

# Why Americans Hate the Media by James Fallows

Why has the media establishment become so unpopular? Perhaps the public has good reason to think that the media's self-aggrandizement gets in the way of solving the country's real problems.

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In the late 1980s public-television stations aired a talking-heads series called *Ethics in America*. For each show more than a dozen prominent citizens sat around a table and tried to answer troubling ethical questions posed by a moderator. The series might have seemed a good bet to be paralyzingly dull, but at least one show was riveting in its drama and tension.

The episode was taped in the fall of 1987. Its title was "Under Orders, Under Fire," and most of the panelists were former soldiers talking about the ethical dilemmas of their work. The moderator was Charles Ogletree, a professor at Harvard Law School, who moved from panelist to panelist asking increasingly difficult questions in the law school's famous Socratic style.



During the first half of the show Ogletree made the soldiers squirm about ethical tangles on the battlefield. The man getting the roughest treatment was Frederick Downs, a writer who as a young Army lieutenant in Vietnam had lost his left arm in a mine explosion.

Ogletree asked Downs to imagine that he was a young lieutenant again. He and his platoon were in the nation of "South Kosan," advising South Kosanese troops in their struggle against invaders from "North Kosan." (This scenario was apparently a hybrid of the U.S. roles in the Korean and Vietnam wars.) A North Kosanese unit had captured several of Downs's men alive--but Downs had also captured several of the North Kosanese. Downs did not know where his men were being held, but he thought his prisoners did.

And so Ogletree put the question: How far would Downs go to make a prisoner talk? Would he order him tortured? Would he torture the prisoner himself? Downs himself speculated on what he would do if he had a big knife in his hand. Would he start cutting the prisoner? When would he make himself stop, if the prisoner just wouldn't talk?

Downs did not shrink from the questions or the implications of his answers. He wouldn't enjoy doing it, he told Ogletree. He would have to live with the consequences for the rest of his life. But yes, he would torture the captive. He would use the knife. Implicit in his answers was the idea that he would do the cutting himself and would listen to the captive scream. He would do whatever was necessary to try to save his own men. While explaining his decisions Downs sometimes gestured with his left hand for emphasis. The hand was a metal hook.

Ogletree worked his way through the other military officials, asking all how they reacted to Frederick Downs's choice. William Westmoreland, who had commanded the whole U.S. force in Vietnam when Downs was serving there, deplored Downs's decision. After all, he said, even war has its rules. An Army chaplain wrestled with how he would react if a soldier in a morally troubling position similar to Downs's came to him privately and confessed what he had done. A Marine Corps officer juggled a related question: What would he do if he came across an American soldier who was about to torture or execute a bound and unarmed prisoner, who might be a civilian?

The soldiers disagreed among themselves. Yet in describing their decisions they used phrases like "I hope I would have the courage to . . ." and "In order to live with myself later I would . . ." The whole exercise may have been set up as a rhetorical game, but Ogletree's questions clearly tapped into discussions the soldiers had already had about the consequences of choices they made.

Then Ogletree turned to the two most famous members of the evening's panel, better known even than Westmoreland. These were two star TV journalists: Peter Jennings, of *World News Tonight* and ABC, and Mike Wallace, of *60 Minutes* and CBS.

Ogletree brought them into the same hypothetical war. He asked Jennings to imagine that he worked for a network that had been in contact with the enemy North Kosanese government. After much pleading

Jennings and his news crew got permission from the North Kosanese to enter their country and film behind the lines. Would Jennings be willing to go? Of course, he replied. Any reporter would--and in real wars reporters from his network often had.

But while Jennings and his crew were traveling with a North Kosanese unit, to visit the site of an alleged atrocity by U.S. and South Kosanese troops, they unexpectedly crossed the trail of a small group of American and South Kosanese soldiers. With Jennings in their midst the Northern soldiers set up an ambush that would let them gun down the Americans and Southerners.

What would Jennings do? Would he tell his cameramen to "Roll tape!" as the North Kosanese opened fire? What would go through his mind as he watched the North Kosanese prepare to fire?

Jennings sat silent for about fifteen seconds. "Well, I guess I wouldn't," he finally said. "I am going to tell you now what I am feeling, rather than the hypothesis I drew for myself. If I were with a North Kosanese unit that came upon Americans, I think that I personally would do what I could to warn the Americans."

Even if it meant losing the story? Ogletree asked.

Even though it would almost certainly mean losing my life, Jennings replied. "But I do not think that I could bring myself to participate in that act. That's purely personal, and other reporters might have a different reaction."

Ogletree turned for reaction to Mike Wallace, who immediately replied. "I think some other reporters *would* have a different reaction," he said, obviously referring to himself. "They would regard it simply as another story they were there to cover." A moment later Wallace said, "I am astonished, really." He turned toward Jennings and began to lecture him: "You're a *reporter*. Granted you're an American" (at least for purposes of the fictional example; Jennings has actually retained Canadian citizenship). "I'm a little bit at a loss to understand why, because you're an American, you would not have covered that story."

Ogletree pushed Wallace. Didn't Jennings have some higher duty to do something other than just roll film as soldiers from his own country were being shot?

"No," Wallace said flatly and immediately. "You don't have a higher duty. No. No. You're a reporter!"

Jennings backtracked fast. Wallace was right, he said: "I chickened out." Jennings said that he had "played the hypothetical very hard." He had lost sight of his journalistic duty to remain detached.

As Jennings said he agreed with Wallace, several soldiers in the room seemed to regard the two of them with horror. Retired Air Force General [Brent Scowcroft](#), who would soon become George Bush's National Security Advisor, said it was simply wrong to stand and watch as your side was slaughtered. "What's it *worth*?" he asked Wallace bitterly. "It's worth thirty seconds on the evening news, as opposed to saving a platoon."

After a brief discussion between Wallace and Scowcroft, Ogletree reminded Wallace of Scowcroft's basic question. What was it worth for the reporter to stand by, looking? Shouldn't the reporter have said *something*?

Wallace gave a disarming grin, shrugged his shoulders, and said, "I don't know." He later mentioned extreme circumstances in which he thought journalists should intervene. But at that moment he seemed to be mugging to the crowd with a "Don't ask me!" expression, and in fact he drew a big laugh--the first such moment in the discussion. Jennings, however, was all business, and was still concerned about the first answer he had given.

"I wish I had made another decision," Jennings said, as if asking permission to live the past five minutes over again. "I would like to have made his decision"--that is, Wallace's decision to keep on filming.

A few minutes later Ogletree turned to George M. Connell, a Marine colonel in full uniform. Jaw muscles flexing in anger, with stress on each word, Connell said, "I feel utter contempt."

Two days after this hypothetical episode, Connell said, Jennings or Wallace might be back with the American forces--and could be wounded by stray fire, as combat journalists often had been before. When that happens, he said, they are "just journalists." Yet they would expect American soldiers to run out under enemy fire and drag them back, rather than leaving them to bleed to death on the battlefield.

"I'll do it!" Connell said. "And that is what makes me so contemptuous of them. Marines will die going to get . . . a couple of journalists." The last words dripped disgust.

Not even Ogletree knew what to say. There was dead silence for several seconds. Then a square-jawed man with neat gray hair and aviator glasses spoke up. It was [Newt Gingrich](#), looking a generation younger and trimmer than he would when he became speaker of the House, in 1995. One thing was clear from this exercise, Gingrich said. "The military has done a vastly better job of systematically thinking through the ethics of behavior in a violent environment than the journalists have."

That was about the mildest way to put it. Although Wallace and Jennings conceded that the criticism was fair--if journalists considered themselves "detached," they could not logically expect American soldiers to rescue them--nevertheless their reactions spoke volumes about the values of their craft. Jennings was made to feel embarrassed about his natural, decent human impulse. Wallace seemed unembarrassed about feeling no connection to the soldiers in his country's army or considering their deaths before his eyes "simply a story." In other important occupations people sometimes face the need to do the horrible. Frederick Downs, after all, was willing to torture a man and hear him scream. But Downs had thought through all the consequences and alternatives, and he knew he would live with the horror for the rest of his days. When Mike Wallace said he would do something horrible, he barely bothered to give a rationale. He did not try to explain the reasons a reporter might feel obliged to remain silent as the attack began--for instance, that in combat reporters must be beyond country, or that they have a duty to bear impartial witness to deaths on either side, or that Jennings had implicitly made a promise not to betray the North Kosanese when he agreed to accompany them. The soldiers might or might not have found such arguments convincing; Wallace didn't even make them.

#### NOT ISSUES BUT THE GAME OF POLITICS

A generation ago political talk programs were sleepy Sunday-morning affairs. The Secretary of State or the Senate majority leader would show up to answer questions from Lawrence Spivak or Bob Clark, and after



thirty minutes another stately episode of [Meet the Press](#) or [Issues and Answers](#) would be history.

Everything in public life is "brighter" and more "interesting" now. Constant competition from the weekday trash-talk shows has forced anything involving political life to liven up. Under pressure from the Saturday political-talk shows--[The McLaughlin Group](#) and its many disorderly descendants--even the Sunday-morning shows have put on rouge and push-up bras.

[Meet the Press](#), moderated by Tim Russert, is probably the meatiest of these programs. High-powered guests discuss serious topics with Russert, who worked for years in politics, and with veteran reporters. Yet the pressure to keep things lively means that squabbling replaces dialogue.

The discussion shows that are supposed to enhance public understanding may actually reduce it, by hammering home the message that issues don't matter except as items for politicians to fight over. Some politicians in Washington may indeed view all issues as mere tools to use against their opponents. But far from offsetting this view of public life, the national press often encourages it. As Washington-based talk shows have become more popular in the past decade, they have had a trickle-down effect in cities across the country. In Seattle, in Los Angeles, in Boston, in Atlanta, journalists gain notice and influence by appearing regularly on talk shows--and during those appearances they mainly talk about the game of politics.

In the 1992 presidential campaign candidates spent more time answering questions from "ordinary people"--citizens in town-hall forums, callers on radio and TV talk shows--than they had in previous years. The citizens asked overwhelmingly about the *what* of politics: What are you going to do about the health-care system? What can you do to reduce the cost of welfare? The reporters asked almost exclusively about the *how*: How are you going to try to take away Perot's constituency? How do you answer charges that you have flip-flopped?

After the 1992 campaign the contrast between questions from citizens and those from reporters was widely discussed in journalism reviews and postmortems on campaign coverage. Reporters acknowledged that they should try harder to ask

questions about things their readers and viewers seemed to care about--that is, questions about the differences that political choices would make in people's lives.

In January of last year there was a chance to see how well the lesson had sunk in. In the days just before and after Bill Clinton delivered his [State of the Union address](#) to the new Republican-controlled Congress, he answered questions in a wide variety of forums in order to explain his plans.

On January 31, a week after the speech, the President flew to Boston and took questions from a group of teenagers. Their questions concerned the effects of legislation or government programs on their communities or schools. These were the questions (paraphrased in some cases):

- "We need stronger laws to punish those people who are caught selling guns to our youth. Basically, what can you do about that?"
- "I notice that often it's the media that is responsible for the negative portrayal of young people in our society." What can political leaders do to persuade the media that there is good news about youth?
- Apprenticeship programs and other ways to provide job training have been valuable for students not going to college. Can the Administration promote more of these programs?
- Programs designed to keep teenagers away from drugs and gangs often emphasize sports and seem geared mainly to boys. How can such programs be made more attractive to teenage girls?
- What is it like at Oxford? (This was from a student who was completing a new alternative-school curriculum in the Boston public schools, and who had been accepted at Oxford.)
- "We need more police officers who are trained to deal with all the other different cultures in our cities." What can the government do about that?
- "In Boston, Northeastern University has created a model of scholarships and other supports to help inner-city kids get to and stay in college. . . . As President, can you urge

colleges across the country to do what Northeastern has done?"

Earlier in the month the President's performance had been assessed by the three network-news anchors: Peter Jennings, of ABC; Dan Rather, of CBS; and [Tom Brokaw](#), of NBC. There was no overlap whatsoever between the questions the students asked and those raised by the anchors. None of the questions from these news professionals concerned the impact of legislation or politics on people's lives. Nearly all concerned the struggle for individual advancement among candidates.

Peter Jennings, who met with Clinton as the Gingrich-Dole Congress was getting under way, asked whether Clinton had been eclipsed as a political leader by the Republicans. Dan Rather did interviews through January with prominent politicians--Senators Edward Kennedy, Phil Gramm, and Bob Dole--building up to a profile of Clinton two days after the State of the Union address. Every question he asked was about popularity or political tactics. He asked Phil Gramm to guess whether Newt Gingrich would enter the race (no) and whether Bill Clinton would be renominated by his party (yes). He asked Bob Dole what kind of mood the President seemed to be in, and whether Dole and Gingrich were, in effect, the new bosses of Washington. When Edward Kennedy began giving his views about the [balanced-budget amendment](#), Rather steered him back on course: "Senator, you know I'd talk about these things the rest of the afternoon, but let's move quickly to politics. Do you expect Bill Clinton to be the Democratic nominee for re-election in 1996?"

The *CBS Evening News* profile of Clinton, which was narrated by Rather and was presented as part of the series *Eye on America*, contained no mention of Clinton's economic policy, his tax or budget plans, his failed attempt to pass a health-care proposal, his successful attempt to ratify NAFTA, his efforts to "reinvent government," or any substantive aspect of his proposals or plans in office. Its subject was exclusively Clinton's handling of his office--his "difficulty making decisions," his "waffling" at crucial moments. If Rather or his colleagues had any interest in the content of Clinton's speech as opposed to its political effect, neither the questions they asked nor the reports they aired revealed such a concern.

[Tom Brokaw's](#) questions were more substantive, but even he concentrated mainly on politics of the moment.

How did the President feel about a poll showing that 61 percent of the public felt that he had no "strong convictions" and could be "easily swayed"? What did Bill Clinton think about Newt Gingrich? "Do you think he plays fair?" How did he like it that people kept shooting at the White House?

When ordinary citizens have a chance to pose questions to political leaders, they rarely ask about the game of politics. They want to know how the reality of politics will affect them--through taxes, programs, scholarship funds, wars. Journalists justify their intrusiveness and excesses by claiming that they are the public's representatives, asking the questions their fellow citizens would ask if they had the privilege of meeting with Presidents and senators. In fact they ask questions that only their fellow political professionals care about. And they often do so--as at the typical White House news conference--with a discourtesy and rancor that represent the public's views much less than they reflect the modern journalist's belief that being independent boils down to acting hostile.

#### REDUCTIO AD ELECTIONEM: THE ONE-TRACK MIND

The limited curiosity that elite reporters display in their questions is also evident in the stories they write once they have received answers. They are interested mainly in pure politics and can be coerced into examining the substance of an issue only as a last resort. The subtle but sure result is a stream of daily messages that the real meaning of public life is the struggle of Bob Dole against Newt Gingrich against Bill Clinton, rather than our collective efforts to solve collective problems.

The natural instinct of newspapers and TV is to present every public issue as if its "real" meaning were political in the meanest and narrowest sense of that term--the attempt by parties and candidates to gain an advantage over their rivals. Reporters do, of course, write stories about political life in the broader sense and about the substance of issues--the pluses and minuses of diplomatic recognition for Vietnam, the difficulties of holding down the Medicare budget, whether immigrants help or hurt the nation's economic base. But when there is a chance to use these issues as props or raw material for a story about political tactics, most reporters leap at it. It is more fun--and easier--to write about Bill Clinton's "positioning" on the Vietnam issue, or how Newt Gingrich is "handling" the need to cut Medicare, than it is to look into the issues themselves.

Examples of this preference occur so often that they're difficult to notice. But every morning's newspaper, along with every evening's newscast, reveals this pattern of thought.

- Last February, when the Democratic President and the Republican Congress were fighting over how much federal money would go to local law-enforcement agencies, one network-news broadcast showed a clip of Gingrich denouncing Clinton and another of Clinton standing in front of a sea of uniformed police officers while making a tough-on-crime speech. The correspondent's sign-off line was "The White House thinks 'cops on the beat' has a simple but appealing ring to it." That is, the President was pushing the plan because it would sound good in his campaign ads. Whether or not that was Clinton's real motive, nothing in the broadcast gave the slightest hint of where the extra policemen would go, how much they might cost, whether there was reason to think they'd do any good. Everything in the story suggested that the crime bill mattered only as a chapter in the real saga, which was the struggle between Bill and Newt.
- Last April, after the explosion at the federal building in Oklahoma City, discussion changed quickly from the event itself to politicians' "handling" of the event. On the Sunday after the blast President Clinton announced a series of new anti-terrorism measures. The next morning, on National Public Radio's *Morning Edition*, Cokie Roberts was asked about the prospects of the proposals' taking effect. "In some ways it's not even the point," she replied. What mattered was that Clinton "looked good" taking the tough side of the issue. No one expects Cokie Roberts or other political correspondents to be experts on controlling terrorism, negotiating with the Syrians, or the other specific measures on which Presidents make stands. But all issues are shoehorned into the area of expertise the most prominent correspondents do have: the struggle for one-upmanship among a handful of political leaders.
- When health-care reform was the focus of big political battles between Republicans and Democrats, it was on the front page and the

evening newscast every day. When the Clinton Administration declared defeat in 1994 and there were no more battles to be fought, health-care news coverage virtually stopped too—even though the medical system still represented one seventh of the economy, even though HMOs and corporations and hospitals and pharmaceutical companies were rapidly changing policies in the face of ever-rising costs. Health care was no longer political news, and therefore it was no longer interesting news.

- After California's voters approved [Proposition 187](#) in the 1994 elections, drastically limiting the benefits available to illegal immigrants, the national press ran a trickle of stories on what this would mean for California's economy, its school and legal systems, even its relations with Mexico. A flood of stories examined the political impact of the immigration issue—how the Republicans might exploit it, how the Democrats might be divided by it, whether it might propel Pete Wilson to the White House.
- On August 16 last year [Bill Bradley](#) announced that after representing New Jersey in the Senate for three terms he would not run for a fourth term. In interviews and at the news conferences he conducted afterward Bradley did his best to talk about the deep problems of public life and economic adjustment that had left him frustrated with the political process. Each of the parties had locked itself into rigid positions that kept it from dealing with the realistic concerns of ordinary people, he said. American corporations were doing what they had to do for survival in international competition: they were downsizing and making themselves radically more efficient and productive. But the result was to leave "decent, hardworking Americans" more vulnerable to layoffs and the loss of their careers, medical coverage, pension rights, and social standing than they had been in decades. Somehow, Bradley said, we had to move past the focus on short-term political maneuvering and determine how to deal with the forces that were leaving Americans frustrated and insecure.

That, at least, was what Bill Bradley said. What turned up in the press was almost exclusively speculation

about what the move meant for this year's presidential race and the party lineup on Capitol Hill. Might Bradley challenge Bill Clinton in the Democratic primaries? If not, was he preparing for an independent run? Could the Democrats come up with any other candidate capable of holding on to Bradley's seat? Wasn't this a slap in the face for Bill Clinton and the party he purported to lead? In the aftermath of Bradley's announcement prominent TV and newspaper reporters competed to come up with the shrewdest analysis of the political impact of the move. None of the country's major papers or networks used Bradley's announcement as a news peg for an analysis of the real issues he had raised.

The day after his announcement Bradley was interviewed by [Judy Woodruff](#) on the CNN program *Inside Politics*. Woodruff is a widely respected and knowledgeable reporter, but her interaction with Bradley was like the meeting of two beings from different universes. Every answer Bradley gave was about the substance of national problems that concerned him. Every one of Woodruff's responses or questions was about short-term political tactics. Woodruff asked about the political implications of his move for Bill Clinton and Newt Gingrich. Bradley replied that it was more important to concentrate on the difficulties both parties had in dealing with real national problems.

Midway through the interview Bradley gave a long answer to the effect that everyone involved in politics had to get out of the rut of converting every subject or comment into a political "issue," used for partisan advantage. Let's stop talking, Bradley said, about who will win what race and start responding to one another's ideas.

As soon as he finished, Woodruff asked her next question: "Do you want to be President?" It was as if she had not heard a word he had been saying—or *couldn't* hear it, because the media's language of political analysis is utterly separate from the terms in which people describe real problems in their lives.

The effect is as if the discussion of every new advance in medicine boiled down to speculation about whether its creator would win the Nobel Prize that year. Regardless of the tone of coverage, medical research will go on. But a relentless emphasis on the cynical game of politics threatens public life itself, by implying day after day

that the political sphere is nothing more than an arena in which ambitious politicians struggle for dominance, rather than a structure in which citizens can deal with worrisome collective problems.

#### POINTLESS PREDICTION: THE POLITICAL EXPERTS

On Sunday, November 6, 1994, two days before the congressional elections that swept the Republicans to power, *The Washington Post* published the results of its "Crystal Ball" poll. Fourteen prominent journalists, pollsters, and all-around analysts made their predictions about how many seats each party would win in the House and Senate and how many governorships each would take.

One week later many of these same experts would be saying on their talk shows that the Republican landslide was "inevitable" and "a long time coming" and "a sign of deep discontent in the heartland." But before the returns were in, how many of the fourteen experts predicted that the Republicans would win both houses of Congress and that Newt Gingrich would be speaker? Exactly three.

What is interesting about this event is not just that so many experts could be so wrong. Immediately after the election even Newt Gingrich seemed dazed by the idea that the forty-year reign of the Democrats in the House had actually come to an end. Rather, the episode said something about the futility of political prediction itself--a task to which the big-time press devotes enormous effort and time. *Two days* before the election many of the country's most admired analysts had no idea what was about to happen. Yet within a matter of weeks these same people, unfazed, would be writing articles and giving speeches and being quoted about who was "ahead" and "behind" in the emerging race for the White House in 1996.

As with medieval doctors who applied leeches and trepanned skulls, the practitioners cannot be blamed for the limits of their profession. But we can ask why reporters spend so much time directing our attention toward what is not much more than guesswork on their part. It builds the impression that journalism is about what's entertaining--guessing what might or might not happen next month--rather than what's useful, such as extracting lessons of success and failure from events that have already occurred. Competing predictions add almost nothing to our ability to solve public problems

or to make sensible choices among complex alternatives. Yet such useless distractions have become a specialty of the political press. They are easy to produce, they allow reporters to act as if they possessed special inside knowledge, and there are no consequences for being wrong.

#### SPOON-FEEDING: THE WHITE HOUSE PRESS CORPS

In the early spring of last year, when Newt Gingrich was dominating the news from Washington and the O. J. Simpson trial was dominating the news as a whole, *The Washington Post* ran an article about the pathos of the White House press room. Nobody wanted to hear what the President was doing, so the people who cover the President could not get on the air. Howard Kurtz, the *Post's* media writer, described the human cost of this political change:

Brit Hume is in his closet-size White House cubicle, watching Kato Kaelin testify on CNN. Bill Plante, in the adjoining cubicle, has his feet up and is buried in the *New York Times*. Brian Williams is in the corridor, idling away the time with Jim Miklaszewski.

An announcement is made for a bill-signing ceremony. Some of America's highest-paid television correspondents begin ambling toward the pressroom door.

"Are you coming with us?" Williams asks.

"I guess so," says Hume, looking forlorn.

The White House spokesman, Mike McCurry, told Kurtz that there was some benefit to the enforced silence: "Brit Hume has now got his crossword puzzle capacity down to record time. And some of the reporters have been out on the lecture circuit."

The deadpan restraint with which Kurtz told this story is admirable. But the question many readers would

want to scream at the idle correspondents is *Why don't you go out and do some work?*

Why not go out and interview someone, even if you're not going to get any airtime that night? Why not escape the monotonous tyranny of the White House press



room, which reporters are always complaining about? The knowledge that O.J. will keep you off the air yet again should liberate you to look into those stories you never "had time" to deal with before. Why not *read a book*--about welfare reform, about Russia or China, about race relations, about anything? Why not imagine, just for a moment, that your journalistic duty might involve something more varied and constructive than doing

standups from the White House lawn and sounding skeptical about whatever announcement the President's spokesman put out that day?

What might these well-paid, well-trained correspondents have done while waiting for the O.J. trial to become boring enough that they could get back on the air? They might have tried to learn something that would be of use to their viewers when the story of the moment went away. Without leaving Washington, without going farther than ten minutes by taxi from the White House (so that they could be on hand if a sudden press conference was called), they could have prepared themselves to discuss the substance of issues that affect the public.

For example, two years earlier Vice President Al Gore had announced an ambitious plan to "reinvent" the federal government. Had it made any difference, either in improving the performance of government or in reducing its cost, or was it all for show? Republicans and Democrats were sure to spend the next few months fighting about cuts in the capital-gains tax. Capital-gains tax rates were higher in some countries and lower in others. What did the experience of these countries show about whether cutting the rates helped an economy to grow? The rate of immigration was rising again, and in California and Florida it was becoming an important political issue. What was the latest evidence on the economic and social effects of immigration? Should Americans feel confident or threatened that so

many foreigners were trying to make their way in? Soon both political parties would be advancing plans to reform the welfare system. Within a two-mile radius of the White House lived plenty of families on welfare. Why not go and see how the system had affected them, and what they would do if it changed? The federal government had gone further than most private industries in trying to open opportunities to racial minorities and women. The Pentagon had gone furthest of all. What did people involved in this process--men and women, blacks and whites--think about its successes and failures? What light did their experience shed on the impending affirmative-action debate?

The list could go on for pages. With a few minutes' effort--about as long as it takes to do a crossword puzzle--the correspondents could have drawn up lists of other subjects they had never before "had time" to investigate. They had the time now. What they lacked was a sense that their responsibility involved something more than standing up to rehash the day's announcements when there was room for them on the news.

#### GLASS HOUSES: JOURNALISTS AND FINANCIAL DISCLOSURE

Half a century ago reporters knew but didn't say that Franklin D. Roosevelt was in a wheelchair. A generation ago many reporters knew but didn't write about John F. Kennedy's insatiable appetite for women. For several months in the early Clinton era reporters knew about but didn't disclose Paula Jones's allegation that, as governor of Arkansas, Bill Clinton had exposed himself to her. Eventually this claim found its way into all the major newspapers, proving that there is no longer any such thing as an accusation too embarrassing to be printed if it seems to bear on a politician's "character."

It is not just the President who has given up his privacy in the name of the public's right to know. Over the past two decades officials whose power is tiny compared with the President's have had to reveal embarrassing details about what most Americans consider very private matters: their income and wealth. Each of the more than 3,000 people appointed by the President to executive-branch jobs must reveal previous sources of income and summarize his or her financial holdings. Congressmen have changed their rules to forbid themselves to accept honoraria for speaking to interest groups or lobbyists. The money that politicians do raise

from individuals and groups must be disclosed to the [Federal Election Commission](#). The information they disclose is available to the public and appears often in publications, most prominently *The Washington Post*.

No one contends that every contribution makes every politician corrupt. But financial disclosure has become commonplace on the "Better safe than sorry" principle. If politicians and officials are not corrupt, the reasoning goes, they have nothing to fear from letting their finances be publicized. And if they are corrupt, public disclosure is a way to stop them before they do too much harm. The process may be embarrassing, but this is the cost of public life.

How different the "Better safe than sorry" calculation seems when journalists are involved! Reporters and pundits hold no elected office, but they are obviously public figures. The most prominent TV-talk-show personalities are better known than all but a handful of congressmen. When politicians and pundits sit alongside one another on Washington talk shows and trade opinions, they underscore the essential similarity of their political roles. The pundits have no vote in Congress, but the overall political impact of a word from George Will, Ted Koppel, William Safire, or any of their colleagues who run the major editorial pages dwarfs anything a third-term congressman could do. If an interest group had the choice of buying the favor of one prominent media figure or of two junior congressmen, it wouldn't even have to think about the decision. The pundit is obviously more valuable.

If a reporter is sued for libel by a prominent but unelected personality, such as [David Letterman](#) or Donald Trump, he or she says that the offended party is a "public figure"--about whom nearly anything can be written in the press. Public figures, according to the rulings that shape today's libel law, can win a libel suit only if they can prove that a reporter knew that what he or she was writing was false, or had "reckless disregard" for its truth, and went ahead and published it anyway. Public figures, according to the law, pay a price for being well known. And who are these people? The category is not limited to those who hold public office but includes all who "thrust themselves into the public eye." Most journalists would eloquently argue the logic of this broad definition of public figures--until the same standard was applied to them.

In 1993 [Sam Donaldson](#), of ABC, described himself in an interview as being in touch with the concerns of the average American. "I'm trying to get a little ranching business started in New Mexico," he said. "I've got five people on the payroll. I'm making out those government forms." Thus he understood the travails of the small businessman and the annoyances of government regulation. Donaldson, whose base pay from ABC is reported to be some \$2 million a year, did not point out that his several ranches in New Mexico together covered some 20,000 acres. When doing a segment attacking farm subsidies on *Prime Time Live* in 1993 he did not point out that "those government forms" allowed him to claim nearly \$97,000 in sheep and mohair subsidies over two years. William Neuman, a reporter for the *New York Post*, said that when his photographer tried to take pictures of Donaldson's ranch house, Donaldson had him thrown off his property. ("In the West trespassing is a serious offense," Donaldson explained.)

Had Donaldson as a journalist been pursuing a politician or even a corporate executive, he would have felt justified in using the most aggressive reportorial techniques. When these techniques were turned on him, he complained that the reporters were going too far. The analysts who are so clear-eyed about the conflict of interest in Newt Gingrich's book deal claim that they see no reason, none at all, why their own finances might be of public interest.

Last May one of Donaldson's colleagues on *This Week With David Brinkley*, George Will, wrote a column and delivered on-air comments ridiculing the Clinton Administration's plan to impose tariffs on Japanese luxury cars, notably the Lexus. On the Brinkley show Will said that the tariffs would be "illegal" and would merely amount to "a subsidy for Mercedes dealerships."

Neither in his column nor on the show did Will disclose that his wife, Mari Maseng Will, ran a firm that had been paid some \$200,000 as a registered foreign agent for the Japan Automobile Manufacturers Association, and that one of the duties for which she was hired was to get American commentators to criticize the tariff plan. When Will was asked why he had never mentioned this, he replied that it was "just too silly" to think that his views might have been affected by his wife's contract.

Will had, in fact, espoused such views for years, since long before his wife worked for the JAMA and even before he had married her. Few of his readers would leap to the conclusion that Will was serving as a mouthpiece for his wife's employers. But surely most would have preferred to learn that information from Will himself.

A third member of the regular Brinkley panel, Cokie Roberts, is, along with Will and Donaldson, a frequent and highly paid speaker before corporate audiences. She has made a point of not disclosing which interest groups she speaks to or how much money she is paid. She has criticized the Clinton Administration for its secretive handling of the controversy surrounding Hillary Clinton's lucrative cattle-future trades and of the Whitewater affair, yet like the other pundits, she refuses to acknowledge that secrecy about financial interests undermines journalism's credibility too.

#### OUT OF TOUCH WITH AMERICA

In the week leading up to a State of the Union address White House aides always leak word to reporters that this year the speech will be "different." No more laundry list of all the government's activities, no more boring survey of every potential trouble spot in the world. This time, for a change, the speech is going to be short, punchy, and thematic. When the actual speech occurs, it is never short, punchy, or thematic. It is long and detailed, like all its predecessors, because as the deadline nears, every part of the government scrambles desperately to have a mention of its activities crammed into the speech somewhere.

In the days before [Bill Clinton's address a year ago](#) aides said that no matter what had happened to all those other Presidents, this time the speech really would be short, punchy, and thematic. The President understood the situation, he recognized his altered role, and he saw this as an opportunity to set a new theme for his third and fourth years in office.

That evening the promises once again proved false. Bill Clinton gave a speech that was enormously long even by the standards of previous State of the Union addresses. The speech had three or four apparent endings, it had ad-libbed inserts, and it covered both the details of policy and the President's theories about what had gone wrong with America. An hour and

twenty-one minutes after he took the podium, the President stepped down.

Less than a minute later the mockery from commentators began. For instant analysis NBC went to [Peggy Noonan](#), who had been a speechwriter for Presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush. She grimaced and barely tried to conceal her disdain for such an ungainly, sprawling speech. Other commentators soon mentioned that congressmen had been slipping out of the Capitol building before the end of the speech, that Clinton had once more failed to stick to an agenda, that the speech probably would not give the President the new start he sought. The comments were virtually all about the tactics of the speech, and they were almost all thumbs down.

A day and a half later the first newspaper columns showed up. They were even more critical. On January 26 *The Washington Post's* op-ed page consisted mainly of stories about the speech, all of which were withering. "All Mush and No Message" was the headline on a column by [Richard Cohen](#). "An Opportunity Missed" was the more statesmanlike judgment from [David Broder](#). Cohen wrote: "Pardon me if I thought of an awful metaphor: Clinton at a buffet table, eating everything in sight."

What a big fat jerk that Clinton was! How little he understood the obligations of leadership! Yet the news section of the same day's *Post* had a long article based on discussions with a focus group of ordinary citizens in Chicago who had watched the President's speech. "For these voters, the State of the Union speech was an antidote to weeks of unrelenting criticism of Clinton's presidency," the article said.

"Tonight reminded us of what has been accomplished," said Maureen Prince, who works as the office manager in her husband's business and has raised five children. "We are so busy hearing the negatives all the time, from the time you wake up on your clock radio in the morning. . . ."

The group's immediate impressions mirrored the results of several polls conducted immediately after the president's speech.

ABC News found that eight out of 10 approved of the president's speech. CBS News said that 74 percent of those surveyed said they had a "clear idea" of what Clinton stands for, compared with just 41 percent before the speech. A [Gallup Poll](#) for *USA Today* and Cable News Network found that eight in 10 said Clinton is leading the country in the right direction.

Nielsen ratings reported in the same day's paper showed that the longer the speech went on, the larger the number of people who tuned in to watch.

The point is not that the pundits are necessarily wrong and the public necessarily right. The point is the gulf between the two groups' reactions. The very aspects of the speech that had seemed so ridiculous to the professional commentators--its detail, its inclusiveness, the hyperearnestness of Clinton's conclusion about the "common good"--seemed attractive and worthwhile to most viewers.

"I'm wondering what so much of the public heard that our highly trained expert analysts completely missed," Carol Cantor, a software consultant from California, wrote in a discussion on the WELL, a popular online forum, three days after the speech. What they heard was, in fact, the speech, which allowed them to draw their own conclusions rather than being forced to accept an expert "analysis" of how the President "handled" the speech. In most cases the analysis goes unchallenged, because the public has no chance to see whatever event the pundits are describing. In this instance viewers had exactly the same evidence about Clinton's performance that the "experts" did, and from it they drew radically different conclusions.

In 1992 political professionals had laughed at Ross Perot's "boring" and "complex" charts about the federal budget deficit--until it became obvious that viewers loved them. And for a week or two after this State of the Union speech there were little jokes on the weekend talk shows about how out of step the pundit reaction had been with opinion "out there." But after a polite chuckle the talk shifted to how the President and the speaker and Senator Dole were handling their jobs.

## TERM LIMITS

As soon as the Democrats were routed in the 1994 elections, commentators and TV analysts said it was obvious that the American people were tired of seeing the same old faces in Washington. The argument went that those who lived inside the Beltway had forgotten what it was like in the rest of the country. They didn't get it. They were out of touch. The only way to jerk the congressional system back to reality was to bring in new blood.

A few days after the new Congress was sworn in, CNN began running an updated series of promotional ads for its program *Crossfire*. (Previous ads had featured shots of locomotives colliding head-on and rams locking horns, to symbolize the meeting of minds on the show.) Everything has been shaken up in the capital, one of the ads began. New faces. New names. New people in charge of all the committees.

"In fact," the announcer said, in a tone meant to indicate whimsy, "only one committee hasn't changed. The *welcoming* committee."

The camera pulled back to reveal the three hosts of *Crossfire*--Pat Buchanan, [John Sununu](#), and [Michael Kinsley](#)--standing with arms crossed on the steps of the Capitol building, blocking the path of the new arrivals trying to make their way in. "Watch your step," one of the hosts said.

Talk about not getting it! The people who put together this ad must have imagined that the popular irritation with inside-the-Beltway culture was confined to members of Congress--and didn't extend to members of the punditocracy, many of whom had held their positions much longer than the typical congressman had. The difference between the "welcoming committee" and the congressional committees headed by fallen Democratic titans like Tom Foley and Jack Brooks was that the congressmen can be booted out.

"Polls show that both Republicans *and* Democrats felt better about the Congress just after the 1994 elections," a Clinton Administration official said last year. "They had 'made the monkey jump'--they were able to discipline an institution they didn't like. They could register the fact that they were unhappy. There doesn't seem to be any way to do that with the press, except to stop watching and reading, which more and more people have done."

## LOST CREDIBILITY

There is an astonishing gulf between the way journalists--especially the most prominent ones--think about their impact and the way the public does. In movies of the 1930s reporters were gritty characters who instinctively sided with the common man. In the 1970s Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman, starring as Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein in *All the President's Men*, were better-paid but still gritty reporters unafraid to challenge big power. Even the local-TV-news crew featured on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* had a certain down-to-earth pluck. Ted Knight, as the pea-brained news anchor Ted Baxter, was a ridiculously pompous figure but not an arrogant one.

Since the early 1980s the journalists who have shown up in movies have often been portrayed as more loathsome than the lawyers, politicians, and business moguls who are the traditional bad guys in films about the white-collar world. In *Absence of Malice*, made in 1981, an ambitious newspaper reporter (Sally Field) ruins the reputation of a businessman (Paul Newman) by rashly publishing articles accusing him of murder. In *Broadcast News*, released in 1987, the anchorman (William Hurt) is still an airhead, like Ted Baxter, but unlike Ted, he works in a business that is systematically hostile to anything except profit and bland good looks. The only sympathetic characters in the movie, an overeducated reporter (Albert Brooks) and a hyperactive and hyperidealistic producer (Holly Hunter), would have triumphed as heroes in a newspaper movie of the 1930s. In this one they are ground down by the philistines at their network.

In the *Die Hard* series, which started in 1988, a TV journalist (William Atherton) is an unctuous creep who will lie and push helpless people around in order to get on the air. In *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1990) the tabloid writer Peter Fallow (Bruce Willis) is a disheveled British sot who will do anything for a free drink. In *Rising Sun* (1993) a newspaper reporter known as "Weasel" (Steve Buscemi) is an out-and-out criminal, accepting bribes to influence his coverage. As Antonia Zerbisias pointed out in the *Toronto Star* in 1993, movies and TV shows offer almost no illustrations of journalists who are not full of themselves, shallow, and indifferent to the harm they do. During Operation Desert Storm, *Saturday Night Live* ridiculed American reporters who asked military spokesmen questions like "Can you tell us exactly when and where you are going to launch your attack?" "The journalists were portrayed

as ignorant, arrogant and pointlessly adversarial," Jay Rosen, of New York University, wrote about the episode. "By gently rebuffing their ludicrous questions, the Pentagon briefer [on SNL] came off as a model of sanity."

Even real-life members of the Washington pundit corps have made their way into movies--Eleanor Clift, Morton Kondracke, hosts from *Crossfire*--in 1990s releases such as *Dave* and *Rising Sun*. Significantly, their role in the narrative is as buffoons. The joke in these movies is how rapidly the pundits leap to conclusions, how predictable their reactions are, how automatically they polarize the debate without any clear idea of what has really occurred. That real-life journalists are willing to keep appearing in such movies, knowing how they will be cast, says something about the source of self-respect in today's media: celebrity, on whatever basis, matters more than being taken seriously.

Movies do not necessarily capture reality, but they suggest a public mood--in this case, a contrast between the apparent self-satisfaction of the media celebrities and the contempt in which they are held by the public. "The news media has a generally positive view of itself in the watchdog role," wrote the authors of an exhaustive survey of public attitudes and the attitudes of journalists themselves toward the press. (The survey was conducted by the Times Mirror Center for the People and the Press, and was released last May.) But "the outside world strongly faults the news media for its negativism. . . . The public goes so far as to say that the press gets in the way of society solving its problems. . . ." According to the survey, "two out of three members of the public had nothing or nothing good to say about the media."

The media establishment is beginning to get at least an inkling of this message. Through the past decade discussions among newspaper editors and publishers have been a litany of woes: fewer readers; lower "penetration" rates, as a decreasing share of the public pays attention to news; a more and more desperate search for ways to attract the public's interest. In the short run these challenges to credibility are a problem for journalists and journalism. In the longer run they are a problem for democracy.

## TURNING A CALLING INTO A SIDESHOW

Even if practiced perfectly, journalism will leave some resentment and bruised feelings in its wake. The justification that journalists can offer for the harm they inevitably inflict is to show, through their actions, their understanding that what they do matters and that it should be done with care.

This is why the most depressing aspect of the new talking-pundit industry may be the argument made by many practitioners: the whole thing is just a game, which no one should take too seriously. Michael Kinsley, a highly respected and indisputably talented policy journalist, has written that his paid speaking engagements are usually mock debates, in which he takes the liberal side.

Since the audiences are generally composed of affluent businessmen, my role is like that of the team that gets to lose to the Harlem Globetrotters. But I do it because it pays well, because it's fun to fly around the country and stay in hotels, and because even a politically unsympathetic audience can provide a cheap ego boost.

Last year Morton Kondracke, of *The McLaughlin Group*, told Mark Jurkowitz, of *The Boston Globe*, "This is not writing, this is not thought." He was describing the talk-show activity to which he has devoted a major part of his time for fifteen years. "You should not take it a hundred percent seriously. Anybody who does is a fool." Fred Barnes wrote that he was happy to appear in a mock *McLaughlin* segment on *Murphy Brown*, because "the line between news and fun barely exists anymore."

*The McLaughlin Group* often takes its act on the road, gimmicks and all, for fees reported to be about \$20,000 per appearance. *Crossfire* goes for paid jaunts on the road. So do panelists from *The Capital Gang*. Contracts for such appearances contain a routine clause specifying that the performance may not be taped or broadcast. This provision allows speakers to recycle their material, especially those who stitch together anecdotes about "the mood in Washington today." It also reassures the speakers that the sessions aren't really serious. They won't be held to account for what they say, so the normal standards don't apply.

Yet the fact that no one takes the shows seriously is precisely what's wrong with them, because they jeopardize the credibility of everything that journalists do. "I think one of the really destructive developments in Washington in the last fifteen years has been the rise in these reporter talk shows," Tom Brokaw has said. "Reporters used to cover policy--not spend all of their time yelling at each other and making philistine judgments about what happened the week before. It's not enlightening. It makes me cringe."

When talk shows go on the road for performances in which hostility and disagreement are staged for entertainment value; when reporters pick up thousands of dollars appearing before interest groups and sharing tidbits of what they have heard; when all the participants then dash off for the next plane, caring about none of it except the money--when these things happen, they send a message. The message is: We don't respect what we're doing. Why should anyone else?