinion--knowing the conventional wisdom--may have been one factor that led to the Times' (and other national news organizations) reliance on campaign aides, strategists, political consultants and pollsters. Generally, the use of campaign aides as sources has been an accepted practice because it gave reporters a feel for how the campaign was going; reporters could trust political strategists to be reasonably

frank and accurate because it was in the latters' long-term, professional interests to remain on good terms with the press. "The result was often more accurate reporting of what was going on in politics than had been the case when reporters were more dependent on state and county party chairmen ..." (Germond and Witcover 51). There is safety and objectivity in quoting sources rather than a reporter including his or her own judgments and interpretations. Often, the Times used the safest method of analysis, quoting unidentified Democratic campaign aides to assess Dukakis's problems. This proved to add to the snowballing of Dukakis's campaign woes. An August 28 story attributed to "some senior aides" the view that "Mr. Bush's aggressive style of campaigning of late has succeeded in putting Mr. Dukakis on the defensive." The complaint seemed to disregard some fairly aggressive remarks by Dukakis that had Bush responding through that week, which suggests that other internal forces--power struggles and personality conflicts--may have been at play (see below). These declarations prompted stories that reflected Dukakis's distress. On August 29, Dukakis took criticism from his own camp for spending too much time in his home state, devoting too much time to his gubernatorial duties. Despite worries among Democrats that Dukakis was increasingly on the defensive against an aggressive Bush, wrote Toner, "Mr. Dukakis continues on his own course," having spent four "regional days" in Massachussetts in August, and planning to spend the next two doing the same. "Regardless of where Mr. Dukakis spends his campaign time these days, though, he increasingly finds himself engaged in a debate framed by the Republicans ..." Toner did grant that "Mr. Dukakis did forcefully answer Mr. Bush's criticism last week. ... He also made a biting new attack on the Reagan administration's drug policy." But the overall tone of the story was that Dukakis needed to sharpen his focus and become "more vigorous in response to the flurry of Republican charges coming his way," a sentiment offered by "his aides" (Toner August 29, 1988: A15). The story set a trend in motion. Not only did the meeting validate the prevailing view that Dukakis was floundering, but it gave the Times a frame--a conventional wisdom--around which to work its evaluation of the campaign.

Perceptions of Dukakis's foundering campaign magnified with each repetition of the notion. On the next day, the Dukakis campaign initially cancelled--and an hour later rescheduled--the daily press conference to try to gain control over its message. Responding to "charges that the campaign had lost direction and momentum over the last three weeks," wrote Toner, Dukakis acknowledged "he was having difficulty getting his message across. ..." Kirk O'Donnell, a Dukakis aide, cited TV network coverage as instrumental in giving Republicans an advantage. Dukakis contended his campaign was not stalled, but that it was the "decibel level" accompanying the selection of Quayle that made it a "little difficult to get through." Toner underscored Dukakis's insistence to debate the issues: "The American people aren't interested in a debate over which one of us loves his country the most," said Dukakis. "We all love our country; there should be no debate over that." But her story could not escape the prevailing contextual frame now driving the process: Dukakis's staff was "trying to cope with a flurry of news reports quoting nervous Democrats who complained that his campaign had let Mr. Bush seize the initiative" (Toner August 30, 1988: A1). By responding to the news reports, Dukakis's staff may have unwittingly given even more life and validity to the stories.

A day later, Dionne's analysis of the status of Bush's campaign credited the success of its tactics, without addressing Bush's avoidance or distortion of issues. Bush's "searing attacks on the social issues [like the prison furlough and pledge of allegiance issues] ... serve the purpose of reminding wavering Democrats why they call themselves conservatives and started voting Republican in the first place." Bush strategist, Charles Black, wrote Dionne, "was pleased with Mr. Bush's fervor," and that he had made North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms the "second most incendiary guy on the podium" (August 31, 1988: A16).

Many stories did not need a strategist to apply "spin." The Times incorporated the language and values of strategists into its writing; judgment was conferred on the basis of whether Dukakis could match Bush's aggressiveness, whether he could regain the

initiative. Dukakis's "stalled" campaign became a central theme around which the campaign revolved, rendering his message secondary to where he stood in the momentum game. What follows is a sample of stories from five consecutive days that reflects the context in which the Times portrayed the status of the campaign:

•September 1: "... the vigor of the Republican offensive has left the Dukakis campaign scrambling to recapture the public's attention for its own portrayal of Dukakis" (Toner September 1, 1988: B8).

•September 2: Dukakis was seeking to "put behind him the days of responding to Mr. Bush's charges against him by opening a new front on an issue that is rated as one of the best for the Democrats in the fall election: education" (Dionne September 2, 1988: A16).

"Mr. Bush, who has confounded the Dukakis campaign with one attack after another in recent weeks, told reporters he was simply defending himself and correcting the record" on the environment (Toner September 2, 1988: A16).

•September 3: "Mr. Bush's campaign has skillfully sought to conjure images of its opponent with innuendo or oblique jabs" (Oreskes September 3, 1988: A7).

"The Sasso announcement caps a three-week period in which the Dukakis campaign lost a substantial lead in the polls and scrambled to respond to a relentless attack by the Republicans. But Mr. Dukakis and his aides said Mr. Sasso's return was not an acknowledgement that the campaign was faltering, a notion quickly advanced by Senator Dan Quayle ..." (Toner September 3, 1988: A1).

•September 4: Dukakis was sounding a theme of economic equality "after a week of moving on several fronts to strengthen his campaign, signalling that Mr. Dukakis, who is usually wary of sharp exchanges in approach, had come to agree with critics in his own party who saw his campaign as stalled and insufficiently aggressive in its responses to Bush" (Dionne September 4, 1988: A1).

"The (Bush) news conference, which was often lighthearted, indicated the relaxed nature of the Bush campaign, which has been buoyed by the candidate's recent rise in

public opinion surveys after he aggressively attacked Mr. Dukakis" (Boyd September 4, 1988: A30).

•September 5: (In an ironic twist often repeated through the campaign, Dionne turned his analysis on the very method of reporting he and other Times correspondents had been using.) "Mr. Dukakis's every move was carefully scrutinized for signs of whether he was reviving his campaign, which had been repeatedly described on television and in the newspapers as 'stalled.' So when he got to Oakland, California, and began lambasting Mr. Bush for his alleged truancy on the educational issue, that was seen as a sign that Mr. Dukakis was striking back" (Dionne September 5, 1988: A1).

After Dukakis rehired his former campaign manager, John Sasso, on September 2, the Times' followup story illustrated the prime location advisers occupied in the overall campaign scheme. Sasso brings a "set of strengths that could prove critical in the last nine weeks," wrote Toner. "... in the view of some aides ... [Sasso] will bring a keen strategic sense to the final stretch of the campaign. ... Some aides expect Mr. Sasso's influence to be quickly felt both in the candidate's performance on the stump and in his paid advertising. 'The campaign realizes there's a need to sharpen the message,' said Kirk O'Donnell, a senior campaign adviser. 'And John has a terrific sense of message and theme.' ... Several aides said that Mr. Sasso ... has the candidate's confidence on political matters in a way that no other adviser has" (Toner September 5, 1988: A8).

The final anointing of the conventional wisdom on the status of Dukakis's campaign came on September 9, when Dionne, in another analysis, referred to the meeting of the Dukakis "high command" and a group of outside advisers, who discussed "why the campaign was in trouble and what could be done to lift it from the defensive." Dionne provided a glimpse of the potential influence strategists commanded over a candidate's reputation when he wrote, "So angry were some aides at Mr. Dukakis's unwillingness to consider changes that they actually welcomed the appearance of a spate of negative news

reports because they hoped that would finally get his attention" (Dionne September 9, 1988: A1).

The Democrats' meeting and Sasso's return to the campaign appear to have served to legitimize the analytical thrust the Times had already begun to take in the last week of August. Aides' willing acknowledgement of dissension within the campaign--which had been building since early summer--provided the Times and other national media outlets a thematic and analytic leg to stand on, or a frame to present their stories. The Times were not creating impressions in a political vacuum, however. They were responding to campaign dynamics that began to take shape in the early summer months. Tactics, rather than merit on issues, were the window through which each campaign could be judged.

WHY A FOCUS ON TACTICS SEEMED IMPORTANT

Why there was so much interest in the internal dynamics of the Dukakis campaign can be attributed to the effectiveness of the Bush campaign, claimed popular critics such as Jack Germond and Jules Witcover. Bush's campaign had become an issue in the early summer, when polling figures appeared to confirm the effectiveness of unseemly tactics. Bush went on the attack for three weeks in June, pressing, among others, the Willie Horton theme. At the Illinois Republican convention in Springfield, Bush said: "What did the Democratic governor of Massachussetts think he was doing when he let convicted first-degree murderers out on weekend passes, even after one of them criminally, brutally raped a woman and stabbed her fiance? Why didn't he admit his mistake? ... I think Governor Dukakis owes the American people an explanation of why he supports this outrageous program." After assaults like this went on for three weeks, the margin Dukakis held over Bush, which had stood as high as 17 points in one poll, began to shrink to as low as four points in one poll. "The message seemed to be getting through," said Bush strategist Lee Atwater (Germond and Witcover 162-163). Democrats, however, were divided over "how

serious a problem the Bush offensive was, and how to respond to it." The tension was between responding to the attack and the "first imperative of the campaign," which was, as aide Jack Corrigan said, "to shift the campaign to our agenda ... every time you respond [to the opposition] you lose that opportunity" (Germond and Witcover 357-358).

Dukakis's "mild" responses to Bush's pre-Democratic convention assaults on the pledge of allegiance and Willie Horton issues--as well as to rumors that Kitty Dukakis had once burned the American flag and Dukakis had twice sought psychiatric treatment for depression--infuriated some veteran Democratic political strategists. Alice Travis, one "field" veteran, told campaign manager Susan Estrich that Dukakis's lawyerly responses to Bush's Pledge of Allegiance attacks were a "bit abstract." Estrich responded, "I know. That's Michael." But, Estrich had hinted earlier to a Democratic consultant that "the Supreme Court answer" would extinguish the issue. "Even when [Dukakis] wanted to fight back, his people were slow providing him ammunition. All summer long, Estrich had shrugged off her men's worries about the Willie Horton story. It would spatter back on the Republicans, she claimed." When Dukakis reclaimed the huge leads in the polls following the Democratic convention, the strategy to "stay on the high road" and avoid getting into the "trenches" (Goldman and Mathews 342) with Bush appeared to be justified.

As Bush's attacks continued, however, and the polling numbers began to contract again between the Democratic and Republican conventions, Dukakis receded "deeper and deeper into himself, away from [his advisers]." His private mood grew increasingly "sullen, snappish and closed to advice." Dukakis felt "ill-served by his people. He complained regularly that he was all alone out there, with no help from surrogates ..." As Dukakis turned inward, he set his focus on his home state in August, said one aide, and "tuned out" the counsel of his advisers to pay more attention to the rest of the country. Estrich, unable to get through to Dukakis, became desparate--"it showed in her demeanor and in her agenda; her session [with three Washington professionals, Bob Beckel, Bill Carrick and Tom Donilon] spent more time on Dukakis than on Bush ... Dukakis wasn't listening, she

told them" (Goldman and Mathews 338-342). Later, Estrich stated that she thought the "critical time was the last two weeks of August, but it may be that there was nothing we could have done" (Germond and Witcover 362). By then, campaign strategy was a full-blown campaign issue, to take on equal, if not more, importance to substantive issues. As strategy grew in importance, Democrats exposed themselves as far inferior to the Republicans, a natural turn of events given the Republicans' eight-year reign in the White House. Germond and Witcover wrote that "the networks found themselves deftly manipulated by the campaigns--and far more by the veteran Bush strategists, working with a pliable candidate, than by the Dukakis team, hampered by a balky one." The networks day after day were "dictated [to] by an agenda carefuly prepared by the professional managing of the Bush campaign. The Democratic candidate and his strategists were hopelessly unprepared and ineffectual in dealing with the real world of a general election campaign" (400).

SUMMARY

Germond and Witcover contended that by 1984, august eminences in the media like the New York Times were "only a primary source of a campaign for an elite of the most politically aware elements of the electorate--activists, political junkies, serious voters. No longer did print enjoy the influence ..." (54). Most voters--"too busy, too lazy, or too uninterested" in the campaign--were not looking for specifics on complex national policies, but an "overall impression" (430). Network television and the Bush campaign were only too willing to oblige. The Bush campaign's strategy to use network television to get out its messages on topics like Willie Horton, the Pledge of Allegiance and the Boston Harbor included fancy visuals and simple messages, and placed heavy emphasis on conflict. All facets of their strategy were perfectly suited for television, whose inherent bias was toward, "showing people in action," and against "complexity and nuance" (401). "We felt

we were doing reasonably well in the evening news," said Bush strategist Roger Ailes, "but we thought it was because we were giving the networks what they wanted" (408). Bush campaign manager James Baker, who invariably invoked a 347-page book that contained "over 200 policy proposals" as evidence of political sincerity, pointed out that the Bush campaign hadn't invented the sound bite. "It is simply a fact of life--not of our making--that the American people get most of their news from TV's evening news programs" (465).

The New York Times' coverage of the 1988 presidential campaign undeniably reflected an environment dominated by television and political consultants. The Times' focus on tactics appeared to be a natural reaction to the changing political landscape. The Bush campaign's tactical successes--reflected in his "surge" in public opinion polls--could not be avoided as an issue. But the Times' adherence to this issue as the primary focus helped elevate the status of strategists, which further reinforced the importance of tactics. The Times initially treated tactics as an issue, but eventually used the language of tactics to define and judge candidates. By viewing the campaign through the lens of tacticians, the Times pushed the text of both candidates into the background, which had the effect of ignoring the unseemliness of Bush's message and the subtleties of Dukakis's. Because Bush's aggressive style yielded positive results, aggressiveness became the defining method. If Dukakis wasn't getting through to voters, it was because he wasn't aggressive enough. What this reasoning overlooks, however, is the debasing effect that Bush's negative campaigning had, later reflected in the low voter turnout. The comparison of campaign staffs on the basis of mechanical expertise or staff morale hardly represented a comparison between candidates. Because Bush was more aggreeable to his staffers' ideas than Dukakis did not necessarily mean that Bush was more in command. Nor did it mean that Bush's message had any more clarity or vigor, or had any more presidential timbre.

The Times, like most of the other national newspapers, did a better job "separating the issues from visuals for their readers." Though the Times did provide a far greater volume

of analysis and sober discussion of issues, the overall breadth of their work in this three-week period devoted a disproportionate volume of work to strategic elements. The Times were, as Germond and Witcover wrote, "too often timid in telling those readers, with the bark off, what was happening in the campaign of 1988" (413). By continually emphasizing tactics or tactical explanations, the Times partially fit the prescriptions of agenda setting, as described by Shoemaker and Reese: "... the more the media emphasize an issue, the more important people will think the issue is" (210). Given the Times' prestige and reputation, the news organization lent a perception of importance to the notion of tactics. Also given the Times' reputation, the findings of this chapter suggest that the Times' emphasis on tactical explanations shows they both reflected and legitimized overall media patterns, which continued, as will be shown in the next two chapters, for the remainder of the campaign among all four newspapers under analysis in this study.

CHAPTER V

DISPOSITION OF PRESS SOLIDIFIES

The following chapter focuses on the performance of the four newspapers during the period approaching the first debate, roughly from September 11 to September 25. It was in this period that the national press's obsession with the horse race, a pursuit of strategic analysis and an attempt to convey a sense of the electorate's desires intersected. The essence of the press's campaign coverage emerged in this period, which is to say, certain suppositions now drove the reporting process: Dukakis lacked focus and Bush was fully engaged. The press partly characterized the two candidates' differing fortunes as stemming from Dukakis's (losing) orientation for detail and Bush's (winning) ability to manipulate symbolic appeals.

It is important to note the link between the coverage of this period with the coverage of the previous three-week period covered in the preceding two chapters. Set in place was the press's reliance on the political consultant (and their unconscious adoption of the strategist's language) and the perception that Bush's tactics were working and Dukakis's failing, given their respective positions in the polls. Also set in place was the approach taken by the press toward the candidates: the press would not step out of their self-imposed boundaries of objectivity into such practices as interpretive or enterprise reporting. The press's focus on theater criticism--through a reliance on strategists--was not without exceptions, however. As the campaign moved into the post-Labor Day stretch, the press

used Bush's attacks as an opportunity to check out his charges. The first section of this chapter examines a rare display of contextual coverage that was, if not entirely interpretive or enterprising, done in the spirit of clarity. The sections that follow trace the development of axioms embedded in press accounts, the press's use of polls to rationalize these guiding assumptions, and the expectations that emerged from them and framed the upcoming two presidential debates.

ATTEMPTS TO UNCOVER CANDIDATES' RECORDS

Though voters showed an unfamiliarity with both candidates, the records of Bush and Dukakis received sporadic coverage in the press. Stories on candidates' records generally are intended to shed light on how the candidates propose to solve, or, as in an incumbent's case, what his record showed how he went about solving, some of the nation's problems. In, 1988, the candidate of the incumbent party had less to show on his record than the challenger. Dukakis's career contained more policy experience than Bush's, whose career rested on a series of appointive positions where accountability was difficult to determine. With Dukakis, reporters were able to project his national priorities by reviewing his record as governor of Massachusetts. Dukakis's record was important to analyze, given the charges that Bush leveled at Dukakis, who, Bush suggested, had a permissive attitude toward criminals (Willie Horton), a negligent approach to the environment (Boston Harbor), a lack of patriotism (the Pledge of Allegiance); and was dangerously inexperienced in foreign affairs. Dukakis, Bush emphasized, was a rigid, smug bureaucrat, descriptions which coincided with the image of Democrats' approach to governance. The Pledge of Allegiance and Willie Horton issues fit into the image, centering around the notion of a policy "wonk" guided by the letter of the law rather than the spirit of human compassion.

An example of the press's effort to clear the record was the Los Angeles Times' David Lauter's analysis of Dukakis's management style: "Some of the concerns about [Dukakis's] management style that Dukakis critics have raised seem less serious when his record is studied in detail." The comparisons with Jimmy Carter for arrogance and reluctance to deal with the "horsetrading side of politics" were inaccurate, wrote Lauter. And where Carter presided over such details as White House tennis court reservations, Dukakis "receives high marks from current and former state officials for giving them extensive authority" to make independent decisions. Dukakis advocated "activist" government, though it would be "noticeably different from the Washington activism that was the hallmark" of such past Democratic administrations as Lyndon B. Johnson's or Carter's (Lauter September 11, 1988: A1). While occasional analyses such as Lauter's attempted to correct the perspective that Dukakis was cool, unfeeling and dispassionate--that his policies as governor indicated a lack of passion for human affairs--Dukakis could not shake the image as "iceman," so effectively reiterated by Bush.

Another example of the press's attempt to straighten the record occurred in early September, when Dukakis's weeklong attempt to outline his foreign policy positions was met by Bush's attacks. The press's analyses showed a less radical picture than Bush was creating. The Chicago Tribune's Ray Moseley wrote:

> A key element of Dukakis's thinking on national security, which is reflected in his views on weapons spending, is that the nation cannot be strong abroad if it is not strong at home. He accuses Reagan of having turned the United States into the world's number one debtor nation and stresses that Americans must be strong economically as well as militarily (Moseley September 12, 1988: 1).

The New York Times cited Dukakis's criticism of the Pentagon procurement scandal "presided over by the Reagan administration," and quoted Senate armed services committee chairman Sam Nunn as saying, "I believe Mr. Dukakis understands the needs of our military forces. ... [H]e has a thorough knowledge of them and ... understands how to go about making our nation strong." The presence of Nunn and other Democrats with ties to the military, wrote Andrew Rosenthal, had "both a substantive and symbolic significance

..." (Rosenthal September 12, 1988: A18). Despite the print media's attempts to portray Dukakis's military stances fairly that week, the predominating image was the infamous tank ride Dukakis took at a Michigan defense plant, suggesting the potency of images that television possessed over the relative impotency of the print media's attempts at substantive topical exploration.

Bush career was "somewhat of a puzzle," wrote Jack Nelson of the Los Angeles Times. "Bush's life is marked by almost no deep-rooted commitments to specific issues or government policies." A constant test for the press would be to keep this in mind over the course of the campaign, a test that got lost in the media's quest to reveal political character through the perspective of strategy. Nelson continued: "His lack of clear identification with fundamental beliefs and policies and his limited administrative experience, are obstacles that Bush would have to overcome in the Oval Office." It was ironic, given Nelson's interpretation, that during debate coverage Bush would be lauded for his passion and "warmth," which translated to commitment. Instead of a record, Bush had political character that could be traced and examined through his improvements in his delivery, which is precisely the campaign "issue" Bush's strategists preferred to hold at center stage. Nelson cited Bush's "resilience," "resourcefulness" and "determination" that served him in "emerging relatively unscathed from Iran-Contra and other Reagan administration scandals." The resourcefulness for which Nelson gave Bush credit is a possible reference to the political savvy that is the hallmark of the Republican public relations apparatus installed during the Reagan administration, and which included the strategy of media inaccessibility that worked against the press's ability to probe Bush for details. What went unexplained by Nelson was the media's complicity--national journalists erecting the conventional wisdom that Iran-Contra was a "stale" issue--in allowing Bush to emerge "unscathed." Nelson did point up the irony of Bush's thoughts on his proudest accomplishment as vice president, his role as the head of the Reagan administration's anti-terrorist task force. Bush recalled one report issued by the task force as reflective of his

leadership, which cautioned against dealing with terrorists for the release of hostages. The irony of the report and Bush's pride in it, wrote Nelson, was that it was being released just as the Iran-Contra "scandal was unfolding." The exchange of arms for hostages was a secret policy that Bush "supported, although he has insisted he knew little about the details" (Nelson September 11, 1988: 1). But this was a theme that remained largely untouched, even when opportunities presented themselves during the first debate.

One position to which accountability could be ascribed to Bush was his one-year stint as director of the Central Intelligence Agency. On the one politically salient issue regarding his CIA tenure--his dealings with Noriega--only the New York Times produced a lengthy examination of their relationship. Following the first debate, in which Dukakis repeatedly invoked Bush's relationship with Noriega, New York Times reporters Stephen Engelberg and Jeff Gerth reported that Bush had an opportunity but refused to expose Noriega for "penetrating" a U.S. intelligence operation in Panama under his watch in 1976. Noriega bribed two U.S. Army soldiers into providing "highly sensitive transcripts and tapes ... widely believed" to have fallen into the hands of Cuba and the Soviet Union. Against the advice of the Justice Department and the head of the National Security Agency, the Army granted the soldiers immunity from prosecution, a decision Bush backed because Noriega was considered an "asset" to the CIA. Subsequent CIA directors and Justice Department officials regarded Bush's decision to be improper. The CIA was then required by law to report to the Attorney General any evidence of illegalities, including espionage. As for the issue that hounded Bush during the campaign--Bush's alleged knowledge of Noriega's alleged drug trafficking, for which the latter was indicted in early 1988--Engelberg and Gerth said there was "no evidence" that showed Bush knew at the time of a 1983 meeting with Noriega of the Panamanian dictator's drug trafficking activities as a British documentary, aired September 21, contended. However, the article noted critics' contention that Bush's high level posts (including the Vice Presidency) gave him access to an "unvarnished picture of Noriega ... [He] had material that should have prompted him to

play a more active role in limiting" U.S. dealings with Noriega (Engelberg and Gerth September 28, 1988: A1). The Tribune reported on the BBC documentary's charge, but did not follow up with its own investigation ("Report: Bush Chided Noriega on Drugs in '83" September 22, 1988: 5). The Los Angeles Times, two days later, published a story showing Bush's "secret battle" with the Justice Department to block federal criminal investigations of senior CIA officers. Los Angeles Times reporter Jim Mann, who "accidentally" discovered newly released files on Bush while researching another topic, wrote that "Bush's defense of clandestine operatives facing criminal charges has a modern echo," citing his support of former NSA adviser John Poindexter and former Lt. Col. Oliver North, who were both facing federal criminal charges at the time (Mann September 30, 1988: 1).

But stories delving into Bush's record were few and far between, and produced at scattered, one-shot, rather than sustained, volume--partly because of the reason stated above: there was not much that could be extracted from Bush's record. The press seemed to find Bush's association with the policies of President Reagan to be less tangible. The press instead attempted to extract Bush's positions from the content of his stump speeches, a difficult task, given the dearth of substance and preponderance of symbolic material aimed at fulfilling the visual and dramatic requirements of the 30-second sound-bite network television news report. Little in the way of sober discussion of details of policy entered into Bush's campaign. Given his apparent rising fortunes in the polls, the press saw the success of this tactic; subsequently, though the press did push Bush from time to time for details (a task made all the more complicated by Bush's inaccessibility), the effort was less than ardent. The press appeared more intent on following what it felt were the dictates of the public, which by the bottom line--Bush's lead--could be read as a comfort with and preference for Bush's more visceral approach. Dukakis, on the other hand, was criticized for his lack of focus, for the detail orientation of his campaign, and for the "stale" issues with which he attempted to attack Bush. The press's efforts to straighten the record,

then, did not apply equally to Dukakis's charges against Bush. Ironically, the candidate who ran the more accurate campaign was effectively penalized by the very accuracy of his attacks, which were not deemed unfair or false, but "stale."

HORSE RACE, STRATEGIC ANALYSIS, AND PUBLIC MOOD MARK PRE-DEBATE COVERAGE

By the time the first debate came into the view of political watchers--roughly mid-September--the press was fully engaged in analysis of the expectations game. The press's most common line of questioning revolved around its fixation on who was up or down in the polls; what should either candidate do to elevate their standings in the polls? What were the keys to Bush keeping his lead and Dukakis overcoming Bush's lead?

The Post, on September 11, gave glimpse to three issues that the press would set its sights on for the next month: the origin of Dukakis's decline (which Democratic pollster Peter Hart attributed to Bush's "unanswered ideology attacks"); the significance of the upcoming debates; and the character of Bush's lead, described as "soft and moveable" (Schwartz September 11, 1988: A23). The first issue, Dukakis's decline, was based on assumptions that grew out of the three-week period following the Republican National Convention, in which Bush overtook Dukakis's large lead in the polls to pull within a tie by the traditional Labor Day campaign kickoff. The second issue, the importance of the debates, encompassed a tremendous volume of analysis that focused on performance standards, based on the prescriptions of political consultants, media experts, polltakers, and campaign aides. And the third issue, the character of Bush's lead, addressed the complexities involved in polling, which included the transience of voters, but ultimately settled on the view that Bush's lead, though soft, was commanding in its consistency.

BUSH'S "UNANSWERED IDEOLOGY ATTACKS"

A New York Times Op-Ed commentary written by longtime Republican strategist Kevin Phillips reflected, if it didn't indirectly influence, the outlook of journalists, campaign aides and political consultants. Phillips claimed that the Democrats were "inept" at handling negative campaign strategy, while the Republicans were "better trained in modern political combat." Democrats had several large openings for attacks, but were not taking them: the nation's uneven economic recovery, wage stagnation and rising income inequality, corruption and conflicts of interest in the Reagan administration; Bush's dealings with "Latin American drug kingpins," secret arms deals with "ayatollahs." Dukakis was weak in "his ability to perceive and slash at the Achilles' heels" of his opponent, perhaps because he *was* the "bloodless Harvard public-policy managerialist his detractors" claimed (September 12, 1988: A21).

As if on cue, Dukakis, the next day, emerged on the stump with the precise ingredients laid out by Phillips. Dukakis took Bush to task for "a series of foreign policy blunders," including Iran-Contra; as well as linking Bush with the Reagan administration's propensity for "lining the pockets of dishonest defense contractors and consultants." Dukakis had "escalated his counteroffensive against Bush, who had been attacking Dukakis for weeks before the Democrat began battling back in earnest last Friday [September 9]" (Rosenthal September 13, 1988: D24). Dukakis's theme--questioning Bush's leadership and judgment "and steadiness required in the Oval Office"--had in fact been a part of his arsenal well before Rosenthal credited Dukakis, as shown in the previous two chapters. But Rosenthal's specifying Dukakis's earliest tough counterattacks would prove to be one of the rare atttempts to place Dukakis's tactics in the context of time, an important consideration given the more common--and easier--practice of generalizing. Generalizing trends or patterns during a campaign allowed reporters to avoid the painstaking, tedious and unaesthetic process of repeating facts. But it also made them vulnerable to misleading

assumptions guided by cumulative--often false--impressions that reflected the temper of the moment rather than the factuality of the now-forgotten past incident. (In this case, the series of speeches criticizing Bush's foreign policy and ethics record that Dukakis made both in June and just after the GOP convention.)

The impression of Dukakis standing by idly while Bush took unanswered verbal swipes at his rival took on the weight of a conventional wisdom reinforced by continual focus on the subject even after its discussion may have been regarded as having served out its newsworthiness (if the same standards that such an issue as Iran-Contra applied) and by an unending supply of Democratic strategists (mostly unnamed) willing to speak candidly and affirmatively on the notion. Factors involved in elevating this issue were: 1) the importance given to political consultants, aides and strategists; 2) the press's unwillingness to act as their own interpreters, and 3) the press's avoidance of policy issues as points of interpretation.

A peripheral but important issue to the criticism of Dukakis's handling of Bush's attacks is the idea of balance between a candidate's response to his foe's attacks and his attempts at creating his own agenda. Dukakis, indeed, was criticized early for responding too much to Bush's attacks--which is why Dukakis finally cancelled his August 29 press conference. To respond to every attack would give the image of a campaign back on its heels, against the ropes; it also lends credence to the attacks and keeps them alive and in public view, a view held by Dukakis aide Jack Corrigan, elucidated in the previous chapter. The candidates' differing press accessibility played a crucial role in the dynamic of Bush's attacks and Dukakis's responses. Dukakis's accessibility allowed the media to question him in daily press conferences, which they used to elicit responses to Bush statements made earlier in the day. Bush, meanwhile, was protected by the insularity of his one-message-a-day campaign that included rare press conferences. The criticism that Dukakis's campaign lacked focus stemmed from the several messages he seemed to provide each day, which was rooted in his accessibility and tied in to his inclination to respond to Bush. This

gives lie to the notion that Dukakis, as the conventional wisdom held going into the first debate, had been largely passive in the midst of an unbridled Bush barrage.

Another "failed" strategy with which the press indicted Dukakis was his inability to create his own message; to set his own agenda to which Bush would have to respond. This strategy had intrinsic difficulties, again because of Bush's insularity. Bush did not have to respond to Dukakis if he did not have to face a questioning press. If Bush did respond to Dukakis attacks, he did it on his own terms. When, in August, Dukakis attacked the Reagan administration's record on drug interdictions, Bush avoided a direct response and turned the issue to fit his own needs, which was to accuse Dukakis of undermining the efforts of Drug Enforcement Agency agents. This is called displacement (Jamieson 210), a tactic made all the more effective if 1) the press can't ask a candidate to clarify his response and 2) if the press fails to correct distortions. On this occasion, Post reporter Bill Peterson did correct Bush's distortions, but more occasions than not reporters had a difficult time keeping up with the distortions. For instance, when Bush began using the Willie Horton theme in June, early reports were filled with disclaimers for Bush's promiscuous use of facts on Dukakis's furlough program in Massachussetts.[6] By the time the fall campaign began, however, the press no longer was providing such disclaimers, instead referring to the effectiveness of Bush's strategic ploy of hammering on the crime issue. So, while Dukakis was trying to strike a balance between his attacks and responses, his attacks drew no engaged response from Bush, and the Democrat's responses were seen as defensive. Jamieson defines engagement as a "process of comparison that enables audiences to determine which argument has the greater force." The two primary elements to engagement are "clash" (pitting two opposing positions against each other) and "extension" ("response to response," which "carries the argument forward") (Jamieson 216). The cumulative effect resulted in Dukakis's strategy appearing ineffectual,

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[6] See, for example, Rosenbaum, David. "Bush Talks Tough on Crime, Criticizing Prisoner Furlough Program." New York Times June 23, 1988: By; or Reid, T.R. "Most States Allow Furloughs From Prison." Washington Post June 24, 1988: A6.

developing further into the bleaching conventional wisdom of "unanswered ideological attacks." Lost were the intricacies of the exchange (or non-exchange), largely determined by press coverage dynamics. A reification occurred: Hazily perceived and relatively intangible activities were given a factitiously concrete form, simplified and labeled with words and other symbols (Lumsden and Wilson 381). The fact that the reification occurred under false assumptions points to specious logic that was to descend through the remainder of the campaign.

Thus, on September 14, the New York Times had Dukakis "now [joining] the fray," a move they had Dukakis making for nearly a month now; if one is just today joining the fray, one's past fray-joining didn't happen. Robin Toner wrote that Dukakis, in the previous month, had responded to Bush attacks with a "marked lack of enthusiasm and the expression of a dyspeptic." His speeches until recently had "included only a few digs at Bush." But now, "the entire text has revolved around [Bush]." Sasso, the campaign manager freshly returned, was credited for the apparent turnaround (Toner September 14, 1988: A28). On September 16, the Tribune credited Dukakis with replacing "studied nuance" with one-liners. Still, Dukakis's "slow" response to the GOP barrage may have offset any chance he had at turning his campaign around (Lentz September 16, 1988: 15). On the same day, the Los Angeles Times quoted "top aides" acknowledging that Dukakis had "made mistakes in recent weeks." Chief Dukakis adviser Paul Brountas, said, "I think they took on a much more intense level than we expected. The Bush campaign made a decision to attack us personally. The psychiatry rumor, the patriotism question, on the Pledge of Allegiance, on the flag incident. And the distortions hurt us" (Drogin September 16, 1988: 1). Brountas' admission was not uncommon in the Dukakis campaign, though most comments came from either unnamed aides or Democratic strategists outside of the campaign. An indication of the Democrats' inexperience, as well as the party's less unified nature in comparison with the Republicans', was their willingness to speak candidly about their own candidate with what media critic Jonathan Alter describes as "ego leaks." A

possibile explanation for Democrats' self-immolations was that they held an inferiority complex with respect to strategy; they were aware of their second-class status to their superior Republican counterparts, not the least formidable of whom was the legendary Roger Ailes, who had participated in the Republicans' run of successful campaigns since 1968. To be able to "play the game" at the GOP's level, the Democrats would have to assume the same air of hubris, which included realistic appraisals of the campaign that were based partially on similar readings of public opinion polls. The GOP's reading of the polls, focusing on the bottom line, the lead, was to their benefit. Democrats could have found their strength in the shadings and ambiguities of the public temper, but chose to avoid possibly appearing naive and credulous, sticking with the simplest message coming from the polls.

THE DEFINING ROLE OF POLLS

Dukakis's apparent boost of confidence in the second week of September had to do partially with the networks' positive portrayal that week of his focus on issues against Bush's symbolic campaign (Toner September 14: A28). But a journalist's impressions of a campaign's interior sentiments count far less than those tapped in public opinion polls. The polls are intricately interwoven into the media's appraisals of the campaign. Accordingly, the same day that one New York Times reporter was suggesting a possible reversal of fortunes for Dukakis, another article used poll figures to show that Bush had "transformed the 1988 election into a contest about his issues." E.J. Dionne based this statement on several competing findings, the most significant of which was that Dukakis's "negative" ratings and Bush's "favorable" ratings had risen simultaneously between the aftermaths of the Democratic and Republican national conventions. Bush now led Dukakis 47 percent to 39 percent in a poll of 1,606 adults. "What is not in doubt is the deterioration of Dukakis's popularity," wrote Dionne. Bush had been able to make many of his

criticisms of Dukakis "stick." What was in doubt, however, was the strength of Bush's lead. More than 40 percent of the voters were either undecided or said they could still change their current choice. The notions of Bush "setting the agenda" and making his criticisms "stick" may not have held such strength if Dionne gave more emphasis to the fact that among the one third of the voters who were paying "a lot of attention to the campaign," Bush led by only 1 percent. Where other polls indicated a somber mood over economic prospects, this New York Times/ABC News poll showed that 57 percent of registered voters felt that the economy was either improving or already in good shape. The strength of Bush's polarizing tactics could be found in the public's view toward the question of "ideology." Only 10 percent said they looked favorably on someone who was described as a liberal; 30 percent said they viewed someone labeled a liberal less favorably. "To be labeled a conservative was more a political plus than a minus," wrote Dionne. The Times/ABC poll recorded the lowest level of identification with liberals--15 percent--since the two news organizations began polling together in 1979 (September 14, 1988: A1).

A different view emerged from poll results released on the same day by the Los Angeles Times. Bush and Dukakis were "now running neck and neck" at 47 percent each. Both had roughly equal sources of strength: Bush, from voters' impression of his ability to handle foreign affairs and his ties to a "popular" Reagan; Dukakis, from voters' "strong desire to 'point the country in a different direction,' away from Reagan Administration policies, even if [Reagan] is popular." Dukakis, George Skelton wrote, benefitted from the perception of uneven economic growth. Voters by a 9 to 1 margin (89 percent to 9 percent) agreed the economy is "very good for some people, but not very good for others"; Bush, most voters agreed, "favors the rich." One question rarely found in polls--"Do you think George Bush has told lies about the Iran-Contra affair, or not?--revealed still-fulminating suspicions in the public's mind, as 49 percent answered yes, 25 percent no, and 26 percent "don't know." Another poll, by the Roper Organization, showed Dukakis in the lead by six points (Skelton September 14, 1988: A1). The Washington Post/ABC News poll

released a day later had Dukakis ahead, 48-45. The article indicated that Bush was ahead or even with Dukakis in three other national surveys, but failed to include the Roper Organization's findings (Peterson September 15, 1988: A10).

The polls and their accompanying articles raise important questions about their uses. The manner in which questions are asked, the questions asked and not asked, the shifting moods of the public, and the varying ways to interpret the findings all point to the pliability of polls. In the 1988 campaign, more polls were taken than ever before in a national election, yet polling practitioners themselves questioned whether polling methods came any closer to understanding the complexities and subtleties that make up a "public opinion." After the 1988 election, I.A. "Bud" Lewis, polling director of the Los Angeles Times, said:

> ... [P]erhaps the most profound influence of media polls ... is ... on the media themselves. ... Some journalists--not all of them in the boondocks, either--have a tendency to make as much as possible out of horse race figures. ... This impulse ... can sometimes produce unintentionally slanted stories, stories that seek to explain the successes of presumed winners and that emphasize the failings of expected losers (qtd. in Lavrakas and Holley 60-61).

New York Times editor of polling services Michael Kagay wrote of the "public confusion" over the meaning of polls, citing the close contest and a proliferation of polls that each week tell "somewhat different stories." These story variations reflected the "especially transitory" and fluctuating public moods, but also the differences between polls. Inherent errors in random sampling methods, differences in who is in the sample and how questions are asked comprise the "imprecise" nature of polling, wrote Kagay. The saving grace of newspapers' use of polls, suggested Kagay, was the sampling error "caveat" each report announced (September 12, 1988: A16). But Kagay failed to account for the defining powers that polls possessed, which partially originate from the need for clarity. For example, the New York Times' Dionne failed altogether to mention findings from other surveys that contradicted his organization's. The failure may reflect a journalist's reluctance to bog down his interpretations in ambiguities that conflicting results would yield. This suggests the premium journalists and their organizations place on constructing clear and unifying themes--which necessarily obviates against the very suggestion of

ambiguities that the sampling "caveats" are intended to keep in place. In the same manner, the continual references to the "softness" of Bush's lead lost effect when that lead, based on its duration, was announced as "commanding."

But for the consistency of Bush's lead, the primary message that could be extracted from the polls was the volatility of the electorate: a disenchantment with the choice of candidates, anxieties over their economic futures mixed in with a present sense of comfort, a longing for a discussion of issues such as education, the environment, health care and crime; and continuing suspicion over the Reagan administration's ethical improprieties and foreign policy scandals. The polls showed that economic anxieties consistently topped the list of voter concerns--one poll showed that 63 percent of registered voters thought that "someone in their community would find it difficult to find a 'good job at good wages,' " while 3 percent thought it would be easy (Dowd September 14, 1988: A29). But enough other concerns spread the field to suggest that no single issue predominated. In condensed form, however, these complexities of a highly segmented populace with diverse needs and outlooks would ultimately be defined as a sense of general and relative prosperity. Such an interpretation--goaded on by Republican strategists--held intrinsically higher value for Bush, who by representing the incumbent party relied on the notion of relative prosperity as a reflection of successful policies, than for Dukakis, who as a challenger, needed the public to be consciously aware of whatever societal anxieties existed.

EXPECTATIONS GAME BEGINS

The leader of such a fluid race might expect to face challenges from a press seeking elaborations on his views of the varying concerns of the diverse electorate. Indeed, the press did respond to public demands for a broader discussion of issues, with stories on topics ranging from the candidates' views on the economy, the federal deficit, foreign policy, education, health insurance, arms policies and the environment. The Tribune, for

instance, touted its series of "occasional articles on the problems voters are talking about," such as "national security interests," and family matters like parental leave, child care, and raising the minimum wage. Voters were talking less about "containing communism than about ... international economic issues" (McNulty September 11, 1988: 1). Yet, as the first debate neared, these stories were subordinated by stories that continued to emphasize the importance of tactics, with a fresh twist: what expectations did the two candidates carry into the debate?

Despite the many variables contributing to confusing readings of the campaign, certain solid impressions were in place as the two candidates headed into the first debate on September 25. The main impression--that Bush had now held a lead in most national polls since Labor Day--determined differing expectations for either candidate. For Bush, reporters wanted to know if all he had to do was to project himself as a "person." The press was cognizant of Bush's attempt to lower expectations for the debate to "minimize the damage if Bush does poorly" (Gerstenzang September 17, 1988: 18). For Dukakis, the imperative was for a dramatic turnabout.

The press's regard for issues--or its interpretation of the public's view toward issues--is especially revealed in how it covered the periods just prior to and after both debates. Expectations were built from the foundation of performance, from a discourse driven by drama rather than issues. "... politicians and political consultants say that Bush and Dukakis would be foolish to try to get deeply into many issues. If the campaign is proceeding as it is, they say, that is only because the candidates are responding rationally to the incentives of the system and the wishes of the electorate. If one thing is clear, it is that the voters themselves see 'the issues' as of secondary importance to their choice." Dionne drew this conclusion from the poll data that showed 67 percent of voters placed importance on competence over issues. Democratic political consultant Darry Sragow said that voters were looking for a "basic feel for who a candidate is and where he's going ... Voters aren't going to make their decisions on the basis of a lot of these issues" (September 18, 1988:

A1). The problem with Dionne's interpretation of the poll finding and Sragow's quote is a lack of definition. What constituted "issues"? The question in the poll did not ask voters to distinguish the kinds of issues that were of importance from those they felt irrelevent. In this way, a blanket disgust could be applied across the board equally between issues like Willie Horton (crime), the Pledge of Allegiance (patriotism), health insurance and jobs. Which of these did the voters not want to hear about? Had Dionne drawn in this article from poll data gathered throughout the campaign to delineate the public's interests, he would have shown that the issues regarded as irrelevent were patriotism and Willie Horton, while other issues such as health insurance or jobs were intricately linked to the notion of "competence." The Pledge of Allegiance, for instance, in one poll was rated ninth in importance on a list of 13 issues (Broder and Morin September 21, 1988: A1). A story by Dionne on September 25 showed that only one respondent of 802 registered voters answered the pledge of allegiance as the most important issue; two said patriotism. Economic concerns (unemployment, inflation and the state of the economy generally) were listed by 22 percent as the most important; the budget deficit, by 10 percent; 13 percent listed defense, nuclear weapons or other foreign policy issues (September 25, 1988: A1). How could the populace look for where a candidate "is going" without substantive issues as a guidepost? The importance given to non-verbal cues by the media, strategists and consultants suggests how substantive issues would be marginalized while those very issues that the public disdained held center stage in the debate coverage. As the expectations game enlarged, how each candidate would demonstrate leadership in front of an anticipated audience of 100 million focused primarily on non-verbal cues rather than intelligently discussed ideological positions. The press often appeared to be at odds with itself, struggling over the two competing imperatives--the public's growing demand for substance over image versus the requisite performance values of nationally televised debates. The latter won handily while the former aroused only peripheral attention, a possible reflection of the ascendency of media strategists in the race. But voters had a hand in this thrust,

also, contended Post political reporter, Paul Taylor, in his book on the campaign, See How They Run:

> The signals that journalists get from the voters are no less paradoxical. The voters say they want more substantive coverage of the issues. But if they meant it, then the MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour, or something like it, would air on ABC, NBC, and CBS--not on PBS, where it draws a tiny fraction of the viewership of the market-driven commercial networks. ... [I]t was these voters who had been accomplices in their own manipulation. For all their complaints about the emptiness of the campaign, they hadn't exactly rewarded candidates who took on substantive issues (7).

The stakes of the debate circled around such factors as facial gestures. "... [P]eople often form their impressions based on a whole host of visual cues ... gestures and style often speak as loudly as words. ... Handled properly, a smile can be a most potent weapon. But it needs to be used carefully." The burden for fulfilling such requirements fell more heavily on Dukakis because of his position in the race and the growing impression that Bush evoked more warmth than Dukakis. Dukakis would have to "avoid coming off as stern and even arrogant" to loosen the image Bush had planted of him as cold and bureaucratic (Oreskes September 18, 1988: A16).

A voter backlash against the "vacuous" campaigning of Bush appeared to be developing in the week prior to the debate, wrote the Tribune's Jon Margolis. "Some polls indicated that Bush had lost some or all of the shaky lead he had built up and Democrats speculated that Bush may have overdone his criticism of Dukakis" (Margolis September 18, 1988:1). But, at the same time some were crediting this turnabout on the public's interest in the details that Dukakis was providing that week on his national defense positions, others attributed his fresh successes to his new "ebullience" toward tactics. How much more initiative Dukakis could seize, however, depended on his upcoming debate performance (Toner September 19, 1988: A16).

For the week prior to the first debate, the two candidates were fully engaged over economic issues, a period in which the press actively fleshed out differences and contradictions. Dukakis issued a series of indictments of Bush's claims of prosperity, while Bush responded that Dukakis was "pursuing a strategy of dividing Americans 'by

class.' " Dukakis appeared to win out in this argument, but only because the press referred to independent sources for information. Against Bush's claim that the Reagan administration had "made Americans at every income level better off," the Los Angeles Times cited economist Joseph Minarik of the "non-partisan" Urban Institute as saying, "all the evidence I have seen is that there has been a widening of the U.S. income distribution." U.S. Census figures showed that in 1980, those in the lowest 20 percent of the U.S. economy received 5.1 percent of the income; by 1986, their share was down to 4.6 percent. Those in the upper 20 percent received 41.6 percent of the nation's income in 1980, and their share rose to 43.7 percent in 1986 (Gerstenzang and Balzar September 20, 1988: 1). Bush vowed that he would take the country in a more "compassionate direction," saying he was "haunted" by the thought of children who grew up "amidst the violence and horror" of the inner cities. The Dukakis campaign criticized Bush for "cynicism" for offering "himself as the champion of the poor" after being a leader in an administration that made cutbacks in programs for the poor. "There has been no significant reduction in the poverty rate for children or adults in the U.S. during the [Reagan administration]," wrote the New York Times' Maureen Dowd, "and at Reagan's request, Congress has made numerous cutbacks in social welfare programs. According to data released by the Government last month, 22.8 percent of all children under 6 lived in poverty in 1987. Poverty rates for minority children [were] worse ..." Dowd continued on, citing the Reagan administration's efforts to minimize the seriousness of homelessness by providing "substantially lower estimates of the homeless ... than have social welfare organizations." Dowd ended her piece with a tone rarely heard during the campaign: "While Dukakis was calling for Bush to 'come out from behind the flag' and talk about what he would do about health insurance, a subject on which Bush has offered no program, the Vice President had surrounded himself with thousands of American flags, colonial flags, state flags and inaugural flags" (Dowd September 21, 1988: B6). The Post produced the lengthiest examination of the issue, explaining that the "Reagan expansion is an unusually lopsided

one, and the prosperity that is typical for some is not for others." The Post quoted Republican political analyst Kevin Phillips, who read a laundry list of victims of the uneven expansion: "Young males, young families, older males in blue-collar occupations, farmers, female heads of household--you've got a long list of groups of people who have been on the downside in real terms." Nearly one million blue-collar jobs were lost in the 1980s and real earnings wages dropped by a dollar an hour, which "spelled bad tidings for young, less-educated men" (Blustein September 22, 1988: A1). Meanwhile, Bush's flag factory visit in New Jersey played more successfully in the Tribune, which congratulated Bush for his "virtuoso" symbolic performance, in which Bush proclaimed that "flag sales are doing well and America is doing well" (Collin and Cawley September 21, 1988: 4). Bush's flag factory visit did not play so well with veteran Republican Barry Goldwater, who the next day introduced Quayle to the Midtown Phoenix Rotary Club by saying: "I hope you take this kindly. I want you to go back and tell George Bush to start talking about the issues" (Balzar September 22, 1988: 20). The Post's Lloyd Grove suggested that the television networks' portrayal of the Goldwater quip as a "swipe at the conduct of the Bush campaign" may have "marked a turning point in the fall campaign, when the TV advantage shifted perceptibly away from [Bush] and toward [Dukakis]." The same-night and next-morning coverage of Goldwater's quip

> capped several days, beginning late last week, from which the lingering images on the network news broadcasts were of Dukakis offering specific solutions for national problems and of Bush making gaffes, staging content-free campaign events, attacking Dukakis, and as ABC correspondent Brit Hume reporter, 'wrapping [himself] in the flag.' (Grove September 23, 1988: A16)

Part of the difficulty in developing a public rapport with such candidate and media engagement lay in the timing of the press's release of polls. In the midst of the Dukakis-Bush exchange over economics, the Post released results of a poll that showed Bush ahead 50-46. Bush was shown to have "gained ground significantly ... on a variety of economic, defense and foreign policy issues" and on the "basic pocketbook question": which candidate would be better for the voters' financial future. The effects of such a report

might be regarded as neutralizing: During a week in which Dukakis scored the Reagan-Bush administration's neglect of the poor, as well as the uneven income distribution that occurred, Bush gets the good news--based on previous campaigning that had little such engagement over economic issues--that makes it appear as if he "won" that week's economic debate. In this way, the press was able to maintain the well-worn theme that the stakes in the upcoming debate were highest for Dukakis. "For him, clearly, a good or bad performance before Sunday's massive television audience could shift millions of votes. ... Bush has improved on personal qualities: honesty, empathy, ability to get things done ..." (Broder and Morin September 21, 1988: A1). These very qualities were called seriously into question by Dukakis and critical press coverage of that week, but did not enter into this report's interpretations. The Urban Institute's Joseph Minarik, three days later, placed "personal qualities" in a different context: "... [W]hat is really at issue is the compassionate leanings of the campaign. What liberal government is about is seeing that the economy grows as rapidly as it can to help those that are left behind. It's that kind of compassion that has been lacking for the last eight years" (Kilborn September 24, 1988: A34).

Similarly neutralizing stories appeared in the Los Angeles Times over the next three days. Drawing from the sentiments of three former Democratic party chairmen, Jack Nelson reported that Dukakis was "falling so far behind" that the debate was perhaps Dukakis's "last chance to breathe new life into his slumping campaign." The three top Democrats--John White, Robert Strauss (who later served as an ambassador in the Reagan administration) and Charles Manatt--"are known to feel that the Dukakis campaign is in deep trouble." One "former party official" (Nelson did not indicate if his source was one of the three ex-chairmen) feared that "It may be too late. I feel it in my bones that Dukakis is a goner" (Nelson September 21, 1988: 1). Two days later, Nelson wrote a piece based on the Times Mirror Company's national polling data that appeared to substantiate the claim that Dukakis was far behind, showing Bush ahead 50-44. "Bush has seriously undermined [Dukakis's] image ... by labeling him a liberal who is soft on defense and by

repeatedly attacking him on emotional issues involving crime and the American flag" (Nelson September.23, 1988: 1). Both of Nelson's stories were written from earlier perspectives--the latter based on a poll taken between September 9-13, a particularly tough period for Dukakis. Neither story made reference to the recent signs of change in the complexion of the campaign, an important consideration in such a fluid campaign. These stories exemplify how the flow of press perspectives can gain inertia, keep moving in the same direction unaffected by fresh and competing forces. New generalized "takes" on the campaign have difficulty surfacing and challenging those that are relatively secure. Nelson's stories could be done because they fit into the prevailing sense of urgency that the debate represented, and it drew off well-established and increasingly inflexible conventional wisdoms.

At the same time that Dukakis's emphasis on the economy appeared to get lost in overarching horse-race analysis, Bush continued to reap the rewards for his tactics. The day before the first debate, the Post based its analysis of Bush on comments of advisers and political friends, who said "Bush has demonstrated talents as a communicator in recent weeks, under carefully controlled circumstances, that they have never seen before." Though Republicans were wary of the possible explosiveness economic issues could represent in the debate--as well as questions of ethics and scandal--they were intent on preserving the impression of Bush's vastly improved communication skills. "The debate also is expected to be a clash of styles and personalities, and it is on this battleground that Republicans are optimistic." Analysis thus turned to elements of style. GOP consultant Jay Smith said Bush had "obviously changed his style. His modulation is much lower. His voice is lower. He's talking slower. It's a combination of going low and slow, versus what used to be a tendency toward being high-pitched, what some who were less charitable said was whiny" (Hoffman September 24, 1988: A10). The same pre-debate Post issue analyzing Dukakis focused more on issues Dukakis would raise. But it delved into performance expectations as well. Still undefined was the distinction between issues and

character; Democratic political advisers did little to clarify these distinctions. "If he wants to wage the debate exclusively over issues and voters' views of how we're doing, Dukakis is going to lose. You've got to get beyond that to character and leadership" (Walsh September 24, 1988: A11). How avoiding issues could clear the path for a view on leadership and character, again, is puzzling. The Democrats' subscription to this formula is even more puzzling, given the disproportionate benefit Republicans derived from it.

Media critic Thomas Rosenstiel laid out as full a rendering of the debate's television imperatives as existed in the campaign a day before the first debate, which, while demystifying and helpful, also fit into the broader performance-expectations game rules by which the press fully abided. "Who wins presidential debates often has little connection with who has mastered the issues, debated well or seemed most able to govern. ... TV, with its need for action and 30-second sound bites, can transform an insubstantial one-liner into a decisive moment." Republican media consultant Robert Goodman aided Rosenstiel along in his analysis: "Debates ... are not debates at all, they are performances." Rosenstiel then warned of a "subtle process" that would take place over the days that followed the debate, yielding a "winner," since most viewers were unable to "independently judge winners." This "process" included the publication or broadcast of early post-debate poll findings, which would help guide the media in their next coverage steps. Republican strategists were already at work, wrote Rosenstiel, in shaping this process by providing the

> context in which reporters view the debate beforehand. George Bush, they say, is ahead in the polls and has sufficiently lowered expectations about his debating talents that he does not need to accomplish much in the debate ... If reporters are convinced this is plausible, it may become a self-fulfilling prophecy. (Rosenstiel September 24, 1988: 1)

Note that the very process of context building that Rosenstiel described occurred in his own piece with the use of Goodman's quote. Roger Ailes provided just such context building to the New York Times that day with a typically irresistible quote: "Even if George Bush makes a gaffe, he'll still be seen as a human guy" (Dowd September 24, 1988: A35). Republican pollster Robert Teeter would base his analysis of a focus group he assembled

around the notion of Bush and Dukakis as "human guys," or "likeable," which would gain wide application in the days following the debate. Controverting all evidence that showed an increased desire for the discussion of substantive issues, as well as an array of voter concerns, the American Enterprise Institute's William Schneider provided more "context" in an analysis by the New York Times' Dionne published the day of the debate. Schneider called the debate important, wrote Dionne, because "there were no overriding issues." Schneider: "When the big issues matter less, the small issues matter more. So, small things, like one-liners and gaffes make a big difference." In this very analysis, Dionne used poll data showing that 52 percent of voters said the candidates were not saying "enough about the issue they felt should be most important." That 37 percent of voters also had no preference yet for either candidate, Dionne surmised that voters were "waiting for the new information they hoped the debate would provide." Yet, the overarching essence of his story grew out of Schneider's take: That "small things, like one-liners and gaffes, can make a big difference." Schneider also specifically framed Dukakis's expectations for Dionne, saying, "Dukakis needs to reassure people that he's safe, pragmatic and doesn't have a bunch of wild ideas," a suggestion, if followed, that Republicans would gain from, given the many points of attack to which Republicans were vulnerable. Yet, Dionne closed by prescribing a nearly impossible task for Dukakis: Dukakis "will have to launch an effective attack on Bush and at the same time avoid looking disagreeable or argumentative ..." (Dionne September 25, 1988: A1).

Many of the campaign's inadequacies could be imputed to the Bush campaign, or his Republican surrogates: Bush's inaccessibility, his content-free symbolism (the Pledge of Allegiance, Boston Harbor), the virulence of his messages (Willie Horton, false accusations of flag burning and psychiatric treatment), avoidance of his leadership record (Iran-Contra, Noriega, ethical breaches in the Reagan administration), his unrelenting focus on the negative attributes of his opponent. Dukakis could be accused of lacking photogenic qualities, and, of strategic disorganization. As for addressing the larger issues of the day--

arguably the ideal for a presidential campaign--Dukakis had been the more conscientious by a fair margin. Yet, despite the growing cry for a more substantive dialogue--and recent improvements in that area--Bush headed into the first debate with a set of expectations that acquitted him of the need to address issues, primarily because his "aggressive approach" had apparently resonated in the polls more successfully than Dukakis's more cerebral approach. And since "issues" were considered of peripheral importance, Dukakis entered the first debate handcuffed on his one superior campaigning attribute, an inclination to talk about policy matters, if not a better grasp of them. The candidates "know full well that the tone [they] strike can be as influential as any specific words [they say]," wrote the New York Times' Michael Oreskes. A sociological view prevailed. One of the debate period's more widely quoted authorities on media and politics was Kathleen Hall Jamieson, then professor of communications at the University of Texas. Her expertise in communications helped journalists prioritize stage elements of the debates, solidifying the centrality of "non-verbal cues" to the performance requirements of Dukakis and Bush. "We make an immense number of judgments and base an incredible part of life on those judgments. Who to hire as a baby sitter? Who to buy a used car from?" There is no reason, she said, to expect people to suspend that kind of judgment when it comes to picking a president. Therefore, Bush would be judged on "voice pitch," the length of his sentences and his ability to curtail the flailing of his hands. Dukakis would have to "display emotion and humor, be less stiff," avoid being pedantic. Though Democrats contended that their polling showed Americans wanted a leader, "not a friend," Oreskes's analysis took a less credulous view: "Americans say they want the presidential race to be about issues, not images. The reality is that voters react from their instincts. ... [T]hey want somebody they can feel good about, who embodies their image of a president." A presidential image could be struck, Jamieson said, by the candidate who speaks with a "deeper pitch" [which] "is associated with decisiveness, competence, masculinity ..." (Oreskes September 25, 1988: A24).

Tribune political reporter Jon Margolis's analysis on the day of the debate showed that expectations did not have to be built from the performance perspective. Margolis drew from polling data from five "key states" that showed the race was full of mixed signals and in a virtual dead heat (Bush held a "shaky margin" of 46-43, with a four percent sampling margin of error). Nearly half (43 percent) of the voters said the debate would be either fairly or very important in determining which candidate they would support, which suggested that the debate "could change the dynamic" of the campaign. A slightly larger sample felt "less favorable" toward Dukakis than toward Bush than a "few weeks ago" (37-to-35 percent). Though 40 percent thought the economy was on the right track, almost half agreed with the statement that "George Bush does not really understand the needs of the middle class"; and 61 percent thought Dukakis "would fight for the average person" as president. Margolis concluded:

> So, if Dukakis can get the campaign agenda back on such economic issues as health care, student loans and social security he might be able to cut into Bush's strength among the swing voters. In addition, several of the respondents said they remained troubled by Bush's role, if any, in the Iran-Contra scandal (Margolis September 25, 1988: 1).

Though voter indecisiveness and middle class economic concerns vested cruciality to the debate, Dukakis faced the greater "imperative because he is the lesser-known contender, the challenger to an incumbent administration, and right now the underdog," wrote the Los Angeles Times' Robert Shogan. Shogan's premise followed the frame provided by Republican consultant John Deardourff, who said, "Dukakis has a heavier burden than Bush. The evidence is almost unassailable that he is behind. He has to make something happen." The burden fell on Dukakis to "humanize" his candidacy, to respond emotionally to issues, to show humor, "but not at the expense of Bush," which would be "seen as mean-spirited"; and to "stress substance, but avoid getting bogged down in details." Bush would have to show that his emergence from Reagan's shadow was "no fluke" by pointing out campaign proposals that go beyond or conflict with Reagan; avoid his "wimpish image"; avoid gushing or groping ("don't enthuse"); emphasize his national security

experience, but avoid providing an opening for Dukakis to assault him on Iran-Contra. Shogan ended his analysis with a closing disclaimer that veered from the premise he'd followed throughout--Dukakis's greater imperative--that had been largely overlooked by the press in its pursuit of clarity: "To most analysts, the latest pre-debate polls indicate that while Bush has an apparent advantage, the dominant reality of the election is the ambiguity of voters toward both candidates." Polls suggested a tenuous race, but Republican suggestions of a much more stable lead for Bush appeared to guide the press's outlook. Contrary to Shogan's suggestion of a "dominant reality" of an ambiguous electorate, the idea that Bush had less to lose than Dukakis carried far greater circulation. For example, there was no Democratic response in Shogan's analysis to the comments of James Lake, Bush's campaign communications director: "Coming out of this debate, if Bush is no worse than he is going into it, it is going to be mighty tough for Dukakis to put together the momentum to catch us" (Shogan September 25, 1988: A1). The press wrote little to contradict the premise that Bush faced lower expectations. Bush made it a point in a rare press conference a day before the debate to lower expectations "by pointing up his own tendency to commit the costly verbal blooper" (Gerstenzang September 25, 1988: A26). Even this frame, however, provided Bush with a pair of advantages that the press did not appear to recognize: 1) By focusing on "gaffes" as the standard by which to judge him, Bush could marginalize the importance of issues. At no time did Bush face a similar expectation level for answering questions on policy issues as he faced for appearing strong; and, 2) By ridiculing and forewarning of his own propensity for committing "gaffes," Bush disarmed even those who might have considered criticizing him from that standpoint. Bush had already received much playful bantering from his traveling press corps after his September 7 speech, when he mistook that day for Pearl Harbor Day (December 7). This strategy corresponded with the patterns already set in campaign coverage: the press avoided value judgments on ideological or policy questions. Instead, they were intent on the performance standards Jamieson and other media experts characterized. So the ground

rules were laid for the first debate. The press would be on the lookout for decisive moments that would revolve not around points of ideological differences but one-liners, gaffes, smirks, hand gestures and shifty bodies.

CHAPTER VI

THE DEBATES: EXPECTATIONS AND PERFORMANCE EVALUATION

The following section first gives a glimpse of how each of the four newspapers reported the first debate in their next morning's news stories on September 26, including the initial analysis. A broader analysis of the prevailing perceptual environment, or conventional wisdoms, that began to emerge on September 27, will follow.

NEW YORK TIMES

The New York Times had Dukakis "relentlessly pressing the Iran-Contra affair and drug policy" of Bush, and Bush "criticizing Dukakis's stands on military issues, the death penalty and taxes." Bush's main thrust was that Dukakis lacked experience and had shown failed liberal judgment as Massachussetts governor. Dukakis contended Bush played a key role in an uncaring administration, had demonstrated flawed judgment on the Iran-Contra affair, dealings with Noriega and "other issues ranging from health care to military policy." Dukakis "set the tone for his approach by going on the attack within three minutes of its start." Of particular notice, Dukakis raised the Iran-Contra scandal and Noriega's drug dealings, "two matters that have faded in the public's mind in recent months, to [Dukakis's] detriment." Bush aides conceded afterward that Dukakis had "turned in a

forceful performance" and "did not praise their own candidate's performance, seeking instead to raise doubts about Dukakis" (Dionne September 26, 1988: A1).

The question of who "won" the debate was sublimated into a broader discussion of how debate "victories" get decided. "It is a fact of political life that what gets said about the debate can be as important as what gets said in the debate." Reporters denied their stories were influenced by the post-debate "spinning" by allies of either candidate--even as they were "furiously jotting down the various views" (Oreskes September 26, 1988: A1).

CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Dukakis "branded" Bush with the failures of the Reagan administration, and Bush "countered strongly," referring to Dukakis's past support of a nuclear freeze and "contrasting it with his own World War II experience as a combat pilot" (McNulty and Collin September 26, 1988: 1). Charles Madigan's analysis suggested that who "won" was "all a matter of political or ideological perspective." Neither candidate varied from his campaign themes, which represent "conflicting views of the American reality, of government and its obligations." The televised debate was "the most substantial exchange since the genre was born" in 1960. Dukakis "scored" for defusing the patriotism issue, for sounding "well-versed and clear in his discussion of foreign policy," for not sounding liberal and not looking "dumb." Bush scored "a major point, too, when he looked into the camera's eye and told the TV audience" he would be willing to share all the blame for Iran-Contra and Noriega if given half the credit for foreign policy achievements. But in the end, there were "no flubs, particularly from Bush, who can be flub-prone," and both candidates' performances were "undoubtedly ... warmly received by their supporters" (Madigan September 26, 1988: 1). Had Madigan written his piece from the perspective of the more than the third of voters whose opinions were not yet formed, his analysis may have taken a more biting approach and may have forced him to apply value judgment to some of the issues the candidates raised.

The most widely heard phrase used by network anchors--"no knockout punch"--appeared to influence Tribune writer Steve Daley's analysis. "Historically, televised presidential debates have turned on a moment, a one-liner, a gaffe that gets hung around the neck of the candidate. ... This confrontation was highlighted by sharp disagreements and a hostile tone, a tone that grew more pronounced as time passed. But the one crucial moment seemed to be missing" (Daley September 26, 1988: 7).

WASHINGTON POST

David Broder applied the phrase, "no knockout," though he credited Dukakis with showing the "huge televised debate audience that he could deflect George Bush's efforts to place him outside the mainstream of American politics." Broder critiqued Bush along the Jamieson continuum, saying he had "some moments when his language and voice seemed to steer out of control." An ABC News poll of 639 voters gave Dukakis a 44-to-36 percent margin as winner. But what turned out to be the debate's defining appraisal came from Republican pollster and Bush debate coach Robert Teeter. Teeter "said a focus group of undecided voters that he organized rated Bush as 'friendlier and more likeable.' " The debate was a draw, Teeter said, but their "voting intentions moved slightly in Bush's direction."

Dukakis had kept Bush on the defensive, wrote Broder, a "major step forward for Dukakis." Dukakis showed emotion over Bush's inference to his patriotism, saying, "He is questioning my patriotism, and I resent it." Bush, Broder wrote, took his toughest shot with that response. The tone of the debate--partly determined by the questions of the panel of journalists--helped keep Bush on the defensive, over such issues as drugs, the deficit, health insurance, AIDs, housing, homelessness and urban poverty ("with abortion the only conservative issue on the table in that time"). "After tonight, it seems almost certain the race will remain close until that second debate in mid-October. Dukakis scored no

knockout tonight, but he certainly denied Bush one--and the way the race had been going, that in itself was a victory" (Broder September 26, 1988: A1).

LOS ANGELES TIMES

The Los Angeles Times' Jack Nelson also cited the ABC poll indicating a Dukakis victory, but chose to reserve judgment: "The debate's 'winner' may not be determined until November 8." By performance standards, the debate could be seen as a wash, because "Neither candidate committed a major gaffe ... [although] both occasionally expressed anger." Apparently, the drama of Dukakis coming out "swinging" on his first comment ("Here we are with a government that's been dealing with a drug-running Panamanian dictator") did not fit performance standards. As Dukakis continued to "hammer away" at the Iran-Contra and Noriega issues, Bush "appeared rattled," wrote Nelson. Bush's response could have been the opening the press was waiting for to address these issues as topical, but instead was regarded as a strong retort, given its apparent bravado. "I'll make a deal with you. I will take all the blame for those two incidents if you give me half the credit for all the good things that have happened in world peace since Ronald Reagan and I took over ..." (Nelson September 26, 1988: 1).

Robert Shogan found a "decisive moment" in Dukakis's defense of his patriotism. "One of the most dramatic moments of the evening" came when Dukakis said:

> I hope this is the first and last time I have to say this. My parents came to this country as immigrants. They taught me that this was the greatest country in the world. I'm in public service because I love this country. And nobody's going to question my patriotism as the Vice President has now repeatedly (qtd. in Shogan September 26, 1988: 1).

"With those words," wrote Shogan, "Dukakis met head-on the challenge from Bush. ..." Dukakis had proven he was more "emotional and human," said Jamieson. Dukakis had succeeded, in this moment, in personalizing his candidacy. Dukakis "otherwise was as cool and controlled as usual" (Shogan September 26, 1988: 1).

NEW YORK TIMES

The followup editorial by the New York Times reflected the conventional wisdom that began to emerge a day after the debate: Dukakis's answers

> were certainly more pointed, and Mr. Bush often found himself on the defensive. Set against Dukakis's relentless self-assurance, however, his occasional gaffes and recovery lines--'wouldn't it be nice to be the iceman so you never make a mistake'--brought a touch of warmth ... ("Debates, Domesticated" September 27, 1988: A34).

Dukakis turned in the better debating performance, appeared presidential, and managed to put Bush on the defensive, even Republicans agreed. But Bush succeeded in "painting Dukakis as a liberal" and appeared more "likeable"--which left the campaign "more muddled than before and as open as it has been since at any point since last spring," wrote the New York Times' Dionne. Bush's campaign manager, James Baker, rarely quoted, felt the time was important enough to help create a frame: Dukakis failed to "come across as likeable, less dour and less technocratic than he has appeared in the past." Bush's communications adviser Lake provided supporting context: "I think Dukakis did a nice job and I can understand why some people say that if you score it on debating points, he wins. But you can't score a presidential debate on debating points." Democratic pollster Paul Maslin confirmed the Republicans' view, saying, "It's not enough to win on the forensics." The accumulative force of the strategists' views did little to support Dionne's contention of a renewed race. The implication of Dukakis's lack of warmth mitigated against any notion of advantage gained by "debating points," which in itself was argued to be a negative, serving to subtly elevate Bush as the winner. Dionne's conclusion clashed with his own opening premise: "If Bush aides and early polls are right, Dukakis will need more than just a debating victory on points. A split decision may be enough for Bush. Dukakis needs something more" (Dionne September 27, 1988: B6).

CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Jon Margolis, who during the campaign occasionally switched between the roles of political analyst and columnist, produced a column attempting to explain why an issue like "likeability" counted. "We are not just electing a president. We are electing an uncle. Or perhaps a brother-in-law or neighbor." For the amount of exposure a modern-day president receives on television, "a presidential candidate's demeanor may be more important than his plans for reducing the budget." Americans, Margolis said, preferred a "silly uncle" to a "dour one," and most definitely resented "snide chipmunks," which is what Dukakis appeared to be when he smiled smugly at Bush. "There is a real question as to how many voters want to invite a snide chipmunk into their living room" (September 27, 1988: 23). Though Margolis appeared to write his column partly in jest, his fundamental point did not veer from the emerging conventional wisdom: Americans were primarily concerned with feeling comfortable with their candidate, and that Bush had done the better job in evoking that comfort.

WASHINGTON POST

The first debate had not changed the "dynamics" of the campaign, wrote the Post's Paul Taylor, meaning roughly that no consensus for a winner emerged, or that if Dukakis had "won," it was by a margin insufficient to change the dynamics. By the time Taylor and others were writing their followup analyses, the press's focus had almost completely dropped reference to issue differences between Bush and Dukakis, and assumed the position of the theater critic or media analyst. The "likeability" factor introduced a day earlier by Teeter gained wide circulation, as media consultants from both parties described Dukakis's performance under such as terms as "tightness" and "smugness." Republican pollster Linda Divall said Dukakis "didn't sound very humanistic in handling" Peter Jennings' question on whether he was a technocrat who had "no passion" about the great issues of his era. "He was more like a robot. Bush was more meandering and there were a

few gaffes, but overall, he probably came across as more human and likeable than Dukakis." Teeter invoked the phrase he erected the day earlier, saying, "I think the most important thing may have been the likeability factor." From that notion descended a novel standard for judging a presidential candidate, cleverly asserted by Democratic consultant David Garth: "... you wouldn't want to have a beer with him" (Taylor September 27, 1988: A1).

LOS ANGELES TIMES

Only a close--if not disingenuous--reading of the polls gave credence to the appraisals of the strategists. Prior to the debate, one of the widely perceived gulfs between Bush and Dukakis was on their respective abilities to project "warmth," with Dukakis lagging far behind. A poll taken by the Los Angeles Times after the debate showed that the two ran roughly even on counts of "warmth" (Bush receiving 36 percent to Dukakis's 34 percent on "who had more warmth"), and "likeability" (Bush only "slightly more popular"). Yet, it turned out that the Times interviewed those same people prior to the debate and found that more people "predicted" Dukakis would "have more warmth" than Bush (38-to-28 percent). It was on Dukakis's decline in "warmth" and "likeability" that the Times based the significance of their poll. If not for that decline between the voters' "predictions" and their post-debate feelings, there would have been no credible "likeability" story. Another valid angle not taken would have been to show that a "tie" for Dukakis in the "warmth" and "likeability" columns represented a win, considering the wider views that prevailed before the debate. Other hints that suggest a voter shift toward Dukakis included a Bush 43-41 percent lead dwindling to a 46-46 percent tie; and that 35 percent felt Dukakis won, compared to 34 percent for Bush. Twenty-nine percent felt the debate ended in a tie (Skelton September 27, 1988: 1).

Media critic Thomas Rosenstiel's early assessment of the media's cautious "creep toward a consensus" that Dukakis was a "marginal" victor and that the race was "now

tightening" (Rosenstiel September 27, 1988: 16) gave way the next day to a more ambiguous reading of the event. The press "backed off" the story of Dukakis as clear winner, wrote Rosenstiel, perhaps because "the media may never want to get too far ahead of the polls ... or public opinion on a story."

The flaw in Rosenstiel's premise lies in his presumption that a consensus proclaiming a Dukakis victory existed. Most analyses, as shown above, settled on the judgment of media consultants that "forensics" and "debate points" did not count; the winner of a debate--which, in the words of one consultant, was not a debate, but a performance--did not necessarily gain politically. The most enduring assessment of the first debate was that Bush had come across with more "warmth"--this election's guidepost. The strongest affirmation Dukakis received was that he had done enough to "stay in the race." Nonetheless, where the press the first day after had at least judged Dukakis a winner of debate points--which worked to confirm Dukakis's image as "cool" and unemotional--by the second day, even that advantage vanished. Rosenstiel used an ABC followup poll showing Dukakis's edge growing--34-to-24 percent--but the largest pool of respondents, 43 percent, calling the debate a draw. Bush himself had a changed heart a day later: "I feel better today ... than the night of the debate. I felt it was about even, and I now think maybe we did a little better than that" (Rosenstiel September 28, 1988: 14).

THE FINAL AFTERMATH OF DEBATE #1

Jon Margolis summed up the final consensus that emerged in the aftermath of the first debate: "One conventional wisdom is that Dukakis did enough to stay in the race. ... Politicians on both sides, though, thought Dukakis would need a clearer victory in the debate to have much chance of overtaking Bush at the end." This appraisal gives an equivocal meaning to the idea of "staying in the race." If "staying in the race" did not confer the possibility of "overtaking Bush at the end," then no there is no inherent value in

staying in the race. Thus "staying in the race" is an empty phrase which translates into "has already lost." Given the tension between "warmth" and "forensics," the final rendering appeared to yield to Bush (Margolis September 29, 1988: 1). A Gallup Poll, released on September 29, showed Bush "clinging to a narrow lead" (47-to-42 percent), though most (38-to-29 percent) thought Dukakis "did a better job." Though Bush's lead had contracted from a 49-41 edge, the Los Angeles Times reported that "little changed," in the campaign and that the debate "had little effect on voter preference," suggesting that though Dukakis was regarded to have "won" the debate, his inability to gain politically neutralized the idea of a win (Los Angeles Times wire reports September 30, 1988: 20).

The press showed great reluctance in choosing a winner from the first debate, perhaps because it had been so devoid of all the performance pegs built into the press's expectations. Why the press descended on the issue of "warmth" or "likeability" stems from their inclination to stay away from policy issues. Where Bush received praise for the "warmth" he evoked with his "ice man" comment ("Wouldn't it be nice to be perfect; wouldn't it be nice to be the ice man so you never make a mistake?"), Dukakis received no accolades for his sharp criticism of Bush and Reagan for "cutting and slashing programs for children. ... Do we spend money on (the Strategic Defense Initiative program) in the billions and trillions or isn't providing some decent, affordable housing for families of this country at least as important?" Dukakis could have but didn't win points for drama or empathy with his caution to the audience to:

> · listen to the Vice President carefully. What he's proposing ... is a tax cut for the wealthiest 1 percent of the people ... An average of about $30,000 that we're going to give to people making $200,000 a year. Why, that's more than the average teacher makes. We've had enough of that ... (qtd. in Nelson September 26, 1988: 1).

To arrive, as did the Post's Paul Taylor, at the appraisal that the "dynamics" had not changed required that one eye be focused sharply on the "horse-race" element of the otherwise irresolute polls and the other eye be shut to issues raised in the debate. Had reporters followed up on any of the many possible angles provided by the debate's several sharp exchanges, the dynamics undoubtedly would have changed. One problem reporters

face is regular exposure to the candidates' issue positions, which serves to numb their senses. But, even for that small voting public paying attention to the campaign, the exchange between Bush and Dukakis was their first exposure to many issues. The dilemma journalists faced--of trying to create fresh angles on "old" issues without being seen as waging an independent crusade--could have been circumnavigated. Given the character of Bush's lead ("soft" and "moveable"), and the sharpness of Dukakis's verbal assault on issues of public interest, a natural press reaction could have been to test the strength of Bush's lead and to see if the issues the challenger raised resonated with the public.

The debate could have provided the press fresh perspectives on lingering yet mostly unexplored campaign issues that may have altered certain perceived advantages that Bush held. From debate material, the press could have explored such notions as leadership (How did Iran-Contra reflect the kind of leadership Bush would bring to the Oval Office?), "likeability" (How did the Reagan-Bush record of eliminating social programs reflect on Bush's "warmth"?), and even the assumption of a "strong defense" (what national security benefits did the nation derive from a system that produced the Pentagon procurement scandal?). The press did expand on Bush's relationship with Noriega, as depicted in the previous chapter. By avoiding broader connections--such as suggesting patterns of unsavory international relationships--and staying with the issue for one day, the press deflated any potential salience that the issue might otherwise have evoked.

CONVENTIONAL WISDOMS HEADING INTO DEBATE #2

If a single difference existed between the coverage of the two debates, it was the media's quick declaration of a winner after the second. Tracking polls based on small overnight samples showed a wider margin of victory for Bush than those that showed victory for Dukakis after the first debate. Equally large margins of voters considered Lloyd

Bentsen the winner in the October 5 vice presidential debate with Dan Quayle, but the press then refrained from declaring a winner. What gave the press its opening to declare a clear winner after the second presidential debate was that it had the single decisive moment the press was waiting for; and which comported with the press's expectations: Dukakis, on the first question, asked by CNN anchor Bernard Shaw, revealed the very lack of emotion that had become such a central focus of the campaign:

> Shaw: "Governor, if Kitty Dukakis were raped and murdered, would you favor an irrevocable death penalty for the killer?"
>
> Dukakis: "No, I don't, Bernard. And I think you know I've opposed the death penalty during all of my life. I don't see any evidence that it's a deterrent, and I think there are better ways to deal with violent crime. We've done so in my state. And that's one of the reasons why we have had the biggest drop in crime of any industrial state in America; why we have the lowest murder rate of any industrial state in America (Germond and Witcover 5).

Strangely, however, most first reports overlooked the significance of Dukakis's response to Shaw's question, though they alluded generally to missed opportunities. How Dukakis's demeanor maintained a centrality to the campaign partly revolved around the notion that the dynamics of the race had not changed after the first debate. If the dynamics were the same, the logic goes, then Dukakis had dealt insufficiently with his predominant image, that of the "passionless technocrat, the smartest clerk in the world," as ABC anchor Peter Jennings put it in the first debate ("Debates, Domesticated" September 27, 1988: A34). Thus, similar expectations preceding the first debate held for the days leading into the second debate. The press laid out these barely revised expectations with the confidence that the expectations circled around accurate conventional wisdoms. One conventional wisdom, for instance, was that Dukakis had not yet answered Bush's attacks, which fed into the perception of a passionless technocrat unfettered by emotional issues.

If the dynamics of the campaign had not changed, it could then be said that Dukakis was still fighting old demons. This perception held for the Tribune's Jon Margolis, who as late as October 12, was quoting disgruntled Democratic strategists about Dukakis's failure to respond to Bush's attacks. The strategists were not lamenting fresh Bush attacks but those

that Dukakis "failed" to respond to in late August. "Most of these charges are false," Margolis wrote, in the present tense, "... [B]ut for weeks the campaign never tried to demonstrate the falsehoods." One "veteran Democratic operative of the Dukakis high command" was quoted as saying, "They're very issue-oriented, very intellectual. They just couldn't believe that attacks on these flimsy issues would have any effect. They also thought people wouldn't believe lies. But people do believe lies if you don't tell them the truth." Margolis conceded that some of the "grumbling" from the Democratic side came from "political operatives who may be bitter about having no role in their party's presidential campaign." But, their view was "shared by many Republicans," so the reader is left to have faith in Margolis's premise on the basis of such partisan claims. Margolis can be credited for posting a rare--if not entirely unique--disclaimer around the many negative Democratic source comments journalists elicited. But, by combining the views of disgruntled Democrats with those of the political opposition, Margolis succeeded in keeping alive a conventional wisdom--flawed that it was--that had been disspelled at least the week prior to the first debate (Margolis October 12, 1988: 1). Jesse Jackson finally vented his frustration over the Democrats' lack of unity and glibness on the day of the debate, accusing other Democrats of being "analysts when they should be activists," contending that too many Democrats were blaming Dukakis's Massachusetts-based campaign organization for the poor showing that the national Democratic ticket was making in their areas (Tumulty October 14, 1988: 29). Five days earlier, Dukakis had mounted an effective response to fresh Bush attacks on the Willie Horton issue. He accused Bush of "exploiting a human tragedy for your own political ends," recalling that his late father, Panos, was the victim of assault and robbery and that his younger brother, Stelian, was killed by a 1973 hit-and-run driver. "So I don't need any lectures from Mr. Bush on crime fighting or on the sensitivity or compassion we must extend to victims of crime ..." (Walsh October 9, 1988: A18).

The Post's Edward Walsh credited Dukakis with, in recent weeks, transforming his campaign into a "formidable challenge" for Bush. Dukakis aides seemed "genuinely convinced that they remain[ed] within striking distance of victory." But, those late August days, Walsh wrote, still dogged the Dukakis camp. The "disarray in the field" had reflected the "smug insularity" of Dukakis's Chauncey Street clique and rubbed wrong on Democratic outsiders. Campaign head John Sasso's "reach-out" effort to these excluded Democrats had helped revamp the "old team," which was now producing more effective assaults on Bush. But, wrote Walsh, "there remains a major question among many Democrats" about whether Dukakis could engage himself in a battle with Bush over "character and values," rather than policy issues (Walsh October 9, 1988: A1).

The perception that Dukakis had not responded to Bush attacks tied directly into the wider notion that he felt no passion (hence, compassion) over the issues Bush was exploiting, like crime. Though Dukakis displayed his emotions on such issues during stump speeches, as well as in his first debate performance, the perception persisted heading into the second debate that Dukakis lacked human emotion. Bush attempted in the week prior to the second debate to capitalize on the notion that Dukakis possessed "an astonishing lack of sensitivity, a lack of human compassion," calling him the "furlough king" (Hoffman October 8, 1988: A9).

The press's patience for Bush's continuation of the Willie Horton theme had worn thin, but still they acknowledged the popularity and unavoidability of the theme. "[Bush] gave a tough law-and-order speech today. Again. Like the producers of a show held over by popular demand, his campaign strategists have decided to keep the focus on crime for another week because their polling shows it is the most effective issue to swing undecided voters into their column" (Taylor and Hoffman October 11, 1988: A1). The "patch of adversity" that Quayle's shaky debate performance represented pushed Bush back onto "familiar and safe turf ... pulling out all stops to make crime his issue ..." (Cawley October 12, 1988: 1).

Republican strategists began to float the suggestion that recent history portended an electoral lock for Bush. Four of the previous five presidential elections had gone to Republicans, and 23 states that represented 202 electoral votes (of the 270 needed for victory) voted Republican in all five elections. This was a "built-in advantage ... that could prove crucial" in a tight race, wrote the New York Times' Dionne. Lee Atwater, one of Bush's top campaign advisers, contended that Bush's base in the South and Rocky Mountains was "secure" and that Bush had "already sewn up something over 200 electoral votes" (Dionne October 12, 1988: A1). This story coincided with one based on similar information that ABC aired the night before the second debate. ABC took criticism for airing the report so close to a crucial campaign event, raising the stakes for Dukakis to near-impossible levels. Most of the media concluded that "Only a decisive win in the second debate could revive an obviously faltering Dukakis campaign," wrote the Los Angeles Times' polling director Lewis. "The second debate proved to have a negative influence on the Dukakis candidacy, in part because of the impact this poll had had on the media." Studies showed that the projections of the 50-state electoral vote were supported by shaky data. Research for the poll was done over a three-week period, a significant space of time in a campaign, in which opinions were shifting daily. Additionally, the samples from some states were too small to be statistically valid (Lavrakas and Holley 61, 81).

NEW YORK TIMES

The New York Times also published poll data that, with Bush maintaining his lead, 47-42, showed that Dukakis "badly needs to use the presidential debate with Bush tonight ... to improve his standing." Dukakis aides feared that only an exceptional performance could erase the doubts of "whether he will ever be able to overtake Bush. ..." From these premises, the requirements for Bush were even more "modest": He must be "competent on substantive questions, and more importantly, appear warmer and more personable than Dukakis." Voters, who after the first debate had been introduced to the term "likeability,"

and were initially virtually split on the two candidates, now considered Bush more "likeable," 47-to-37 percent. The desire for change, Dionne added, "appears to be receding," which has further "eased ... Bush's task in the 1988 presidential campaign and Dukakis's more difficult" (Dionne October 13, 1988: A1).

CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Dukakis adviser Kirk O'Donnell, convinced that Dukakis had made enough progress in the previous two weeks' polling, said, "We don't need a big win." The Tribune's Jon Margolis, although conceding "some progress," placed the higher stakes on Dukakis. "Dukakis needs a win more than Bush, and he needs a bigger win than he got in the first encounter." The nice-guy/tough-guy prescription would be tough to balance. While being the "aggressor," Dukakis must also "seem somewhat gracious," said one Democratic strategist. Bush merely needed to avoid mistakes and "keep Dukakis on the defensive" (Margolis October 13, 1988: 1).

WASHINGTON POST

Dukakis was in "dire need of a breakthrough to change the dimensions of the race," wrote the Post's Edward Walsh. Dukakis, "widely considered the winner" of the first debate, would have to "convey a better sense of himself and his fundamental values." Voters did not find Dukakis "likeable." Walsh, as did all journalists, failed to heed the initial figures showing only a 36-to-34 percent edge for Bush in that category. Instead, Walsh fed off the trough of the consultants. Here, he used the salty words of an old Republican hand, Ed Rollins, who said, "The closer you get to Mike Dukakis, the less warmth there is and the less you like him. ... He has an almost impossible task" in overtaking Bush. Democrats, as typical during the campaign, had difficulty applying a spin that veered too far from the Republican read. Sasso said: "What is important is for the American people to know who [Dukakis] is, know what his values are, know who would

get the benefit of the doubt when the door of the Oval Office closes." Bush merely needed to "reassure" those voters who had already decided to vote for him (Walsh October 13, 1988: A21).

A conflict exists between the press's description of Dukakis as the winner of the first debate and the political benefits accorded a winner. First, there was no such declaration after the first debate. Dukakis perhaps won on "debating points," but the press refrained from conferring victory on those merits. If Dukakis had "won" that first debate, he would have gained a political boost, not only from the polls, but from coverage that a triumphant political moment typically generates (like the "bounce" candidates get from national party conventions). Movement in post-debate polls require followup coverage--what Rosenstiel called the "consensus-building process," a reaction that "many experts consider as important as the debate itself in shaping how the public remembers the event" (Rosenstiel September 28, 1988: 14). So, a Dukakis boost in the poll would have required a boost in the type of coverage he received after the debate. No such benefits came his way, so his standing in the polls remained relatively static. A circular condition existed. Since the press did not find significant what upward movement Dukakis experienced in the polls, they did not alter their mode of coverage. Hence, the prevailing thought that the "dynamics" remained unchanged.

LOS ANGELES TIMES

The "irrefutable calculus of the polls lined the strategic realities"--four public surveys taken in the previous 10 days showed Bush leading by margins ranging from three to seven points. From Dukakis's perspective, this represented a "striking distance." From Bush's, no "significant inroads" had been made recently. This thesis contends that the variation in story angles taken from either perspective is crucial, as the choice of one bears significantly on the other. The press made choices between perspectives like this all campaign long. Given the press's propensity to follow the lead of the polls (without acknowledging their

influence on the polls), Bush's eight-week long lead in the polls held a strong influence over the press's choice of perspecives, which in turn helped maintain Bush's lead.

Some Democrats tried to dispell the expectation that a "knockout" was needed, that Dukakis should just try to "concentrate on making himself more human as a candidate ..." Polling evidence buttressed this belief: "Most viewers thought Dukakis won" the first debate by "seeming crisper and more knowledgeable than Bush." But the "little or no ground" gained by Dukakis suggested that his performance was lacking in the "likeability" column, Democrats agreed (Nelson and Shogan October 13, 1988: 1).

DEBATE #2: OCTOBER 13

The outcome of the second debate could be viewed as predictable. Dukakis's relatively high expectations and Bush's minimal requirements presented the former with an inordinately difficult--if not impossible--task. The press's reaction was equally predictable, considering the frame of expectations they had erected and with which they would view the event. What stood out in the press's reactions were some subtle revisions of their earlier assessments. By the end of the second debate, for instance, the press's conventional wisdom decreed Dukakis as having been "widely regarded" as the winner of the first debate. As pointed out earlier, the press never conferred the political benefits the winner of a debate might expect accrued to him. The phrase, "widely regarded," implies that Dukakis was a "clear winner," a misleading inference, given the press's reluctance to make such a declaration. If Dukakis was not a "clear winner" of the first debate, then the notion of having been "widely regarded" as the winner holds no value and is misleading as a concept. A possible explanation for the press's willingness to belatedly bestow the triumph to Dukakis was a need to rationalize their rush to judgment on the second debate without appearing to apply double standards.

NEW YORK TIMES

E.J. Dionne was particularly reserved in his day-after analysis of the second debate, writing that Dukakis displayed a "command of issues and details, ... and sought to convey more personal warmth than he had" in the first debate. Bush, Dionne wrote, "seemingly more assured than in the first debate, avoided the sort of major misstep that might have derailed his candidacy." Dionne failed to make any reference to Shaw's opening question; the closest he came to identifying a defining moment was Dukakis's rigid response to a question about whom children should regard as an American hero. "He seemed taken aback and offered only general categories of people": doctors, police officers and scientists (Dionne October 14, 1988: A1).

By the next day, Dukakis's response to Shaw's question took a central position in strategists' assessments of his performance. "Over and over Democrats cited Dukakis's failure to give a more personal response when ... asked if he would still oppose the death penalty if his wife, Kitty, were raped and murdered. ... " Strategists criticized Dukakis for choosing to "win the battle for affability" over the battle over who was the stronger leader. Dukakis had not succeeded in shifting the agenda and generating momentum for the rest of the campaign, said Democratic pollster Paul Maslin. The instant polls coincided with that judgment: margins of "victory" for Bush ranged from 16 points in an ABC News poll to 23 points in a CBS News poll. The Los Angeles Times' poll had Bush winning by a 47-to-26 percent margin. Some Democrats "openly talked about the specter of a disastrous loss," wrote Dionne, quoting Maslin as saying: "The worst thing ... is for Dukakis to slide into a double-digit defeat" (Dionne October 15, 1988: A1).

One way the press certifies its value judgments, analyses and assessments is by citing others in the media that confirm their work, even if they are done ostensibly as analyses of the other media. One ironic example of this came when, in the New York Times' Andrew Rosenthal's piece analyzing the networks' rush to judgment on the second debate--which gave clues to the Times' overall critique--network officials cited morning newspaper

accounts as one basis of confirmation of their views. This mirroring process appears to be one way the press maintains distance and "objectivity" from its subject while utilizing those interpretive instruments accessible at the given time. Rosenthal's piece also subtly revealed the limits of interpretation that the 1988 campaign contained. Remarks by NBC commentator John Chancellor characterized the campaign's primary interpretive limitations --what could be considered to be the main flaw of the entire press's coverage of the campaign. Chancellor said: "I think the words winner and loser are dangerous journalistically. You can talk about performance, but how issues are handled and more detailed analysis, that's more for print than for TV." Chancellor, first, held the misguided assumption that print analyzed the debates on the candidates' presentation of issues. His logic on performance standards, though flawed, held a window to the entire press's--TV's and print's--approach to the campaign. "Performance" was viewed as an area open to debate because it apparently held no intrinsic ideological (thus, ostensibly, political) weight. Little effort was made to evaluate candidates on their policy stances--the truest measurement for ideology. In the absence of ideological evaluation, the political value contained in performance evaluation filled the vacuum. It was on the performance basis that the networks apparently made their quick assessments. Rosenthal wrote: "After deliberately not picking a winner in the two previous debates, the networks declared George Bush the victor Thursday night." NBC anchor Tom Brokaw thought Dukakis would "have something in his hip pocket, some kind of dramatic new position"; it was the fact that Dukakis had not unveiled a new position, rather than the substance of a position, that Brokaw cited. ABC's Sam Donaldson, using a football analogy, said that the "long ball" Dukakis needed to throw had not been thrown.

One explanation used by network executives for declaring Bush the winner was that the instant polls showed a "clear winner." Rosenthal pointed out that the networks had not given the same triumphant treatment to the equally clear victory that Bentsen earned over Quayle in the vice presidential debate (one poll showed a 51-to-27 percent margin of

victory for Bentsen). ABC News President Roone Arledge attributed this disparity to his polling unit's lack of preparation after the Bentsen-Quayle debate. Rosenthal also quoted Marvin Kalb, director of Harvard's Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, as saying Dukakis was a "victim of an unfair expectations game." But those expectations, Arledge said, were based on the state-by-state electoral vote poll ABC broadcast the night before the debate that showed Bush's apparent electoral lock. "So our interpretation of this event was that Dukakis really had to do something extraordinary to turn this thing around and that was the logical basis for the story" (Rosenthal October 15, 1988: A8).

CHICAGO TRIBUNE

The Tribune's first news report also set forth a reserved tone, though it did settle on Bush as the political winner. "Neither candidate scored an obvious victory ... But Dukakis had the most to lose ... which meant the advantage was likely to accrue to Bush." Again, the question that would later be determined to be the "defining moment" was overlooked. The question that "seemed to fluster" Dukakis was not Shaw's, but the one about contemporary American heroes. "He rambled ..." (McNulty and Cawley October 14, 1988: 1).

Media analyst Steve Daley identified Shaw's question as the "lowest moment" of the debates, though not as Dukakis's political deathblow. "Rather than attempting to rise above the dismal level of this presidential campaign, the panel was stampeded by the hot buttons. ..." (Daley October 14, 1988: 13).

Dukakis's lack of emotion on Shaw's question was typical of his campaign, but also indicative of Dukakis's inability to capitalize on the moment. He passed up "several opportunities to ridicule the vice president or goad him into anger or a mistake." Neither candidate was a "clear winner," which "according to the conventional wisdom, was all to Bush's advantage." Dukakis had confirmed his image as an "abstract, bloodless candidate" on the Shaw question and the "heroes" question. "Dukakis did not take advantage of the

opportunity to express outrage at the question or to express any love for his wife" (Margolis October 14, 1988: 1).

Two days later, Margolis suggested that Dukakis had lost an opportunity to cut a swath into a tenuous race; that, prior to the second debate, Bush's lead "was not only small, it was shaky, with perhaps 20 percent of his supporters indicating they might change their minds before election day." Now that the second debate was over and Dukakis had missed his opportunity, Bush "doesn't have to" make a case for himself anymore. "Most mystifying of all," wrote Margolis, was Dukakis's reluctance to refute Bush's "harsh attacks," just as he had during the campaign. These attacks were "easily refutable by an articulate candidate determined to fight back. ... [In the debate] he seemed determined, to the dismay of many Democrats, not to fight very hard at all. ..." (Margolis October 16, 1988: 1). Contrary to Margolis's view, the conventional wisdom going into the second debate was that Bush did not have to make a decisive case for himself. Margolis is correct that Bush's lead was shaky, but wrong in stating that the press's pre-debate outlook was guided by the fluid conditions of the campaign. And his continual reference to the "unanswered ideological attacks" logic at least partially distorted the record and perpetuated the most common, and one of the most flawed perceptions of the campaign.

WASHINGTON POST

The second debate was consistent in showing the contrast between the candidates' personalities, wrote David Hoffman and T.R. Reid. "Dukakis appeared, as he had in the first debate, to be more cerebral and policy-oriented, while Bush, who was excited and tense in the first encounter, came across as more relaxed and humorous ..." (Hoffman and Reid October 14, 1988: A1).

David Broder analyzed the net political effects accrued from these personality differences. On Shaw's "deliberately shocking" question, Dukakis's face "was as impassive as if he'd been asked the time." Dukakis entered the debate furnished with

advice from future Democratic candidate and winner Bill Clinton--to "aggressively counterpunch, heavy and hard, assert a vision of America that allows people to see things will be better if he wins and worse if Bush wins ... and allow people to make a connection to him by showing his passion and humor." But, Broder wrote, in the debate's aftermath, Democrats were "wondering whether Dukakis had accomplished any of those three, let alone hit the triple target" (Broder October 14, 1988: A1).

LOS ANGELES TIMES

Jack Nelson made reference to the "widely held" perception that Dukakis had "edged" Bush in the first debate before declaring in his day-after story that "most felt Bush had the upper hand here" (Nelson October 14, 1988: 1). Nelson perhaps forgot his initial appraisal of the first debate, in which he stated: "The debate's 'winner' may not be determined until November 8." Nelson's news story was accompanied by a prominently placed boxed sidebar in the upper right hand column on instant poll results showing that Bush was the "big winner." The "immediate reaction" of 522 voters, taken for two hours directly following the debate, showed that Bush displayed more "warmth," seemed "more likeable," and had outperformed Dukakis. Bush "won," 47-to-26 percent, according to these immediate reactions (Skelton October 14, 1988: 1). The Los Angeles Times, after the first debate, referred to poll results indicating an edge for Dukakis in the main news story.

Robert Shogan wrote that, according to "most" analysts, Dukakis, as the underdog, needed to "whip Bush soundly"; Democratic political scientist Austin Ranney, chairman of the UC Berkeley political science department, said, "He needed to hit a home run, and all he hit was a single." There were some "uneven moments" for Bush, but with a "monthlong lead in national polls, Bush could afford some uneven moments. ..." Dukakis's "dour and bloodless demeanor" had overshadowed Bush's previously questionable psyche and had "become the focus of journalistic scrutiny." So, Bush's "smooth" followup response to the panelist's question on "likeability"--which Dukakis

flubbed with a technical-sounding answer--came off as not only dignified, but as the epitome of a candidate's leadership qualities. Bush said:

> I don't think it's a question of whether people like you or not to make you an effective leader. I think it's whether you share the broad dreams of the American people. I think it's a question of values, not likeability or loveability (qtd. in Shogan October 14, 1988: 1).

Here, Bush succeeded in downtalking the very value system--"likeability"--that his strategists had elevated as the pre-eminent issue of the campaign, a cousin tactic to the one Bush parlayed between the double-edged Willie Horton-and-"kinder/gentler" themes throughout his campaign.

The press described Dukakis's debate performance--based on supporters' "behind the scenes" comments--as "somewhere between defeat and disaster" (Dionne October 15, 1988: A1); his chances as "just about over" (Margolis October 16, 1988: 1); and his task in the upcoming four weeks as "onerous" (Dionne October 16, 1988: A1). Meanwhile, two days after the debate, during a rare Bush press conference, the press quizzed Bush on what his election would represent (Boyd October 17, 1988: A16).

Two Post articles in the immediate aftermath of the second debate summed up the press's view on how Bush had been able to virtually put an end to the campaign 25 days before Election Day. Bush constructed a campaign of "simplicity," which worked to obscure issues that would have been damaging to his chances. A "veteran" Democrat, lawyer Harry McPherson, held the oft-stated view that "there are no real issues," so, in that climate, it was "then possible to convert cliches into issues. ..." The Bush campaign had approached the electorate like a mass market in search of a quality soap product, suggested University of Virginia Professor of rhetoric William Lee Miller, a Democrat:

> ... it's inherent ... that your appeals be basic, simple, elemental, and almost necessarily irrational. It's symbols, it's association and it's a danger to the republic. ... It's really a grotesque study in American political morality--the latest and worst development in a tendency that began in 1952 when public relations and advertising techniques started to become part of campaigning in a big way. It hammers association like product advertising: 'Lucky Strike Means Fine Tobacco,' 'America's Turning 7-Up.' But what does that mean? What policy significance does it have? As far as I'm concerned, none. But, alas, the thing works (qtd. in Grove October 15, 1988: A1).

What also worked was Bush's "ability" to sidestep potentially damaging issues that the Reagan administration scandals represented while reaping the benefits of Reagan's successful policies. "A few months ago," wrote the Post's David Hoffman,

> it appeared that Bush would be saddled with the legacy of such episodes as the Iran-Contra affair and the Environmental Protection Agency scandal, the ethical questions of Ed Meese III and the charges that drug-running by the Panamania strongman (Noriega) was overlooked. ... Dukakis has tried mightily to make these Reagan liabilities stick to Bush, and some of (Bush's) top strategists were braced for an onslaught at the debate Thursday. But Iran-Contra didn't come up, Noriega was absent ... In short, the old Reagan liabilities seem to have receded as voter concerns --or have been disguised by Bush. Dukakis, lagging in the national polls, may be having difficulty making them an issue.

Hoffman then quoted two Republican sources as saying "there's no ... juice left in them [the Reagan liabilities]" and "They're old issues. Both Dukakis and [Bush] have put the focus on the future, and ironically, that erased concern about the past" (Hoffman October 16, 1988: A26).

Grove's and Hoffman's assessments touched the same chords the press had played since before the Republican national convention, when the very first movements in the polls began to indicate the success of Bush's attack tactics. These appraisals formed the touchstone--the guiding principles--to the press's prevailing perceptions throughout the campaign. Both of these analyses, however, contain the flawed assumptions that have been cited throughout this thesis: a dearth of issues allowed "cliches" to serve as campaign issues; Dukakis was incapable of making issues "stick" and voters had lost interest in "old" Reagan liabilities. The first assumption stemmed from polling information showing no single, predominating issue. But, as stated above, the public had many concerns, which may have reflected the complexities of a growing and diverse society, rather than relative comfort. The latter two assumptions fail to account for media performance; fail to understand the implications of story choice, story angle, source elevation and marginalization, among other important factors that shape media perceptions, and ultimately political realities. Had the press, for example, not decided that Iran-Contra was "stale," and pursued any number of the possible stories that the issue could have yielded, Dukakis

may indeed have been able to make the "old" Reagan liabilities "stick." Hoffman stated that Dukakis did not raise these issues in the second debate. What Hoffman left unstated was the relative silence with which the press greeted Dukakis's pointed and biting references to the issues in the first debate. The two Republicans quoted in Hoffman's piece could not be expected to suggest anything other than what served their interests, though even the latter source's contention that the candidates' focus on the future "erased concern about the past" struck a lurid, Orwellian tone that Hoffman appeared to accept unquestioningly.

CHAPTER VII

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The major intent of this thesis has been to establish, in empirical fashion, the conduct of four major national newspapers in the 1988 presidential campaign: What images of political reality--the perceptual environment--did each newspaper contribute to the campaign? What politically crucial information did the four newspapers transmit and omit? What "raw and malleable ingredients of reality" (Entman 40) did the media mold into political reality, and what influenced the molding process? Though this thesis has attempted to present the four national newspapers in their own unique light, a larger picture evolved over the duration of the campaign suggesting similar patterns of coverage that yielded a generalized climate of opinion. If the premise holds that these four news organizations possess individual and accumulative agenda-setting influence over less prestigious or influential news organizations, one can surmise the degree to which their coverage affected the direction and complexion of the campaign. Had, for instance, the New York Times eschewed the practice of relying so predominantly on the views of strategists and instead devoted their energies to contextual reporting--balancing the record against statements, policy decisions against proposals--perhaps the strategists would not have held such a prominent place in the campaign. That may have meant less emphasis on the horse race and the visual "requirements," and more emphasis on points of policy. Given the New York Times' prestige, a rippling effect may have been felt through the rest of the media, pitching the

campaign at a distinctly higher tenor. This is speculative, but the intent of this thesis has been to lay forth the possible alternatives that could have been taken in 1988.

This thesis makes little attempt to infer the public's use of the press's total product other than to suggest generally that the overall conduct of the campaign contributed to public confusion and apathy, resulting in the lowest voter turnout for a presidential election since 1924. That only 50.16 percent of the voting population decided to cast ballots in 1988 (Taylor 1990: 4) gives notice to the exceptional character of the campaign. A combination of factors could have turned off the public, including the choice of candidates, the depiction of candidates by either side, and the focus on "theater" rather than policy. The selection of issues should be regarded as a crucial element to the low voter interest. Half of all voters in a New York Times/CBS poll taken after the election expressed dissatisfaction with the way the candidates discussed issues (Taylor 1990: 7). Responsibility for issue-selection lays significantly with the candidates, but as presented throughout this thesis, a candidate who fails to conform to media requirements by providing dramatic visuals and simple messages is hard pressed to maintain control over the selection of issues. Data are mixed on how much autonomy the public has in determining what is important in a campaign, given the media's ability to either elevate or suppress issues. The original study on the media's agenda-setting capacities demonstrated that "If the media tell us nothing about a topic or event, then in most cases it simply will not exist on our personal agendas ... [W]e judge as important what the media judge important. The media's priorities become our own" (Shaw and McCombs 99). More recent scholarly material gives weight to the press's influence in determining not only what the public thinks about, but how (cited in Entman 75-77). The logic of these recent arguments is that if the media possess the power to keep the public's consciousness alerted to some issues and not others, this in and of itself influences how the public thinks, though the degree of influence is difficult to prove and is beyond the parameters of this thesis. An example of the press's agenda-setting function in 1988 was its use of polls based on questions and issues raised by strategists. Los Angeles Times

pollster I.A. Lewis stated: "Instead of testing the public's opinion, the public polls tested the assertions of their manipulators ... the media polls detected what they themselves had publicized" (Lavrakas and Holley 61).

This thesis does not attempt to prove the degree of influence that the press have, but it does contain evidence to show how four prestige papers--organizations with agenda-setting influence within the sphere of national politics--helped to construct priorities, or the "realities," of the campaign. The priorities were set by variables tending to favor the candidate who maneuvered most adroitly through deeply-entrenched media routines, rather than the candidate who may have attempted to create a political dialogue about competing social needs. Many critics of the 1988 campaign contend that the Republican campaign "manipulated," the media, usurping media routines to its own ends. One of the purposes of this thesis has been to show that the national print media had it in their power to shape their campaign coverage independent of these "manipulative" efforts, yet failed to do so.

A media routines critique might argue that that failure rests in the organizational mechanisms that confine the press's options. The press's reliance on polls--more pronounced in 1988 than any presidential election year before--appeared to handcuff it the most. The press's readings of the polls suggesting Bush's constant lead seemed to obviate against the possibility of pushing forward independent of the public's apparent will. However, signs of discontent over the conduct of the campaign emanating from the polls could have persuaded the press to assert itself against the image-driven campaign. In the end, the press cautiously read the components of the polls suggesting a desire for change, opting to base its more assured outlook on Bush's soft but consistent lead.

Another distinguishing feature of the press's seemingly limited function in the 1988 campaign was a factor related to poll watching, their devotion to the views of strategists. The press maintained what it believed to be a value-free, "objective" stance while exercising what were viewed to be acceptable interpretive energies, albeit through others' lenses. The value-free component of this routine, however, is illusory. When strategy is the guiding

principle that defines a candidate, the press extrapolates a good candidate from effective strategy, intrinsically a value-laden judgment. There is also negative value in the marginalization of issues: Space and emphasis given to strategic analysis is space taken away from policy analysis.

In Dirty Politics, a book on television coverage of presidential campaigns from 1960 to 1988, Kathleen Hall Jamieson concludes that a focus on strategy is "cynical" because "it minimizes the disposition of the press to elicit or the viewer to discern the important differences the candidates would bring to the process of governance." A strategy "schema" existed in the 1988 campaign, a "script" or "story form" through which "reporters, scholars, and occasionally politicians most often invite us to view political elections:

> In the strategy schema, candidates do not address problems with solutions but 'issues' with 'strategies.' The language of the strategy schema is that of sports and war. The vocabulary lets reporters, candidates, and the public ask, who is winning and how? The posture invited of the electorate by this schema is cynical and detached (Jamieson 165-167).

Could the press have exercised more independent judgment in the 1988 campaign, or were they bound by the dictates of polls and pundits? Did abiding by these self-regulating routines lock the press into a path that led inevitably to the brambles of 1988? The national press--at least the four newspapers under study in this thesis--often appeared to be acting as a single organism, embracing the same pool of sources, methods of analysis, and conventional wisdoms that rejected the coverage of key issues. This is described by routines theorists as "pack" journalism, regarded as unavoidable given competitive pressures. Even if the argument was accepted as plausible that the press's methods were set in stone, however, the press had available to it within the same coverage rules--from poll findings, from different elite sources--alternative critiques. The four newspapers rarely provided what can be defined as popular alternative deductions--in the sense of laying grounds for a competing perceptual environment, i.e., that Dukakis indeed was returning Bush's fire, or that Dukakis's commitment to social policy-making possibly represented compassion; or that the public actually did have concerns about the economy.

These deductions and others were readily available to a press willing to look beyond the prevailing modes of analysis. Pressure for a more substantive campaign could have arisen from a public exposed to different coverage.

DID BUSH BENEFIT FROM IDEOLOGY OR A CONSERVATIVE MOOD?

The four newspapers in this study displayed consistent, repeated and systemic distortions that are difficult to view as accidental, or as mere results of news production imperatives. Given the broad array of choices available to it and the relatively narrow range of selectivity they chose to follow, the press's actions in 1988 might have revealed an ideological undertow to the conditions under which it worked. One test of media ideology is the degree to which the press evades readily available disconcerting political information, evidenced throughout this thesis. Proof for a claim of ideology also would have to be registered in a much broader analysis of political conditions leading into the 1988 campaign. Hertsgaard (On Bended Knee) and Palentz and Entman (Media Power Politics), provide substantial evidence indicating that the most prominent national media organizations--the New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, Time and Newsweek magazines and three networks, CBS, NBC, and ABC--contributed to the creation and perpetuation of a conservative political climate from the mid-70s through Reagan's administration, setting in place the mechanisms by which Bush would profit in 1988.

Entman asserts that, between 1975 and 1978, the media "converged on the theme" of a popular political "lunge to the right." The media's perception of a conservative trend grew in spite of evidence showing the opposite, Entman found. The policy preferences of the public in polls taken between 1968 to 1977 showed strong approval of "liberal government activism." Two-thirds of the public held consistently positive views toward programs that would help pay medical costs, guarantee jobs for all, achieve job and housing opportunities

for blacks, and enforce safety standard for factories. The polled public also showed a "strong trend of disenchantment with the behavior of private enterprise" (Palentz and Entman 198-199).

Still, leading news organizations such as the New York Times and the Washington Post interpreted other signs, such as favor toward the military and antipathy toward bureaucracy (private and public), as the more salient indicators of the period. As the theme of the surging conservative mood grew, "journalists may have perceived spokespersons on the left as irrelevent or naive. As these delegitimized sources were consulted less frequently, liberal proposals and interpretations received less coverage, and those on the right received greater emphasis" (Palentz and Entman 201).

Hertsgaard contends a transformation of news standards took place among news organizations in the 1980s. Washington Post executive editor Ben Bradlee called it a return to "deference" (1988: 101). The shift grew out of a retrenching and gun-shy press after Vietnam and Watergate, in the midst of perceived change in outlook on classical liberal ideology. Key Reagan advisers constructed a propaganda or "public relations apparatus" that would control "what America saw and heard of Reagan on TV." The apparatus was "explicitly designed to insulate the President from serious scrutiny on the part of the press. ..." Reagan's reelection in 1984 could be in no small part be attributed to that insulation: Reagan made no appearances in front of the press from July 19 until after the November election. The fact that Democratic challenger Walter Mondale was far more accessible led to a problem of imbalance that reporters did not address. The press, as happened in 1988, was often able to focus on what it wanted in covering Mondale, because, as ABC correspondent Brit Hume said, "he was available to talk about whatever we wanted. Reagan, on the other hand, was not available, so the press tended to talk about whatever he was talking about." How two standards came to stand unchallenged may best be explained by Michael Deaver, one of Reagan's key technical experts in the public relations apparatus: "Our backdrops were always terrific, there was always a new gimmick even though it was

the same speech. And so the press came to realize it was a very well oiled machine, and they respected that." NBC News President Laurence Grossman agreed: "It says something about the kind of President he'd [have] been. If you don't pay attention to people who are telling you you've got to learn how to use TV, you should get some training, some coaching, you should improve yourself, then maybe [when] he tells you there's a bomb coming over in the middle of the night, what kind of reaction do you have?" (Hertsgaard May 1988).

The use of the press was a vital element to the success of the public relations apparatus, contended Hertsgaard, who wrote that "it was one of Communication Director David Gergen's guiding assumptions that effective governance was not possible unless it could 'get the right story out' through the 'filter' of the press" (1988: 5). Gergen said:

> the press in general was worried as Reagan came into office that they had been an unwitting participant in the destruction or downfall of at least two Presidents, and they felt that the public was not sympathetic to their role. They were worried about losing viewers, losing audience, losing public support... That was working in Reagan's favor coming in, and it wasn't hard to fan those flames from within the White House (qtd. in Hertsgaard 1988: 171)

Gergen admitted it was his communications staff that saw to it that the sympathetic mood toward Reagan be translated into an embrace of not-so-popular policies. "The whole theory going in was, if we go to the country and just try to sell conservatism straight up, it's not going to work," said Gergen. "You don't have the kind of [political] base in the country to do that. ... The point was, if Reagan can be successful, and show that he is effective, people would come to believe in Reagan. And as they believe in Reagan, they would evenutally come to agree with him on issues, and see him as sensible, and eventually his philosophy would have a lot more impact" (Hertsgaard 1988: 107).

Hertsgaard suggests that the press's coverage of the Iran-Contra scandal was indicative of the media's timidity: They came to it late, left it too soon, and failed to "convey its full significance along the way." New York Times Managing Editor A.M. Rosenthal's explanation of his paper's coverage summed up Hertsgaard's view of why the press failed in its Iran-Contra coverage, and more broadly, its coverage of the White House during

Reagan's terms: "For a paper with the resources and intelligence of the New York Times, there are no excuses. The only things there are, are values--what we think it's important to do" (Hertsgaard 1988: 341-342).

Showing that Bush benefited from a perceived conservative climate does not alone prove ideology. A sound argument could be made to suggest that journalists were merely following what they thought were the dictates of the public. But an ideology critique looks beyond the work of individuals, and even individual organizations. An ideology critique asks what institutional and cultural mechanisms for the creation of political discourse were in place and why? The parameters of this thesis provided answers to the first part of the question. It would take another volume to answer the second part, Why?

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