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THE NIXON MEMO

By Marvin Kalb

Discussion Paper D-13
July 1992

The Joan Shorenstein Barone Center

PRESS • POLITICS



• PUBLIC POLICY •

Harvard University
John F. Kennedy School of Government

INTRODUCTION

The Shorenstein Barone Center is devoted to the proposition that the intersection of the domain of the press with the domain of politics is a fruitful area for academic inquiry. Under the broad heading of press and politics, however, lie several more specific concerns. One of these is the effect of government on the press, and here we encounter numerous more specific topics. One involves governmental policies about press access, for as long as government remains much of what the press covers, then the extent of availability of governmental processes, personnel, and documents will influence the nature of coverage. Another is the way in which the governmental machinery regulating radio, television, and newer forms of telecommunications influences the structure of the relevant industries and also the content of what they do. And still another is the extent to which the constitutional constraints of the First Amendment themselves affect the way in which government can affect the press.

All of this, however, sees the press/politics relationship in terms of the political system's effect on the press. Of equal or greater importance, however, is the effect of the press on the political system, and here there is much work to be done in understanding the nature of that relationship. Some of the relevant research involves analyzing press content, and trying to determine and to explain those patterns of coverage that may be no less important just because they are not immediately apparent to the casual reader or viewer. The content of the press has the ability to affect politics and policy, however, largely as a function of the way in which what is in the press affects political behavior, and so another area of research tries to examine just how and how much what is written or printed influences the actions of policy-makers. Once we conduct this examination, however, we discover that often the patterns of influence are complex, and so some people study the way in which the press may at times serve to facilitate communication among different branches of government, and others try to look at the causes and effects, and the rights and the wrongs, of the various interconnections between the world of the press and the world of public policy.

To locate the topic of press/politics is not to identify a method of inquiry, and all of the above topics can be and are studied with a variety of methods and in a multiplicity of disciplines. Sometimes we learn from formal models, for isolating patterns of influence and incentive can help us better to understand the relationships that are at the heart of press/politics interaction, and the factors that lead some events to be newsworthy and others not. At other times the methods of science are most appropriate, and here we see political scientists, social psychologists, and sociologists, among others, using the tools of their craft to analyze data in the hope of revealing some of the secrets that raw data so often conspires to obscure. Normative analysis, whether philosophical, legal, or political, can help us to evaluate the status quo and offer proposals for change. And, consistent with one of the primary teaching vehicles of the Kennedy School of Government, the detailed and nuanced case study often serves as a way of understanding and memorializing those particular events whose lessons are generalizable to the problems of the future.

The following paper by Marvin Kalb, Director of the Shorenstein Barone Center and Edward R. Murrow Professor of Press and Public Policy at the Kennedy School of Government, was first presented as the keynote address at the Center's fifth anniversary celebrations. It provides an ideal example of the complexity of press/politics interaction, and of the way in which tired images of the press as invisible and non-participating observer cannot begin to capture the intricacies of the modern relationship between the press and politics. Moreover, it offers a prime example of one of the methodologies I have just mentioned, because in so successfully using the method of the case study it both adds to our understanding in its own right and furnishes a vehicle for others, with other methodologies, to use to add to our understanding from quite different perspectives.

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THE NIXON MEMO

This is a tale about an aging American politician, and a memo, one of hundreds that arrive on a Washington insider's desk every day. It is also a tale about press, politics and public policy, which makes it entirely appropriate for this fifth anniversary celebration of a research center at the Kennedy School named after my friend, Joan Shorenstein Barone. I'd like to describe this tale as a fairytale, but I can't. There are no fairies, no fantasies, no Wizard of Oz, except perhaps the aging politician himself.

He lives now in Saddle River, New Jersey, a 79-year-old politician with a very special distinction. He was the only President in the history of the United States forced to resign in disgrace, a step ahead of House impeachment. He was also, in his time, a successful attorney, a Vice-President, a Senator, a member of the House of Representatives, an officer in the U.S. Navy during World War II. We are talking about an extremely accomplished person, but one so singlemindedly ambitious and amoral that he also leaves a legacy of scandal and embarrassment.

In his long career, this politician has often been crafty. He raised a mischievous question in the early 1950's that ended up defining a good part of our political debate for decades to come. After the Communists stormed into Beijing in 1949, the politician, who was then a young Turk on the rise, and his cohorts, asked, "Who lost China?", as though a nation of a billion people dominating Asia was any particular American politician's or statesman's to lose. The simplistic but politically-devastating implication was that the Democrats had lost it, and history had chosen him to recover the loss—which he did in February, 1972 during a door-opening presidential visit to Beijing. Never one to think small, he called his visit "the week that changed the world."

Over the years this politician has also contrived a strange and fascinating relationship with the press. He's never liked newspeople, yet he knows their value; and they've never liked him, or felt comfortable in his presence, yet they know a good story when they see one. Together, this politician and the press have established the strangest kind of love-hate cooperation in recent American history—using, misusing and abusing each other with extraordinary frequency and with so little joy.

First Amendment considerations to one side, Richard Nixon has always felt a need to use, (always to use), tame, control, manage, organize,

arrange, taunt, tease, loathe, hate, attack, and criticize the press, and he has applied a surgeon's skill to the manipulation of newspapermen and TV reporters. Quicker than almost any other modern politician, he understood the enormous power of television to shape popular perception and advance political agendas. It was television that saved his vice-presidential spot in 1952. Remember Checkers and Pat's cloth coat? And, ten years later, after he'd lost the California gubernatorial race, remember him saying on TV, "You won't have Richard Nixon to kick around any more." There were many who would have regarded such a promise as a profound blessing upon the land, but they were to be disappointed. Nixon didn't mean it. Then, or ever.

No sooner had he relocated, as they say, to New York in the mid-1960's, closer to the hub of the press, television, *The New York Times*, Wall Street, the big barons of law and business, even Washington, than he began to organize his 1968 campaign for the presidency. Nowhere was the new flavor of American politics (TV-driven, manipulated, the rise of political ads, image over substance) better described than in Joe McGinnis's 1969 book, *The Selling of the President*, which shows how Nixon was repackaged from "old" to "new" by a team of PR/TV specialists.

As William Gavin, a Nixon aide, told the candidate, suggesting the nature of the salespitch: "Voters are basically lazy, basically uninterested in making an effort to understand what they're talking about... We've got to appear larger than life, and this is one great advantage of a film: it can be projected larger than life... We cannot win the election of 1968 with the techniques of 1952. We're not only in a television age, but in a television-conditioned age—and it's one of unease, of discontent, of frustration, largely undirected or multidirectional, diffuse." Familiar?

And so, this politician, old or new, disgraced and continually resurrected, unwilling like General MacArthur simply to fade away, impatient even at his age for another round of adulation, for another contribution to his nation, (assuming, this once, that his motivation was selfless), absolutely convinced he ranks with Churchill or Roosevelt as one of the great leaders of the 20th century—this aging politician is determined not to be forgotten, and the press, time and again, even against its better instincts,

obliges RN, as he's still called, by providing him with a lens, a column or a speaker's platform.

This latest collaboration, which revolved around the Nixon memo, focused on his strong belief that the Russian Revolution of 1991 was an historic occasion, similar, as he has put it, to Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo in 1815, or the Versailles Conference of 1919, or the birth of NATO and the Marshall Plan in 1948, and the response of the West—indeed, of the Bush Administration—has been woefully inadequate. Rather than recognize the magnitude and profound importance of the event, the West and the Administration have been missing the moment, engaged as they have been, in Nixon's view, with short-sighted, "penny-ante" stuff.

Question: How to sell this view? How to move it from his mind to the front page of *The New York Times*? Time-tested techniques: Pressure the administration. Galvanize the press. Stimulate debate. Raise the ghosts of politics past. More than anything else, be clear about your central argument. One, if what goes for democracy fails in the new Russia of President Boris Yelstin, make the point that the West will face a new, more terrible despotism, requiring a major and very expensive rearmament effort. That may or may not be an accurate prognosis, but it will attract attention. Then rub a political nerve end, in the firm knowledge that it always hurts and always gets a reaction: an updated version of "Who lost China?" becomes "Who lost Russia?" But more on this point later. For now, let us say only that Nixon intends to sound the alarm. He wants to affect public policy, to change the course of Administration policy. But how?

This is one aging politician who does not have to be reminded that the US is in the midst of a wildly contentious presidential campaign, in which the very mention of foreign aid continues to draw a sullen hiss. In the current political vernacular, hard-earned tax dollars are not supposed to be sent to Russia; they're supposed to be spent in America. Now boldness, audacity, vision is needed, not the caution and timidity that he clearly associates with the Bush administration. But how to light the fire? And how to do it in such a way that, at least for his own image, for his place in history, he seems statesman-like—how did his old aide, William Gavin, put it, "larger than life," a figure above the political fray?

To be clear and fair, at this stage Nixon is thinking about a phenomenally important matter of public policy—namely, the U.S.

response to urgent Russian needs. Why shouldn't a President who made his reputation as much on anti-Communist hysteria as on foreign policy expertise focus on this vital issue? He has knowledge, experience, contacts. Ever since the mid-1970's, when he retreated to San Clemente, he's been engaged in a nonstop comeback, his rise to new levels of respectability. Step by step. A timid appearance at a conservative Republican gathering in southern California. How did the press react? An article. A book. A TV appearance. An occasional foreign trip. Another book. Another TV appearance. By now, 18 years after his resignation, if Nixon wants to be heard, he has reached a level of acceptance by the so-called establishment that he can and should be heard. He's ready.

Once again, Nixon needs the press. Probably without even being aware of it, he is about to engage in an exercise called press/politics, the new field of study to which the Shorenstein Barone Center has devoted itself for the past five years.

On his desk, no doubt, as he sat there thinking about his strategy, was a copy of his latest book, "Seize the Moment: America's Challenge in a One-Superpower World." For old soldier/politicians like Nixon, books are better than op-ed pieces for conveying an impression of stature, significance and seriousness. Books lend legitimacy to an author and to an idea. His latest effort leaped to the best-seller list of *The New York Times*, largely on the strength of Nixon's name and reputation—and stayed there for more than two months.

Still Nixon had the distinct impression that the message, while it was "out there," was not generating the desired bounce. So far as he could tell, the President hadn't read it, not Scowcroft nor Baker nor Cheney, either, because the Administration's policy remained unaffected and, more important, unchanged. More had to be done.

In late December, 1991, the Soviet Union having officially disintegrated, but the U.S. having responded with only smug satisfaction, Nixon made his next move. On a yellow, legal-size pad, he wrote an unsolicited page-long column for *Time* magazine. A year or so before, he had written another column for *Time*, and he had enjoyed the experience. Why not an op-ed piece for *The Times* or *The Post*? Probably, because at the time he felt that route had lost some of its glitter. He asked an aide to call Richard Duncan, one of two executive editors at *Time*. Was the magazine interested in an RN offering? The answer was encouraging. Indeed it was. The editors recalled Nixon's earlier piece.

Nixon represented both stature and controversy, surefire ingredients in the super-charged competition among American magazines. He was also perceived as a guru on foreign policy. As Duncan's colleague, Ronald Kriss, explained: "It was one of those 'over the transom' things. We read it. It was current, worthy, and we ran it."

The Nixon column appeared on page 27 of the January 13, 1992 issue of *Time*. "Now is the time to provide economic aid," he began, "to pro-reform Republics of the new Commonwealth of Independent States." They "deserve our help," he said, and Yeltsin "must not fail." Why help? Because, Nixon wrote, "no better alternative exists," and "the reform of Russia is a key to the reform of the other Republics." In this piece, he did not directly criticize the Administration, limiting his critique time and again to the vague political and diplomatic composite known as "the West," which he said has been "slow" to come to Russia's aid.

He then listed four ways to help.

1. "Create a U.S.-led organization to spearhead Western aid efforts."
2. "Provide accelerated assistance to agricultural sectors."
3. "Establish 'enterprise funds' for reformist republics."
4. "Expand educational and information-exchange programs."

As you can see, aside from Point 1, about American leadership of Western aid, Nixon was not exactly lighting up the heavens with controversial proposals. If his editors at *Time* were disappointed with the product, they didn't say so. Quite the contrary, they might actually have been delighted. They'd run a Nixon column, a bow to the right that's always handy in case the right chooses one day to criticize *Time* for tilting too much to the left.

But, again, nothing much happened. No debate, no pressure, indeed no pickup from the wires. It was as if Nixon had spoken, and no one had listened. Was the old master losing his touch? Was *Time* losing its magic? Or, was the subject so removed from the consciousness of American politics—was the recession so nagging and depressing a reality—that any talk of foreign aid in general or aid to Russia in specific simply slipped into oblivion without leaving a trace? One thing was certain: Nixon was not one to be discouraged.

What emerged over the next month had all the earmarks of a three-staged strategy, though it might have been three actions only loosely coordinated. Either way, the effect was the same.

The policy was changed. First, Nixon decided that he would go back to the well at *Time* with another column on the same subject, only this one would be slightly more urgent. Next he would send a private memo, again on the same subject, to fifty carefully selected Washington insiders—friends, journalists, politicians, and former aides, such as Brent Scowcroft, the President's National Security Advisor. (Interestingly, the Secretary of State, James Baker, did not get a copy.) The memo, because it was "private," would be more explicit, directing its fire at President Bush's administration, not just at the amorphous "West," which seemed to have no particular address. It would be called, provocatively, "How to Lose the Cold War." Nixon assumed—indeed, understood—that the memo would leak. After all, it's not every day that an incumbent Republican President is attacked by a former Republican President, now considered an elder statesman.

Finally, Nixon would approve plans for a special conference in Washington devoted to the theme of "America's Role in the Emerging World." When it would take place and who'd be invited were important questions not to be left to chance. In charge of the operation, dubbed "A Nixon Library Conference in Washington," was James R. Schlesinger, a former Cabinet official in the Nixon administration, who chaired the conference committee. It consisted of two other Cabinet officials, George Shultz and William Simon, expert Dimitri Simes and aide John Taylor. They decided, presumably with Nixon's approval, that the conference would be held on March 11-12, 1992, and they'd invite prominent journalists and columnists, former government officials, politicians and scholars. At Simes's suggestion, Russians would also be included.

My invitation to the conference was dated February 7, 1992. I was surprised to receive one. My relations with the Nixon administration had been, to put it charitably, strained. My phones had been wiretapped (I believe, illegally), I'd made the fabled "Enemies List," and I'd been tailed by US agents while covering the Vietnam peace talks in Paris. Still if I could have attended the conference (a prior engagement kept me away), I would have enjoyed participating or simply listening to what the invitation described as "a distinguished, diverse group of international experts, including President Nixon himself," discuss "the historic challenges and opportunities in a world that has been dramatically and irrevocably transformed by the dissolution of the Soviet Union."

Between February 7, the date of the invitation, and March 11, the date of the conference, much was to happen in this example of press/politics, some of it, as we've seen, planned like a military campaign, other parts of it accidental or coincidental, a chance conversation or telephone call, a hunch, a tip, a friendship—in other words, the normal ingredients of journalism.

Central to our tale, we should again remind ourselves, is the memo, and central to the memo is the man who wrote it. At this point, context is important. Nixon has never been one of Bush's great admirers. Though Nixon had appointed him to a job or two, he felt Bush was essentially weak, an effete northeasterner, whose father, Senator Prescott Bush of Connecticut, belonged to the wrong wing of the Republican Party. During a book tour in 1980, Nixon told Pat Buchanan on CNN that presidential candidate Ronald Reagan would be wise to drop Bush from the ticket. At issue was a story that Bush had refused to deliver a broadside against Democrat Walter Mondale. When necessary, Nixon had been Dwight Eisenhower's hatchetman, and Spiro Agnew had been his. Bush needed a spine-stiffening jolt, and Nixon in 1992 was prepared to administer it.

In four-plus pages, Nixon drafted a tightly-reasoned attack on the Bush Administration. He outlined his stark vision of a world teetering between a wholly new era of freedom and democracy in Russia led by President Boris Yeltsin or a desperate descent into "a new, more dangerous despotism based on extremist Russian nationalism." We are, he said, "at a watershed moment in history." Yeltsin's success is crucial, yet what are we doing to insure his success?

Barely disguising his contempt, Nixon then listed the modest steps authorized by the Bush administration to meet this "historic challenge," such as, "a photo-opportunity international conference," sending 200 Peace Corps volunteers and 60 cargo planes of leftover surplus food and medical supplies from the Persian Gulf War. To Nixon, this was all "mere tokenism," a "pathetically inadequate response."

He must have known that this tough criticism would sting and embarrass the White House, especially since it came at a time when the President was still wobbly and unstable from the unexpectedly sharp political assault by former speechwriter Patrick Buchanan, the self-appointed crusader of the "America First" wing of the Republican Party. He must also have known that, by proceeding with this attack, he might be jeopardizing his chances of being invited by the

President to the Republican National Convention in Houston in August, 1992—for him, the crowning moment of his official rehabilitation. Nixon must have calculated the odds—and proceeded. What better time for this ultimate gambler to press his advantage!

The former President ticked off six ways to help Yeltsin, including food and medical aid, a "free enterprise corps" of thousands of Western entrepreneurs, rescheduling the Russian debt, greater access for Russian exports, a currency stabilization fund worth "tens of billions of dollars," and, a repeat of one of his earlier proposals from *Time* magazine, a U.S.-led group to coordinate Western aid and credit.

"The stakes are high," Nixon wrote, "and we are playing as if it were a penny-ante game."

Then he applied the political coup de grace. He reached back into his own history and, in words aimed straight at the Oval Office, he said: "The mark of great political leadership is not simply to support what is popular but to make what is unpopular popular if that serves America's national interest. In addition, what seems politically profitable in the short run may prove costly in the long run. The hot-button issue in the 1950's was, 'Who lost China?' If Yeltsin goes down, the question of 'Who lost Russia?' will be an infinitely more devastating issue in the 1990's."

According to William Safire, a *New York Times* columnist who was a wordsmith in the Nixon White House, the former President has always believed that "people act out of fear, not out of love." Nixon was, in effect, telling the President that if he didn't follow the Nixon formula, and Yeltsin collapsed, and a new despotism emerged, Bush would be saddled with the political responsibility. Right or wrong, he'd be seen as the President who lost Russia. This was an example, Safire said, of Nixon thinking not as another, off-the-rack foreign policy specialist but as an imaginative hard-nosed politician, who intended to force the President to act—and the sooner the better.

The memo left Saddle River, New Jersey in two waves. Among the fifty-or-so Washington insiders who received it were former Nixon aides, officials and journalists, including, unsurprisingly, *New York Times* columnist William Safire, who had just recently written another of his occasional columns about Nixon. His, part of the first wave, was dated February 25, 1992. Arnaud de Borchgrave, Editor-at-Large of *The Washington Times*, also got one dated February 25, 1992. Harry Rosenthal, on

temporary assignment at the White House for the Associated Press, got a copy. Mitchell [Mike] Levitas, editor of the op-ed page of *The New York Times*, received his copy on March 9, 1992; part of the second wave, it was dated March 3, 1992.

A personal cover note accompanied each copy of the memo. It began with a hand-written salutation—Dear Bill, Dear Arnaud, Dear Mike—and all contained a terse typed message: “I have enclosed some thoughts on a vital issue that deserves priority attention during the ’92 campaign.” It was signed: “Sincerely, RN.”

Here the press/politics plot begins to thicken. For one thing, the memo did not leak the moment it hit the Washington scene, which is interesting. When would it leak? And under what circumstances? For another, Nixon rewrote the memo and, following a familiar pattern, asked an aide to call Richard Duncan of *Time* magazine to see if he’d be interested in running another column on the increasingly important need for the “West” to aid Russia. Again the answer was an enthusiastic yes. As Duncan’s colleague, Kriss, explained, “The issue had gathered force, and we thought the column was worth running.” The Nixon column appeared in the March 9, 1992 issue.

At the time neither Duncan nor Kriss was aware of the stronger version contained in the private memo. Neither had received a copy. Later, Kriss said: “Actually, we were chagrined to hear about the memo. It had quite a good kick to it.”

One of the strangest facts about American press and politics is that it follows no single libretto. Institutional politics lends itself to organization; journalism seldom follows precise guidelines. Despite surface similarities, no one newsroom is like another. In 1980, when I transmigrated from CBS to NBC, I was astonished at the differences in style and attitude between the two networks.

In this instance, de Borchgrave acknowledged that he had simply missed the significance of the memo. Hence no story in *The Washington Times*. Rosenthal of the AP read the memo and then put it in a drawer. He too had missed its importance. Safire, always sensitive to criticism that he was still too close to Nixon, said: “I’m not his press agent at *The New York Times*.” *Washington Post* reporter David Hoffman had been given access to a copy—he’d not received one himself—and could have written a story focusing on Nixon’s criticism of Bush—a surefire front-page story—but he decided to do it another

way. He was investigating a story about how campaign politics was constraining the Administration’s handling of foreign policy. Nixon’s criticism of the President’s timidity on the question of aid to Russia fit into the broader theme that Hoffman was describing. Not until the eleventh paragraph of an extraordinarily long story—1,524 words, to be exact—did Hoffman mention the Nixon memo. Obviously he didn’t think it was the most important fact in the story.

Hoffman later explained his decision by saying the memo “deserved a wider framework. His [Nixon’s] voice was only one among many.” Whether, in addition, Hoffman felt that he didn’t want to be “used” by the former President and therefore refused to lead his story with the memo is not known.

Although Hoffman’s story was ready for publication by March 5, 1992, the editors either didn’t read to the eleventh paragraph or, like de Borchgrave, they just missed the point. Either way, waiting for a lighter news day, or for a better news peg, they held up publication until March 10, 1992, coincidentally the very same day that *The New York Times* ran two prominent stories about the Nixon memo and accomplished in one edition of the newspaper what the former President had been orchestrating for months. It was to be another illustration of the power and influence of *The New York Times*. One story, which ran on the front-page under the headline “Nixon Scoffs at Level of Support for Russian Democracy by Bush,” was written by Thomas Friedman, like Hoffman, the paper’s diplomatic reporter. The other story ran on the op-ed page under the headline “How To Lose the Cold War”—the same headline Nixon had used on his memo. The piece was written by Daniel Schorr, a veteran analyst for National Public Radio.

What happened between March 5 and March 10, 1992, a brief but crucial time in the presidential campaign, was of particular importance to our story. It was the final countdown to Super Tuesday, when Republicans and Democrats would be voting in primary elections in such key states as Florida, Texas and Massachusetts. Not surprisingly, most reporters were focusing their attention on domestic politics.

On March 5, Mike Levitas called Schorr and asked him to write an op-ed piece for March 12 about the results of Super Tuesday. Schorr accepted the assignment, and both agreed to talk again on Monday, March 9.

Over the weekend, Schorr happened to be attending a conference about Russia at the Wye

Plantation in Maryland. Don Oberdorfer of *The Washington Post* was also present. During a panel discussion, Oberdorfer mentioned that Nixon had written and circulated a memo highly critical of Bush's approach to the question of aid for Russia. This was "news" to most people at the conference. Oberdorfer had received his copy from a former government official. He felt no hesitation about mentioning the memo because, for one thing, the conference was "off the record" and, for another, he knew that his colleague, David Hoffman, had already written about it in a story that, so far as Oberdorfer knew, could have been published the very next day.

Oberdorfer also told the conference that Nixon would be coming to Washington on March 11 and would undoubtedly be discussing his reservations about Bush's approach to helping Russia. Oberdorfer, one of Washington's best reporters, had checked with Dimitri Simes, who had helped arrange the Nixon conference of March 11-12, and learned that Nixon planned to disclose the contents of his memo when he addressed the conference at noon, March 11. This was a matter of "major importance," Oberdorfer said, and "I intend to cover it."

It should startle no one that this fascinating set of facts got lodged in Schorr's mind. He too is one of Washington's best reporters. Later that evening, in a telephone conversation, Schorr informed Oberdorfer that he was going to write a piece about Bush's policy for *The Times* and would appreciate a quote from the Nixon memo. Oberdorfer gave him the quote about Bush's "pathetically inadequate response."

On Monday, March 9, 1992, *Time* magazine ran its second Nixon column in two months—both on the same theme. In it Nixon made essentially the same points, again refusing in *Time*, as distinct from the specificity he added to his memo, to finger Bush for special criticism. This *Time* column would not have been part of a journalistic or political explosion, in and of itself, had it not been for the conversation that morning between Schorr and Levitas.

According to both men, Schorr was still thinking primarily about the political piece that Levitas had originally assigned. He suggested the anomalous theme of everyone campaigning to settle the question of who would govern in 1993 when no one, not even the President, was really governing in 1992. Schorr said that Bush was having problems at home and abroad. No one was discussing aid to Russia, for example. Almost as a throwaway line to support his case,

Schorr added that "even Richard Nixon is criticizing the President."

Levitas's ears instantly caught the unmistakable roar of a news story. What's that?, he asked. What about Nixon? Schorr explained that he'd heard that Nixon had written a memo critical of the Bush approach to Russian aid, and that Nixon might well go public with his criticism at a Washington conference on Wednesday. Levitas asked Schorr if he could get a copy of the memo and use the Nixon criticism as the basis of his op-ed piece.

In fact, Schorr already had a copy. Early Monday morning, he'd played a hunch, always a handy tool in journalism, and called his friend, William Safire, and told him what he'd learned about the Nixon memo. Did Safire by any chance have a copy? The answer was yes and within a few minutes so too did Schorr. Safire faxed it to his home, along with a request—that if Schorr wanted to use it, fine, but first check with Nixon. Schorr was not exactly a Nixon favorite, but what did he have to lose?

Schorr told the Nixon aide who answered the phone that he had "access" to the memo, thought it was "interesting and very well written," and wondered whether Nixon would mind if he "quoted from it." Schorr assumed that the aide would say that she first had to check with Nixon, and Nixon, remembering Schorr's broadcasts during the Watergate scandal, would probably say no, but in fact all she did was say, "sure, he'd be very happy if you did."

Delighted, Schorr told Levitas about the good news. He knew, as he would later say, that "I was fulfilling the master's wish," but he had no objection. Nor did Levitas. The editor then decided on the spot that Schorr should focus on the Nixon memo and, instead of publishing the piece on Thursday, as originally scheduled, it would be published the following morning—Tuesday, March 10, a day before Nixon was to speak at his conference. Via the front page of *The New York Times*, the Nixon memo would become the herald of the Nixon speech.

Safire had not only provided Schorr with a copy of the Nixon memo but later, at Levitas's request, he also provided a copy to his colleague, Thomas Friedman. After all, Levitas did not want to scoop his own paper.

Friedman, a two-time winner of the Pulitzer Prize, "went right for the jugular," as he would later put it. "I read the memo, thought it was very important, articulate, a major news story." Friedman, like most *Times* reporters covering the State Department, had excellent sources.

He'd known ever since Baker's last trip to the former Soviet Union that the Secretary's aides were "obsessed" by a political nightmare: that if Russia collapsed into chaos, Baker would be stuck with the blame. They were happy to learn that Friedman intended to focus on Nixon's criticism of Bush. They wanted to protect their man, even at the risk of hurting the President. Friedman felt justified in beginning his story with the Nixon-attacks-Bush bombshell. "I have no regrets; it was a superb story."

Across town, in the offices of *The Washington Post*, at just about the same time, a group of editors decided to run the Hoffman piece the following day. Their motivation, more than likely, was not to beat the Nixon speech into print, which was clearly Levitas's motivation, but rather to give a broader, foreign dimension to Super Tuesday coverage. The headline that topped the piece read: "U.S. Politics Constrains Role Abroad; Voters Look Inward; World Seeks Help."

There was no collaboration between *The Times* and *The Post*; neither had knowledge of the other's plans. Yet both ran their Nixon stories on the same day.

Levitas, in New York, then busied himself with his morning mail. There, among the hand-outs and bills, was, of all things, his copy of the Nixon memo. In recent months, Levitas had been in touch with Nixon's office about a possible op-ed piece—but, though he didn't get a piece, he did apparently get on Nixon's mailing list. He did not have much time to relish the ironic coincidence of events; for a moment he considered dropping the Schorr piece and running the Nixon memo. He telephoned Schorr. What do I need you for? I just got the memo in the mail. No restrictions. After a moment of reflection, though, he stuck to his original plan, only he urged Schorr to make certain that the piece focus primarily on the Nixon criticism.

Imagine, Levitas thought days later, an estimated fifty people in Washington had the memo, including many journalists, and, up to this point anyway, none had written about it. How was this to be explained? Was it another example of poor "Inside the Beltway" news judgment, meaning everyone was so absorbed with power and position that no one, even a reporter, wanted to rock the boat? Or, was it the normal journalistic assumption, which in this case proved to be fallacious, that the memo was "off the record," though the covering letter contained no such inhibition? Or, was it that some journalists, feeling deliciously virtuous, didn't want to play any role in Nixon's political games and refused

to write anything about the memo, while a few others felt so "honored" to get a personal note from a former President—Nixon, no less—that they never considered its news implications?

Levitas's reaction was proper and professional: he recognized that Nixon was a master of press manipulation, that by running the memo, *The Times* was serving his ends, even lending its enormous prestige and credibility to his message, but that in the final analysis if Nixon was making news, and in this case he surely was, *The Times* had a professional obligation to cover it. That's the job of journalism. Nixon understood that job better than many other politicians, and he had no hesitation about using the press to advance his own agenda.

On Tuesday morning, March 10, President Bush saw the Friedman, Schorr and Hoffman stories in *The Times* and *The Post*. Later, at a news conference, the President engaged in the time-honored practice of damage control. Choosing his words carefully, he said that he'd talked with Nixon, that they were both in "total agreement," and that in any case the Administration had already done a great deal to help Russia—a point flatly contradicting Nixon's basic critique.

Bush explained: "There are certain fiscal financial constraints on what we can do, but we have a huge stake in the success of democracy in Russia... We will be working in every way possible to support the forces of democracy... So there's a lot of taxpayer money going in this already."

The President then stated that he didn't regard the memo as an attack. "I didn't take it as personally critical, and I think he would reiterate that it wasn't."

Nixon, who had always had his eye on the substantive issue of aid to Russia, had finally gotten the President's attention. That evening, the Nixon-Bush flap was on network news, on the 11 pm local news around the country, a big story on the international wires, an even bigger story in Moscow. Finally CNN announced that it would carry the Nixon speech "live"—meaning his message would circle the globe and reach every foreign ministry in the world.

The following day, March 11, the Nixon conference opened in a Washington hotel. The timing could not have been better. The newspapers and the airwaves were filled with stories about Nixon's stunning challenge to the President. A few hundred experts, scholars, journalists and politicians gathered for panel discussions about Asia, international economics, the

Middle East, Europe and Russia but, most important, for the opportunity to hear Nixon at noon and the President at dinner and to see both of them maneuver in the new political reality created by the publication of the Nixon memo.

At high noon, like the Nixon of old, the former President stood before this assemblage of worshipful and respectful Washingtonians. His only prop was a microphone stand. No podium. No notes. He spoke for 30 minutes, expressing his strong criticism of President Bush's "photo-op" approach to helping Russia. In a capital accustomed to political timidity, to handlers and carefully-drafted memos, the sight of this controversial politician speaking extemporaneously about a matter of international importance was exceptional. William Hyland, editor of *Foreign Affairs* who'd once worked for the Nixon administration, enjoyed the spectacle. "He memorized the memo," he said, "I'm sure of it, and even made it better."

Nixon spoke of Harry Truman's courage during an earlier rendezvous with history, when, fighting the polls and the advice of many cautious aides, he plunged ahead with the establishment of the Marshall Plan and NATO. He was even eyeball-to-eyeball with Joseph Stalin during the Berlin blockade, and it was not Truman who blinked. Nixon extolled the power of "guts." Egged on by Zbigniew Brzezinski, a luncheon companion, Nixon even recommended a program of aid for other former Soviet republics, such as Ukraine and Byelarus. It was clear, Hyland thought, that Bush and Scowcroft "were not happy."

At the White House, Richard Haass of the National Security Council staff helped Scowcroft draft, edit and then redraft the President's after-dinner speech. At times there'd be a draft that would meet the Nixon challenge, outlining an accelerated program of American and Western aid to Russia; at other times there'd be a draft that, on the broad question of supporting democratization and a free market economy, was forthright and sound, but, on the more narrow question of specific aid to Russia, waffled. By the time the President left the White House for the dinner, it was not clear, even to his closest advisers, how he would respond. It almost seemed as if he had two drafts in his pocket—one bold, the other cautious.

When, finally, the President spoke, caution took command. Safire recalled: "He walked right up to it, and then couldn't do it." Bush spoke of the importance of Yeltsin's program in very positive terms, and he outlined a program of Western aid. But he never advanced a new vision

of Western responsibility or a new program of Western aid.

The next day Nixon's critique again dominated the news. The President's speech only reinforced the widespread impression that the White House had no vision, no program and no voice. Jim Leach, a Republican Congressman from Iowa, gave voice to this common view. "I think the country is crying out for leadership," he said. "When there is a major issue of our time that is not being addressed, such as the Russian aid question, the alternative party usually steps forward. This time the Democrats have not, which is why in this void the new moral voice in America is Richard Nixon."

Eighteen years after Watergate, Nixon was being described as "the new moral voice in America." Even if Nixon could not, as yet, force the President to accelerate a program of American aid to Russia, he could at least bask in the warm glow of recaptured respect and adulation.

But the battle was not yet over. Nixon retreated to Saddle River to work the phones, a favorite presidential pastime, while editors, op-ed writers, columnists, diplomats, politicians and foreign policy specialists argued the merits of the Nixon attack, many of them supportive. The effect of the ongoing debate was to increase pressure on the White House to change its policy. On Capitol Hill, Senators and Congressmen, already under fierce criticism for excessive perks and privilege and meager accomplishment, proved to be a frightened and impressionable lot in this charged atmosphere. They too were frightened that if they didn't side with Nixon and this cherished chance for democracy in Russia were to wither on the vine, they'd be as politically vulnerable as the President. "Who lost Russia?" could apply to them, too.

Throughout the week of March 16, key members of Congress met privately with Vice-President Dan Quayle and Secretary of State Baker. Nixon's criticism shaped the agenda. Democrat Patrick Leahy of Vermont and Republican Richard Lugar of Indiana, working with the White House, cobbled a compromise between a program of generous assistance, which quite a few in Congress preferred, and one of modest but directed aid, which the White House thought would be more practical, both in terms of what Russia could absorb and what the American people would tolerate in an election year.

By March 22, an aid-to-Russia package emerged, which the White House supported. The date was important, for two reasons. On March 17, the President's primary victories in Michigan

and Illinois finally destroyed Buchanan's "America First" challenge from the right, which had effectively frozen the administration's foreign policy. Now, the President felt that he could again troll in foreign waters, safe from conservative attack. In addition, Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton, also fresh from victories in these primaries, decided to deliver a major foreign policy speech, presumably about aid to Russia, a few days before the New York primary on April 7. His hope was that such a speech would distract voters from the "character" issue and lift the Governor's sights to national and international issues.

On April 1, twenty-one minutes apart, the President speaking at 11:04 am at a White House news conference, and Clinton at 11:25 am at the Foreign Policy Association in New York, both contestants for the presidency responded to the Nixon challenge and political demands and described their visions of the post-Cold War era. Bush's was specifically targeted at the single issue of aid to Russia. He said that as a result of consultation with Japan, Germany, Britain, France, Italy and Canada, the West would fashion a \$24-billion aid package. The Nixon challenge clearly fashioned his thinking. If democratic reforms in Russia fail, he said, "it could plunge us into a world more dangerous in some respects than the dark years of the Cold War." Clinton also supported aid for Russia—indeed, their packages were strikingly similar—but projected a broader vision of democracy and human rights as the defining characteristics of his foreign policy. Clinton charged that the President acted only after he'd been "prodded by Democrats in Congress" and "rebuked by Richard Nixon." The President asserted that "this isn't a Johnny-come-lately thing, and this isn't driven by election year pressures."

Bush was engaging in rhetorical legerdemain. Japan, one of those countries allegedly consulted before the President's aid decision, complained publicly that it had not been consulted—at least, not sufficiently—and the \$24-billion figure was questionable.

What role did Nixon play in this diplomatic rush-job? National Security Advisor Scowcroft had one answer. Appearing on "Meet The Press" on April 12, 1992, he grudgingly acknowledged that Nixon deserved "some credit" but only "in the sense" that he helped elevate the policy discussion above the level of "just aid."

National Public Radio had a different sort of answer. On April Fool's Day, with Bush and Clinton aid packages competing for airtime, the

imaginative afternoon program, "Talk Of The Nation," invited Rich Little to do one of his famous Richard Nixon impersonations. "Having marched up this hard road and won back your confidence," Little-Nixon said, "I ask you once again to make me your President." The phones "went berserk," said an NPR spokesperson, obliging the network to confess that it was all a joke.

And so, what lessons, if any, can be learned from this episode of press/politics?

1. An aging politician, on a nonstop quest for rehabilitation and respectability, can take advantage of an unusual vacuum in foreign policy discussion to raise a key question about aid to Russia.

The vacuum is centrally important. Timing is everything. If there were no presidential campaign, there'd have been no Buchanan and no Clinton; and if there had been a normal debate about foreign policy, there might not have been a need for a Nixon memo.

Nixon knows the memo will leak, but he doesn't know how it will leak. It's different each time. Concocting models for leaking is a useless exercise. Nixon not only understands the power of the print and electronic press, but he enjoys the manipulation of the press as a way of advancing his own agenda. He is fully familiar with the inter-relationship of press, politics and public policy.

2. A citizen might well conclude that the press is engaged in a vast collaboration or conspiracy and that in any case it was no mere coincidence that *Time* ran its Nixon piece on March 9, *The Post* and *The Times* ran theirs on March 10, and Nixon spoke on March 11. But what we now know is that it was much more coincidence than it was conspiracy that three major news organizations were working independently on the same story, and that if Nixon had not written the memo, and raised the nasty question of "Who lost Russia?," and then circulated the memo to his fifty closest friends, and Schorr had not attended the Wye Plantation Conference, and Oberdorfer and Safire had not helped Schorr, and Levitas had not spotted the import of the story and Friedman not pressed it, and Buchanan not failed and Clinton not challenged, then it is still possible that the President might have come to Russia's aid, but under somewhat different circumstances.

3. What this episode in press/politics proves is that the concept of causality is not especially helpful in understanding how politicians use the press to affect public policy. Context, condition and circumstance are much more helpful. Imagine for a moment a gigantic loop, global in scale, from which there is no escape and in which information, people and politics are circulating and colliding at extraordinary speeds, like a trillion particles bumping and banging into one another,

influencing one another, sometimes deliberately, often without design, but always together, always in motion and always with surprising and unpredictable consequences. Such a loop is press/politics. Only the naive, or the enormously presumptuous, can possibly believe that this loop can be managed, except perhaps when the manager is a politician, such as RN, and when the journalistic heavens and stars can be arranged just right.