

READER'S FORUM

Campaign reporting: advice from a 'double agent'

by JEFF GREENFIELD

As a writer who doubles as a political professional (or maybe it's the other way around) I've developed very ambivalent feelings about the coverage of politics. As a writer, I've spent enough time trying to get into offices, homes, and locker rooms to favor open access to candidates; as a speech writer/strategist/media consultant, I've refused to help reporters gain that kind of access when I felt that what they were after was none of their business. I dislike sloppy reporting — and I chuckle with satisfaction when bad reporting reflects badly on an opposing campaign. I admire tough-minded investigative reporting — and I'm delighted when none of it focuses on my candidate. I think there are specific steps that the press could take to make political coverage much better, and much tougher on candidates — and the political professional in me is glad these steps haven't been taken, because I'd have to work harder.

What I think useful is to describe how the press looks to those of us inside campaigns, and to suggest, concretely, how the press might cover us with more success — even if that means more work for me in the future.

To understand how politicians view the press, remember the literal meaning of "campaign" — a military operation carried out in pursuit of a specific objective. For anyone running for office, for anyone working full-time in a campaign, the months of work represent an enormous personal gamble. Regardless

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of whether pecuniary lust, personal ambition, or deep moral imperatives drive the candidate, the commitment of strength and resources is total. When Dan Walker entered the race for governor of Illinois in 1971 — a race which appeared hopeless — he gave up a six-figure job as Montgomery Ward's general counsel and mortgaged his home to pay for his campaign.

Even for those few who can afford to run, a campaign involves an emotional risk of frightening proportions. Which of us would be willing to ask our friends, colleagues, and total strangers to vote on whether they like or trust us more than someone else? A campaign is not an enterprise designed to produce a casual indifference toward opposition. This same intensity holds true for campaign managers, advance operators, schedulers, speech-writers, researchers, drivers, mail-room clerks, and messengers. The motive for plunging into this world of no sleep, enervating hours in stuffy rooms, and payless paydays doesn't matter. Whether people hope for government jobs or an end to an unjust war, they are working for one absolute, clearly defined goal: victory.

A political campaign, moreover, is unlike the ordinary world of business, commerce, or journalism because it has a definite climax. On Election Day, all of the hopes and dreams of a campaign organization will be enhanced or dashed. Imagine how much more intensely you would lead your life if you knew it would end on a given date in the not-too-distant future, and you have some idea of how obsessive a political campaign can be — and how deeply politicians resent any outside force that stands between them and victory. Remember, too: unlike paranoids, politicians have real enemies. Like Yossarian in *Catch-22*, who knew there were people out there trying to kill him, politicians always face the reality of oppo-

nents who are working night and day to defeat their hopes. Someone else wants that same victory, and every critical comment on a politician *in fact* helps those running against that politician.

This means that within a campaign there is no such thing as objectivity. Even veteran journalists such as Richard Dougherty and Frank Mankiewicz found themselves raging at press coverage from inside the McGovern campaign. They reasoned that a story mocking the feuds and stumblings of the McGovern campaign was actually one more assist to the reelection of Richard Nixon. Similarly, the Nixon crew in 1972 complained that the CBS coverage of Watergate was harmful *whether or not it was fair*, because it could only sway voters against Nixon. And both camps were right. When you work inside a campaign, you borrow the standard of the old immigrant whose grandson raced home to exclaim, "Babe Ruth hit three home runs today!" Replied the grandfather: "Is it good for the Jews?"

In 1974, when I was working for Hugh Carey in his campaign for the governorship of New York, an upstate New York newspaper headlined an interview with his opponent: SAMUELS: I'LL RUN THINGS FROM ALBANY. All Howard Samuels meant was that he would spend full-time in the capital instead of in New York City. But the implication was that Samuels was arrogant and autocratic. I was delighted.

In the general election, WCBS-TV interviewed Carey for a week-long discussion of the issues during the local news. The camera happened to catch Carey on his way to a formal dinner in white tie and tails. We were outraged, because for five straight nights New Yorkers saw this "F.D.R. Democrat" looking like a belted earl.

Many reporters I know think of the politician's wariness toward the press as

a reflection of distrust or contempt. That may be, but it also reflects a lot of respect. We know, perhaps better than the press does, how powerful that institution is; how one offhand, flippant remark can create a specter that haunts a candidate throughout his campaign. I have made it a habit never to lie to a reporter, mostly because lies have a way of coming back to hurt you. But I've often refused to tell reporters what I think a candidate's worst trait is, or what I disagree with a candidate about, because it can do no good for our campaign.

I've also learned that a good reporter will always look for the feuds that infest every campaign. My first experience with a political journalist came in the 1968 Kennedy campaign when columnist Robert Novak introduced himself to me by saying, "The people back in Washington say you have absolutely no input on policy, and that all you do is to write some words to put icing on the cake." Now, innocent that I was, I did sense that this was a leading question — an opening for me to launch into a diatribe against the New Frontier liberals who had started the Vietnam war and led our country through the gates of hell. What I did was to shrug and mutter something banal. I have kept to that practice ever since (not banality, but the refusal to discuss internecine fights). Of course, such feuds make good reading, and I understand full well why a reporter wants to find these things out. I assume reporters understand why I have no interest in helping them.

The most puzzling omission in political coverage, at least to my thinking, is the press's inability to penetrate the rhetorical fog of campaigns and to draw from a candidate's public statements and record the substantive heart of his effort. The most important question about a candidate is *what would be different* — in our lives, in the public pol-

icy of the community — if that candidate were given power. And it is that question that the press seems least willing, or least able, to answer.

I believe that people want to know about a campaign's "substance" more than they wish to know about which county leaders are supporting which office-seekers. When voters choose a major leader, their concerns are tangible and direct: what will happen to my job, my neighborhood? Will Smith stumble into a war? Does Jones have the strength to stand up to interests that threaten my well-being? Does Brown respect the values I live by? Yes, these *are* more general than the questions asked on a League of Women Voters survey; but they are substantive, and crucial.

Some people, particularly educated liberals, seem to doubt the impact of "issues" on voters, especially when their favorites do not do well. On the eve of the 1972 Nixon landslide, for example, playwright Arthur Miller wrote in *The New York Times* that "if the system worked as it is supposed to, [elections] would be decided on positions taken toward issues, but the issues mean next to nothing, apparently." My own judgment is that the 1972 campaign was decided almost entirely on issues. Voters put aside their long-held (and fully justified) suspicions about Nixon's character and voted for him precisely *because* they believed him closer to their beliefs than was George McGovern on such matters as fealty to traditional values, the vitality of the work ethic, and the way to pursue peace. Whether this determination was right or wrong, it was on this basis that George McGovern suffered a historic defeat.

If I am right about the importance of policy in election judgments (and I would argue that personality has not been a deciding factor in presidential elections since 1960), then the question is what can the press do to make policy

clearer — to force candidates to abandon the shells they and their writers secrete for them. Let me suggest some possible alternatives to traditional campaign coverage.

First, the kind of intensive journalistic inquiries that papers such as *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, and the *New York Daily News* have focused on public policy should be aimed at political campaigns. There is nothing wrong with the Johnny Apple-David Broder kind of broad political coverage; but it needs backstopping. Put the position papers and speeches of a candidate into the hands of a solid investigative reporter, and let that reporter look at the implications of these campaign pledges; let him ask of a candidate or his staff the hard questions that always seem to get sloughed off in the midst of an election: how much will your plans cost? Whom will they hurt? What new problems might they create, requiring even more governmental action?

Second, encourage adversary coverage of campaigns. The single most devastating question ever asked a candidate was the one Bob Novak put to McGovern during the 1972 California primary: how much will your welfare reform proposal cost? McGovern's admission that he didn't know sent shock waves through his campaign.

Of course it was a hostile question, aimed by a reporter in open and total disagreement with McGovern's stands on Vietnam, party reform, and other major issues. But (unlike some of Evans and Novak's columns about the campaign) it was fair. A potential president ought to be able to tell us how much we will pay for his ideas. And a potential leader ought to be able to answer hard questions.

The interview programs should put a reporter like George Will on the tail of liberal Democrats, who never seem to

tell us how we will pay for tax cuts or job-creation programs. The likes of Nicholas von Hoffman would give a corporate-state conservative like Ronald Reagan a hard time on the question of public subsidization of private industry.

Third, we need reporters who can break through the cheering section mentality and find out how much our would-be leaders know about basic public policy. Too often, reporters accept the explanation of least resistance — explaining Robert Kennedy's 1968 call for decentralization as a "move to the right" without ever mentioning that decentralization was a major concern of the post-New Frontier left, or calling Nelson Rockefeller a "liberal" simply because the Goldwater elements of the Republican party opposed him.

We need to expose politicians to tough-minded questioners who can sort out evasions and inaccuracies from the good-natured replies to questions. What are the public policy consequences of our enormous personal, corporate, and public debt, and what can be done about it? What will radical tax reform do to our need for capital formation, and is there an alternative method of getting productive enterprises going?

As an institution, the press has, I believe, steadily improved over the last fifteen years. It remains for our great newspapers, our news magazines, our television networks, to take the skills they have developed and to apply them to campaigns for public office without the bewitching attraction of personalities and color and back-door anecdotes. Tell us what the candidate ate for breakfast, sure; but tell us what he means to do about the price of food. Give us the bands and the banners, but give us also as hard a look as you can at this potential leader's grasp of our needs, our grievances, our satisfactions. There is no question that the press has the capacity; the question is one of will.

Newsweek-Bernard Golofny



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