

Preview: "You Don't Tell Us How to Stage the News, and We Don't Tell You How to Cover It"

Future historians of the presidential-press relationship will surely regard the decade of the 1970s as epochal. During this period the chief executives virtually mastered the media.

It is arguable, of course, that in a free society no one can best the press. The institution is too large, too diverse, too pervasive. And it always has the last word. But observe closely the nose of a Washington reporter—particularly a White House reporter—who says he or she is never manipulated; it will grow a bit each time the utterance is repeated.

The fact is that over the past ten to fifteen years the presidents and their aides have been fine-tuning a press manipulation strategy that rarely fails in any momentous way. It is executed by teams of sophisticated media specialists who swarm through the White House and its overflow corral next door, the old Executive Office Building. There are spokesmen who give the impression of saying a lot while actually saying little; pollsters whose fingers are constantly on the public pulse; image merchants who strive to design impressions that will convince the public it is getting what it wants; television experts who stage news events and turn popes and monarchs into presidential props; media monitors who maintain a continuous watch on the press, spot trends, and provide early warnings of trouble; "enforcers" who use a variety of techniques to cow recalcitrant reporters and their sources. Taken together this cadre of specialists constitutes an awesome apparatus whose sole function is to mold the news to reflect favorably on the president. They attempt to manage the news. They are extraordinarily successful.

This is not to say that the First Amendment is in imminent danger of collapse. A president cannot be faulted for exploiting every legal

means at his disposal to communicate with the public and, indeed, most journalists who cover his activities largely depend on his use of them for their livelihood. Lyn Nofziger, a former political aide to President Ronald Reagan, described the symbiotic relationship this way: "There is a mutual use of each other. The press uses the president for their news, and to get what they want. It would be ridiculous to expect then that the president or the White House or the administration would not use the press for its purposes whenever it can. That's the way, the system works."¹

In short presidential manipulation of the press is not a sinister practice, but it is an insidious one, for when the press is being used, the public is being used. The best way to avoid becoming a victim of the media maestros is to know their tactics and strategies.

What then is the press manipulation strategy that White House communications experts have honed and polished to virtual perfection in recent years? Basically it breaks down into three parts, all of which function simultaneously: the president is isolated and the press is appeased with positive or harmless news; television and propaganda tactics are used to evade the press and address the people directly; and the flow of negative news is stemmed through the intimidation of reporters and their sources and through the use of censorship techniques, such as the classification of information.

Appeasement

Most modern presidents have operated on the theory that limited exposure to the press reduces the risk of error and negative coverage. But since the public is unlikely to rally behind a hermit, the trick has been to appear accessible without actually being so. It is accomplished by appearing before news people only under the most tightly controlled of circumstances.

Jimmy Carter practiced the technique with flair. He endeavored to portray himself as a man of the people, carrying his own luggage, eschewing a limousine and walking the inaugural route down Pennsylvania Avenue from Capital Hill to the White House, speaking often during his prolonged and relentless campaign for the presidency of the "open" style of administration he would establish. "I would do everything that I could to open up the government to the people," he vowed. He would conduct open meetings with the Congress and open cabinet sessions.² At his second meeting with the cabinet, on January 31, 1977, the new president announced his tentative decision to honor his campaign commitment; permitting the press to witness

their conclaves, he said, would “let the American public know their government is in good hands.”³ Seventeen days later Carter had done an about-face. His cabinet secretaries were almost unanimously opposed to the idea of open meetings, and he had had “second thoughts,” the president said. He was, however, toying with the idea of releasing the minutes of cabinet meetings to the press.⁴

This capricious behavior became a pattern in Carter’s dealings with the press. The president regularly blew hot and cold, alternating periods of intense contacts with journalists and long weeks of relative isolation. It was as if his head wanted to get along with the press, but his heart kept rebelling.

The public was largely unaware that Carter was an intensely private man. “I’m not going to relinquish my right to go to the zoo with my daughter, to the opera with my wife or to pick up arrowheads on my farm without prior notice to the press,” he told a group of reporters shortly after his inauguration. He could, he continued, “get away from you when I want to.”⁵ Even as he uttered that boast, Carter had already proved his ability to elude newsmen almost at will. As a presidential candidate and as president elect, he had often managed to deceive reporters by ordering his Secret Service driver to turn off the headlights and depart in darkness. His Secret Service protectors had also occasionally led the press on wild goose chases in Carter’s car while Carter sped off in the opposite direction in a different vehicle.⁶ Shortly after he was sworn in, the president, his wife, Rosalynn, and his daughter, Amy, slipped away from the White House to view a performance of *Madame Butterfly* at the Kennedy Center. Several furious reporters complained that members of the president’s staff had lied to them by claiming that Carter was in the executive mansion when in fact he was at the opera. The president’s assistants, said press secretary Jody Powell, had “overzealously” interpreted Carter’s orders not to announce the excursion. Powell continued: “The President does wish to reserve his right to go places for strictly family or personal reasons without prior announcement. . . . The President has a right to go to the opera without prior public knowledge.”⁷

By June 1979 Carter had secretly evaded the press corps that normally followed him on at least ten occasions. He had gone fishing and skiing and had dined at public restaurants in Washington. The evasion route to one restaurant was so complicated that the president’s dinner companions got their instructions mixed up; Carter arrived and sat at the table alone for fifteen minutes until the others showed up.⁸

Gerald Ford liked reporters and appreciated their role. He had been a congressman for twenty-five years, considered himself a professional,

and considered his critics in the Fourth Estate as professionals also. During the first year in the White House, he was among the most accessible of presidents. As the 1976 campaign year rolled around, however, his advisers decided to exert more control over the presidential image and began to draw a curtain around him. He ignored the national press, preferring instead to answer only the more uninformed questions posed by local reporters wherever he traveled. Newsmen on the White House beat, said Associated Press correspondent Frank Cormier, began to grow frustrated: "During the early stages of the '76 campaign [Ford] would go out on the road and would take questions only from the local press. He would ignore questions shouted . . . by those traveling with him, which led to a great scene in the Rose Garden. Walt Rogers of AP radio shouted at him: 'Would you take a few questions from the local press?' As I recall, Ford declined."⁹

As the election drew nearer, Ford became even more inaccessible. "The polls showed him losing popularity every time he campaigned heavily," his press secretary, Ron Nessen, later wrote.¹⁰ The president was thus advised to remain in the Rose Garden until the final weeks of the campaign, handing out awards, signing bills, and looking presidential for the television cameras. When Ford did go on the road, the White House press went along but rarely got close to him. At a fund-raising dinner in Los Angeles, for example, reporters were met at the ballroom door by an usher in a tuxedo who led them to a roped-off section on one side of the room.¹¹ Reporters also had to view political rallies from roped-off areas or remain on the press bus and listen to a pool reporter's piped-in version of an event. "We're trapped in a steel cocoon," complained *Philadelphia Bulletin* correspondent Larry O'Rourke. "We're fed what they want us to know."¹²

Ronald Reagan, however, makes Ford and Carter look like tyros in the game of appearing accessible without being so. Reagan guards his privacy assiduously and his staff exposes him to reporters with great care; there is rarely more than one tightly controlled appearance per day. This not only reduces the risk that Reagan may utter a wrong word—he is extremely prone to making gaffes—but it also forces the reporters who are covering him to chew on the one bone of news they have been tossed that day. Thus the nightly news often features film of the president, but it is usually coverage of a set speech or of Reagan tossing off some quick remark as he exits or enters his limousine. The president's media advisers do not like it when he is confronted with questions that demand spontaneous answers. They invented the "engine drown-out" technique, for instance, to discourage

reporters from asking questions when Reagan is ready to board the presidential helicopter. As soon as Reagan appears in the White House doorway, the helicopter engines are started. The television cameras capture his smile and his waving hand, but he does not answer any questions because he cannot hear them.¹³

Much of the news footage of Reagan is shot during photo opportunities, occasions when photographers, camera crews, and reporters are briefly allowed into the Oval Office to take pictures of Reagan and his official visitors and guests. In the first weeks of his tenure the president would answer two or three questions from reporters during such sessions, but his aides began to fear he would say the wrong thing and instructed newsmen to hold their tongues. As Reagan's assistant for communications, David Gergen, put it, the president "has the right to conduct the office with some dignity, to have opportunities when he's meeting with a visitor to have photos taken. I don't think he necessarily ought to be subjected to questions every time he does that."¹⁴

Many reporters resisted the White House edict. While Reagan was meeting with Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak in February 1982, ABC correspondent Sam Donaldson popped a question about Cuba. Deputy press secretary Larry Speakes leaped forward. "Lights!" he screamed, giving the signal that the photo opportunity was over and the press was to leave. He angrily lectured Donaldson for asking a question that could cause an "international incident" and later decreed that reporters would be barred from photo opportunities.¹⁵ A compromise was eventually struck, and reporters are still asking occasional questions at picture-taking sessions, but they rarely fail to elicit rebukes from the White House media team. Said United Press International's veteran White House correspondent Helen Thomas, "Whenever I can get two words in, I fire questions at [Reagan]. His aides become absolutely apoplectic. You can see them thinking, 'My God, they're at it again.' They overprotect him, even to the point of forming a human shield around him when they don't want questions."¹⁶

All presidents who served during the 1970s and since have kept track of how well their news managers were doing their jobs through the perusal of news digests, daily and weekly summaries of stories that appear on television news shows and in newspapers and magazines around the country, prepared by staff assigned to that task. Purportedly the news digests are prepared for informational uses only, but in fact they are used to monitor the press. Carter's news summary staff, for example, was instructed to give priority to adverse stories and commentary when there were space restrictions. This undoubtedly gave

readers of the digest a skewed view of what was being reported.¹⁷ The Reagan news summary, according to David Gergen, is “not a management tool. . . . It is used more for information purposes.”¹⁸ Just a few months before Gergen made that statement, syndicated columnist Jack Anderson put together a story alleging that Secretary of State Alexander Haig might be dismissed. A copy of the column was received in the White House news summary room before it was published and was passed on to Gergen. He called Anderson to deny the story, then alerted Haig of the upcoming column. Haig called Anderson to deny it. Finally Ronald Reagan called the columnist from the presidential retreat at Camp David to express his confidence in Haig. Anderson then pulled the Haig story and substituted one describing the frantic efforts to scuttle it.¹⁹

The person charged with keeping the press as contented and occupied as possible, while the man they are at the White House to cover remains out of sight, is the presidential press secretary. Because his job is to entertain as much as it is to inform, he should be intelligent and humorous. Because he must convey an impression of authority, he should have direct and frequent access to the president. And because he has to keep the press out of the way, he should be very attentive to their needs. He should keep the news releases coming and answer reporters’ telephone calls. When the president is on the road, the press secretary must keep the bar and refrigerator on the press plane well stocked and must see that reporters’ luggage is delivered intact and on time.

The rule of thumb, in short, is to keep reporters happy and make them think they are getting real news. It is not an easy task.

Among the least qualified in recent years, judging from his bad reviews, was President Ford’s second press secretary, former NBC correspondent Ron Nessen. He was a hard-driving and hard-working spokesman but he was not temperamentally suited for the job. He was combative, sensitive to criticism, and given to sarcastic putdowns of his interrogators, traits he later acknowledged were not compatible with the position: “I think that, had I had the same kind of even temperament that Ford had, I wouldn’t have been so prickly. He was always kind to reporters, never showed his irritation. . . . I’m relatively thin-skinned; I don’t respond very well to criticism.”²⁰

One of the very best was Jimmy Carter’s press secretary, Jody Powell. In spite of Powell’s frequently expressed contempt for news people, his tart tongue, and temper tantrums, he was often compared to Steve Early, James Hagerty, and Pierre Salinger, the well-liked press secretaries who served Presidents Franklin Roosevelt, Dwight Eisen-

hower, and John Kennedy, respectively.²¹ Veteran correspondent John Osborne of the *New Republic* was an unabashed admirer: “Jody Powell . . . is one of the best White House press secretaries I’ve dealt with, off and on, over the past forty-five years. In some respects he is *the* best.”²²

Three personal assets rescued Powell from perdition: He was extremely close to the president and thus spoke with authority, he was undeniably intelligent, and he had an unfailing, if sometimes acerbic, sense of humor. Whatever their reservations about Powell, most reporters found themselves guffawing as he broke up tense situations and turned aside harsh questions with witticisms, one-liners, and pointed barbs. In 1977, for example, the Russians booted an AP correspondent out of the Soviet Union, and a reporter asked Powell if President Carter would respond in kind. Retorted the press secretary: “We did discuss something along those lines. It was our feeling that if the Russians got to kick an AP correspondent out of Moscow, we ought to get to kick an AP correspondent out of here.”²³

“What saves Jody much of the time from just being totally hostile is that he does have a sense of humor,” said NBC’s Judy Woodruff. “He kids hard and is kidded hard back.”²⁴ Jack McWethy of *U.S. News & World Report* summed up the Georgia-born press secretary’s personality this way: “Powell is an amazing combination of country bumpkin and a very, very slick PR man. He is not dumb by any means. And he’s an extremely good deflector of serious questions with humorous replies. On his bad days, those replies are very barbed. On his good days, he’s as funny as a stand-up comic. For the reporters who depend on that daily briefing, it can be very frustrating.”²⁵

The Reagan White House suffered an enormous setback on March 30, 1981, when a would-be assassin attempted to take the president’s life. Not only was Reagan hospitalized with a bullet to the chest, but his press secretary, James Brady, suffered severe brain injury. Had he not been debilitated, Brady probably would have been ranked with the best White House spokesmen. He had access to Reagan and his top aides and spoke with authority. He is intelligent, irreverent, articulate, affable, and possessed of a quick, wry wit. Reporters liked “the Bear,” as the six-foot, 235-pound Brady was affectionately nicknamed. He was ideally suited for the task of keeping the White House press corps occupied and entertained.²⁶

In the wake of Brady’s injury, the job of briefing reporters every day fell to deputy secretary Larry Speakes, a forty-four-year-old former newspaperman from Mississippi. Reagan’s top advisers were displeased with his performance, however, and arranged for the briefing duties

to be shared with the assistant for communications, David Gergen, a gangly, forty-one-year-old, Yale- and Harvard-educated lawyer. But he proved vague and guarded in his responses to reporters, so the daily briefing once again became Speakes's exclusive province.²⁷

Speakes has matured into a competent handler of the White House press corps. He is not perceived as a member of Reagan's inner circle but is regarded as pleasant, unflappable, hard working, responsive, and at times even humorous. He has become the "cowboy" of the Reagan press operation; through a combination of cajolery and threats and an occasional push, he has managed to keep reporters assembled into a reasonably intact herd. On March 24, 1983, for example, Speakes stated that no "internal investigation" of White House contacts with officials of the scandal-ridden Environmental Protection Agency was underway. The following day he acknowledged that an internal review was being conducted. NBC correspondent Chris Wallace characterized Speakes's earlier response as a "lie," and the press secretary took umbrage. "That's the most serious charge that you can level at me," he snapped. Following the briefing, Speakes said to Wallace: "I'm not having anything to do with you Chris. You're out of business as far as I'm concerned."²⁸ When reporters complained about how one news event was being handled, Speakes admonished them, "You don't tell us how to stage the news, and we don't tell you how to cover it."²⁹

How effective are Reagan's media specialists at shaping the news by dangling him in front of the press a few minutes at a time and by handing out nuggets of information one at a time? UPI's Helen Thomas commented: "We're pretty tightly managed and controlled. . . . They plan the day's story and try to keep our eye on that ball. We have only limited access to the president. We can go for days without seeing him. They seem to think that it is bad manners to ask him questions except under certain controlled conditions. Every day, they calculate what we do and how we jump."³⁰

The least controllable confrontation between president and press is the news conference, and few things are more indicative of the modern president's casual concern for the approbation of the national press than their indifferent approach to such meetings. In the age of television there are many easier, less perilous ways of delivering a message and projecting a desired image.

It is undeniably true that the presence of television cameras at news conferences has turned them into theater. The president usually comes across as a heroic castellan holding off a mob that has laid siege to the gates. Shouting reporters strive to get the attention of the president and of the electronic eye that will show family, friends and supervisors

how involved and important they are. But in our system of government, news conferences are the only opportunities the public has, through its press surrogates, to demand that a president defend his decisions and policies. Press conferences ought to be regarded by presidents as integral to the democratic process, but they are usually endured only when other television formats have been used to excess or when the clamor for a conference becomes embarrassing.

Gerald Ford was a refreshing exception. He seemed to thrive on press conferences. He made an effort to respond fully to questions, gracefully evaded queries he did not want to answer, and rarely showed anger over a hostile question. By the end of February 1975, however, White House reporters were complaining of too many press conferences. Not enough good questions were being asked, and the president was acting as if he was on a soapbox. "He has devalued the press conference," one newsman griped.³¹

As president elect, Jimmy Carter announced that he would hold regular press conferences once every two weeks, events permitting, and a minimum of twenty per year. He actually convened fifty-nine formal press conferences during his four years in office, twenty-one short of his goal.³² Carter should have met the press more often, for when he did he was usually a boffo performer. At a press conference on June 30, 1977, to cite just one example, the president began with the announcement that he was terminating the Defense Department program to build the B-1 manned bomber. His was a "lonely" task, he said, and this in particular was "one of the most difficult decisions that I have made." He then discussed U.S. relations with the Soviet Union, Israel, Taiwan, and mainland China, as well as domestic issues. The final question was asked by Lester Kinsolving, an Episcopal priest-journalist and right-wing gadfly. Given Carter's rigid views on monogamy, Kinsolving wanted to know, why didn't he do something about those people working for him who "were promiscuously with other women"? Carter smiled and said, "If there are some who have slipped from grace, then I can only say that I will do the best I can to forgive them and pray for them." The attending newsmen erupted in laughter and applauded as Carter departed. The following day *Washington Post* correspondent Haynes Johnson praised the president as being "alternately serious and deft, solemn and humorous. And he was always in command." The *Post's* editorial writers, however, wondered about the competence of the Washington press corps: "Over the years, presidents have occasionally complained that Washington reporters seem to live on a different planet than the rest of the country

does. Any citizen watching the press conference . . . might have come to the same conclusion.”³³

In the Reagan White House press conferences seem to rank with cancer and airplane crashes as things to be avoided. During his first year in office the president called six formal meetings with the press. His seventeenth press conference was held in the twenty-eighth month of his tenure.³⁴

Reagan is not the most energetic of presidents; he does not like to deal with detail, prefers instead to delegate it, and spends his limited hours in the office making big decisions. When a press conference can no longer be avoided, therefore, he must work hard to master the minutiae he has previously shirked. Even after studying his briefing books and partaking in practice sessions, however, his press conference performances have often been sloppy. His answers frequently have been too sweeping and simplistic; he has braced his opinions with facts and figures pulled from the air; he has attempted to support his conclusions with evidence that is distorted or does not exist.

The president's media advisers have thus been compelled to search for ways to control press conferences as tightly as possible. Reagan is urged to study and rehearse. Reporters are instructed to keep their seats and quietly raise their hands when they have a question. A lottery was once used to determine the order of questioners, but network officials complained when their correspondents did not get picked so the idea was dropped. The president is provided with seating charts and photographs and first names of reporters so he can call on the journalist of his choice and make it appear that he is on intimate terms with the person asking the question. Prior to March 31, 1982, Reagan's press conferences were held in the afternoon; thereafter they were moved to the prime-time evening hours to deny reporters and producers for the evening news shows the opportunity to prepare film clips of, and commentary on, his bloopers. Seating arrangements for reporters are carefully calculated. There is some concern, for example, that Reagan may be asked questions as he makes his exit and utter an ill-considered, off-the-cuff answer. “We keep the nuts and dodos off the first row on the right so they can't grab him on the way out,” said a senior White House aide. The front section on the right is stacked with what are called “known friendlies,” reporters thought to be sympathetic to Reagan and not inclined to ask difficult questions. The president is then told by his media team that when he is confronted with an uncomfortable line of questioning, he should “go to the right.”³⁵ At a press conference on July 28, 1982, Reagan tried what might be called the “McClendon bailout.” He called on Sarah McClendon, a

feisty, dogged veteran correspondent for a group of small newspapers who has a penchant for asking tough but offbeat questions. This time the McClendon bailout backfired: she demanded to know why Reagan was suppressing a Justice Department investigation on discrimination against women. As he fumbled for answers, she peppered him eleven times with questions and caustic comments.³⁶

Evasion

While the Washington press corps is kept occupied and content with appeasement tactics, the president seeks to go over their heads and address the public directly, primarily through the use of television. The leader of the nation can thus chat with the people without having his remarks filtered through the press. He can make announcements, allow himself to be interviewed, even arrange events to demonstrate to the public what a decent, honest, strong, compassionate, presidential person he is. Whatever he chooses to do, the cameras will be there; the networks need him as much as he needs them.

Take Jimmy Carter, for example. Sometimes it seemed that every move he made was designed to impress the television audience with his credentials as a leader. "No administration in the television age has studied the methods of the medium more religiously than this one," wrote *Boston Globe* reporter Curtis Wilkie in November 1980. "And none has designed its actions more accordingly." The Carter White House lacked a theme, Wilkie continued, but it had a scheme:

Carter went into office with the idea of using television to his own advantage, and from his walk down Pennsylvania Avenue on his Inauguration Day to his first "fireside chat" in a cardigan sweater to his more recent appearances in the White House press room to deliver personal statements, it has all been orchestrated with TV in mind. . . .

The scheme was to maintain an endless campaign. . . . The goal of Jimmy Carter and his coterie of advisers has always been simple and singular: To promote and perpetuate Jimmy Carter as president. Carter's photogenic grin and glib speaking qualities are their political platform and television is their political machine.³⁷

Carter's public relations specialists did seem obsessed with television. "The presidency has become an ongoing series for television," communications director Gerald Rafshoon once said.³⁸ Tony Schwartz, a media consultant who helped produce Carter's campaign commercials, offered this candid remark: "Whether it's Coca-Cola or Jimmy Carter, what we appeal to in the consumer or voter is an attitude. We don't

try to convey a point of view, but a montage of images and sounds that leaves the viewer with a positive attitude toward the product regardless of his perspective."³⁹

Carter's image team was particularly adept at staging media events that resulted in favorable coverage for the White House and simultaneously satisfied the networks' appetite for visual drama. One of the preferred varieties of this genre was the road show; the most telegenic one was a 660-mile, 47-stop trip down the Mississippi River from St. Paul to St. Louis aboard an old-fashioned steamboat, the *Delta Queen*, in August 1979. It was billed as a "working vacation," during which Carter would push his energy program. It was, in fact, a political campaign swing—as *Time* magazine put it, "a waterborne version of the whistle-stop tour."⁴⁰

Although a presidential road show has many public relations advantages, it has one inherent shortcoming: Newsmen cannot be controlled as tightly as when they are confined to the White House press room. Photographers and television crews sometimes catch the president in an embarrassing situation or making an unbecoming gesture.

As the *Delta Queen* excursion was being planned, Jody Powell drew up some stern rules to control press coverage: photographers and television camera crews would be allowed to film the president only in designated areas and during stipulated periods; news agencies and magazines would not be permitted to purchase photographs taken by tourists; pictures published by local newspapers could not be distributed nationally; no photographs could be used without White House approval. The restrictions were promulgated on the grounds that Carter desired some privacy. "We can't have a situation in which the president is followed by a pack," grumbled Powell.⁴¹ Said another White House aide: "If the press has its way, you'd have a goddam bazaar all over the boat."⁴² The *Washington Star*, however, had a different viewpoint: "Now, if Mr. Carter were a rock-and-roll star or a business tycoon or a sports celebrity, he probably could get away with those guidelines. But he isn't. He's the president of the United States, and his constituents are picking up a fair piece of the tab for the trip and its presidential trappings. If they want a look at his grin as he sails past Hannibal and St. Louis, they're entitled."⁴³

The news agencies and magazines agreed and informed Powell they would boycott the trip. Staff photographers would not be assigned to cover it. Hugo Wessels of UPI notified Powell by letter that his news agency would "pursue such other avenues as may be open to us" to guarantee that subscribers received "adequate and unrestricted picture coverage."⁴⁴

That was hitting the White House media manipulators where it hurt the most: what good was a presidential trip if you could not stage photo opportunities? Powell relaxed the rules.⁴⁵

Carter, Rosalynn, and daughter Amy bounded up the red-carpeted gangplank of the stately sternwheeler in St. Paul as a crowd of several hundred watched and a Dixieland band played "When the Saints Go Marching In." As the vessel crept down the river at three miles per hour, boats full of sightseers circled it. At night people camped by the river. Smiling and waving Carter repeatedly yelled at almost everyone he spotted. "Hi, I love you," he said. At scheduled stops and at virtually every lock and dam, he plowed into the crowds, shaking hands and kissing babies. While the ship's calliope bleated out "God Bless America," the president urged onlookers to help "make the greatest nation on earth even greater." In rain and fog and at all hours of the day and night, he preached his energy ethic: turn your thermostats down, insulate your homes, drive less, drive slower, use car pools. He fished, danced, drank gin-and-tonics, gazed through binoculars at the shoreline. He also insisted on jogging every day. The first morning, he was up at 6:30 a.m., doing twenty-two laps around the deck. But the passengers sleeping below complained about his clomping feet, so for the next six days, he obligingly jogged ashore. He hosted a radio talk show for forty-five minutes in Davenport, Iowa. He presided over a town meeting on a gentle bluff overlooking the river in Burlington, Iowa, and gushed when a citizen named Gertrude Gerdom asked him if he had caught any fish. "Gertrude, that is the kind of question I never get from the Washington press corps," Carter said. "I love you, Gertrude."⁴⁶

As the *Delta Queen* pulled into St. Louis, Carter was greeted with a spectacular finale carefully arranged by his media men. A flotilla of tugboats and other vessels surrounded the steamboat; fireworks shot into the sky; fire hoses spouted water high into the air; a multicolored hot-air balloon carried aloft the words, "Hello, Jimmy." After a reception with local politicians, the president flew back to the White House, and then went on to Camp David for a rest from his "vacation."⁴⁷

With the election of Ronald Reagan the age of the television presidency burst into full flower. As journalist David Halberstam wrote about the 1980 campaign, "Politics is television, television is entertainment, and entertainment is politics."⁴⁸ When the campaign ended, a professional actor became the president of the United States.

The fact that most of the fifty-four films that Ronald Reagan appeared in were of the grade-B variety is deceiving: the man is an excellent actor. His every gesture, every bob of the head, every smile,

chuckle, and wave of the hand is practiced. He is comfortable in front of the camera and knows it is his friend.⁴⁹

His closest aides, some of them trained public relations specialists, know it too. The world is their “telestage,” to use Halberstam’s word, and Ronald Reagan is their star performer.⁵⁰ Events are plumbed weeks in advance to determine how they can be exploited for television. Reagan is told only what scene he will be playing; he needs no direction. As former Reagan aide Lou Gerig put it, presuming to advise the president on the use of television “would be like attempting to advise the Pope on the subject of Catholicism.”⁵¹

No example better illustrates the attitude and expertise of Reagan’s television team than the July 1980 GOP convention in Detroit. The entire four-day event was scripted as a television show that would be played to an audience of 40 million viewers. “The whole idea,” said the convention’s program director, Ken Reitz, “is to make the event into a TV production instead of a convention. The most important thing we can get out of our convention is TV coverage.”⁵²

As the network cameras looked on, the first-night festivities began with the pledge of allegiance led by crooner Pat Boone. Country-western singers Glen Campbell and Tanya Tucker sang the national anthem, and evangelist Billy Graham delivered the invocation. Then followed an hour of patriotic performances by singers and entertainers Susan Anton, Vicki Carr, Buddy Ebsen, Chad Everett, Dorothy Hamill, Michael Landon, Vicki Lawrence, Wayne Newton, Donny and Marie Osmond, Ginger Rogers, Jimmy Stewart, Lyle Waggoner, and Efrem Zimbalist, Jr. The balloting came on the third night, and when Montana’s twenty votes gave Reagan his victory, the crowd leaped to its feet. Precisely on cue twelve thousand red, white, and blue balloons fell from the ceiling, and the band struck up a series of Sousa marches. On the fourth and final evening Reagan moved to center stage. He delivered his acceptance speech artfully, as if he were speaking extemporaneously; in fact he was using a teleprompter that displayed the words on transparent glass. At the end Reagan asked the conventioners to join him in a few moments of silent prayer. The hall fell quiet until the candidate dramatically broke the silence with the words, “God Bless America.” The crowd erupted into a twenty-minute ovation and sang along as the band played “God Bless America” and “This Land Is Your Land.” Republican Governor Robert Ray of Iowa pronounced Reagan’s performance “dynamite.” Exulted Ray, “He touched the soul of America. He’s off to a flying start.”⁵³

Presidential advisers are keenly aware that the successful exploitation of television requires that the viewing public have a positive image of

the man in the White House. They spend hours conjuring up ways to project such an image as well as protect the president from anything that may cause the public to perceive him negatively. The offensive (as opposed to defensive) techniques are generally designed to show that the president is a nice guy, is certainly head and shoulders above anybody the opposition could put forth, and is above all a leader—strong, forceful, above politics, presidential.

When the nation's medical experts recommended in 1976 that a massive inoculation program be undertaken to protect citizens against an expected epidemic of swine flu, Gerald Ford stepped forward and took his shot—in front of the television cameras. With his Whip Inflation Now (WIN) campaign, Ford tried to demonstrate that he was capable of leading the nation out of its economic doldrums. But his simplistic approach—"take all you want but eat all you take," ride bicycles, search the trash for waste—was heartily jeered by cartoonists, columnists, and commentators. In May 1975 a U.S. merchant ship, the *Mayaguez*, and its thirty-nine crewmen were seized by a Cambodian patrol boat. Ford called in the Marines and ordered air strikes against targets on the Cambodian mainland, and the ship and its crew were released within two days. Much to the dismay of the White House media team, however, Pentagon spokesman Joe Laitin leaked the news of the rescue and stole the president's thunder. But Ron Nessen came up with a scheme to remind everyone it was Jerry Ford who led the nation through the crisis: "I had an idea how Ford still could get press attention at his moment of success. 'Look, we have one thing that Laitin doesn't have,' I suggested. 'We have the president. Why doesn't the president go out and announce the recovery of the *Mayaguez* and the crew on live television, in the middle of the Johnny Carson show?' 'That's a good idea,' Ford agreed."⁵⁴

Because Jimmy Carter put so much emphasis on presenting himself as a humble man of the people, looking like a leader was sometimes a difficult task. But his media specialists tried to portray him as a populist who could also play the provost.

Most important was physical appearance. Prior to the first Ford-Carter debate in 1976 Carter's television adviser, Barry Jagoda, demanded that the taller Ford stand in a depression in the stage. Barring that, said Jagoda, Carter should be permitted to stand on a riser. Jagoda also argued that Ford should be addressed by questioners as "Mr. Ford" instead of "Mr. President." The demands were rejected by Ford's image experts.⁵⁵ In 1978 Carter started jogging and was soon running up to six miles a day. His weight fell, and aides informed

him he was no longer telegenic. He promptly cut back his running to three miles per day.⁵⁶

Carter also made a conscious effort to act presidential. Among other things this meant he had to appear deeply concerned and hard working. An NBC crew filming a day in the life of the president “caught” Carter complaining because he had to take an hour away from his paperwork to talk to anchorman John Chancellor. While preparing a speech on energy in July 1979, Carter sent for a network camera crew so they could film him working in rolled-up shirtsleeves.⁵⁷

Acting presidential also called for an occasional display of toughness. When Carter purged his cabinet in July 1979, it was generally seen as a deliberate effort to demonstrate that the ship of state was being guided with an iron hand.⁵⁸ At a White House buffet for eighty congressmen in June 1979, Carter was asked what he thought of Senator Edward Kennedy’s hints that he would challenge the president in the 1980 primaries. “If Kennedy runs in ’80,” Carter responded, “I’ll whip his ass.” “Excuse me, Mr. President,” said Congressman William Brodhead of Michigan from across the table, “what did you say?” “I don’t think the president wants to repeat what he said,” interjected Connecticut congressman Toby Moffett. “No, I’ll repeat it,” said the born-again Baptist president. “If Kennedy runs in ’80, I’ll whip his ass.”⁵⁹

Given Ronald Reagan’s fundamental disinterest in all but the pageantry of the presidency, he presents a stiff challenge to the image merchants who seek to sell him as a forceful, involved leader. They try, though, and for the most part are successful. In an effort to portray him as a leader of all the people, for example, they arranged to kick off his 1980 campaign in the shadow of the Statue of Liberty. One thousand people representing various ethnic groups were bused in to hear Reagan condemn Jimmy Carter’s treatment of the common folk. “The Lady standing there in the harbor has never betrayed us once,” he said. “But this administration in Washington has betrayed the working men and women of this country.” News photographers and camera crews worked to capture the candidate as he closed his performance with a dramatic embrace of Stanley Walesa, father of Polish strike leader Lech Walesa.⁶⁰

The “flood gimmick” has occasionally proved a useful device to divert the public’s attention from Reagan’s lengthy vacations and his troubles with Congress. When he was under fire in March 1982 for his conservative economic program, his advisers arranged a quick stop at a flood site in Fort Wayne, Indiana, where he was photographed as he helped a flood-control crew pass sandbags.⁶¹ In January 1983, following a week-long stay at the Palm Springs estate of millionaire

Walter Annenberg, Reagan landed in the flood-ravaged community of Monroe, Louisiana, and helped fill sandbags for eleven minutes as the television cameras looked on. He then hopped aboard a Salvation Army jeep and made his way through two feet of water to a radio station where he was to deliver a short address. At one point Reagan stopped and waited for the camera crews to get ahead so they could film him as he arrived in the jeep.⁶²

A leader must have followers, of course, and the Reagan media team endeavors to assemble photogenic crowds for the president. When Reagan returned from a ten-day trip to Europe in June 1982, he was greeted at Andrews Air Force Base by 15,000 cheering, flag-waving diplomats and government workers, most of whom had been assembled by the White House and hauled to the arrival gate in rented buses. A smiling president professed his "complete surprise" at the festive welcome and then delivered his prepared remarks.⁶³

Few occasions afford a better opportunity for a leader to show his mettle than an international summit, so when the heads of state of seven industrialized democracies gathered in Williamsburg in late May 1983 for a U.S.-hosted discussion of the world economy, the White House media maestros geared up for a major effort. On April 25 National Security Council director William Clark circulated a memorandum, stamped "Confidential," to key advisers outlining a "Framework for Public Affairs Strategy." The "primary perception" that would be sought, wrote Clark, was this: "The President as *leader of vision*, whose policies spearheaded U.S. recovery and help strengthen the West as a whole (Reaffirmation of U.S. Leadership Role)." Clark also listed "Some Desired Headlines," among them these: "President's Domestic Policies Highlight Summit Deliberations," "Reagan: Jobs a Central Subject at Williamsburg," and "Summit Partners Praise Williamsburg Organization."⁶⁴ During the conference the only journalists allowed near the president, with rare exception, were photographers and camera crews. Reporters were largely confined to press tents. Hot food was available around the clock, but hot news was available only when official spokesmen spooned it out.⁶⁵ As the image team planned, Reagan dominated the headlines and news shows, avoided major gaffes, and came across as an intelligent and strong chief executive well versed in international economics. Noted *Washington Post* columnist Richard Cohen:

This president is treated by both the press and foreign leaders as if he were a child. He earns praise for the ordinary, for what used to be the expected. His occasional ability to retain facts is cited as a triumph when it should, in fact, be a routine occurrence. . . .

The press, joined by foreign leaders and led by the pompon boys on the White House staff, wind up celebrating the mundane, and we all get the feeling we are watching home movies—look at Ronnie walk. . . .

How smart is Reagan? It's obvious.
A lot smarter than we are.⁶⁶

The past few presidents have maintained what is generally known as an office of communications, ostensibly fashioned to service the non-Washington press. It has, in fact, functioned as a public relations agency for the executive branch and is little more than another device designed to evade the press that directly covers the president. It would be more accurate to call it the office of propaganda. The presidential assistant who manages the office supervises the preparation of so-called fact kits—collections of statements, speeches, press releases, editorials, and newspaper clippings—which are routinely dispatched to the hinterlands press, special interest groups, and ethnic organizations. Nothing of a partisan nature is ever sent out with public funds, of course—just the facts that the White House press corps ignore. If it is deemed necessary to educate the editors around the nation in matters that are manifestly political, the Democratic and Republican National committees usually foot the bill.

In most administrations the head of the communications office also coordinates the activities of the public affairs offices of the various agencies of the executive branch; arranges for administration officials to hold regional briefings for reporters in various parts of the country; schedules speaking dates and television appearances for White House and cabinet officials; and brings out-of-town journalists—usually publishers, broadcast executives, editors, and columnists—to Washington to chat with the president or other top-level officials.

During most of Gerald Ford's twenty-nine months in the White House, the office of communications was supervised by deputy press secretary Gerald Warren and five assistants.⁶⁷ According to Ron Nessen the operation was conducted quietly to avoid undue publicity.⁶⁸ The fact kits, however, were a staple product. When Ford put forth a series of economy and energy proposals in January 1975, for example, Warren organized a mailing to hundreds of editors. He also arranged for administration officials to publish bylined newspaper editorials.⁶⁹

In the Carter administration the functions of the communications office were initially supervised by Jody Powell. But Powell lacked administrative skills and eventually surrendered many of his ancillary duties. Had he possessed any talent as an executive, he might well have created a communications empire. In November 1976, before

Carter was sworn in, the press secretary designate paid a visit to the White House to see how Ron Nessen organized his office. Nessen later told a reporter: "He [Powell] was curious about other parts of the White House that he thought might fall under his jurisdiction logically, such as speechwriting, advance and the photo office. They're not currently under us, but, you know, I think he's probably on the right track with that kind of view of organization, given the fact that he has a close relationship with Carter. It makes sense to put all the elements of White House communications under one man."⁷⁰

That is precisely how Powell proceeded to set up his office and organize his staff of forty-plus. Five divisions reported to him: the news and information staff, the news summary team, the speechwriters, the arrangers of television and radio appearances, and the office of media liaison (the bureau that administered to the needs of the hinterlands press). A deputy press secretary, Patricia Bario, was appointed to run this shop on a day-to-day basis.⁷¹

In July 1978, with Carter's popularity on the wane and his image as an inept leader gaining credence, Gerald Rafshoon, a professional public relations man who had been tinkering with Carter's image off and on since 1966, joined the White House staff as an assistant for communications and immediately began packaging and selling the president in a coherent fashion. He also began supervising the speechwriters and the press advance team and arranging photo opportunities and interviews for Carter and his aides. Powell, his kingdom now substantially reduced, readily admitted he had not been up to the task: "It was a fact. I never really got depressed about it. It was obvious to me I had bitten off more than I could chew. And I had two ways of looking at it. Either the problem was that there was more to do than anybody could handle, or anybody could have done it except for me." He chose to accept the first option, he said.⁷²

When Bario took charge of the office of media liaison, she promised to provide out-of-town reporters with the "same loving care" that Jody Powell lavished on their Washington colleagues. The media liaison staff thus became a font of knowledge about Jimmy Carter. A journalist could call and find out what tie Jimmy wore to his inauguration (the same "good luck tie" he had worn on primary election nights); his dimensions (five-foot-nine, 155 pounds; 33-inch waist, 39-inch chest); his favorite poet (Dylan Thomas); his favorite books (*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* by James Agee and *War and Peace* by Leo Tolstoy); his favorite spectator sport (stock car racing); his favorite automobile (a Studebaker Commander that he owned in 1948); his age when he first began to date (thirteen).⁷³

Bario also prepared and dispatched fact kits, regularly mailing packets of material—photographs, briefing transcripts, backgrounders on such issues as inflation, energy and foreign policy—to editors, columnists, special interest groups, and assorted individuals. Every few months a booklet entitled “President Carter Speaks on the Record” was sent to editors and broadcast news directors; a reporter in search of a presidential quote to round out a story had only to check the alphabetized list of issues to see what Carter had said on the subject at hand.⁷⁴ One survey revealed that the office of media liaison mailed an average of 35,551 items per month from June through September 1978.⁷⁵

With the March 1981 assassination attempt on Ronald Reagan and the disabling brain injury suffered by press secretary James Brady, it took about a year for the White House to organize an office of communications. Once it was done, however, the Reagan administration had put together what is probably the most efficient White House propaganda office ever assembled. David R. Gergen supervised the construction of the organization and now runs it. His official title is assistant to the president for communications, but it would not be inaccurate to describe him as a communications czar. His job, as he casually describes it, is to “hold an umbrella” over the press office, the speechwriting staff, the public affairs office (which coordinates the activities of other executive branch public information offices), and the media liaison office (which, as in the Carter administration, caters to the out-of-town press). In addition Gergen does long-range planning, which means that he keeps track of coming events and devises schemes to extract positive publicity from them.⁷⁶

Gergen has proved particularly adept at farming out purely partisan public relations projects to outside groups. When Reagan went before Congress in February 1981 to urge passage of his economic proposals, Gergen launched a campaign to enlist public support. Editors and columnists were brought to the White House for briefings by the administration’s economic experts, and television appearances were arranged for Reagan’s spokesmen. A volunteer committee was organized to sell the president’s economic package to the country; a public relations firm, Wagner & Baroody, was hired to handle the details and prepare fact sheets for newspaper editors, broadcast executives, trade associations, labor unions, and other special interest groups.⁷⁷ The effort to push through Reagan’s budget proposals was given an additional boost three months later when the White House, the Republican National Committee, and congressional Republicans launched a three-prong attack. Two dozen speakers were dispatched to the home districts of conservative Democrats whose votes the

administration needed; the national committee sent letters to 200,000 Republican contributors urging them to fill out enclosed postcards and mail them to House Speaker Thomas “Tip” O’Neill (D-Mass.); House Republicans, reacting to O’Neill’s warning to Reagan that he would have to “play hardball” to get his proposals passed, stood on the Capitol lawn and waved baseball bats for the television cameras.⁷⁸

Intimidation

There comes a time in every administration when the presidential-press relationship starts to turn sour. Usually it begins when the polls show the president’s popularity is dipping, or when a major effort to push a program through Congress falls flat, or when a high-level aide becomes embroiled in scandal. The press, which the public generally dislikes anyway, becomes an ideal scapegoat. Suddenly all those journalists who had heretofore demonstrated outstanding wisdom in carrying White House-fed stories about the president’s strength, intelligence, and endearing human qualities find their credibility challenged. They find themselves being chided for their obsession with “bad” news and find that government gumshoes are on the prowl for their sources. It is an extremely dangerous game because the more the president and his surrogate enforcers attack the press, the more the press tends to counterattack. Unless it is kept under careful control, it can get out of hand.

Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter were acutely aware that engaging personally in pitched battle with the press does not pay. By and large they kept whatever negative feelings they harbored about reporters carefully hidden and let their subordinates berate the press when it was deemed necessary. Ronald Reagan, who has an inherent distaste for confrontation anyway, has followed a similar pattern.

President Ford complained in private, sometimes bitterly, when he felt he had been mistreated by the media, but rarely voiced such feelings in public. Said one top official in the Ford White House, “My theory is that it bugs him nearly as much as it bugs me and others when he gets an unfair rap, but I can’t imagine him saying it out loud. It’s part of his political personality. Down deep he has this private rule: ‘Don’t attack the press.’”⁷⁹ Ford was upset, for example, when news stories and photographs depicted him as clumsy, and he griped to friends. After all he had been a college football player and was an active skier. But when asked by two *Washington Post* reporters how he felt about his doltish image, this was the president’s “complaint”: “Most of the critics . . . have never played in a ball game, never skied.

I don't know whether it is a self-defense mechanism in themselves or what, but I'm kind of amused at that. It doesn't bother me at all."⁸⁰

The Ford administration's chief enforcer was press secretary Ron Nessen. Some of his quarrels with reporters were premeditated, but most were the product of his hair-trigger temper. He did not appreciate, for example, a question posed by UPI's Helen Thomas at a Ford press conference and, at the next day's regular briefing, the press secretary rebuked the reporter by name. "We can take a break here for the filing of corrections," sneered Nessen, "if anyone wishes to do so."⁸¹

On occasion Nessen attempted to intimidate reporters with calculated tantrums, the most notable of which was a late June 1975 exhortation to reporters to cease their "blind, mindless, irrational suspicion and cynicism and distrust." Another premeditated outburst occurred while the Ford family was on vacation in Vail, Colorado, during the 1975 Christmas season. Ford took a spill on the ski slopes, and pictures of the presidential pratfall were prominently displayed on front pages across the nation. Nessen asked White House chief of staff Richard Cheney for advice on how to put an end to the stories about Ford's clumsiness, and Cheney suggested that the press secretary show some anger in background sessions with the press. The following day Nessen strolled into the press room and delivered a diatribe to a half-dozen reporters. The stories they had been writing, he fumed, were "the most unconscionable misrepresentation of the president. . . . He is healthy, graceful, and he is by far the most athletic president in memory."⁸²

Almost from the moment Ford took the oath of office, he and his key aides were engaged in a struggle to stop leaks of sensitive information. In October 1974, for instance, the White House ordered that no one receive economic statistics in advance save the administration's chief economist, Alan Greenspan, in order to plug premature leaks to the press.⁸³ In early January 1976 President Ford let it be known he was angry over published reports that the United States was secretly involved in the war in Angola and had attempted to manipulate the domestic situation in Italy.⁸⁴ A few weeks later CBS newsman Daniel Schorr obtained the secret report of a House Select Committee on Intelligence investigation of Central Intelligence Agency activities and passed it on to the *Village Voice*. A furious Gerald Ford offered House Speaker Carl Albert (D-Okla.) the full "resources and services of the Executive Branch" to probe the leak.⁸⁵ At about the same time the president dispatched to Congress a proposal that would, among other things, impose a fine of up to \$5,000 and a five-year prison term on

any government official who disclosed intelligence secrets, even if the disclosure were made after the official left public employ.⁸⁶

The press was not held in high esteem in the Jimmy Carter camp. Carter “thinks he’s ninety-nine percent smarter than anybody who’s around him,” said *New York Times* reporter James Wooten, who covered the Carter campaign and the first year of his administration. “He has no respect for scribes; he hates the press.”⁸⁷ This observation by an outsider was later confirmed by an erstwhile insider, Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs Hodding Carter. The president and his associates viewed “the press as the enemy,” said Hodding Carter in an interview with the *Boston Globe*. “They think that reporters are clods and animals and that you simply feed them.”⁸⁸

This was a curious attitude given the fact that throughout his political career, Carter was the beneficiary of generally favorable treatment by the press. He was “discovered” as the governor of Georgia and catapulted onto the national stage in 1971 when *Time* magazine featured him on a cover. The artist who painted Carter’s portrait for the magazine was instructed to make him look like John F. Kennedy.⁸⁹ In early 1976 *Time* ran a full-page ad in about two dozen magazines, ostensibly to tout its election coverage. The ad depicted Carter sitting in a rocking chair, as John Kennedy had, and served to promote his fortunes as much as those of *Time*.⁹⁰ After Carter had been in office almost two years, *National Journal* correspondent Dom Bonafede concluded that “few modern presidents have enjoyed more favorable treatment at the hands of the news media.”⁹¹

But Carter saw it differently. As a candidate in 1976 he complained that the press concentrated on his mistakes while treating Ford with deference.⁹² Four years later it was Reagan who got the free ride from the news media.⁹³ *Boston Globe* correspondent Martin Nolan once described Carter’s attitude toward the press as one of “bemused contempt.”⁹⁴ Journalist Sanford Ungar noted during the 1976 campaign that Carter “has his own list of ‘enemies’ in the press, believes that some of the negative articles about him are motivated by pure maliciousness, and forgives very slowly, if ever, for any coverage that he considers unfair.”⁹⁵

But Carter managed, for the most part, to restrain whatever vindictive urges he may have felt. The intimidation tactic he used most often was the simple tongue lashing. During an appearance on NBC’s “Meet the Press” shortly before the 1976 Democratic convention, for example, Carter was asked a question about his coverage. “That assumes the press is unbiased, which I have a hard time doing,” he said.⁹⁶ In August 1979 ABC news reported that U.S. intelligence agencies had planted

an electronic eavesdropping device in the New York apartment of UN ambassador Andrew Young and thus knew in advance of a secret and controversial meeting between Young and an official of the Palestine Liberation Organization. Later Carter spotted ABC's White House correspondent, Sam Donaldson, and snapped, "You were wrong." Replied the newsman, "We're concerned with accuracy." As he stalked off, Carter growled, "I wish you would demonstrate it."⁹⁷

Among individual journalists no one raised Carter's choler with more consistency and intensity than syndicated columnist Jack Anderson, who fixed the president in his sights shortly after Carter settled in the White House. Anderson broke numerous significant stories about budget director and presidential friend Bert Lance, presidential brother Billy Carter, and presidential friend and adviser Dr. Peter Bourne. But the day that Carter became an implacable Anderson hater was August 18, 1980, when the columnist published the first of a five-part series charging that the president was planning to rescue the American hostages then being held in Iran by ordering a major invasion of that nation. Moreover, wrote Anderson, Carter intended to schedule the operation during the final weeks before the presidential election. The story, Anderson later said, came from disgruntled Democratic appointees and sources with access to classified documents prepared for the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The White House responded with a furious denial: "The suggestion that this or any other administration would start a war for political benefit is grotesque and totally irresponsible. The allegation made by Jack Anderson is absolutely false." Several of Anderson's clients, including the *Washington Post*, refused to publish the series. The *Post* claimed it "could find no substantiation for the assertions in Anderson's column."⁹⁸ Other news organizations published stories that tended to support the columnist's charges. On August 16, 1980, for example, UPI cited the upcoming Anderson columns and reported that "Congressional sources say the administration has fashioned a new plan to rescue the fifty-two American hostages in Iran."⁹⁹ Eight months later journalist Richard T. Sale reported in the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* that following the unsuccessful hostage rescue attempt in April 1980, Carter had instructed "the Joint Chiefs of Staff to develop an even larger, more powerful military operation against Iran."¹⁰⁰

Jimmy Carter, however, remained defiant. When a television reporter asked him on October 21, 1980, to respond to the Anderson columns, Carter snapped, "Jack Anderson is the one columnist in this nation who habitually lies."¹⁰¹

Although Carter usually managed to avoid direct confrontation with reporters, he had in his inner circle a press kicker who seldom hesitated to make use of his considerable talent. And White House reporters were well aware that when Jody Powell jumped on them, he was acting as Carter's surrogate. "Jody pretty well reflects the mood of the president," said the *Washington Star's* Phil Gailey. "When Jody is pissed off at the press, you can bet the president is pissed off."¹⁰²

Many times, of course, Powell's temper tantrums were merely spontaneous bursts of anger. White House correspondents believed, however, that he often had an ulterior motive when he snarled at them. "Jody practices winning through intimidation," said one veteran reporter. "He can bully reporters and hopes you'll be a little less aggressive next time."¹⁰³ Chris Ogden of *Time* magazine agreed: "There was a certain bit of the bully to him. You had to yell back at him or he'd spot it as a weakness."¹⁰⁴

Shortly after Carter took office Powell took umbrage at an AP story on the administration's arms limitations proposals. He roused reporter Rick Meyer out of bed at 6:15 A.M. and bawled him out. When the *Washington Post* reported in early 1978 that White House chief of staff Hamilton Jordan had spit a drink down the blouse of a female customer at a Washington singles bar, Powell went into a rage. He labeled the story "sleazy crap," issued a thirty-three page denial and, in the words of John Osborne, "rebuked and harangued the assembled White House press corps for days afterward and expanded the lectures and protests in prolonged telephone calls—one lasting forty-five minutes—to individual reporters"¹⁰⁵

Jimmy Carter and his top aides were obsessed by leaks of sensitive and embarrassing information and engaged in an unceasing campaign to contain them. During one search for reporters' sources in the spring of 1979, investigators in two government departments told *New York Times* correspondents that they were looking for "an example—a case that would really slam an employee and possibly embarrass the news organization that dealt with him."¹⁰⁶

Carter's concern over leaks became evident in February 1977, a month after he was sworn in, when he ordered that the number of officials who enjoyed total access to intelligence information be cut from forty to five.¹⁰⁷ When the details of a National Security Council meeting were reported in the press in August 1977, a gag order quickly made its way down through the White House hierarchy.¹⁰⁸ Two months later the White House launched what one official called a "witch hunt supreme" in search of the individual who had whispered to reporters the details of tax reform proposals then under consideration.¹⁰⁹

Early in 1978 Jack Anderson began publishing excerpts of the minutes of cabinet meetings. The documents were dry—Carter and his colleagues seemed to spend much of their time reviewing their press notices and carping about negative and “inaccurate” news accounts of their activities—but that apparently mattered little to the president. A leak was a challenge, and it had to be plugged. The president who entered office vowing to hold open cabinet meetings ordered his cabinet secretary, Jack Watson, to investigate the leak of the minutes and submit a memorandum on his progress. Instructed the president, “We’ve got to stop Jack Anderson putting in his column what’s going on at cabinet meetings.”¹¹⁰ Time and again, the subject came up. Item 6 in the minutes of August 7, 1978, for example, stated, “The president asked that cabinet members treat the minutes of the cabinet meetings with the care that should be given confidential documents. He said that for the last several cabinet meetings, Mr. Watson has been distributing the minutes to cabinet members marked ‘for their eyes only.’”¹¹¹

Carter’s concern about leaks seemed particularly intense in the spring and summer of 1978. In April he summoned senior White House staff members and cabinet officials to Camp David to discuss how they might iron out their differences. One of their biggest problems, said the president, was leaks. They had to stop cutting each other up in the press. They should begin practicing the art of taciturnity, he instructed, by remaining silent about what went on at that very conference. “Only Jody Powell is to do the talking on this meeting,” Carter said.¹¹² According to Health, Education and Welfare Secretary Joseph Califano, who was present at the meeting, the president also said: “The problems [news leaks] that we do have I attribute primarily to the White House. Some leaks from the White House are inexcusable—derogatory remarks about [certain cabinet officials]. If I could find out who did it, I would kick his ass out of the White House.”¹¹³

When it comes to the needs of the poor and deprived, Ronald Reagan’s political opponents have said, the president has a warm smile and a cold heart. Journalists could say the same thing about his attitude toward them: he is probably the best-liked menace to a free press since Theodore Roosevelt, who fulminated about muckrakers and filed libel suits against publishers and editors.¹¹⁴

The amiable, avuncular Reagan is popular with the reporters who cover him, and this kindly sentiment has spilled over into their news stories. The president’s campaign press secretary and former political aide, Lyn Nofziger, is one of the most irascible and acerbic press critics on the national scene. But in March 1982 he had this to say about

the way reporters have treated Reagan: "Overall, I don't have any real complaints about the way the press has covered this administration."¹¹⁵ Wrote C. T. Hanson, one of the *Columbia Journalism Review's* Washington editors, "The White House press served with unusual frequency during Reagan's first two years as a kind of *Pravda* of the Potomac, a conduit for White House utterances and official image-mongering intended to sell Reagonomics."¹¹⁶

Reagan knows that one of his most valuable assets is his good press, and he has taken care to safeguard it. Like all other presidents he has privately bristled over things written and said about him; on occasion he has let his feelings get the better of him and voiced his complaints publicly. During the 1980 campaign he accused the press of giving too much credence to Jimmy Carter's criticisms of him. "I think they [the news media] have gone off half-cocked," Reagan fumed.¹¹⁷ In an interview with *TV Guide* published in March 1982, Reagan asserted that television newsmen were putting "a kind of editorial slant" on their stories about the U.S. effort to help the government of El Salvador defend itself against left-wing guerrillas. He expressed a wish that reporters would "trust us, and put themselves in our hands, and call and say, 'I have this story' when dealing with sensitive information."¹¹⁸ The day that news accounts of the interview appeared, Reagan sat down with reporters from the *Daily Oklahoman* and censured television journalists for their "constant downbeat" stories on the economy: "You can't turn on evening news without seeing that they're going to interview someone else who has lost his job or they're outside the factory that has laid off workers or so forth—the constant downbeat—that can contribute to slowing down a new recovery that is in the offing. . . . Is it news that some fellow out in South Succostash someplace has just been laid off that he should be interviewed nationwide?"¹¹⁹

Within twenty-four hours Reagan apparently realized he had escalated the presidential-press cold war to a dangerous level, and he digressed from a speech before the National Association of Manufacturers to offer a truce. "I hope I didn't touch a nerve with any of the press a few days ago," he said, "because I think that most of the time the overwhelming majority of them are doing a fine job."¹²⁰

With these and a few other exceptions President Reagan, like Ford and Carter, has depended on subordinates to keep the press in line. The person who most often reads the riot act to reporters is press secretary Larry Speakes. He has summoned White House correspondents to his office for lectures on their raucous behavior during press conferences. A reporter for the Independent Television News Association once interjected at a news conference with a pointed question,

and Speakes threatened to ban him from future sessions. The sentence was eventually commuted to exile in the back row of the cavernous East Room.¹²¹

In an offhand remark to a group of Massachusetts business executives in January 1983, President Reagan allowed that it was “hard to justify” the federal income tax on corporations. When the story was reported, Speakes chastised reporters for putting too much emphasis on it and accused them of “jumping up and down, licking their chops, clapping their hands and doing back flips.” In a speech to the National Association of Government Communicators a few days later, Speakes reproved the press for what he said was a twenty-year crusade against presidents: “My question to you is, can the modern presidency survive the modern media? Can any man in public office stand up to the daily drumbeat of morning newspapers and the flashing symbols of evening television shows? The steady denigration of the president has gone on for two decades. It has been directed not only at the president but at his use of presidential powers.” It was a chicken-and-egg situation, Speakes said: “Does the public perception that things are bad come first or does the public say things are bad after they’ve seen the bad news night after night?” What was needed, said Speakes, was a “good news” segment on the nightly news shows.¹²²

Communications director David Gergen is not as quick to challenge the press, but he occasionally wields a big stick. CBS news, for example, aired a documentary, “People Like Us,” on April 21, 1982. Anchored by reporter Bill Moyers, the show featured the stories of four poor or disabled people who were enduring hardships brought on by President Reagan’s budget cuts. “There’s no question but that federal programs are riddled with waste and fraud,” said Moyers in his concluding remarks. But in making his budget decisions, Reagan had “chosen not to offend the rich, the powerful and the organized,” opting instead to “take on the weak” by advocating budget cuts that fell “most heavily on the poor.”¹²³

The gripping report had thrown the spotlight on what one White House official called a “goddam touchy” issue: the public’s perception that Ronald Reagan is a rich man’s president who is heedless of the needs of the disadvantaged. Several times before the show was aired, Gergen demanded that the network include a response from the administration, but the requests were rejected on the grounds that the film had already been distributed to affiliates and that the network had given the administration’s point of view intensive coverage during regular news broadcasts.¹²⁴

After the documentary was shown, Gergen called in reporters for a series of briefings to rebut CBS's facts. "Frankly, this one was below the belt, and we're going to respond," Gergen himself said during one forty-minute session with newsmen. The individuals whom CBS had featured "clearly had difficulties in their lives," he said. "What we clearly have problems dealing with is a story that lays all the problems of that sort on Ronald Reagan's doorstep." He called on CBS to give the White House a half-hour in prime time "to present our side of the story." Once again the network refused. Although the White House counterattack failed, Gergen professed satisfaction. He had "put the media on notice," he said, "that when there is something unfair we're going to respond to it, so people will be more careful next time."¹²⁵

Verbal intimidation of journalists is but one of the tools presidents and their aides use to keep the lid on negative news. A far more pernicious tactic is the use of the government's vast resources to intimidate and locate reporters' sources and to restrict the transmission of information through the use of the secrecy stamp and other censorship devices. It is in this area that Ronald Reagan's cold heart threatens to freeze the flow of news.

The president, like his predecessors, does not like leaks—by which he does not mean acclamatory leaks but unauthorized leaks of bad news or of news that preempts his own announcements or actions. At times, according to one White House official, Reagan's concern over leaks amounts to "an obsession."¹²⁶ In February 1981 he returned from a weekend at Camp David in high dudgeon over a series of news stories about proposed foreign aid cuts. "He was ticked off and said so," said one of the president's aides. "He let it be known in no uncertain terms that fights over policy are not to be waged through the press."¹²⁷ A spate of stories in January 1983 about White House budget deliberations sent Reagan into what one presidential assistant called "a towering rage."¹²⁸ Declaring he had "had it up to my keister" with leaks, he ordered subordinates to issue "guidelines" to regulate contacts with the press by White House officials. David Gergen formulated the rules, which designated a small number of officials who would be permitted to speak about various subjects and required that all other staff members clear journalists' requests for information with the office of communications. "I would not call it a gag order," Gergen told reporters. "We are going to try and serve you to insure that we get a full and free flow of information."¹²⁹

Reagan and his top aides have occasionally launched investigations to find out who talked to newsmen. A *Wall Street Journal* article about

the 1982 congressional elections, for example, carried several quotes from anonymous White House officials, and the telephone logs were scrutinized in search of those who had spoken out of turn.¹³⁰ In March 1983 Reagan and his top aides discussed several options for nuclear arms limitation proposals that could be raised in negotiations with the Soviet Union. Details of the discussions appeared in the *Washington Post*, and the president's minions attempted to find the transgressor.¹³¹ On April 7, 1983, the *New York Times* printed part of the text of a National Security Council document outlining the administration's plans for containing the spread of Soviet and Cuban influence in Central America. National Security Adviser William Clark called in the FBI and instructed the agency to locate the person who had leaked the document.¹³²

President Reagan, in stark contrast to the six chief executives who preceded him, has also taken extraordinary steps to tighten government secrecy. He signed an executive order on April 2, 1982, that greatly extends the authority of government officials to classify national security information. The order, nineteen pages long, supersedes regulations promulgated by Jimmy Carter in 1978 and eliminates a requirement that government officials consider "the public's interest in access to government information" before stamping a document "Top Secret," "Secret," or "Confidential." The Reagan rules also do away with the requirement that information can be classified only if its disclosure would result in identifiable damage to the national security; the classified stamp may now be used only if unspecified damage "reasonably could be expected." In addition Reagan's executive order instructs government officials that when they are in doubt about which category of classification to use, they should always give the benefit of doubt to the higher level of secrecy.¹³³ That is merely the most outstanding instance of Reagan's efforts to stifle the flow of government information to the public. There have been many similar efforts, which, taken together, have weaved a noose that threatens to choke the First Amendment.

In December 1982 the Defense Department announced that polygraph tests would be given to military and civilian personnel selected randomly. One official told the *New York Times* that as many as 15,000 to 20,000 people could be examined. Pentagon spokesman Henry Catto, Jr., said the program was designed to reduce a "hemorrhage of information" to the press.¹³⁴ On March 12, 1983, the White House released without fanfare an executive order compelling all federal employees with access to classified information to submit to polygraph tests on request. Officials with security clearances, stated the order,

“may be required to submit to polygraph examinations, when appropriate, in the course of investigations of unauthorized disclosures of classified information.”¹³⁵

The same executive order imposed yet another, even more odious system of censorship on every government employee with access to classified information: whether actively employed in the government or not, they must now obtain written approval for everything they plan to say or write about their activities as a government official. The rules apply to books, book reviews, speeches, even works of fiction. Everything will be submitted to government censors, who will then determine what the public will be permitted to see, hear, and read. Such regulations had previously applied only to employees of the intelligence services.¹³⁶

The White House has proposed legislation and supported other efforts to restrict severely the types and amount of information obtainable under the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act. Outrageously high search fees have been routinely charged to persons who have asked for documents. Attorney General William French Smith decreed in May 1981 that information requested under the FOIA could be denied on purely technical grounds.¹³⁷ And in April 1983 an interagency task force set up by national security adviser William Clark recommended that the administration request legislation that would make it a federal crime for government employees to disclose classified information. Malfeasors could be punished by as many as three years in prison and a fine of \$10,000. The task force also suggested that unauthorized recipients of classified information, including journalists, be subjected to civil penalties.¹³⁸

These instances illustrate how the press manipulation strategy adopted by modern presidents—appeasement, evasion, and intimidation—is used to mold public perception and opinion. How did it all come about? Who taught the presidents how to appear accessible to the press without actually being so? Who showed them how to rope reporters off, how to restrict them to the press bus, and force them to listen to piped-in speeches and other events? Who formalized the daily press briefing and the photo opportunity? Who invented the daily news summary as a device to monitor the press? Who wrote the press secretary job description, which stipulates that the main task is to coddle the Washington press and convince reporters the president’s schedule is hot news? Who taught presidents how to exploit television by staging events, scripting political conventions, timing the descent of the balloons? Who perfected the techniques for taking the show

on the road? Who demonstrated for them the importance of image, the necessity for a good public relations program, and PR experts to implement it? Where did they learn the flood gimmick and the Statue of Liberty trick? Who invented the office of communications? Most important, who taught modern presidents that it does not pay to provoke the press personally, that it is better to let subordinates administer the spankings?

The answer: Richard Nixon. The post-Nixon presidents do not admit it and do not hang their diplomas on their walls. But they are all graduates of the Richard Nixon School of Media Manipulation.