

PROLOGUE: THE LESSONS OF 1972

CHAPTER 1

The 1976 presidential campaign officially began in “the snows of New Hampshire,” where Theodore White has instructed us to look. Gerald Ford was photographed snuggling a campaign worker’s baby; Ronald Reagan was recorded throwing snowballs—at the urging of camerapersons; and Jimmy Carter’s “peanut brigade” arrived without gloves or overcoats. James Reston noted somewhat indulgently in the *New York Times* that the presidential primaries are “the last of the Chautauqua circuit, of vaudeville, and the road shows of America.” In 1976, the “vaudeville” was quite different qualitatively from previous campaigns, partly because of the press’s changing role in the act.

First of all, an apparent shift in political power took place. The traditional party nominating system was strained by the overload of new primaries, new campaign rules, and new candidates. Whereas in 1972 there were twenty-three primaries, there were thirty in 1976, beginning with New Hampshire in

late February. In addition there were hundreds of district elections and caucuses to select convention delegates. There were literally hundreds of new rules governing everything from delegate selection to fund-raising practices. "It was possible to go to jail in 1976," said one campaign manager, "for doing things that were considered routine in 1972." And there was the large field of candidates, Republican and Democratic.

The overloads were the product of such well-intended measures as the Campaign Finance Act of 1974 and the changes engineered in the Democratic party rules at the 1968 and 1972 conventions. The resulting reforms were meant to curb the power of the big contributors and the party leaders; they succeeded—perhaps too well. In 1976, with the victory of the obscure, antipolitics candidate Jimmy Carter, we may have witnessed the beginning of what political scientist Walter Dean Burnham has described as "politics without parties."

The traditional political parties have been weakened by population shifts, by the breakdown of old coalitions, and by growing emphasis on mass media campaigns. They may finally be swamped by the wave of reform. Burnham and others believe that third and fourth parties are possible in 1980 or 1984. As the old parties flounder, the role of mediating among factions and building up one or another of the candidates has been shifting elsewhere. In the "bad" old days, a candidate had to reach a relatively small number of fat cat contributors and power brokers. Now each candidate must win over hundreds of delegates, potential campaign workers, and thousands of small contributors. To do this he must convince them that he is indeed a viable candidate by attracting the press's eye.¹ A magazine cover is one way; an appearance on "Face the Nation" or similar television programs, another. A generation ago a power broker like Colonel Jake Arvey of

Illinois could “make” an Adlai Stevenson. Now a Barbara Walters interview or a *New York Times Sunday Magazine* article can certify a candidate. More and more the press becomes a vehicle for the candidate who has studied the rules and the nominating process.

Increasingly, too, the press can be cajoled to do more than give or withhold printer’s ink or broadcaster’s air time; it also analyzes and interprets events (something its critics have always been urging it to do). The more complex and crowded the election process, the more interpretation there is. Interpretation may become power when the press can be persuaded to declare that Ronald Reagan ran strongly—or failed—in New Hampshire or when Walter Cronkite concludes an interview with Fred Harris by saying, “Harris is the most radical presidential candidate, occupying a position on the Democratic party’s Far Left.”

The new tasks of assessing and anointing political candidates are shifting to the press at a time when its own institutional forms are undergoing severe changes. The 1976 elections were the first post Watergate presidential election. Fatuous as that may sound, it has some real meaning. Well before the photo opportunities of New Hampshire, executives and editors of national news organizations held earnest meetings to plan their coverage of the 1976 campaign. Every four years, editors and executives always convene meetings to proclaim their intentions of reporting the election in a fresh, distinctive, and professional way. In 1976 there appeared to be greater resolve than usual.

Most reporters and editors acknowledged—as they prepared for 1976—that the press had not done a very good job of covering the 1972 presidential campaign. When pressed to say what the media did well in their 1972 presidential election coverage, these journalists usually cited the investigative work

of Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward (although neither was doing only political or campaign reporting) and—with surprising frequency—the warts-and-all sketches of the press-campaign process reported in Timothy Crouse’s book, *The Boys on the Bus*. After these names, though, the list trails off.

Reporters and editors usually mentioned three failures of performance. First, they had failed to recognize, and take seriously, the early rise of George McGovern; one reason this happened was the lack of appreciation of the then-new delegate selection rules (fashioned by, among others, George McGovern). While underplaying McGovern, the press overplayed the phantom candidacy of Senator Edmund Muskie. Most journalists—David Broder was a notable exception—took the Muskie press releases about the senator’s endorsement strength at face value. Muskie “won” the nomination at the starting gate and McGovern was initially written off, in part because of the familiar horse race mania with Louis Harris and George Gallup calling the field like track announcers. As James M. Perry later wrote in *Us and Them: How the Press Covered the 1972 Elections*: “We leaped into print to award the nomination to Muskie, even before the first of 23 primaries took place. We read Dr. Gallup’s famous poll and we leaped into print to write off George McGovern.” Transfixed by the horse race, the press was late in covering many of the issues of the campaign—a second failure in performance. It was not until late May, for example, that McGovern’s \$1,000 “demogrant” proposal received any close scrutiny, and even then it was mainly due to Hubert Humphrey’s prodding attacks in the last days before the California primary. The same was true of McGovern’s military defense programs.

Finally there was the notorious failure to flush out Richard Nixon and the entire Nixon campaign. The huge sums of ille-

gally raised money, the activities of CREEP, the full dimensions of the Watergate break-in and cover-up, Nixon's personal demeanor—all remained largely hidden. “We thought that Nixon would eventually come out and campaign and we would have access to him for questions,” recalls Broder. This failure was particularly galling not only because Nixon-CREEP was *the* story but also because every political reporter had come under the influence of Theodore White by 1972. Reporters worked hard to dig out the color, the quotes, and the scene setters (“snows of New Hampshire”) just as White had done in his presidential campaign narratives throughout the 1960s. As a result, by the end of the campaign they knew what McGovern press secretary Frank Man-kiewicz had done to McGovern campaign director Gary Hart (or vice versa) but nothing about what Nixon-CREEP had done to the country.

The determination to do a better job in 1976—“the media want to get their manhood back,” a friend once said—was admirable. Like analysis and interpretation, grit is a quality that the critics value. In 1976, the press's manhood was stiffened by another post-Watergate attitude, the strong antipolitics mood of the country. Our own eyes and ears, as well as the public opinion polls, informed us of the steady decline in public trust of national leaders and governmental institutions. Ever sensitive to trends, the press understood the message.

But how were they to cover politicians in a time of anti-politics? Not so long ago, the national politicians and the national press were linked in the friendliest of embraces. Crouse's book had a great impact because it revealed to a wider public what insiders already knew: that the press and the candidates needed and used each other. But even without reading Crouse, a half-attentive public sensed the partnership of newsmakers. “The audience could see them together at

news conferences and other public events,” explained Gary Hart, now a senator from Colorado. “In effect, they had their arms around each other’s shoulders.” The correct stance toward authority these days is more than arm’s length; the press wants distance between itself and the politicians. Post-Watergate, these old friends act as if they don’t even recognize each other. “Now a politician is considered guilty until proved innocent,” claims Frank Tivnan, the director of communications for Boston Mayor Kevin White’s successful re-election campaign of 1975. Electoral politics itself is suspect.

The performance of the national news organizations in their coverage of the 1976 campaign reflected the new press stance.² One of the lessons of 1972 was that the press generally missed the significance of the early McGovern campaign. One approach to prevent a repeat performance was to take all of the candidates seriously in 1976. The *New York Times*, with its customary thoroughness, began a comprehensive series on the presidential candidates in late December 1975, proceeding from the announced contenders to the unannounced, such as Senator Hubert Humphrey. Jimmy Carter appeared early in the series because the *Times* went down the list alphabetically. Because another lesson of 1972 was that political reporting had been distracted by the horse race psychology of the press, a number of strategies were devised to get at what are invariably called the “real issues.” CBS News defined these as what public opinion polling showed was on people’s minds. Beginning in mid-November 1975, CBS News broadcast a series of interviews called “Campaign ’76—The Candidates and the Issues.” According to Walter Cronkite, who did the on-camera interviewing, CBS “set out to find what will most concern the voting public” and then sought out the candidates to get their “hard answers to [these] hard issues.” Because the CBS News poll, a telephone survey of

1,126 persons of voting age during the week of October 6, determined that “the most often-mentioned issues” were inflation, unemployment, crime control, and the energy crisis, Cronkite asked each of the major declared candidates where he stood on those issues. One of CBS’s premises, according to Robert Chandler, who was in charge of the network’s campaign coverage, was that the public rather than the candidates ought to be able to define the issues.

NBC News was also committed to extensive polling. On the first Sunday of 1976, NBC aired “What America Thinks,” a poll of attitudes on subjects such as President Ford’s performance, abortion, drugs, and sex education in schools. NBC News returned to the American voters’ concerns periodically during the year and also made use of the analyses of public opinion specialist Richard Scammon. During the 1972 campaign ABC News designated Columbus, Ohio, as an “ABC city” to be visited periodically so that ABC could broadcast regular reports on Ohioans’ attitudes on the ABC evening news. In 1976, ABC hired the Louis Harris firm for analysis.

Newsday and the *Boston Globe* used the services of the Tubby Harrison group to poll during the election year. The *New York Times* linked up with CBS News to do its own polling, used an outside firm, and covered the continuing story of the polls in the campaign. The *Times*’s “precision journalism” specialist, Robert Reinhold, was sent to the University of Michigan to learn survey research techniques during the summer of 1975.

A number of news organizations also assigned reporters to follow the fund-raising activities of the candidates (“to find out where the money came from and where it is going,” as one afternoon newspaper editor explained) because they had missed the funding story in 1972. And because the “real” Richard Nixon proved so hard to find in 1972 (and 1968 and

1960), analyses of the demeanor and character of the candidates figured in the coverage plans of several organizations. Maynard Parker, then *Newsweek* magazine's national affairs editor, tried to "convey a sense of the man and what he is really like and not just simply how he stands on abortion or détente." *Time* did a "first round introduction" of the candidates—"where Fred Harris has been, who he is and what his record is"—but held off on the personalities and private lives of candidates until after the primaries, "when the field begins to thin out." According to Robert Ajemian, the *Time* editor in charge of the overall coverage, "We have to avoid the 1972 pitfall of getting overly excited about someone like a Muskie and then seeing it all change."

The *Washington Post*, in a series of Sunday pieces that began in December 1975, examined "the past record and reputation of each candidate." According to David Broder, the *Post*'s chief political writer, character analysis came in as a minor note to "establish" the candidate's personality early in the campaign and thus provide a reference point for the rest of the coverage. For example, in an article on Senator Henry Jackson, the reporter Jules Witcover described the senator as a dogged workaholic and loner who never relaxes on or off the Senate floor. This comment was intended to put the frequently repeated charge that Jackson "lacks charisma" in a proper context; it showed, said Broder, that Jackson "has never been one of the boys." After these candidate portraits and scene-setting pieces on the primary states, the *Post* went on to describe the campaign in terms of the issues emerging and the candidates' organizations.

A number of news organizations looked at the role of the press in the campaign. The *National Observer*, *Newsday*, and the *New York Times* assigned reporters to write regularly about the political coverage on television, political adver-

tising, and the use of consultants—the “media side” of the campaign. Other news organizations, such as NBC and CBS, watched and reported on how the press was watching and reporting the campaign, though they did not assign full-time correspondents to the story. There were other watchers watching the watchers who were watching the candidates. The Ford and Markle foundations and the Social Science Research Council made a study of the media-candidate “interface” its main research project of the campaign, funding some of the best political scientists in the country in a cooperative venture.

These topics—“money,” “polls,” “organization,” “personality,” and “media”—are known as *sidebar* stories, accompaniments to the day-to-day running story of what the candidates said and did. In 1976, the running story was suspect; after all, the press in its new-found sophistication clearly understood that candidates stage media events to attract television coverage every day and usually only repeat a standard speech or “position paper.” “We are leaving the daily story to the wire services,” a newspaper editor told me. “That way we can concentrate our own resources on other special stories.”

One problem with this is that the sidebars may squeeze out the substance. In its renewed zeal to give the inside story and the “feel” of the campaign, the press learned about the temperature and upholstery of the studio where the candidate appeared, the last-minute details of who wrote his speech, and the gaffes in his delivery. In short, they covered everything except what the candidate had said.

The wire services were supposed to provide this daily bread and butter of the campaign, but they had also grown restive about merely covering what the candidates said and did. In a memorandum distributed by United Press International in early November 1975, H. L. Stevenson, editor-in-chief and

vice-president, reported that UPI's Washington bureau was discussing "how to change traditional coverage patterns." When UPI's Newspaper Advisory Board surveyed one hundred client newspapers a few weeks earlier, board member Clayton Kirkpatrick, editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, had found that the client editors wanted "new approaches and new techniques" in UPI's political reporting. As Kirkpatrick reported,

Wrapups and interpretive stories are in strong demand. . . . Texts of speeches and official papers are seen by most editors to be of little value. Investigative reporting is highly prized. . . . It is not enough to follow candidates around taking down their speeches and putting them on the wire. Interviews with the candidate's staff, gathering in-depth reactions from crowds, reports on opposing candidates' positions on issues, wrapping up a few days of speeches in a single story, are devices that client editors recommend.

Where did this new journalistic aggressiveness leave the candidates and their plans? Every political campaign can be seen as a struggle for control between press and candidate in the sense that each has its own needs (for example, the "favorable" news versus the "real" news, the speeches versus the "in-depth reactions"). If we are to believe the press's own press notices, political journalism was more aggressive, more wary, and more independent of the candidates in 1976 than they had been in 1972. Successful politicians, however, successfully adapt to such changes.

If traditional politics are out and antipolitics are in, then some candidates will be antipolitical. Jimmy Carter, George Wallace, Ronald Reagan, and Edmund G. (Jerry) Brown all ran against the establishment in 1976—not a new stance, for Wallace and Brown had been making careers of antipolitics for years.

If on the other hand investigative reporting is in, then some

candidates will serve up scandal. In the 1975 Boston mayoral election, incumbent Mayor Kevin White, who had served for eight years, faced what looked like an easy challenge from Joseph Timilty, a relative unknown. The major Boston newspapers and area television stations started out by providing carefully balanced coverage. In the final weeks of the campaign, however, an investigative reporter at one of the Boston television stations produced alleged evidence of a 1970 shake-down of real estate people by the city assessor—a White appointee. *New Times* magazine, based in New York, ran the same corruption story (it turned out that the Timilty campaign had sold the writer and the story to the magazine). The White counterattack proceeded on about the same level; the police commissioner was the apparent source of a story depicting Timilty as the candidate of organized crime interests opposed to the reform-minded, incorruptible mayor. The overall tone of the campaign is perhaps best conveyed by a cover headline of the *Real Paper*, a Boston weekly; WHITE LIES, it proclaimed. White won, but in a surprisingly close race.

“Woodward and Bernstein were fine investigative reporters and they did the country a great service,” Frank Tivnan says. “But, journalisticly, they have spawned a batch of poor carbon copy ‘investigative reporters’ in a business that is nakedly imitative.” Tivnan is not an unbiased observer. Patrick Cadell, the Cambridge public opinion analyst and a Timilty campaign strategist (who later went to work for Jimmy Carter), saw what he judges to be a brighter side to the coverage: “There are certain standards we are beginning to expect in politicians and the press is becoming the arbiter of these standards.” In Boston, however, the newly aggressive, investigative instances of reporters proved to be ultimately malleable in the hands of the skilled political operatives. It was a premonition of the presidential campaign of 1976.

A related problem was that the new political sophistication of the campaign reporters was not always tempered with new political wisdom. Some reporters have been known to disdain to read candidates' speeches and position papers because they were press releases and somehow tainted. But as diligent and hard working as the best political reporters are, they may just not know as much as the politicians inside the campaign. Mark Shields, a Democratic party strategist who emerged as a key Carter aide, made the commonsense observation that the press is like the military—always ready to fight the next war with the weapons of the last. Everybody wants to cover the “real issues,” says Shields, but in 1974 a good part of the press thought the campaign was about social issues—the “three A’s” of acid, abortion, and amnesty—when, as Shields points out, the real story was about illegal money. In the campaign of 1976, everyone was geared up to do money when the important story was somewhere else.

In one place, however, the lessons of 1972 took hold in 1976. The media were one of the real stories of 1976, although not in the terms most commonly discussed. For reporters to tell us that Fred Harris's camper trip across the country was a “media event” or that Jimmy Carter changed into blue jeans before making an important political announcement was merely to touch the surface of the candidate-press relationship. Down deeper was more vital material that had to be uncovered: how the press used its power.