



Press, Polls, and the 1988 Campaign: An Insider's Critique

Citation

Duncan, Dayton. "Press, Polls, and the 1988 Campaign: An Insider's Critique." Shorenstein Center Discussion Paper Series 1989.D-1, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, August 1989.

Published Version

<https://shorensteincenter.org/press-polls-and-the-1988-campaign/>

Permanent link

<https://nrs.harvard.edu/URN-3:HUL.INSTREPOS:37370884>

Terms of Use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, WARNING: No applicable access license found.

Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#).

[Accessibility](#)

**Press, Polls, and
the 1988 Campaign:
An Insider's Critique**

by Dayton Duncan

Discussion Paper D-1
August, 1989

The Joan Shorenstein Barone Center

PRESS • POLITICS



• PUBLIC POLICY •

Harvard University
John F. Kennedy School of Government

INTRODUCTION

For the past two years, a number of our faculty and fellows have been researching and writing papers on the intersection of the press and politics. The subjects have varied greatly—from Kiku Adatto's explorations of the differences between television coverage of the 1968 and the 1988 presidential campaigns to Phillip van Niekerk's report on the impact of South Africa's emergency measures on Washington's policy approach to apartheid. A dozen or so papers are now in different stages of production. Just as soon as these are completed, we shall distribute them. They shall fall into two categories: informal discussion papers and research papers.

It is my pleasure to distribute the first discussion paper. It was written by Dayton Duncan, a writer and political junkie who was press secretary for Governor Michael Dukakis's unsuccessful run for the presidency last year. Dayton was a Fellow of the Joan Shorenstein Barone Center on the Press, Politics and Public

Policy in the spring semester of the 1988-1989 academic year, sharing his rather exceptional experiences in press/politics with all of his customary candor and intelligence. I use the word "exceptional" because there are so few of us who have actually experienced the special madness of being press secretary to a presidential candidate—madness in this case being a non-partisan affliction. I asked Dayton if he felt that he wished to convey his perceptions to other students of press/politics, including journalists, politicians, and scholars. His answer was an enthusiastic yes, offered with a faintly bemused smile.

So, with Dayton Duncan's reflections on press/politics during the 1988 presidential campaign, I am happy to launch our series of discussion papers. All of us at the Center—and, I assume, Dayton himself, who has now moved to Kansas so he can reimmerge himself in "America," pending the next campaign—would be delighted to get your reactions to this paper.

Marvin Kalb
Edward R. Murrow Professor
Director, Joan Shorenstein Barone Center
on the Press, Politics and Public Policy

PRESS, POLLS, AND THE 1988 CAMPAIGN: AN INSIDER'S CRITIQUE

On October 12, 1988, four weeks before the presidential election, Peter Jennings, the anchor of ABC's "World News Tonight," looked solemnly into the studio camera—and through it to millions of living rooms across the nation—to announce that this night's broadcast was about to do something that "has not been done before." Having grabbed the audience's attention with the promise that something unprecedented was about to happen, Jennings went on to reveal... the results of the latest ABC/*Washington Post* presidential poll.

As the press secretary for the campaign of Michael Dukakis, watching the newscast from the hotel suite in Los Angeles where we, the campaign workers, were preparing for the final debate the next evening, I understandably had more than a passing interest in what one of the major networks was reporting. But I think it's fair to say that even those Americans who were more interested in the World Series than the presidential election would have agreed with my initial reaction to Jennings' hyperbolic buildup to his newscast: Devoting campaign coverage to an opinion poll was hardly unprecedented; on the contrary, throughout the long campaign of 1988 it seemed that poll reporting *was* campaign reporting.

Polls were everywhere. You couldn't escape them. Every time you turned on a television set, listened to a radio or opened a newspaper, someone had a poll telling you, in effect, that you had already voted. Everyone in the media business—from the tiny radio station in Iowa that asked people to flush their toilets when they heard the name of their favorite candidate (and thus measured support by the amount of water flow at the public works plant, with an undetermined "margin of error" caused by residents who were simply answering the call of nature at the wrong moment) to such giants as CBS, NBC, ABC, CNN and major metropolitan papers—was in the poll business in 1988.

In focusing on yet another poll, ABC's report that night in October, then, was not something that "had not been done before." (CBS, for instance, was reporting the results of its own poll the same evening.) Quite the opposite, it was more of the same, part of a growing pattern of a surfeit of polls in campaign coverage. But it was noteworthy in one respect: it took the media's obsession with political polls to a new

level. For the first twelve-and-a-half minutes—more than half the entire broadcast when you add the commercial breaks—the only "news" was the poll. It showed that George Bush was leading Dukakis 51 percent to 45 percent in the popular vote, but in a state-by-state breakdown Bush had "firm" leads in 21 states (to Dukakis' 3) and "leaning" leads in 15 more (to four for Dukakis). A map of the United States was prominently shown, displaying Bush's states in shades of red and Dukakis' in blue—the same visual image we have become accustomed to seeing on election nights. There were reporting segments exploring various aspects of the poll, explanations of how the electoral college works, analyses from political experts on what Bush had done right and Dukakis had done wrong up to this point, and then reactions from workers of the two campaigns on what they thought about the poll results.

I am not a pollster or even an expert on polling, and this is not a story to complain about the accuracy of polls, but it is worth noting that in various campaign postmortems a number of respected pollsters have questioned this particular poll's methodology and accuracy. I raise the incident instead to make a larger point about campaign coverage, because I think it is a telling example of one of four trends in campaign reporting moving in the wrong direction.

The principal problem with ABC's coverage of its poll that night was the excessive attention the network gave to it: more than half that night's news. Think for a second. What other event in the world would get half of a broadcast devoted exclusively to it? The death of U.S. Marines from a terrorist bomb in Beirut? Elections in the Soviet Union? A new cure for cancer? If Bush had admitted he had personally delivered arms profits to the contras or Dukakis had revealed he was secretly planning a major increase in the income tax, would that have gotten as much time? Maybe so. But in this case, *nothing had actually happened*—except that a network had gone to considerable expense to conduct its own opinion poll and like every other news outlet during the campaign, differing only in the extreme degree of its presentation, decided that this was the most important news it had to offer.

The Twin Scourges

If it can be said that two of the greatest scourges of the modern age are the spiraling nuclear arms race and the growing addiction to drugs, elements of both problems can be found, metaphorically, in the news media's obsession with campaign polls.

The mid-1970s, when the CBS/*New York Times* poll was inaugurated, was the dawn of the media polling age. Initially, restraint was the watchword. The network and the newspaper used their polling results to assist reporters in keeping up with shifts in popular opinion, as a guide for story ideas, and as a protection against the practice of campaigns selectively leaking self-serving portions of their own polls. The *Times* wouldn't even permit the "horse race" numbers of its poll to be reported, and poll stories were played in the back pages. (The *Los Angeles Times* followed a similar restriction with its polls.) Rapidly, however, other networks and newspapers launched their own polls. The race was on. Restraint was tossed aside. Not only were more news outlets conducting polls, the poll stories themselves became more and more prominent in the outlet's coverage—from the back pages to the front pages, from the bottom of the newscast to the lead story.

By the 1988 campaign, national polls were being regularly conducted and reported by CBS/*New York Times*, ABC/*Washington Post*, NBC/*Wall Street Journal*, and CNN/*USA Today*—the "superpowers"—as well as by the Gallup and Roper organizations and KRC/*Hotline* (a political "insider" publication whose poll was purchased by a number of newspapers). Local television affiliates and the larger regional newspapers were also now commissioning their own polls—some of them national, some just of their home state—like developing countries seeking the status of world powers by coming up with their own, however crude, A-bombs. Not infrequently, one news outlet, in between its own polls, would report on some other outlet's latest poll results.

Hardly a day went by in the fall campaign that somebody didn't release a new poll. A candidate getting off a plane in a new city would have a battery of microphones thrust in his face (or in the faces of his top aides if he wasn't talking) and almost always be asked one of two questions. Both would start, "The latest polls show that you're..." and end with either,

"...leading your opponent; how can you hold that lead?" or "...trailing your opponent; how can you turn it around?" The candidate would then respond with either: "Obviously my message of hope and prosperity for the people is getting through, and I'm gratified" or "Once my message of hope and prosperity gets through to the people, I'm sure I'll do well and win." Either way, the candidates would have said essentially nothing, but of course what they said wasn't the point anyway; the story was the poll and the comments were sought simply to provide a soundbite for the poll story.

Much has been made, and rightly so, about the increasing trend of presidential campaigns to stage "pseudo-events"—the "photo opportunity," or "visual," done solely to manipulate a

Poll news is not a "pseudo-event" created by the campaigns, it is "pseudo-news" created by the media.

picture or image of the candidate that is, in truth, utterly devoid of any real meaning or substance. (On the night of ABC's broadcast all three networks carried pictures of Dukakis and me playing catch with a baseball. We had purposefully scheduled it to provide pictures of a relaxed Dukakis, rather than of someone in the midst of considerably more intense debate preparation. The same night, all three networks had pictures of Bush jogging.) Poll news is not a "pseudo-event" created by the campaigns, it is "pseudo-news" created by the media. At best, it reflects how the population rates the campaign at a given moment or explains why candidates and their campaigns are doing some of the things they are doing. But at its core, it doesn't report anything real. Polls are just representative samplings of ephemeral opinion. Some polls, because of bad methodology or poorly phrased questions, are simply wrong—in which case the "pseudo-news" doesn't even report the "facts." Even if a poll is accurate at the time, opinions can change. (Jennings took pains several times in his broadcast to say the ABC poll measured what would happen "if the election were held tomorrow." But the election *wasn't* the next day; it was a month away. Even the people who had been polled knew that.) At least in covering "pseudo-events" the media can blame the candidates for providing nothing else.

But the burgeoning coverage of the "pseudo-news" of polls is their own doing—they create it, pay for it, and then report on it—and a poor excuse for filling in the void.

If you talk to representatives of the media about this (as I have since the election), they invariably resort to a defense of the accuracy of

... Polls are like drugs, a kind of political crack: easily available, capable of crowding out thoughts of everything else, and very addictive.

their own poll (with occasional criticism of somebody else's methodology) and to the argument that they only reported their own polls occasionally. It's like talking to, say, Britain during the bomb tests of the late 1950s and being told, "Well, *our* bomb by itself doesn't pollute the atmosphere that much." What is overlooked is the cumulative effect. With everyone from the superpowers to the media equivalents of Pakistan regularly setting off detonations, the sky can get pretty dark and the milk more and more tainted. The political-reporting atmosphere is clogged with numbers, some accurate and some not, but all of them essentially useless to voters trying to decide who should be the next leader of the free world (unless they're going to cast their ballots like a bet, hoping to be with the candidate with the best odds).

Lying behind this obsession is the reality that polls are like drugs, a kind of political crack: easily available, capable of crowding out thoughts of everything else, and very addictive. Politicians (who, after all, were poll users long before the media got hooked on the habit) are deeply addicted, as are those of us who work for them. I, myself, have been known to go to extreme, sometimes bizarre, lengths to get any early fix on some network numbers and pass them on to my superiors. And if you talk to nearly any citizen during a campaign, one of the first questions you will get is, "Who's ahead?" or "Is so-and-so going to win?" Giving people what they want is, after all, part of the competitive news business (although a crack pusher could say the same thing about his work), but it is a different standard from giving them what they need. Nor does it address the question of

whether that's *all* they want. Even crack users want food, shelter and clothing, if only because they're necessities for survival, just as solid information is a necessity for a healthy democracy.

The problem with reporting on horse-race polls is one of balance. There are simply too many poll stories. Every dollar that a news organization spends on a poll is a dollar that could have been used for something else—such as paying for another reporter to look beyond a candidate's statements to his record or background. And every inch of column in the paper or minute of air time devoted to reporting polls is space or time that could have been used to provide the material a voter might need in making an informed decision.

Whether poll reporting has the side effect of telling voters that, in essence, the ballots have already been cast and theirs therefore don't count is a riddle for others to solve, although it's hard to imagine that obsessive poll reporting encourages voter turnout. But what seems patently clear to me is that this reporting has gotten out of hand. Reporting on polls—trying, in the best methods possible, to say who's ahead and who's behind—has a legitimate place in covering a campaign. That place is in the background, not so overwhelmingly in the foreground. "Pseudo-news," like coverage of "pseudo-events," has become too easy a substitute for the harder work of digging into a candidate's positions and history to tell us what (or, in some cases, whether) he thinks and will do if elected, rather than what a sampling of voters thinks and might do. Election day answers the latter question anyway; it might be nice to know more about the former before that day arrives.

Referees of Fact

Political journalism has evolved over the years to include a mixture of straight reportage (what the candidates say or do), investigation (a candidate's record, personal history and campaign finances), arbitration of truth (comparing campaign claims to the facts) and analysis (what tactics are being employed and why, what's working and what's not, who's ahead and who's not). In the 1988 campaign, just as poll reporting careened out of proportion, the media role as analyst seemed too often to overshadow the

other three functions. The press's obsession with polls was, in essence, part of this larger shift in balance: a preoccupation with campaign tactics finds its quantitative foundation in the "facts" of poll results (otherwise it would simply be one reporter's opinion). The principal casualty in this shift was the press's role as truth arbiter, as seen in how the media covered the responses of Senator Robert Dole and Governor Dukakis to attacks from Vice President Bush and his campaign.

Every campaign has a series of "moments"—dramatic vignettes, usually at critical junctures, that become ingrained in the nation's consciousness principally through their constant replaying in the media. One of those moments came the night of the New Hampshire primary when, after being defeated by Bush, Dole was asked on national television if he had any message for the Vice President. Dole, looking grim and battered, answered: "Tell him to stop lying about my record."

I'm sure Dole wished even as he said those words that he had been more gracious in defeat.

The principal casualty in this shift was the press's role as truth arbiter. . .

It was clearly a tactical mistake. One of the values we are all taught growing up is to be a good loser, and his remarks clearly put him out of that category. Dole already suffered from people's lingering memories of the 1976 election, when his "meanness" as Gerald Ford's running mate became a media issue. (Reporters, focused on tactics, had already written that the Bush campaign's strategy in the early caucuses and primaries was to push and crowd Dole in order to get him to "break" and stir those memories.) For the next days and weeks, the "stop lying about my record" comment was endlessly replayed on television and repeated in newspapers and magazines, chiefly as a way of explaining that Dole had blundered and was having trouble catching Bush in the polls.

I don't doubt that Dole's comment was politically harmful, nor even that it might reveal something about his personality. But ask yourself two questions. Do you remember his comment? (Of course you do. It would be hard not to have seen it, it was repeated so many times.) Now, do you remember many stories

looking into the basis of his complaint? Even in the hyperbolic language of politics, "lying" is a highly charged work, and, at least where I grew up, being a liar was considered even worse than being a poor sport. But in the preoccupation of discussing Dole's tactical blunder and the almost Freudian revelation of his "meanness," what seemed to be missing in the coverage was much attention to whether the Bush campaign had in fact lied about—or at least seriously misrepresented—Dole's record. Ironically, the Bush campaign's plan, which it seemed willing to discuss publicly, was, in essence, to be as mean as possible toward Dole, in order to get him to reveal his mean streak, which Dole's campaign was trying to keep secret. In its fascination with all these tactical maneuvers, the press seemed to overlook the fundamentals. *Somebody* was lying—either Bush and his people, or Dole—but all we heard about was whose tactic was working, not the legitimacy of the charges.

The response of Dukakis and his campaign to virtually the same tactics (early in the spring Bush's campaign manager told reporters the strategy would be to "strip the bark off the little bastard") in the general election was the opposite of Dole's and yet, even Dukakis would admit, equally ineffective: he ignored the attacks too long. Throughout the summer, as charges were leveled at Dukakis—ranging from favoring nuclear disarmament to preventing school children from reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, from wanting to confiscate hunting rifles while furloughing murderers and rapists, to supporting grain embargoes while opposing military strikes against terrorists—he resisted making forceful responses. Just as the coverage of the Dole episode was weighted heavily toward his "poor sport" response, the coverage during the summer and early fall focused more on the tactics of the situation (why Dukakis was not responding, or responding so ineffectually, and the impact of the Bush strategy on the poll standings) than on the substance of the initial charges.

Before this sounds too much like so many sour grapes from someone involved in a losing campaign, let me add a few comments. Candidates and their campaigns are principally responsible for their own success or failure. The press didn't "lose" our campaign; to the extent that it might ever have been ours to boot away, we did it without anyone's help. Campaigns

have the option of choosing tactics, including the option of choosing the wrong one. The media have different obligations. One of them clearly is to point out and analyze for the public the tactical situations in a campaign. But another one is to investigate what is being claimed and hold it up to the facts. The press should not be expected to carry a candidate's water in fending for himself or herself, but, like it or not, as the public's representative in the course of a campaign, they are expected to sift out truth from lies, misrepresentation from legitimate charges, and let the people know about it. I don't believe they have the option of ignoring their role as referees of fact.

This isn't meant to suggest that some refereeing wasn't done. It was. ABC in particular did it several times. Following each debate, James Wooten reported on the factual errors the candidates had committed. And, when the Bush campaign released its famous tank commercial, which included a number of false claims about Dukakis' defense policy, Richard Threlkeld pointed them out, as well as an overstated claim in a Dukakis commercial about Bush and Social Security. Lesley Stahl of CBS did the same concerning Bush's "revolving door" ad about Dukakis' prison furloughs. The problem, again, is one of balance and emphasis. To the extent that referee reporting took place, it was usually

Candidates still determine the tenor of a campaign, but. . . the press as referee still has an obligation to try as hard as possible to hold truth up out of the slime.

late in the game. The charges and false claims—and, yes, the lies—had already had plenty of time to sink in, and they kept on being made. Most news outlets, in fact, can probably say, "We did that story." The question is: How many times, and when?

A referee blows his whistle the moment a foul is committed, and if it is committed again, the whistle is blown again. Likewise, all fouls, like sins, aren't of the same magnitude; some deserve a louder whistle. Doing so doesn't necessarily help one side over the other or determine the outcome of the game. In politics, these kinds of fouls aren't just against an opponent, they are fouls against truthfulness. Candi-

dates still determine the tenor of a campaign, but even if they decide the game is mud wrestling instead of boxing, the press as referee still has an obligation to try as hard as possible to hold truth up out of the slime.

Inside Baseball

While the topic is sports, let me switch to a story about baseball to make a third point. I like baseball, played it constantly when I was a kid. I'm a fan now, but not an avid fan. When spring training begins, I don't pay any attention to it. I'm aware of opening day, but as the season progresses I couldn't tell you the rankings in any of the four leagues; if I had to vote for the All-Stars, I'd probably cast my ballots for somebody whose name was familiar but might, in fact, be having a horrible summer and not deserve it. Occasionally, when one team is having a big streak, or some player does something spectacular, or something in the sport happens that's newsworthy enough to vault into the news pages (Pete Rose comes to mind this spring), I'm made aware of it. By fall, I start looking at the sports pages to see who might make the playoffs, then watch the playoffs and choose up sides. But the World Series, I'm glued to my television set and poring over the sports coverage, deeply involved in what's going on and passably conversant about the two teams. You see, until the post-season games, when it counts, I'm just not interested enough to pay close attention. There are other things on my mind.

I think the same thing applies to most voters and politics. They know when the time is approaching for them to make a decision, and that's when they really tune in. Oh, they're aware when the season opens in Iowa and New Hampshire, and when something big happens (Gary Hart and Donna Rice, for instance) it registers with them, just as the conventions—the political equivalent of a combined All-Star game and playoffs—grab a certain amount of their attention. In the meantime, they have other things—existence—to keep them busy, and they know they'll have all fall to devote enough time and attention to an election. This is all very normal and as it should be. God help us if the entire nation became political junkies—nothing productive would get done.

The difficulty, I think, is that the press

doesn't take this enough into account. Campaigns for president now begin several years before the final election, and, rightly so, campaign coverage starts at the same time. By the time the Iowa caucuses and New Hampshire primary take place in February, most political reporters have heard the candidates' speeches more times than they ever wished; they've covered the various positions on the major issues of the day; and they've probably done major biographical pieces. The conventions might even spark another round of this kind of basic reporting.

But by the time Labor Day arrives—at the very time the bulk of America is now turning its attention to the political choice ahead—the reporters are numbed from at least a full year of listening to speeches and reading position papers. “News” by its very definition is something that is new, that either hasn't happened or been said before or represents a change in situation. At this juncture, the basic information about a candidate's personal history and position on major issues—the very things voters need and, I believe, want—are no longer “news” to the people upon whom this new audience relies for its information: the reporters who by this point have been following the campaign for more than a year. As they would say, “We did that story.” True enough, but were any people other than the political counterparts of baseball maven in a position to receive it?

Compounding this, what *is* always new, and therefore news, is the latest poll—“pseudo-news”—or a change in tactics, the internal maneuvers within a campaign organization, or the release of a new commercial: the things political folks call “inside baseball.” In an atmosphere already overcrowded with tactical coverage, the normal imperatives of news coverage conspire to bring the voters even more of it.

The only answer is for the media to keep this disjuncture between the two timetables, the voting public's and that of the people wrapped up in the long political whirl, constantly in mind. Journalism is a communications business, meant to inform as well as report, and communication happens best when there is someone at the other end, ready to be informed. There should be nothing wrong with a major newspaper or network deciding that, like baseball, politics has distinct segments—and audiences—to its season and therefore telling

some of its stories over again for those who have just tuned in. This is especially important since, unlike baseball, in politics it is the audience who ultimately decides who wins and loses.

The Gotcha Game

Around 3 a.m. one night in late July, while we were on a campaign swing through Michigan, the telephone woke me up in my hotel room. It was a reporter from a large newspaper, calling at the insistence of his editors. They had heard a rumor that another large paper was about to publish a blockbuster story about a rumor that Dukakis had once secretly undergone psychiatric treatment for clinical depres-

The long presidential campaign of 1988. . . was marked by heightened coverage of “character issues,” most often in the form of explosive “revelations.”

sion. His paper, on the West Coast and therefore still not beyond its final deadline, didn't want to be “scooped.” Understand something here. He wasn't asking if the rumor about Dukakis and depression was true; he was asking if the rumor about a story about to come out was true. This particular incident, I think, is doubly illustrative.

The long presidential campaign of 1988—from early 1987 to the final election—was marked by heightened coverage of “character issues,” most often in the form of explosive “revelations.” These ranged from disclosures about Gary Hart and Donna Rice to Joe Biden's exaggeration of his college career and cribbing from other politicians' speeches, from the conception of Pat Robertson's first child out of wedlock and Dan Quayle's military record to Bruce Babbitt's and Albert Gore Jr.'s confessions that they once smoked marijuana. The coverage of Dukakis' mental health—which consumed a week in mid-summer, included the publication of rumors that were acknowledged to be totally unsubstantiated, and ultimately forced him to deny a charge that had never authoritatively been made—was probably the nadir of this trend.

I believe that “character” in the broad sense

is the most important criterion in assessing who should lead the nation. A checklist of where a candidate stands on the issues is certainly useful information, but, as we have learned from most presidents once they are elected, those positions can change—either because they were dissembling in the first place (Johnson and the war in Vietnam) or they simply saw things differently once they were in office (Bush banning the importation of AK-47s comes to mind). Furthermore, critical issues and situations are likely to arise during a presidency that might not have been foreseen or discussed during the campaign. Much more crucial and pertinent, then, are those attributes that can be lumped under the character umbrella. What are the candidate's core beliefs and values? How does he respond to crisis and pressure? How does he manage people and information? Is he dogmatic or pragmatic, self-directed or guided by his advisors? Does he, in fact, change his mind on

In the 1988 campaign, the broader issues of character seemed subsumed into a kind of "gotcha game."

issues and under what circumstances? (And does he keep his campaign promises?) To the extent that these are discernible, beyond the candidate's speeches and pronouncements during a campaign, they can most likely be found in exhaustive searches of a candidate's personal history and political record.

Part of a candidate's character and history also includes whether he spent weekends on yachts with young models, inflated his academic record, once used an illegal drug, led a wild life before a religious conversion, went into the National Guard instead of to a war he publicly supported, has exhibited streaks of "meanness" or sought professional help during times of personal tragedy. Such things are not just "fair game" for the press, they are bits of information the public deserves to know before choosing its president.

The problem, once again, is one of balance—of context and of atmosphere. In the 1988 campaign, the broader issues of character seemed subsumed into a kind of "gotcha game." The press too often defined covering "character" as the discovery of a human flaw, which was

then reported in a breathless, hyped atmosphere that threw context aside—and in the Dukakis case was little more than rumor mongering. Gary Hart is caught with Donna Rice and then is asked if he's ever committed adultery: "gotcha." The dates of Pat Robertson's marriage certificate and the birth of his son are compared and a discrepancy is found: "gotcha." Joe Biden wasn't a great student, Dan Quayle wasn't a war hero, and, despite the whispers, Michael Dukakis didn't seek psychiatric help: "gotcha, gotcha, gotcha."

My point is not that the press should idealize the candidates or sanitize their records. But taken to its extreme, the logic of the "gotcha game" would result in a system where the model public servant, being devoid of human faults, would be too boring to deserve character coverage, and it would mean that an accounting of any person's life is a matter of subtraction (or in some cases, elimination) rather than addition and subtraction.

The second part of my anecdote about being called in the middle of the night helps explain, at least partly, why this game happens. The West Coast paper was concerned about being scooped. If somebody else was going with the rumor story, it was prepared to follow. Within the pack journalism that is so much of campaign coverage, a frenzy easily develops, particularly at the prospect that something damaging is about to be exposed. During the primaries, when most campaigns were struggling to get almost *any* media attention, ironically the worst thing a press secretary could tell his candidate was that twenty satellite trucks had suddenly shown up outside his hotel room and fifty reporters were waiting for him to answer some questions.

The news about Pat Robertson and his first child is another, slightly different, example. The information that he and his wife had conceived their son months before their marriage was part of a long profile of Robertson in the *Wall Street Journal*, reported more than halfway down the story and put into the context of his entire biography—it took place before he was "born again" and he had remained happily married the rest of his life. Within minutes of the paper's hitting the streets, however, the single fact had been lifted from the story and was leading news broadcasts around the nation. Biography and examinations of character often rely on the "telling anecdote"—the vignette or

story that illuminates a larger point and, in a vivid shorthand, explains more than the vignette itself. But what seems to have been forgotten on occasion during the last campaign is the significant difference between the telling anecdote and simply telling anecdotes.

To be sure, there were several excellent explorations of the candidates' character and history. Garry Wills' series for public television, "The Choice," was probably the best. The *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times* and some other newspapers and magazines also did exhaustive examinations of the candidates' biographies and records. Unfortunately, in the overall impression left on the voters—in the *communication* of information—they were overshadowed by the "gotcha game." (And, in the case of most of the print examinations of character, they almost uniformly were published so early in the long campaign that only those of us consumed with "inside baseball" read them. I think it would have been worthwhile to have either reprinted or reworked the stories about the eventual nominees for publication near the election.)

With the decline of the political parties in recent years, and thus the decline of party peers selecting nominees after quietly sifting through their private lives, peccadilloes, and human failings, the media have been left the task of helping voters weed out people who may be unsuited for office. By necessity, the process is now very public and occasionally messy. I don't want the press to back off from probing the "character issue." It's the most vital issue concerning our nation's most vital office. (Although I do think there are limits. The *New York Times* requested permission to review raw FBI files on the candidates; a request they wisely withdrew after a firestorm of legitimate criticism. And the "fact" that a rumor is spreading or being denied is no justification for publicizing the rumor.) What I would hope is that a continued, even intensified, investigation of character does not sacrifice context and balance to hype

and scandal, that the view of the forest isn't lost by barking up just one tree.

Given my personal political leanings, not to mention the job I held during the campaign, I obviously wish the outcome of the last election had been other than what the voters decided. My criticisms of the press coverage are meant neither as an excuse nor as an explanation for our campaign's defeat. The media didn't dictate the course and tenor of the campaign; the candidates and their organizations did. Nor did the media determine the result; that role is preserved for the voters.

Having been involved in varying degrees with the last three presidential campaigns, however, my impression last year was that the overall quality of political coverage was declining, not improving. I believe the objectives and role of the media in covering a campaign are to report, to investigate, to inform, to referee and to analyze (yes, even telling the public who's ahead and who's behind). The coverage of the 1988 campaign included all those elements.

But in the growing fascination, almost obsession with tactics and polls, in the willingness to provide greater scrutiny to the consequences rather than to the legitimacy of campaign charges, in following a political calendar that is increasingly out of sync with the voters', and in the tendency to treat personal character as a game of "gotcha"—those elements slipped out of balance.

Political journalism is like a front tire on the automobile of democracy. It's not the engine, the fuel, or the chassis. Out of balance, a front tire doesn't necessarily prevent the car from moving ahead. Unless it's corrected, however, the whole auto starts to shimmy, gets harder to steer and eventually runs the risk of an unexpected flat. As the political system idles briefly before embarking down the next campaign road, now is the time to think about a little tire maintenance.