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Whispers and Screams:
The Partisan Nature of Editorial Pages

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WHISPERS AND SCREAMS: THE PARTISAN NATURES OF EDITORIAL PAGES

By Michael Tomasky

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study of the partisan intensity of the nation's agenda-setting liberal and conservative editorial pages finds that while the pages are more or less equally partisan when it comes to supporting or opposing a given presidential administration's policy pronouncements, the conservative pages are more partisan-often far more partisan-with regard to the intensity with which they criticize the other side. Also, the paper finds, conservative editorial pages are far less willing to criticize a Republican administration than liberal pages are willing to take issue with a Democratic administration.

This paper looks at the editorial stances during the Clinton and Bush II administrations of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* (the liberal papers) on the one hand and *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Washington Times* (the conservative papers) on the other. It identifies ten issue areas confronted by each administration that are "roughly comparable"-for example, the controversy surrounding Bill Clinton's nomination of Zoe Baird to be attorney general, and the similar controversy surrounding George W. Bush's nomination of Linda Chavez to be his labor secretary. Editorial comment from all four newspapers on this and nine other similarly comparable topics was collected; editorials were given a "score" of being either positive, mixed, or negative; numbers were tallied with regard to how often each of the four papers supported or opposed Clinton and how often they backed or opposed Bush. Finally, certain conclusions about the papers' differing views of partisanship, as expressed on the page, were drawn. In all, some

510 editorials covering a decade were included in the study.

The body of this paper (pages 10-50) will walk the reader through what each newspaper had to say about each of the ten issue areas under study. Appendices at the end will provide the raw numbers. But here is a quick sample of this study's findings:

_ The liberal papers criticized the Clinton administration 30 percent of the time. By contrast, the conservative papers criticized the Bush administration just 7 percent of the time.

_ The liberal papers praised the Clinton administration only 36 percent of the time (the balance were mixed). The conservative papers, on the other hand, praised the Bush administration 77 percent of the time.

_ The liberal papers criticized Bush 67 percent of the time. The conservative papers criticized Clinton 89 percent of the time.

The study finds that there was often a striking difference in tone between the two sides as well. The Clinton administration had barely unpacked its bags when *The Wall Street Journal* referred administration figures as "pod people from a 'Star Trek' episode. . .genetically bred to inhabit the public sector." That sort of language does not appear on the liberal pages. In sum, the two sides define partisanship quite differently and envision the roles they play as political actors very differently as well.

1. Introduction

On its front page, a newspaper shows the world its smiling-or perhaps scowling-face. But it is on its editorial page that a newspaper bares its soul. In its news, sports, and culture pages, a newspaper makes an effort to reflect the world; merely to describe it, hopefully in a fair and accurate and considered fashion. But on its editorial page, and only on its editorial page, a newspaper attempts to do something more than describe: It seeks to advise, argue, commend, rebuke; to imagine the world as it wishes it to be, not simply to describe it as it is.

It may just be one page, but it's an important one, because newspapers become defined by, and develop their identities according to, what appears on that page. A paper is called liberal or conservative because of the content of its editorial page. This is a fact that is typically of little moment to most general readers. But for the elites-politicians, activist and interest groups, opinion makers, media insiders-an editorial page is arguably a newspaper's most important. This is especially true of the nation's agenda-setting newspapers: Their editorials are messages, smoke signals to the political and opinion-making class of what the newspaper considers right, wrong, permissible, or unacceptable. And while it's difficult if not impossible to quantify their impact on political leaders or presidential administrations, it is certainly the case that these pages have influence over leaders and the decisions they make.

A liberal editorial page will signal to a Democratic administration where that page will support its proposals and where it will draw a line; a conservative page does the same with Republican administrations. Conversely, a liberal page's opposition to a Republican proposal, or a conservative page's objections to a Democratic one, can often serve as a useful and accurate signal of how intense the opposition to that proposal will be. Neither is their influence limited to

policy proposals. On the coarser level of politics-scandals, contretemps, questions of leadership style and symbolism-what editorial pages put in print can send messages to politicians that say, “We will back you here,” or, “Don’t expect our help on this one.” The obvious case in point here is the lack of succor *The New York Times* editorial page provided the Clinton administration during the Lewinsky scandal. Many a conservative peroration against Clinton during those steamy summer days of 1998 began with the line, “But even *The New York Times* agrees that. . .” It may be too much to say that had the *Times* taken a different tack, there might have been no impeachment, since the people who drove impeachment-House members from districts where voters didn’t give much of a hoot what did or didn’t appear on a distant, liberal editorial page-were not the sort of people who took their instructions from *The New York Times*. On the other hand, had the newspaper of record aimed its gun-barrels at Kenneth Starr rather than at Bill Clinton, more Democratic members of Congress (who *do* pay attention to the *Times*) would likely have picked up the signal, and the nature of the fight might have been very different indeed.

One often hears it said that Democrats have *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, Republicans have *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Washington Times*, that the papers serve similar functions for each side, and that it all pretty much evens out in the wash. Does it? This is the question my research will attempt to answer. In this hyper-partisan age, are all editorial pages created equal-are the degrees of partisanship of the liberal newspapers and the conservative ones essentially the same? It is an important question because if one accepts the terms laid out above-that editorial pages signal the parameters of the permissible to decision-makers-then surely what each side considers permissible is a question with relevance to both the

making of policy and the way day-to-day politics plays out in Washington. How strictly do the liberal pages follow the Democratic line? The conservative pages the Republican one? How capable is each side of criticizing its own? And how much credit is each capable of giving, however grudgingly, to the other side?

Ours is an era of choleric argument about degrees of partisanship and bias in the media. Conservatives have spent years denouncing “the liberal media,” while liberals more recently have started to take up the opposite chant. Editorial pages, of course, constitute one journalistic venue in which bias is acceptable, indeed the rule. As such, the degrees and intensity of their partisanship can give us insights into how each side experiences and expresses its partisanship; that, in turn, can tell us much about the nature and parameters of political debate in contemporary Washington.

2. Methodology and Evidence.

This study is based on a review of some 510 editorials that appeared in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* on the one hand (the “liberal” papers) and *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Washington Times* on the other (the “conservative” papers) during the administrations of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. The exact methodology was as follows.

I chose ten “roughly comparable” incidents from the two administrations and looked at how editorials in each of the four newspapers wrote about those incidents. “Roughly comparable” incidents are defined as issues or controversies on which there was a rough equivalence between what the Clinton administration was trying to do and what the Bush administration was trying to do. That is to say: It was felt, by me and the advisers, that this

research would be most useful if it compared matters that were basically equivalent and tried to measure the partisanship of these editorial pages under “normal” circumstances. This means, of course, that extraordinary events and circumstances are not within this paper’s scope. There was no Bush equivalent of the Lewinsky scandal; there was no Clinton-era equivalent of September 11. Both of those events, and certain others, were so unique that they brought the newspapers out of their normal postures. Put another way, they constituted events that transcended the usual parameters of partisanship. Every newspaper was going to criticize Clinton for lying under oath, as indeed every newspaper did, and every newspaper was going to rally around Bush after the September 11 attacks-as, indeed, every newspaper did. Therefore, editorial reaction to events such as those really doesn’t tell us much about editorial-page partisanship.

The chosen approach also means that editorial reaction to the many Clinton scandals (or “scandals,” depending on one’s point of view) is not really reflected in this research. There has been no Bush-administration equivalent to Whitewater or the travel-office firings or any of the other flare-ups that were such a persistent feature of the Clinton administration. Partisans will argue about why: Conservatives will say that Bush has run a clean and above-board administration, and liberals will say the Democrats don’t possess the same kind and degree of attack machinery that conservatives do. Whatever one’s belief here, the point for present purposes is that there is nothing in the Bush universe to compare Whitewater to. It was thought that including such matters would have in some ways amounted to a finger on the scale when it came to measuring the partisanship of the conservative papers because it would have skewed results greatly in the direction of showing that the conservative pages, which caviled incessantly about those issues, attacked Clinton far more than the liberal papers attacked Bush. It is of course

true that the conservative papers behaved this way. But a study that proves something we all already know would be of little use to anyone. A more interesting study is one that tries to lay those extraordinary events and circumstances to the side (to the extent possible) and address the question of how the agenda-setting liberal and conservative newspapers express partisanship most of the time.

All that said, the subjects were chosen in the following way. Five sets of issues were chosen under the rubric “policy,” meaning that editorial reaction to Clinton and Bush administration straightforward policy proposals was compared. Five other sets of issues were selected under the rubric “politics/process,” which includes matters that were not strictly about policy per se but were about questions that were more directly political in nature. It should be noted that while ten sets of issues may seem like an easily attainable number-like there should have been many comparable moments from which to choose-the fact is that, once the matters were given real thought and examined closely, things that seemed comparable at first blush were actually not that alike. For example, the thought occurred to compare editorial postures on the Kosovo War and the Iraq War. They are similar at first blush-Clinton’s war versus Bush’s war. But in fact, they were very different things-one a mere air war, the other involving a substantial commitment of ground troops-that raised different sets of questions about America’s foreign policy (besides which the latter was of course far more intensely debated). Furthermore, there were some matters that were considered but on which, surprisingly, the editorial pages really didn’t weigh in. For example, consideration was given to trying to compare how the pages wrote about Clinton adviser Dick Morris on the one hand versus Bush adviser Karl Rove on the other, but editorial discussion of both men was, in fact, scant to nonexistent.

So finding ten comparable episodes wasn't easy. Every effort was made to ensure fairness and to try to locate points of comparison that would not lead to results that one could guess before doing the research would tilt the findings in one direction or another.

Here is the list of paired issues, with brief explanations as to why they were deemed to be roughly equivalent:

Policy:

1. The Clinton 1993 stimulus package, paired with the Bush 2001 tax cut: i.e., each administration's first-year, centerpiece fiscal legislation.
2. Clinton's "mend it, don't end it" announcement on affirmative action in 1994, paired with Bush's decision to file an amicus brief opposing the University of Michigan affirmative-action policies in 2002: i.e., each administration's most high-profile incursion into a highly contentious policy arena.
3. Clinton's signing of the welfare bill in 1996, paired with Bush's decision to promote steel-tariff protection in 2002: i.e., the most striking moment in each president's tenure when he went against the conventional wisdom within his own party (admittedly, Clinton's welfare decision was much more controversial than Bush's steel-tariff decision; but it was thought that seeing how each set of newspapers reacted to watching as a president it supported went against its own editorial policy mitigated the imbalance and might serve as an interesting marker of each side's willingness to criticize a president it generally supported).
4. Clinton's declaration to "Save Social Security First" in 1999, paired with Bush's appointment of his Commission on Social Security in 2001: i.e., each president's most

public move on the benchmark social-entitlement policy.

5. Clinton's vetoes of the partial-birth abortion ban (1997 and 1999), paired with Bush's split-the-baby decision on embryonic stem-cell research in 2001: i.e., an anticipated and controversial decision by each president on what is arguably the nation's most divisive social issue.

Politics/Process:

6. Janet Reno's first year in office, paired with John Ashcroft's, 1993 and 2001, respectively: The attorney general is arguably the most important *political* appointment a president makes. Both of these nominees were controversial (either from the start or shortly after taking office), and both had rocky first years. Efforts were made to find specific moments in each's tenure to compare, but that didn't really work for the kinds of reasons laid out above.
7. Legitimacy and Mandate questions faced by each president-elect, 1992-93 and 2000-01, respectively: Both Clinton and Bush faced questions of legitimacy as they came into office-Clinton because he did not receive 50 percent plus one of the vote, which led some Republicans, notably then-Senate Minority Leader Bob Dole, to begin immediately questioning Clinton's mandate and his legitimacy; and Bush because of the hotly contested nature of the 2000 election (true, the 1992 election was not contested in anything like the way the 2000 election was, but Dole's sally against Clinton put the legitimacy issue squarely on the table in 1992).
8. Clinton's nomination of Zoe Baird (1993) and Bush's nomination of Linda Chavez (2001): Both were major cabinet nominees needing Senate approval, Baird for attorney

general and Chavez for labor secretary, and both ran into roughly similar trouble over their relationships with undocumented aliens.

9. Charges of secrecy surrounding the Hillary Clinton health-care plan in 1993, paired with charges of secrecy surrounding Vice President Dick Cheney and the formulation of the Bush administration's energy policy in 2001: Two prominent policy initiatives that were led by leading figures in each administration and that followed roughly similar processes.
10. Clinton's nomination of Bill Lann Lee to head the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division in 1998, paired with Bush's nomination of Theodore Olson for the post of solicitor general in 2001: two comparable and controversial appointments to key legal positions in each administration.

In each of the ten cases, preliminary research established a timeline of events for the subject in question. Then, a Nexis search was done of each of the four editorial pages under study to determine how many editorials each paper wrote on the subject. So, for example: Bill Clinton proposed his stimulus package in a speech to the nation on February 17, 1993. Congress largely accepted the broad outlines of the package in mid-March. The House approved it in late May. The Senate approved its version in June. The House and Senate versions were reconciled, and final passage achieved, on August 7. So all four newspapers were searched within those dates—actually, in the interest of catching perhaps a stray comment early or late in the process, the time frame of each search was fattened by a few weeks on both ends. Only editorials that were *chiefly about* the topic at hand were included in the research. For example, *The Washington Times* wrote many editorials that took passing swipes at Janet Reno in a sentence or two; similarly, *The New*

York Times may have criticized Bush's affirmative action stance, say, in a sentence within a broader editorial that was mainly a critique of the Bush administration as moving to the hard-right. Also, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, for example, wrote editorials critiquing the House and Senate partial-birth abortion bans, but these editorials were not chiefly an enunciation of a position in support of (or against) a presidential administration. Editorials in all these categories were not included in the research.

Then, once all the editorials were assembled, they were given one of three designations: positive (P), mixed (M), or negative (N). A positive designation meant the editorial supported the administration's policy position or defended it in a political fight. A mixed editorial was deemed to have either a) taken no position and merely offered its observations on an occurring dust-up, or b) taken an "on the one hand, on the other hand" posture, apportioning credit or blame in more or less equal measure. Also, most editorials written in advance of major presidential decisions that urged him to sign or not sign a bill, for example, were put in the mixed category, since that is most closely what such editorials are (i.e., they weigh the pros and cons of an issue and finally say, "The president should do X.") However, a few of these "urging" editorials were couched in language loaded enough in one direction or another—that is, language that very clearly favored one outcome or argument over the other(s)—that they fairly earned a positive or negative designation. Finally, a negative designation meant the editorial in question opposed the administration's policy position or attacked it in a political fight. Again, every effort was made to read each editorial fairly and appoint designations dispassionately.

A chart attached to the end of this paper (Appendix A) shows the raw results. In each box there is an aggregate number representing the total number of editorials a given newspaper wrote

on a given topic. Following that number there are three numbers in parentheses, representing, respectively, the number of editorials that were judged positive, mixed, and negative. So, for example, a box that reads 12 (6-5-1) means that the paper wrote 12 editorials on the subject; six were positive, five were mixed, and one was negative. A second chart (Appendix B) will break down the results in ways that will be of interest to readers and provide more specific measures of partisanship: e.g., how often the liberal pages criticized Clinton, how often the conservative pages criticized Bush, etc.

But it should be emphasized: The numbers, of course, don't tell the whole story. Editorials consist of language, after all, and in argument, language is everything. So the intensity of support or opposition, the strength of partisanship, is best described in narrative terms, which this paper will do in the succeeding section.

3. Results.

Three main conclusions can be fairly drawn from this research. They will be fleshed out in the body of this section and discussed at greater length in the next section, but here they are in sum:

1. When it comes to taking policy positions, the liberal and conservative editorial pages studied are more or less equally partisan with regard to criticizing the other side. For example, *The New York Times* opposed the Bush tax cut about as often, and about as strongly, as *The Wall Street Journal* opposed the Clinton stimulus package. The conservative papers tended toward more forceful language, as we will see below, but the positions taken were roughly equivalent. However, when it came to dealing with their own side, the liberal papers were far more balanced, which leads into the second

conclusion.

2. As a rule, the liberal editorial pages were much more willing to criticize the Democratic administration than the conservative pages were willing to criticize the Republican administration. This happened, to be sure, in the case of Clinton signing the 1996 welfare-reform bill (i.e., going against the liberal papers' beliefs), but it also happened in other instances, leading to the conclusion that the liberal editorial pages were more evenhanded in their treatment of parallel episodes, particularly under the politics/process rubric, where the liberal papers were eight times more critical of Clinton than the conservative papers were of Bush.
3. Also as a rule, the liberal editorial pages were somewhat more willing to give the Bush administration credit where they felt it was due. They were not lavish in their praise of Bush by any means; on the other hand, the conservative newspapers virtually *never* praised Clinton. In the 148 conservative editorials on the Clinton administration under study here, just four were deemed "positive," and three of those, as we shall see, carry rather meaningful asterisks. (Appendix B shows the numbers that support conclusions 2 and 3.)

Herewith, summaries of the findings in the ten categories under study. It should be noted that these narrative descriptions of the papers' opinions do not attempt to reflect every point of support or opposition; so, for example, *The Washington Times's* arguments against the Clinton stimulus package are not fully parsed, and *The New York Times* criticized John Ashcroft on more matters than are discussed below. To have summarized every one of 510 editorials would have

been overwhelming to the point of being ridiculous. What follows, then, is an attempt (lengthy enough as it is) to convey the main points, to represent fairly the papers' views, to note particularly interesting arguments and rhetorical flourishes, etc.

1. Policy 1, Clinton '93 Stimulus vs. Bush '01 Tax Cut.

The New York Times wrote 15 editorials on the Clinton budget package; 10 were supportive, five mixed, and none negative. *The Washington Post* wrote 29 editorials on the subject; 12 were positive, 16 mixed, and one negative. *The Wall Street Journal* wrote 16; one was mixed, and 15 negative. *The Washington Times* ran 24; all were negative.

The Times began skeptically, writing in "Reading Mr. Clinton's Lips" on January 28 (all dates in this section are 1993): "Day after day, Presidential surrogates hint that one or more of his campaign promises is about to be broken, or hedged in obfuscation. And what does the nation's new leader think about any of this? He's not telling." Two more mixed editorials followed, but Clinton won the paper over with his presentation to the nation on February 17. The next day, *The Times* wrote that "After several weeks of floundering, Bill Clinton has given focus to his Presidency by seizing on exactly the same issue that eventually gave definition to his campaign: the economy" ("Bill Clinton's Moment," Feb. 18). From there, the paper got solidly behind the Clinton plan, rebuking his naysayers ("The President's Captious Critics," Feb. 23); denouncing a competing deficit-reduction plan offered by then-senators David Boren and John Danforth ("A Bipartisan Disservice," May 21); critiquing House and Senate attempts to fiddle with Clinton's priorities ("A Budget Worthy of Mr. Bush," July 26); and finally applauding the package's passage on Aug. 8 ("The Budget Fight Has Just Begun").

The Washington Post also had a mixed view of Clinton's package at first ("The

Unveiling,” Feb. 17, and “The Illusionists,” Feb. 19). It announced its basic agreement with Clinton’s goal of deficit cutting (“Deficit History Lessons,” Feb. 21). Later in the process, the paper urged Democrats to “vote aye” on the Clinton plan: “Bill Clinton is right: Two deficits were allowed to accumulate over the past 12 years—one fiscal, the other social. Today the House Democrats have an opportunity to begin to reduce them both. . .” (“The House: Vote Aye,” May 27). Still, even though the paper backed the Clinton plan, the bulk of its editorials were observations or ruminations on the process, taking on the voice of an interested spectator watching a game, rather than full-throated calls for legislators or citizens to back the president. “Budget Compromise” (June 2) is typical, which concludes thus: “In broad economic terms, the president hasn’t given much ground—but this has never been a dispute about broad economic policy. Who pays? That’s the question—and whether, in shifting the answer slightly, the president can gain support within the party without losing any.”

The conservative papers were much sharper-edged. *The Journal*, reacting to Clinton’s February 17 speech, averred that “The Clintonites, like pod people from a ‘Star Trek’ adventure, have peeled off the thin layer of centrist rhetoric that they wore for the presidential campaign. We now learn that they are people genetically bred to inhabit the public sector. Their oxygen source is the moisture of taxes, which are remitted by the aliens in the private sector” (“The Clintonites Have Landed” Feb. 19). The paper backed the Boren-Danforth substitute, arguing—not so presciently, it turns out—that the Clinton plan had to be reversed and that “(v)igorous prosperity will return when we bring down the curtain on class warfare and provide incentives for a new era of growth” (“The Class-Warfare Economy: Boren and Beyond,” May 27). Its editorial bemoaning final passage took some glee in the fact that, since the package passed each

house of Congress by one vote, each Democratic legislator could be held accountable. “Of course, if the Clinton Boom materializes as advertised, they all have nothing to worry about,” *The Journal* wrote (“Now, Accountability,” Aug. 9). “But last week’s follies suggest that there are grave doubts even among the Democratic sheep.”

The Washington Times spent most of its energy harshly pounding away at the tax-increase aspects of the Clinton plan. The tenor of the argument can be summed up in some headlines: “Are You Undertaxed?” (Feb. 17); “The Truth About Taxes” (Feb. 19); “The Bright Line on Taxes” (March 16); and “In Which the Editorial Page Radicalizes the Debate on Taxes” (July 18).

On the Bush tax cut, *The New York Times* wrote 14 editorials, all but one negative. *The Washington Post* wrote nine, all negative. *The Journal* wrote 14 editorials, 11 positive and three mixed. *The Washington Times* wrote 16, all of them positive.

The New York Times came out against the tax cut of the box, calling it “excessively large” (“Conflict and Accord at 1600,” Jan. 24, 2001; all dates in this section are 2001) and arguing later that “the Bush tax-cut proposals are too costly because they use up the federal surpluses for a giveaway to the wealthy” (“Tax-Cut News for Mr. Bush,” Feb. 20). But the page also urged Democrats “to be conciliatory to these moderates”—meaning Republican senators like Lincoln Chaffee and Olympia Snowe—“but also emphasize the essentially ideological nature of Mr. Bush’s proposal” (“Countering the Bush Tax Plan,” March 4). But overall, *The New York Times* was strongly critical of Bush.

The Washington Post took a similar position. It argued that the tax cut “is neither as affordable as the administration maintains nor as directed toward average Americans. . . It would

likely consume or exceed the available budget surplus, leaving none for other purposes” (“The Real Tax Plan. . .,” Feb. 11). It hit this note again on Feb. 16 (“Unreal Cuts”), and argued that putting a large tax cut before the assured solvency of programs such as Social Security and Medicare was like putting “Spinach Before Dessert” (March 5). Unlike the *The New York Times*, though, the *Post* didn’t really offer any specific courses of action for Democrats to take to counter the Bush proposal.

The Journal and *The Washington Times* both argued strenuously in favor of the tax cuts. *The Journal* certainly supported Bush and his plan. But it did run three “mixed” editorials that, while careful never to criticize the president directly or personally, fretted that the proposed cut would wind up, if anything, too low: “. . .Mr. Bush is proposing to trickle-in an already modest tax cut over several years. If Republicans are going to pass a tax cut, they might as well pass one of a size and speed that people will notice” (“Tax Cut Danger,” Feb. 8). The paper also expressed some disappointment in the Bush administration for accepting Congressional compromises. In “Gulliver’s Tax Cut-II,” (March 9), the page argued against the concept of “triggers”-future targets for paying down the federal debt that would have to be met for the future cuts to kick in. Its strongest invective was directed at Democratic leader Tom Daschle, but the page expressed a kind of resigned disappointment that the Bush administration seemed to be going along. “With the triggers having shot the life out of the Bush tax cut,” *The Journal* complained, “it would be safe to untie President Gulliver. At that point, he’d belong to the Beltway and its needs, rather than to the voters who elected him.” Still, the paper stood firm with the tax-cut package, and its ire was directed toward Congress-Daschle, above; moderate Republicans (“The Spending Senators,” April 9), and even the House Republicans for “the mess

they're making of George W. Bush's tax proposal" ("Watering Down Bush," March 2).

At *The Washington Times*, there was less such hand-wringing. One early editorial ("The Bush Tax Cut," Feb. 9) argued that increased surplus projections and other factors meant that "the plan Mr. Bush announced 14 months ago appears today to be more timid than bold." But the paper didn't make consistent arguments, as *The Journal* did, for an even larger cut; and it did not reprove the Bush administration for accepting Congressional compromises: "Though Mr. Daschle would, understandably, be loathe to admit it," the paper wrote ("A Glass Full of Optimism," April 11), "the fact is that the Democratic leadership has moved much closer to Mr. Bush than he has moved toward them" (no one should take this sentence to mean there weren't criticisms of Congressional Democrats and moderate Republicans; there were several). Finally, at the end of the process, the paper was elated, writing: "By any standard of measurement, Mr. Bush's victory was huge. . . an extraordinary legislative achievement. . . reminiscent of 'the Gipper' and LBJ in their prime and at their best" ("A Tax Cut to Remember," May 30).

2. Policy 2, Affirmative Action.

On this topic there were far fewer editorials in each paper than on so major a topic as a president's first-year economic plan. *The New York Times* wrote four editorials on Clinton and affirmative action, three positive and one mixed. *The Washington Post* wrote three, one positive and two mixed. *The Wall Street Journal* did one, which was negative. *The Washington Times* ran six, all negative. It should be noted that all of the papers wrote more editorials on the topic of affirmative action, but these were the only ones that were chiefly about Clinton administration policy (as opposed to the courts, or the larger social issues at stake, or some local controversy that didn't involve the administration directly).

In “Affirmative Action Without Fear” (September 19, 1994), *The New York Times* applauded Clinton and his Justice Department for arguing that race was an acceptable deciding factor in a teacher-layoff case out of New Jersey: “The shift comes awkwardly in the middle of a court case, but it is a welcome correction of federal job discrimination policy.” A later editorial encouraged the president to accept the findings of a confidential report by administration officials defending the need for affirmative action (this report became the basis for the “mend it, don’t end it” policy). But the editorial didn’t express complete confidence that Clinton would do so: “It would be nice to think that Mr. Clinton had believed all along in affirmative action. But even if that is not the case, he now has a reason to embrace its cause. . .” (“Affirmative Action, Affirmed,” June 4, 1995). Six weeks later, when Clinton announced his policy, *The New York Times* was thrilled: “In near-evangelical tones, President Clinton made the moral, legal, and practical case yesterday for the embattled cause of affirmative action. It was a sermon the nation needed to hear from a President who can only be helped by exhibiting a strong core of principle” (“Defending Affirmative Action,” July 20, 1995).

The Washington Post was notably less rhapsodic. In “Affirmative Action’s Limits,” from April 11, 1995, when Clinton announced the formation of the panel that produced the aforementioned report, *The Post* wagged its finger: “If the commission is going to hand out a moralistic report telling us all how to think, it shouldn’t waste its time. But if it sees its job as broadening the affirmative action debate to a discussion of how to ensure something closer to equality of opportunity. . .it might do some good.” Nevertheless, once Clinton announced his policy, *The Post* approved, though in terms reflecting its ambivalence on the issue: “Mr. Clinton loves to create a middle ground; sometimes he tries to do so where none exists. But in trying to

do it on this convulsive issue he performs a useful service, and we hope he both persists and succeeds” (“Right on Affirmative Action,” July 20, 1995).

The Wall Street Journal didn’t weigh on Clinton and affirmative action until November 4, 1997 (“Above the Law?”), in the wake of the Supreme Court’s refusal to review the constitutionality of California’s anti-affirmative action Prop. 209. “Of affirmative action, Bill Clinton says, ‘mend it, don’t end it,’” *The Journal* wrote. “Problem is, the actions of the Administration make its professions of moderation and reasonableness utterly non-credible. It has spent five years using administrative fiat and enforcement actions to achieve what it simply no longer can hope to get with legislation, much less higher court decisions.”

The Washington Times’s six anti-Clinton editorials began in April 1995, when the panel was announced, continued through that summer, and picked up again in early 1998 during Clinton’s national “conversation on race.” The paper made its position on the question quite clear. Here is what it wrote on July 21, 1995 (“The Mighty Thinking on Racial Preferences”): “So, President Clinton put on his thinking cap (or, rather, had George Stephanopoulos put on his thinking cap) and cogitated. And after five months of hints that he would see reason rather than Democratic Party politics and do away with affirmative action, the president (and, of course, Mr. Stephanopoulos) came up with. . . a cliché. . . a platitude. . . and a slogan.”

With regard to the Bush administration’s intervention in the University of Michigan case, *The New York Times* wrote three editorials, one mixed and two negative; *The Washington Post* just one, negative; *The Wall Street Journal* just one, mixed; and *The Washington Times* four, three positive and one mixed.

The New York Times first urged Bush not to side with Solicitor General Ted Olson, who

was leading the argument within the administration to weigh in against the Michigan programs, in language that relied more on suasion than criticism: “President Bush regularly talks of the virtues of inclusion. He is justifiably proud of appointing distinguished African-Americans and Latinos to such important posts as secretary of state. . .” (“Stand Up for Affirmative Action,” Dec. 19, 2002). The day before briefs were due in the Michigan case, the *Times* acknowledged (“A Crucial Decision on Race,” Jan. 15, 2003) the likelihood that the administration would act as it did but warned: “A president who wants his administration to stand for racial inclusion will not go down this path.” Three days later, the paper complained (“An Anti-Quota Smokescreen,” Jan. 18, 2003) that the “administration sacrificed truth for political gain this week,” criticizing his repeated use of the word “quotas” in his speech announcing the move where, the paper said, none in fact existed.

That same Jan. 18, *The Washington Post*, in “Dishonest on Diversity,” said that “(t)he government’s briefs present an unpersuasive effort to split a hair that just won’t split.” Still, the *Post* didn’t exactly plant its flag in the liberal corner, pronouncing itself mystified at the “tempest” Bush’s decision had created among Democrats.

The Wall Street Journal, interestingly, didn’t weigh in after Bush announced his decision. Its only editorial comment on the matter came on Jan. 2, 2003, in “Gonzales’s Racial-Quota Test,” which criticized White House counsel Alberto Gonzales for arguing against Ted Olson’s position. The editorial urged the White House to announce it was “turning the decision over” to Olson. Since Bush ultimately sided with Olson, apparently *The Journal* felt satisfied enough not to comment after the fact.

The Washington Times published four editorials, three in the run-up to Bush’s decision

urging him to oppose Michigan and one congratulating him (“The Right Brief on Affirmative Action,” Jan. 15, 2003). Of the other three, only one was considered mixed because it sounded a bit nervous that Bush might make, from the paper’s perspective, a fatal compromise. The other two applauded Bush for his past policies on racial preferences and expressed optimism that he’d stand his ground on the Michigan matter: “We’re confident Mr. Bush will make the right decision,” the paper wrote on Jan. 13 (“Correcting Wrongs”).

3. Policy 3, Clinton and Welfare vs. Bush and Steel Tariffs.

Here, Clinton took his harshest beating from the liberal papers. *The New York Times* wrote five editorials, one mixed and four negative. *The Washington Post* hammered at him, with 11 editorials, three mixed and eight negative. *The Wall Street Journal* wrote two editorials, one mixed and one negative. *The Washington Times* ran five, one positive and four negative.

The New York Times began by warning Clinton not to fall into “The Republican Welfare Trap” (Feb. 2, 1996). When summer came, and the bill was before the Senate Finance Committee, the paper rebuked Clinton for ignoring the question of how many children the bill might throw into poverty and darkly predicted that many children would be, “thanks to a callous Congress and a Democratic President too frightened to stand in the way” (“Ducking the Truth About Welfare Cuts,” June 26, 1996). A July editorial in advance of Clinton’s decision criticized the fact that he was even contemplating signing the bill: “That is not a place a Democratic President should stand,” *The Times* wrote in “Mr. Clinton’s Duty on Welfare,” July 25, 1996. Then, after Clinton announced his decision, the paper lowered the boom. “President Clinton’s defense at yesterday’s press conference of his decision to sign an atrocious welfare bill exaggerated its tiny virtues and ignored some large faults. . . This is not reform, it is punishment.”

(“A Sad Day for Poor Children,” Aug. 1).

The Washington Post wrote a series of editorials in the first-half of 1996 that bewailed the fact that welfare reform, after an earlier presidential veto, had even reared its head again. These editorials rapped the Republicans for pushing a draconian bill but also shoveled blame on Clinton as well: “President Clinton continues to try to avoid a trap into which you could argue he deserves to fall. It was he who sought to distinguish himself from the run of the Democratic mill in the 1992 campaign by promising to end welfare as we know it. . .By trying thus to steal an issue from the Republicans, the president began a process that he has been unable and in some respects politically unwilling to control” (“The Welfare Trap,” May 21, 1996). As crunch time approached, the paper’s rhetoric got tougher: “If. . .he signs the bill, he no doubt will claim it as a triumph, but in moral and policy terms it will be the low point of his presidency,” the *Post* wrote (“A Children’s Veto,” July 25). Finally, after Clinton announced his decision, the *Post* declared that it was about “expediency and opportunism. . .(and) the president’s disingenuous defense of the decision made the matter worse. It added to the squalor that it sought to cover up” (“The Welfare Decision,” Aug. 1, 1996). That language was as tough as any used by the *Post* in all the editorials under review here.

The Wall Street Journal took note of Clinton’s moves toward welfare reform in the spring of 1996, but it wasn’t buying it. In “The Great Pretender,” published May 28, 1996, the paper said the administration’s reality (i.e., blocking state reforms) didn’t meet the president’s pro-reform rhetoric and hoped that voters would notice that “he only showed up last week on the road to Damascus.” After Clinton announced he’d sign the bill, *The Journal* paid Clinton a compliment, but it was backhanded at best: “And however astute the politics of Mr. Clinton’s

decision, we suspect that in the public mind, the principles associated with the new direction in welfare policy are tied to the Republican Party” (“It’s Over,” Aug. 1, 1996).

The Washington Times’s four run-up editorials on welfare reform all expressed deep skepticism that Clinton would honor his 1992 campaign pledge. “(T)he president has yet to show any willingness to actually buck his liberal base,” the paper wrote on Feb. 10, 1996 (“Welfare Reform Alert”). “And if [Marion Wright] Edelman has anything to say about it he won’t start now.” A May 28 editorial noted that Clinton “has a habit of claiming credit for welfare-reform proposals emanating from Republican-governed states” and labeled his reform plan “utterly shameless” (“Real and Phony Republicans”). Later, the paper warned that “experience has shown how risky it is to take this president at his word” (“A Test of Sincerity of Welfare,” June 4). But finally, when the bill passed, the paper did give Clinton credit on Aug. 1 in “Welfare Reform At Long Last.” While it was scarcely overflowing with praise and gleefully took note of the “considerable amount of prodding from the Republican Congress,” it did call the bill “a political victory” for Clinton “and the Republican Congress.”

Bush’s steel-tariff decision was greeted with similar displeasure. *The New York Times* ran one editorial, negative. *The Washington Post* ran four, all negative. *The Wall Street Journal* published four, three mixed and one negative. And *The Washington Times* ran two, both negative.

The New York Times reproved Bush for “considering the ill-advised move of slapping tariffs on steel imports, one that his Democratic predecessor responsibly resisted” and noted the political aspect of the decision, particularly with regard to the electoral votes of West Virginia and Pennsylvania (“Playing Politics With Trade,” March 5, 2002). *The Washington Post* made

similar arguments: “Mr. Bush needs to focus on the national interest in free trade, not on a special interest group that happens to matter in a few swing states” (“Mr. Bush’s Steel Test,” December 26, 2001). In the wake of Bush’s announcement on March 5, 2002, *The Post* called the decision “The Bush Tax Hike” in an editorial headline over a piece arguing that Bush’s decision “will destroy jobs and raise costs to consumers” (March 6).

The Wall Street Journal published three editorials in the run-up to Bush’s decision, all urging him not to cave in to the steel industry. These were judged mixed because they were neither dubious that he would act properly from the paper’s point of view nor fulsome in their praise of Bush. The Bush administration, *The Journal* wrote on Dec. 6, 2001, in “Political Steel,” “has a chance if it shows some steel of its own to break the welfare dependency that has kept the industry a supersized weakling.” A Feb. 19 piece (“Steel Trapped Minds”) urged him “to do what Presidents are elected to do, which is stand up for the overall U.S. economy.” After Bush made his decision, *The Journal* criticized Bush in “Cold Rolled Bush”: “This is President Bush’s worst day so far,” the paper wrote on March 6. This editorial was also by far the shortest of all those included in this research, clocking in at 123 words. This was the only *Journal* editorial under study that was negative toward Bush personally or his administration.

The Washington Times was a bit tougher than that. On the same March 6, in “Bush Goes Soft on Steel” (506 words, a normal editorial length), the paper scored Bush for “placing political calculations above the overall well-being of the economy” and concluded that “Mr. Bush faced a test yesterday and failed to display a steely mettle” (the papers found these steel puns, as we see, difficult to resist). Then the paper came back a week later and averred on March 13 (“Tirades on Steel Tariffs”) that Bush had “seriously tarnished” his image as a free trader.

4. Policy 4, Social Security.

Clinton first said the phrase “Save Social Security First” in his 1998 State of the Union Address. But at that point the Lewinsky scandal was raging, and the editorial pages were preoccupied. He repeated it in the 1999 address, and some editorial comment rolled in. *The New York Times* wrote one mixed editorial. *The Washington Post* wrote one, which was negative. *The Wall Street Journal* wrote two, negative, and *The Washington Times* one, also negative.

Specifically, the Clinton plan, announced in 1999 as the Senate was trying him for impeachment, set aside \$2.7 trillion over 15 years to strengthen Social Security. *The New York Times* said the proposal “served notice that the President’s battle to stay in office would include efforts to revitalize the big safety-net programs that are extremely popular among the swing voters whose support he needs in the impeachment fight” but declared it “promising but untested” (“Mr. Clinton’s New Agenda,” Jan. 20, 1999). *The Washington Post*, forgoing any mention of impeachment, just didn’t like the plan on its merits. It “won’t solve the Social Security problem”; only benefit cuts would do that, the *Post* argued, but it also predicted that Clinton wouldn’t do that because “(t)oo much like leadership, that would be” (“Revamping Social Security,” Jan. 21, 1999).

The Wall Street Journal characterized the Clinton plan as “having the government buy up some 4% of the stock market,” which was another (and somewhat loaded) way of saying that 15 percent of the Social Security Trust Fund over time could be invested in the market, which is what Clinton had proposed (“The Rubin-Jackson Raid,” Feb. 1, 1999). But in that same editorial, the *Journal* saw something else at work: “So here’s the bottom line. In one sense the White House proposal is a desperate effort by an irrelevant president to regain support from the only

group that's remained loyal to him, the far left wing." *The Washington Times* ("State of the Federal Government," Jan. 21, 1999) opined that "the best that can be said of the agenda the president outlined in his State of the Union speech is that much of it has little chance of becoming law," and had this to say on Social Security: "After spending a year demagoguing the Social Security issue to thwart any possibility of a tax cut being passed in 1998, Mr. Clinton finally offered an outline of his solution to Social Security's long-term dilemma. Regardless of how it is disguised, it amounts to a gigantic tax increase."

Bush appointed his Social Security commission, co-chaired by Daniel Patrick Moynihan and AOL-Time Warner executive Richard Parsons, in early May 2001. It issued reports in July 2001; December 2001; and June 2002 (though not all reports attracted editorial comment). *The New York Times* wrote two negative editorials about the commission. Ditto *The Washington Post*. *The Wall Street Journal* wrote one mixed editorial, and *The Washington Times* four favorable ones.

The New York Times reacted to the first report complaining that it "clearly shows a bias toward the kind of reform President Bush favors—one based on individual accounts invested in market securities" and charging that its analysis "exaggerates the problems facing Social Security in an effort to justify a quick move toward privatization" ("A Biased Social Security Report," July 27, 2001). In December, when the commission presented three options to the president, the *Times* argued: "If anything, they reinforce the reasons that Mr. Bush's approach on Social Security is dubious. All three options would require drastic benefit cutbacks and large infusions of money from outside the system to keep it solvent" ("No Help on Social Security," Dec. 27, 2001).

Just after the commission was appointed, *The Washington Post* called on the commission to

deal with the question of benefit cuts honestly (“Fixing Social Security,” May 3, 2001). Later, the paper accused the commission of issuing “a combative and somewhat skewed report that overstates both the deficiencies of the current system and the likely strengths of the partial privatization alternative that the commissioners were chosen to promote”; the same editorial charged some opponents of the commission with being “demagogic” but said “the commission invited the attacks by writing a report that disparaged a program it pretended merely to describe” (“Poor Start on Social Security,” July 26, 2001).

The Wall Street Journal supported Bush’s privatization goals and argued that the commission wasn’t pursuing the goal with enough zeal and that Congressional Republicans, facing the 2002 elections, were being tepid (“Social Insecurity,” Dec. 10, 2001). *The Washington Times*, though, was much higher on the commission, with four editorials praising Bush’s goals and the commission’s work. The most striking was a Sunday editorial—the paper’s Sunday editorials run much longer than others, in this case 805 words—that ripped into then-House Minority Leader Dick Gephardt and stoutly defended the commission’s interim report (“The Looming ‘Crisis’ in Social Security,” Aug. 19, 2001). “These,” the editorial concluded, “are the important issues that confront the bipartisan commission addressing Social Security reform, which certainly will require some form of higher-yielding private, individual investment accounts. No amount of Democratic demagoguery or flip-flopping can change that fact.”

5. Policy 5, Clinton and Partial-birth Abortion vs. Bush Stem-Cell Decision.

Clinton twice vetoed bills passed by Congress banning so-called partial-birth abortions procedures, in April 1996 and again in September 1998. *The New York Times* supported those vetoes but wrote two other editorials that were mixed toward Clinton. *The Washington Post*

wrote two, both mixed. *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Washington Times* wrote four and six editorials, all negative, and harshly so.

The New York Times started out by congratulating Clinton for a veto that “not only preserves a woman’s constitutional rights to use the procedure but protects doctors who perform it from severe criminal penalties. . . (“A Principled Veto,” April 11, 1996). After his second veto, the *Times* wrote an editorial urging the Senate to sustain it and again lauding the president for refusing to sign “this crude attempt to narrow every woman’s access to safe and legal abortions” (“Sustain the ‘Partial Birth’ Veto,” Sep. 18, 1998). The two mixed editorials merely urged Clinton vetoes without praising or damning him.

The Washington Post took a far less direct stand. It noted in one editorial that the “legal right to abortion in this country remains protected by the Supreme Court and backed by consistent majority opinion over decades” (“A Sweeping Abortion Ban,” May 19, 1998). So the paper stated its general support of abortion rights, but it refrained from praising Clinton for his vetoes. The same editorial described what the paper saw as two arguments against the ban and observed that “President Clinton, in twice vetoing congressionally passed bans. . .has mostly cited the first danger.”

An extended quote from one *Wall Street Journal* editorial will convey the flavor of its position: “With capital punishment back in vogue. . .we have a modest proposal: Why not stick a catheter in [a convicted criminal’s] brain and suck it out until his skull collapses? We jest, of course. No one would think of doing this to another human being, even the Unabomber. But the President of the United States stands up foursquare for doing it to babies still in the womb but nearing birth. . .And, of course, he gets plaudits from all those most eager to brand the Christian

right and other abortion foes as ‘extremists’” (“Who Are the Extremists,” April 25, 1996).

The Washington Times was scarcely less contained in its anger. In the run-up to Clinton’s first veto, the paper wrote that if Clinton vetoed the bill, “he will place himself squarely in the camp of those extremists for whom no abortion is too brutal to be considered beyond the pale” (“Too Gruesome Indeed,” March 31, 1996). After the veto the *Times* had this to say: “Wednesday, the day Bill Clinton vetoed the partial-birth abortion ban legislation passed by Congress, was a sad day indeed for Americans yearning for a return of moral sanity to our society” (“Maximum Feasible Abortion,” April 12, 1996).

Reaction to Bush’s stem cell decision, which he announced in a highly anticipated televised speech from Crawford, Texas on August 9, 2001, showed something of a surprise. *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* were mostly critical; the *The New York Times* wrote seven pieces, two mixed and five negative. The *Post* wrote three mixed ones. *The Wall Street Journal* backed Bush in two editorials. But *The Washington Times* was clearly disappointed in Bush. Its three editorials, two before the decision and one after, were all judged mixed, but one could read between the lines of the last one in particular and see that the paper was miffed.

After two mixed and one negative editorial before Bush’s decision, *The New York Times* criticized the result: “Last night, George W. Bush had one of those rare opportunities a president gets to take a bold step that might define his administration. Instead, he ducked” (“President Bush Waffles,” August 10, 2001). A follow-up compared Bush’s waffling, unfavorably, to Clinton (“William Jefferson Bush,” Aug. 12, 2001). Another quick follow-up acknowledged that the speech was “a political success” but opined that Bush’s plan “will not hold up over the long haul” (“Stem Cells 101,” Aug. 15, 2001).

The *Post* was far less invested in the issue. A run-up editorial indicated support for broad stem-cell research policies (“Embryo Ethics,” July 1, 2001). But its comment on his decision, rendered some three weeks after the fact, was cautious: “For those of us who believe that concern for embryos should not stop potentially lifesaving research, Mr. Bush’s compromise policy will be a reasonable one only as long as the existing lines are capable of supporting the research scientists need to perform. As soon as that is no longer the case, Congress will have to intervene. That could be soon, but maybe not. . .” (“How Many Lines?,” Aug. 31, 2001).

Bush had had an audience with Pope John Paul II during a European trip on the eve of his stem-cell decision. Most American papers seized on the section of the pontiff’s talk that expressed the See’s opposition to the research. But *The Wall Street Journal* wrote an editorial arguing that Pope John Paul II, far from lecturing Bush on the dangers of stem-cell research, had in fact delivered to Bush “a papal paean to America,” which would have been clear to anyone who “read the text” (“George’s Cross,” Aug. 6, 2001). After Bush’s speech, the *Journal* said it “would support funding for even more stem-cell research” but praised Bush’s speech as “notable for the way it grappled with the issue’s merits. He impressed us, and probably most Americans, as someone making an honest attempt to deal with a moral conundrum” (“Splitting the Embryo,” Aug, 13, 2001).

The Washington Times was less pleased. In contrast to the *Journal*, the *Times* praised the pope “for reminding Mr. Bush that life is not disposable” (“The Pope Speaks,” July 25, 2001). After Bush’s speech-in an editorial that ran not the day after the speech but the following day, a Saturday-the paper expressed its disappointment in carefully couched phrases: “It was, by any account, a difficult choice. . .Mr. Bush could not avoid disappointing everyone. . .Mr. Bush was

under considerable pressure to go much further” (“A Difficult Decision,” Aug. 11, 2001).

6. Politics/Process 1, Janet Reno vs. John Ashcroft.

During Janet Reno’s first year in office, *The New York Times* wrote 33 editorials about her (major decisions, initiatives, etc.); five were positive, 11 mixed, and 17 negative. *The Washington Post* wrote 14—seven positive, three mixed, and four negative. *The Wall Street Journal* wrote 16—one positive, four mixed, and 11 negative. *The Washington Times* wrote 18, of which two were mixed and 16 negative.

The New York Times, after an initial editorial commending her selection (“A Promising Choice for Justice,” Feb. 13, 1993), praised Reno on the following matters: for criticizing “rigid” federal sentencing guidelines (“Janet Reno’s Warning on Crime,” May 1, 1993); for supporting the independent-counsel law (“Janet Reno’s Independent Stand,” June 1, 1993); for seeking a federal indictment of Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman in the wake of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing (“The U.S. v. the Sheik,” Aug. 27, 1993); and for opposing Clinton for embracing then-Rep. Dan Rostenkowski, under investigation at the time for his role in a House Post Office scandal (“Mr. Clinton Trips,” March 3, 1994). Other than that, the *Times* was pretty tough on Reno. It criticized her demand for the resignation of incumbent U.S. attorneys (“Janet Reno Starts Badly,” March 25, 1993). In regard to the government raid on the Waco Branch Davidian compound, the paper huffed that both Clinton and Reno “will need much better explanations than the visibly shaken Ms. Reno gave yesterday to justify what looks like an ill-conceived and unwarranted operation (“Apocalypse in Waco,” April 20, 1993). The *Times* ran a total of five editorials on Reno and Waco. It ran four on Reno’s resistance to appointing a special prosecutor

to dig into the 1991 stabbing of Yankel Rosenbaum during the riots in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. But Whitewater took the prize, with six editorials urging Reno, in increasingly alarmed tones, to appoint an independent counsel (two headlines: “Janet Reno’s Shameful Delay,” Jan. 7, 1994, and “Whitewater: No Longer a G.O.P. Plot,” Jan. 11, 1994). In sum, as we shall see, the *Times* was just as hard on Reno as it was on John Ashcroft.

The Washington Post defended Reno’s request for the resignations of all federal prosecutors (“Jay Stephens Strikes Out,” March 26, 1993). The paper also backed Reno on Waco initially: “The Justice Department’s plan to escalate pressure was reasonable on its face” (“...An Inferno in Texas,” April 20, 1993). And, at least in that first year, the *Post* wasn’t as hot on Whitewater as the *Times*. It wrote just two editorials on the matter, one criticizing Reno for not having named a prosecutor yet (“Problems That Can’t Be Managed,” Jan. 11, 1994), and another praising Reno’s appointment of Robert Fiske (“The Independent Counsel,” Jan. 21, 1994).

The Wall Street Journal greeted Reno’s appointment by observing that “(i)n the cloistered existence of the home her mother built with her own hands, Ms. Reno has never hired an illegal alien. Her views aren’t exactly our cup of tea, but...we see no particular reason to oppose her”; still, the same editorial noted that “we were far from reassured by Ms. Reno’s responses to questions about the peculiar behavior of the Justice Department in the corruption trial of Rep. Harold Ford (“Who Is Webster Hubbell?-II,” March 11, 1993). The *Journal* actually defended Reno after Waco, but chiefly for the purpose of aiming at Clinton: “Ms. Reno played her part, bravely taking a substantial beating from the press for her president...[Clinton’s] lack of grace...raises anew issues about his instinct on matters of personal responsibility” (“In Defense of Janet Reno,” April 21, 1993). The *Journal* editorial page sometimes tries to make

controversies of matters it feels the rest of the media are ignoring; thus, three editorials slammed Reno for allegedly allowing then-House Commerce Committee Chairman John Dingell (D-Mich.) to have his “staff interrogators interview career attorneys at Justice about their cases” (“General Dingell,” July 8, 1993; “General Dingell-II,” Sept. 2, 1993; “Reno’s Surrender,” April 6, 1994). With regard to Reno and Whitewater, the *Journal’s* only editorial was a criticism of her choice of Fiske, noting that he’d “attracted the written opposition of 14 Senators” (“Too Much Baggage,” Jan. 21, 1994).

The Washington Times rode Reno hard from the start. It took issue with her demand for the U.S. attorneys’ resignations (“At the Justice Department, Incredible Shrinking Diversity,” March 28, 1993). It wrote two editorials after the Waco raid, one suggesting avenues for Congressional investigation and another mocking Reno’s suggestion that the raid was undertaken to protect the children in the compound (“The Waco Fiasco” and “Children’s Crusade?,” both April 21, 1993). Two editorials demanded that Reno press for an independent counsel on the White House travel office firings and on the so-called Filegate matter (“An Independent Travelgate Investigation,” Aug. 5, 1993, and “No Excuses, Investigate the File Search,” Nov. 4, 1993). Returning to Waco after publication of a Justice Department review, the *Times* assailed the report as a “whitewash” but was pleased that the report noted that Reno “ordered a report on the situation that she never read, first canceled then approved the raid without explanation, and was unable to provide any evidence of the child abuse she said warranted the assault” (“The Verdict on Waco,” March 1, 1994).

On John Ashcroft’s first year, *The New York Times* editorialized 24 times (four positive, seven mixed, 13 negative). *The Washington Post* wrote 23 editorials-four positive, six mixed,

and 13 negative. *The Wall Street Journal* published ten-nine positive and one mixed. *The Washington Times* ran 15-10 positive, two mixed, and three negative.

The New York Times was perhaps at its most partisan here, striking early and often with six editorials criticizing the Ashcroft nomination; formal opposition was registered on Jan. 23, 2001 (“Opposing the Ashcroft Nomination”). Sizing up the 58-42 Senate vote in favor of Ashcroft’s designation, the *Times* tried to warn that the vote “suggested a level of solidarity among the Democrats that could force Mr. Bush toward more flexible positions on a range of issues. . .” (“The Ashcroft Message,” Feb. 2, 2001). After that initial volley, though, the *Times* was mixed on Ashcroft. An editorial on Timothy McVeigh’s execution praised Ashcroft for ruling that the families of Oklahoma City bombing victims could watch and said he was “surely right to bar televising the execution for the general public” (“Witness to an Execution,” April 13, 2001). It also agreed that Ashcroft “acted properly” in delaying the execution when it was revealed that the F.B.I. had mishandled 3,000 pages of documents related to the case (“The F.B.I.’s Lost Files,” May 12, 2001). After September 11, the *Times* was initially mixed toward Ashcroft, writing that his “hastily assembled antiterrorism package contains some useful proposals” (“The Home Front; Security and Liberty,” Sept. 23, 2001). Progressively, though, the paper hardened its line, with seven editorials from October to the end of the year, complaining, as one put it, that Ashcroft “has been careless with the Constitution when it comes to the treatment of people arrested in the wake of Sept. 11. . .” (“Disappearing in America,” Nov. 10, 2001). It is perhaps worth noting, though, that the *Times* did not officially oppose the anti-terrorism legislation, known as the Patriot Act.

The Washington Post, too, opposed Ashcroft’s nomination (“Wrong for Justice,” Jan. 21,

2001). Like the *Times*, it praised his decision to delay the McVeigh execution (“Even in This Case,” May 12, 2001). Pre-September 11 criticisms dealt with Ashcroft’s “remarkable” letter to the National Rifle Association positing an individual-rights view of the Second Amendment (“Mr. Ashcroft and the NRA,” Aug. 10, 2001), and his defense of federal drug-sentencing guidelines (“Misplaced Priorities,” Aug. 24, 2001). After the 9-11 attacks, the *Post* found some aspects of Ashcroft’s behavior to praise but was mostly critical: “It is hard to fathom why. . . John Ashcroft would think his recent order authorizing the monitoring of conversations between detainees and their lawyers would be acceptable in a society that values the rule of law” (“An Affront to Democracy,” Nov. 12, 2001). The *Post*, too, did not officially oppose the Patriot Act, but one editorial chastised the House (though not Ashcroft) for passing it without anything remotely resembling proper debate in the paper’s view (“Stamped in the House,” Oct. 16, 2001).

Even before Ashcroft was nominated by Bush to be attorney general, *The Wall Street Journal* praised him for “rank(ing) his constituents’ interests above victory” by conceding defeat to the widow of the man he was actually on the ballot against, deceased Missouri Gov. Mel Carnahan (“Defeated He Stands,” Nov. 9, 2000). When Ashcroft was nominated the *Journal* moved quickly to play offense: “With the crew that made Bork a verb now lining up to oppose John Ashcroft as Attorney General, you have to wonder precisely what lies are coming” (“The Democrats’ Race Card,” Jan. 3, 2001). Three more editorials praised Ashcroft during the nomination process. After September 11, the paper was roundly in Ashcroft’s corner, mocking the dire warnings made by Pat Leahy about the anti-terrorism package: “It all sounds scary, if only it were true. But when you cut through the hysteria, it turns out that what Mr. Ashcroft is

proposing is far from threatening” (“The Ashcroft ‘Fatwa,’” Nov. 29, 2001).

The Washington Times backed Ashcroft’s nomination but later showed a prickly at best attitude toward the anti-terror measures, reflecting the right-wing civil-libertarian streak that one saw in, say, Texas Rep. Dick Armey. The *Times* called Ashcroft a “truly inspired” choice (“The Rise and Fall of Bipartisanship,” Jan. 8, 2001) and later argued that Ashcroft would “uphold the Constitution and the laws of the nation. After eight years of an increasingly degraded Justice Department, that would be—may we say it?—the department’s salvation” (“Ashcroft Under Fire,” Jan. 17, 2001). The *Times* applauded Ashcroft’s NRA letter (“The Right to Bear Arms,” May 29, 2001), and wrote that his decision to drop the Microsoft case “was a triumph of the rule of reason (“Microsoft’s Narrow Escape,” Sept. 8, 2001). After September 11, the paper published two mixed editorial on Ashcroft’s efforts and one negative one, opposing two key features of the Ashcroft proposals in particular: “Despite Mr. Ashcroft’s best efforts, the administration has failed thus far to make the case for military tribunals and keeping detainees’ names secret” (“Victory Abroad. . . Constitutional Concerns at Home,” Dec. 7, 2001).

7. Politics/Process 2, Legitimacy/Mandate Questions.

The question here, with regard to Clinton, was the extent to which the papers saw fit to comment on the fact that in the three-way race of 1992 he received 43 percent of the vote (i.e., less than 50). Of special interest was then-Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole’s post-election comment that “57 percent of the Americans who voted in the Presidential election voted against Bill Clinton, and I intend to represent that majority on the floor of the U.S. Senate.” *The New York Times* wrote three editorials on the topic, two positive toward Clinton and one negative. *The Washington Post* also wrote two, which were mixed. *The Wall Street Journal* didn’t write

directly on this subject. *The Washington Times* wrote two negative pieces (one a ringing endorsement of Dole's remarks).

The day after the election, *The New York Times* began its lead editorial: "The American public thundered yesterday for, above all, change" ("A Monumental, Fragile Mandate," Nov. 4, 1992). This editorial made sport of an electoral college map that ran in *USA Today* on May 28, 1992, giving Clinton six electoral votes and did not mention that Clinton had received only 43 percent of the vote. A second editorial dressed down Dole: "He's entitled to his aspirations, just as the nation is entitled to vigorous, constructive dissent. But what's good for Mr. Dole may not be good for the nation, or for his party" ("Bob Dole's Politics of Rancor," Nov. 10, 1992). Then, interestingly, the paper turned around and later seemed to wish that Dole had stood by those words. The issue was the confirmation hearing of Ron Brown, which the *Times* labeled a "bipartisan disgrace" because as the paper saw it the hearing did nothing more than to "make Washington safe for Mr. Brown's law firm." It then asked: "Where were the Republicans? Dole . . . asserted that the election had given him a mandate for vigorous opposition. On Wednesday he seemed to abandon that mandate" ("Breaking Bill Clinton's Promise," Jan. 8, 1992).

The Washington Post wrote that while some say "he has no mandate" because he received "less than a full 50 percent of the vote," Clinton nevertheless deserved congratulations for a "strong, smart, and civil campaign." Still, the editorial noted that "neither the size of his victory nor the nature of his campaign rhetoric provides a clear and specific mandate or 1-2-3 agenda for action that all can agree on" ("The Presidency. . .", Nov. 5, 1992). The paper didn't make as much of Dole's comments as the *The New York Times* did. It called Dole's comment "an imaginative revision of the outcome" because Dole's assumption that Ross Perot's 19 percent

was an anti-Clinton vote was, to the paper, dubious; however, it made these remarks not by way of defending Clinton but by the convoluted way of chiding the G.O.P. for its role in creating the federal deficit (“One More Veto,” Nov. 6, 1992). Finally, the paper offered a mixed assessment of Clinton’s first week in the capital as president-elect, noting facetiously that even “grumpy Bob Dole was being gracious” (“Warming Up for President,” Nov. 22, 1992).

The Wall Street Journal sat this debate out. It didn’t comment on Dole’s remarks one way or the other, only calling him, Newt Gingrich, and Dick Armey “eager and capable partisans” in an editorial largely devoted to another topic (“The Bush Pardons,” Dec. 28, 1992; note that this editorial, since it was chiefly about another topic, is *not* included in the numerical count). *The Washington Times* however, defended Dole: “The aggressive posture of Senate Minority Leader Bob Dole in the days following the election has been a tonic to the Republican opposition who will need such leadership in the months to come if the Republicans are to be an effective force during the Clinton administration. . .Mr. Dole sounded just the right note on election night, with the observation that Mr. Clinton had neither a mandate nor coattails as a result of the balloting” (“Mr. Dole and Mr. Michel,” Nov, 13, 1992). A later editorial admitted that Clinton was a great “practitioner of the glad hand” but said more seriously that Clinton was “elected without a mandate. . .[and] possessed of a governing plan that has already been overtaken by events,” what with the economy showing signs of life, according to the paper (“The President’s Style Section,” Nov. 30, 1992).

As to the 2000 election, all the papers of course wrote many editorials about Florida and *Bush v. Gore*. All those editorials aren’t included here; only those that touched on mandate and legitimacy questions to a significant degree. *The New York Times* wrote four, all mixed. *The*

Washington Post ran two, one positive toward Bush and the other mixed. *The Wall Street Journal* ran two, both positive, and *The Washington Times* published three, all positive.

The New York Times wrote on Nov. 12, 2000 (“Searching for a Respite”) that the “next president will face a mandate problem that will force him toward tactics different from those of recent winners. . . our guess is that whoever wins the White House, the public will let him try to lead despite lingering unhappiness over the election.” A second editorial took note of the results in closely contested states and said “the next president will have a public-opinion foundation—that being the balanced, mainly centrist sentiment in the battleground states. . .” (“The Count and the Map,” Nov. 20, 2000). After the Supreme Court ruled for Bush, the *Times* said: “Just as John F. Kennedy carried a piece of note paper reminding him of the narrowness of his victory in 1960, Mr. Bush should keep in mind the more complicated numbers of this election”; but it added that “Mr. Bush’s title to the office comes through the electoral count and through appropriate legal procedures. . .” (“The Court Rules for Mr. Bush,” Dec. 13, 2000). The next day, the paper urged Bush to “ignore” advice from his party’s right wing about pressing large tax cuts and “start by forging alliances with Democrats and Republicans on practical legislation for which there is already a national consensus” (“Mr. Gore’s Farewell, and Mr. Bush’s Task,” Dec. 14, 2000).

Before the outcome was known, *The Washington Post* wrote: “Whoever becomes president will, in one sense, have a qualified mandate. Almost exactly half the country will have said no to what the other half embraced” (“Handle With Care,” Nov. 9, 2000). After the Supreme Court ruling, the *Post* tried to strike a more upbeat note: “Democrats say Mr. Bush lacks a mandate to carry out his proposals, but he doesn’t lack the mandate to try. There is no asterisk after his powers; he is duly the president-elect. We congratulate him on the victory. Time now to

turn to the question of how he uses it” (“A President-Elect,” Dec. 14, 2000).

The Wall Street Journal and *The Washington Times*, being supporters of Bush, evidently didn’t see the need to wring their hands so much over whether their man would be entering office with a real mandate (it should be noted that the *Journal* does not issue endorsements, as editorial pages traditionally do; however, the page made its preference for Bush clear in many editorials). Before Thanksgiving, the *Journal* despaired that the GOP would be hamstrung by its adherence to principle, in a passage that predicted the future course of events with only partial accuracy: “It is not hard to imagine an eventual U.S. Supreme Court decision in which the conservative justices defer to the principle of states’ rights and the liberal justices go with Gore. This is of course a way of saying that Republicans are constrained by principle while Democrats are not. . . The conventional wisdom is that if with this hassle Governor Bush does become President he will be a crippled one. Perhaps. But we find it equally plausible that facing down the kind of assault now being waged in Florida would be precisely the best preparation for what may lie ahead” (“The Squeamish GOP?”, Nov. 21, 2000).

The Washington Times opined two days after the election that in the “likely event that the Florida recount confirms Mr. Bush’s majority in the Electoral College, Mr. Gore. . . will be expected to respect the Constitution’s unequivocal election rules (“The Electoral College,” Nov. 9, 2000). The day after Thanksgiving, the *Times* was already prepared, well in advance of the Supreme Court decision, to call Bush, in a headline, “President-Elect Bush” (Nov. 27, 2000): “By now, Mr. Bush has most certainly earned the title of president-elect.”

8. Politics/Process 3, Zoe Baird vs. Linda Chavez.

Zoe Baird was Clinton’s first attorney-general nominee who was withdrawn when it was

discovered that she had knowingly hired undocumented aliens. *The New York Times* wrote four editorials on the matter, one positive and three negative. *The Washington Post* wrote four-two mixed, and two negative. *The Wall Street Journal* wrote four-two positive, and two mixed. *The Washington Times* also ran four, three mixed and one negative.

The New York Times started favorably, saying she “more than vindicates President-elect Clinton’s determination to put a woman at the head of the Federal legal establishment” (“Looks Like America,” Dec. 25, 1992). But the paper turned hard, on Baird but especially on Clinton, after the alien hires were revealed: “They didn’t understand, the powerful who lead the country. Bill Clinton and his advisers, who promised a departure from the old ways of go-along Washington, didn’t get it” (“The Lesson of Zoe Baird,” Jan. 23, 1993). *The Washington Post* wasn’t very high on Baird to begin with. But when the troubles began, the paper wrote that her efforts to explain everything in her Congressional testimony “added nothing to extenuate what she did” and in fact “made it worse” (“The Baird Nomination,” Jan. 24, 1993).

The Wall Street Journal actually defended Baird to some extent, observing that, as a corporate lawyer for a major insurance firm who had spoken sympathetically of tort reform, her crime in the eyes of the Democratic left was not that she had hired illegals “but that she’s not one of them” (“Bill Clinton’s Washington,” Jan. 20, 1993). The *Journal* at first hoped that Clinton “would go to bat for his nominee” (“Zoe’s Lesson, and Bill’s,” Jan. 18, 1993), but waved goodbye to the saga by contextualizing that Baird was taken down in part because America is “riven with class resentments” that in recent years had been “seized upon as a political weapon,” by Clinton among others (“The Clinton Whirlpool,” Jan. 25, 1993). *The Washington Times* considered “her actions disqualifying for the particular job that she seeks” (“The Baird

Hearings,” Jan. 21, 1993), but it agreed with the *Journal* that the animus against her came from the left: “There is, in short, a plausible case that Ms. Baird is one of those ‘New Democrats’ . . . Unfortunately for her, the old Democrats. . .do no much care for newness of this sort” (“Some Sympathy for Zoe Baird Is Right, All Things Considered,” Jan. 24, 1993).

Linda Chavez, Bush’s first nominee to be his Secretary of Labor, withdrew her name after it was revealed that she housed and fed-or essentially employed, depending on the eye of the beholder-an undocumented Guatemalan immigrant (there was no argument that the woman lived in her home, and harboring an illegal alien is technically against the law). *The New York Times* editorialized twice on the matter, once positively and once negatively. *The Washington Post* wrote three, all negative. *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Washington Times* wrote one and five, respectively, all positive.

The New York Times viewed Chavez as “a highly ideological choice” (“More Conservatives from Mr. Bush,” Jan. 3, 2003). But whereas the *Times* had blistered Clinton after the Baird revelations, after the Chavez story broke, the paper applauded Bush (hence the “positive” designation) for a response to the news-accepting her resignation-that was “swift, decisive, and correct on the merits” (“A Speedy Exit for Linda Chavez,” Jan. 10, 2003). *The Washington Post* also didn’t take to Chavez from the start; when the alien story broke, the *Post* still held out a slim possibility that she might overcome it but asserted that “this isn’t a trivial incident, and that in explaining her conduct Ms. Chavez has a much greater burden to bear” (“A Steeper Hill for Ms. Chavez,” Jan. 9, 2003). And the *Post* saw no reason to applaud Bush for accepting her withdrawal, but urged him to use the occasion “as a welcome opportunity to make a more constructive choice” (“Ms. Chavez Withdraws,” Jan. 10, 2003).

The Wall Street Journal's editorial defended Chavez and supported Bush. "In most parts of America," the paper wrote ("Blood in the Water?", Jan. 10, 2003), "a woman who stretched out a hand to a struggling Vietnamese refugee, who paid for the schooling of two Puerto Rican children. . .and who opened her home to a battered Guatemalan woman without first demanding to see her green card would be held up as an example." The paper called Chavez "an exemplar of Mr. Bush's compassionate conservatism" and said "(i)t is up to Mr. Bush to see that her ideas live."

The Washington Times strongly defended Chavez on its editorial page, lashing out at "Democrats and Big Labor," which, "in an act of both political desperation and character assassination. . .directed their fire at Mrs. Chavez for perpetrating acts of compassionate conservatism" ("The Attack on Linda Chavez," Jan. 9, 2003). Like the *Journal*, the *Times* did not criticize Bush for accepting her withdrawal; it said that Bush was really the "intended target" of Chavez's critics and called on Bush "to put forth an equally qualified, comparably committed nominee for this important post" ("No Good Deed Goes Unpunished," Jan. 10, 2003).

9. Politics/Process 4, Health-Care Plan Secrecy vs. Energy Plan Secrecy.

Bill Clinton appointed his wife, Hillary, to head his health-care task force in his first State of the Union address in 1993. Over the course of that spring and summer, her task force was taken to court by three private groups to force it to open its proceedings and records to public review. *The New York Times* wrote four editorials, all negative (i.e., critical of the Clintons). *The Washington Post* wrote one, which was mixed. *The Wall Street Journal* wrote eight, all negative. *The Washington Times* wrote seven, also all negative.

The New York Times early on called the Clinton effort toward secrecy "unseemly,

possibly illegal and wrong. . .Mrs. Clinton should open the curtains and let the sun shine in. . .” (“Opening Up on Health Care,” March 7, 1993). The next week, the paper supported a decision by federal circuit court judge Royce Lamberth compelling Mrs. Clinton to open the deliberations under the terms of the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) and chastised: “The Clintons ran as outsiders who proclaimed that letting the public in was the best way to govern. They need to take their pledges of openness beyond the letter of the law” (“Let’s All Be Health Care Insiders,” March 13, 1993). That June, when an appeals panel overturned Lamberth’s decision, the *Times* noted that the Clintons “found sympathetic judges last week. But they need to ask themselves whether Clinton voters sent them to Washington to damage open government, by both example and litigation” (“A Very Private Public Servant,” June 29, 1993). *The Washington Post*, by contrast, wasn’t too troubled by the secrecy. After the Lamberth decision, its editorial mostly parsed the different aspects of his ruling and mused on “whether Mrs. Clinton’s active role in her husband’s administration will set a pattern or not is hard to predict” (“The Sunshine Opinion,” March 12, 1993).

The Wall Street Journal was altogether more upset. In a series of editorials that continued even after the health-care legislation had died, the *Journal* raised repeated questions about FACA and other laws the task-force might have violated. It applauded the Lamberth decision (“Hillary’s Health Planners,” March 11, 1993). In a move very rare indeed for editorial pages, the *Journal* obtained the names of the 528 members of the task force; it ran the names and invited readers who could identify any of the 528 to “please fax us at (212) 416-2658. Address it: Kremlinologists” (“Do You Know These People?,” March 24, 1993). The next week, after readers had duly reported in, the paper ran an editorial announcing some of the findings, which

ran to a virtually unprecedented (for an editorial) 2,408 words (“Who’s Who on Hillary’s List,” March 2, 1993).

The Washington Times didn’t go quite that far, but its dudgeon was clear: “If ever there was a situation that demanded that all ethics regulations be followed down to the last dot on the last ‘i’ and the last cross on the last ‘t’ it is the doings of the health care task force. . . what records are there, where are they, and when can they be perused?” (“Where, Please, Are the Health Task Force Records?”, Oct. 28, 1993). A later editorial took after the “tangled skein of cronyism and dishonesty in the Clinton administration” and sought to tie the task-force secrecy issue to the travel-office story (“Maybe We Should Just Call It White-House-Gate,” Oct. 10, 1994).

The Bush Energy Task Force, chaired by Vice President Dick Cheney, met with private groups through the spring of 2001 and unveiled its policy recommendations that May. With the Enron scandal brewing, Democrats pressed for records of how often Cheney met with Enron and other corporate interests, and eventually the General Accounting Office sued the White House (a court ruled for the White House in December 2002). *The New York Times* wrote five editorials, all critical of Cheney. *The Washington Post* wrote one, mixed. *The Wall Street Journal* wrote one, positive (defending Cheney). *The Washington Times* wrote three—one positive, one mixed, one negative.

The New York Times’s position was essentially the same one it took toward the Clinton task force: “Sunshine, the Watergate-era rallying cry proclaimed, is the best disinfectant. It is a credo that, 30 years later, is more relevant than ever as the White House and Congress battle over whether records” should be made public (“Illuminating the Cheney Task Force,” Jan. 29,

2002). When the court threw out the GAO suit, the *Times* declared it “a ringing victory for special-interest lobbyists and said “the public has a right to know what businesses and special interests [the task force] heard from, and whether Mr. Cheney was seeking information on every side of the issue” (“Keeping Dick Cheney’s Secrets,” Dec. 11, 2002). *The Washington Post*, again, was not at all as upset. Its one editorial, headlined “Not Worth Fighting About” (Jan, 31, 2002), concluded thus: “If both sides would stop rattling their sabers, the White House could turn over non-deliberative, factual information. . .and the GAO could agree not to seek more. And neither side would have to admit it was wrong.”

The Journal, in sharp contrast to its attacks on Hillary Clinton, supported Cheney. It wasn’t until after the court tossed out the GAO suit that the paper commented, when it said: “This purely political lawsuit was [John Dingell and Henry Waxman’s] attempted end-run around the Constitution’s tedious separation of powers. . .Guess the minority members have to busy themselves somehow” (“Cheney’s Private Discussions,” Dec. 11, 2002).

The Washington Times began by defending Cheney. Its first editorial, “Energetic Differences” (April 20, 2001), sought explicitly to rebut a *Washington Post* news story that drew parallels between the Hillary Clinton task force and the Cheney one, concluding: “Perhaps the most important difference between the two task forces is that no one on the Bush team is channeling policy from Eleanor Roosevelt.” But over time, the paper grew more incredulous at the administration’s tone-deafness. A Jan. 23, 2002 piece (“Enron End Run”) called the White House response to the Enron scandal “staggering” and asked, “Was nothing learned from the Clinton years?” But a Feb. 4, 2002 editorial (“GAO vs. the White House”) toned it down a little, saying that while “the White House did not create this perception problem, it surely has

contributed to it.”

10. Politics/Process 5, Bill Lann Lee vs. Ted Olson nominations.

Clinton nominated Bill Lann Lee to be his assistant attorney general for civil rights in July 1997. The Senate refused to vote on him, and Clinton appointed Lee to fill the position on an acting basis, which he did for three years. *The New York Times* editorialized six times in his (and the administration’s) favor. *The Washington Post* also wrote six, five positive and one mixed. *The Wall Street Journal* wrote 10 editorials, all negative. *The Washington Times* published 12, also all negative.

The New York Times called conservative opposition to Lee as being out of the mainstream a “gross misrepresentation” (“A Chief for Civil Rights,” Oct. 29, 1997). Later, the paper said that “Mr. Lee offended conservatives simply because he favors upholding the law, which includes using affirmative action as a remedy for some civil rights violations” and called the Senate’s behavior “a temper tantrum” (“Disdain in the Senate,” Nov. 14, 1997). The paper also urged Clinton to sidestep the opposition and name Lee on an acting basis while the Senate was in recess (“Another Route for Bill Lann Lee,” Nov. 25, 1997).

The Washington Post, as we have seen, does not take quite the interest in affirmative action that the *The New York Times* does. Nevertheless it was supportive of Lee while acknowledging its more general ambivalence: “There are lots of legitimate issues to be argued about in connection with civil rights law. Mr. Lee’s nomination is not the right vehicle for resolving them” (“The Lee Nomination,” Oct. 24, 1997). On another occasion it used the Lee nomination to argue again for his confirmation; but the editorial again tossed the merits and demerits of affirmative action back and forth, and it said that Democrats who had labeled

opposition to Lee as racist were “reckless, unfounded. . .disgusting. . .pitiful” and “should be ashamed” (“A Debate in the Wrong Forum,” Nov. 10, 1997). Even so, the paper also applauded Clinton for appointing him during recess (“The Right Move on Bill Lann Lee,” Dec. 17, 1997).

The Wall Street Journal was highly agitated by the Lee nomination. “So there’s a reason for the caution about approving Bill Lann Lee. These appointments have become important in a legally reckless regime like Mr. Clinton’s,” the paper wrote in “Above the Law?” (Nov. 4, 1997). The *Journal* on a few occasions attacked Lee’s opposition to California’s Prop. 209 (e.g., “The Bill Lann Lee Fight,” Nov. 17, 1997). When Clinton appointed Lee, the *Journal* invoked the Federal Vacancies Act and said: “‘Acting’ means almost, sort of, kind of, not quite, like, I lied to my diary, I didn’t inhale. . .No, folks, we don’t think that Bill Clinton made Latrell Sprewell strangle P.J. Carlesimo. What we think is that Mr. Clinton has given the public life of this country a legacy of politics as whatever you can get away with” (“Acting Exercise,” Dec. 16, 1997). One final shot (“Bill’s Bill,” Aug. 8, 2000) noted that Clinton’s “reputation for political genius has been honed on a Democratic Party that, as an institution, has submerged all considerations of principle to the continuation of power. . .”

The Washington Times’s dozen anti-Lee editorials struck a similar note toward “the man who would be quota king” (“The Troubles of Bill Lann Lee,” Oct. 30, 1997). The paper noted that “Mr. Lee is a racial two-fer, if you will. . .Because Mr. Lee is an unreconstructed advocate for affirmative action, any opposition to the civil rights lawyer can be portrayed as insensitivity to the needs of African-Americans. And since Mr. Lee is of Chinese descent, his political fortunes can be made a proxy for Asian-American prestige” (“Bill Clinton on Race,” Dec. 12, 1997). Later, the paper called his entire tenure “improper” and accused Clinton of “(i)gnoring the

Constitution” in naming him (“DoJ’s Bad Actor,” March 25, 1999).

Bush nominated Ted Olson to be his Solicitor General in May 2000, and the Senate confirmed him. But controversy arose around the issue of whether Olson had told senators the truth (under oath) about his involvement with the anti-Clinton “Arkansas Project.” *The New York Times* took no position. *The Washington Post* wrote one positive editorial, backing Olson. *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Washington Times* each published four positive editorials.

The New York Times wrote one sentence, after Olson had been confirmed, saying that the vote on Olson was premature; but since it was after the fact it was not included in the editorial count. *The Washington Post* did weigh in before the Senate vote, saying that “the Republicans were wrong to stop Bill Lann Lee; the Democrats would be wrong to block Mr. Olson” (“The Olson Nomination,” May 18, 2001).

The Wall Street Journal decried “The Return of Borking” (May 8, 2001) in its first editorial on the matter: “Always ugly, borking was at least rare. But now Democrats want to make it a permanent part of our politics.” Three days later, “The Politics of Demonization” (May 11, 2001) argued that the “‘Arkansas Project’ was an exercise of the American Spectator’s First Amendment rights, something much of the major media seems to think applies only to itself.” Its final two headlines sum up its feelings well: “Payback for Florida,” (May 17, 2001), and “The Permanent Campaign” (May 24, 2001).

The Washington Times, too, sought to defend Olson’s work with the Arkansas Project and attacked Democratic Senator Patrick Leahy, who was leading the questioning of Olson in the Senate. “Mr. Leahy is demanding that the American Spectator open its books to inspection by the committee,” the paper wrote (“The Olson Nomination, Act II,” May 17, 2001). “Someone

ought to remind Mr. Leahy that this is not Vladimir Putin's Russia, but a free country where First Amendment protections apply even to publications on the right.”

4. Discussion and Conclusions.

First, some percentages.

The results can best be digested by thinking in terms of four major categories, which are the categories of Appendix B: The liberal papers' posture toward Clinton; the conservative papers' posture toward Clinton; the liberal papers' posture toward Bush; and the conservative papers' posture toward Bush. Within each of those four groups, we may further break down the results under the two rubrics used in this study, “policy” and “politics/process”-so, for example, we can chart how often *The Washington Post* supported Clinton on policy, or to what degree *The Wall Street Journal* backed Bush on politics/process questions. I'll describe each of the four categories briefly.

Liberal posture toward Clinton: The liberal papers wrote a grand total of 152 editorials on Clinton in the topics this research took in. Of those, 54 (36%) were positive; 53 (35%) were mixed; and 45 (30%) were negative, adding up to a decidedly mixed assessment. Many of these criticisms were from the left, i.e., both papers on welfare reform. But by no means were all criticisms from the left. *The New York Times* wrote several disapproving pieces on Janet Reno that arguably went after her from the right (e.g., her resistance to opening a federal prosecution of the Yankel Rosenbaum case).

The papers were somewhat more supportive of Clinton on policy questions than on matters of politics (38% o 34%). On politics, the papers actually wrote more editorials critical of

Clinton (31 editorials, or 40%) than supporting him (26, or 34%). Comparing the two papers against each other, *The Washington Post* was more critical of Clinton on policy, running 10 negative editorials (eight of them on welfare policy) while the *The New York Times* ran just four. But the *The New York Times* was more negative on politics, running 25 critical pieces (the majority of them about Reno) and only 11 favorable ones.

Conservative posture toward Clinton: The conservative papers wrote 148 editorials on Clinton. Four (3%) were positive. However, as shown in the previous section, only one of those editorials actually gave Clinton straightforward credit for something (*The Washington Times* on welfare reform; even in that editorial, the praise was limited to parts of two sentences, but since there was no corresponding criticism of Clinton within the piece, it counted as positive). The other three, all in the *Journal*, included two editorials that defended Zoe Baird because she was under attack from the left and one that defended Janet Reno after Waco for the purpose of laying the onus on Clinton himself. They were not, in other words, ringing defenses of Clinton by any means.

A further 13 (9%) were mixed; that leaves 131, meaning that the conservative papers were against Clinton at a rate of 89%. They were slightly more negative, in percentage terms, on policy questions (96%) than on politics (83%). Comparing the two papers, *The Washington Times* was the more partisan. Of its 85 Clinton editorials, just one was positive, while 79 were negative.

Liberals on Bush: The liberal papers wrote 111 editorials on Bush. Eleven (10%) were positive, somewhat higher than the conservative papers' support for Clinton. Another 26 (23%) were mixed, while 74 were negative-67%, as opposed to the conservative paper's 89%

opposition to Clinton. To be sure, the liberal papers opposed Bush strongly on policy: They wrote a combined 46 policy editorials, and none (0%) were positive. However, on the 65 politics/process editorials, they wrote 11 positive ones (17%) and 19 mixed ones (29%), meaning that they were negative toward Bush on politics just 54% of the time (as opposed to the conservative papers' 83% opposition to Clinton on political matters). Both papers opposed Bush about equally, so there is no striking contrast to be made between them.

Conservatives on Bush: The conservative papers were more than twice as supportive of Bush as the liberal papers were of Clinton. They wrote 99 Bush editorials; 76 (77%) were positive, 16 (16%) were mixed, and just seven (7%) were negative. They were slightly more positive on political matters (83%) than they were on policy (71%), a distinction driven chiefly by two factors: the *Journal's* occasional ambivalence on the Bush tax cut, which the paper wanted to be larger, and the staunchly pro-life *Washington Times's* lack of enthusiasm for Bush's decision on stem-cell research. Those reservations led the conservative papers to write several mixed editorials on the Bush administration.

The papers produced very few negative editorials-seven, as compared to the liberal papers' 45 negative editorials on Clinton. And even among those seven, the papers were loathe to criticize Bush himself-most of the negative editorials criticized Ashcroft, or Cheney, but rarely Bush himself. In general, *The Washington Times* was more willing to criticize the Bush administration, publishing six of the seven negative pieces. *The Wall Street Journal*, in its 40 Bush editorials under review, published just one negative one, the 123-word dissent on his steel-tariff decision.

Clearly, these liberal and conservative editorial pages represent two different models of journalism. The conservative editorial pages are more likely to think of themselves as being “on the team,” as it were, supporting a Republican administration, while the liberal editorial pages do strive for more independence, evidenced especially by their willingness to criticize Clinton, as compared to the conservative papers’ great reluctance to criticize Bush. We have seen, for example, that the liberal papers, especially *The New York Times*, hew to certain principles on several issues that transcend the question of who is in office, while the conservative papers are less likely to behave that way.

This can best be seen in the “secrecy” category. *The New York Times* believes in open government as a matter of principle. Therefore, it was just about as critical of the Clinton health-care task force, writing four negative editorials, as it was of the Bush-Cheney energy task force, which it criticized five times. The language and arguments in all those nine editorials were pretty much the same; the page was just as critical of Hillary Clinton as it was of Dick Cheney, and for the same reasons. The conservative papers, on the other hand, did treat the occasions very differently. The *Journal* and *The Washington Times* savaged Hillary Clinton in a combined 15 editorials, while the *Journal* in particular turned a completely blind eye toward the Cheney task force (its only comment on the subject was to defend Cheney and mock the Democrats who had demanded the release of the task force’s documents). Similarly, while one can be confident that the conservative papers were just about as aghast at Bush for his steel protectionism as the liberal papers were at Clinton for his agreeing to sign the 1996 welfare bill, the conservative papers were far more muted in their criticism of Bush. *The Washington Times*, at least, showed a somewhat higher fealty to a principle than to a particular president on concern for civil liberties

post-9-11 and on the abortion issue. But even there, its criticisms of Bush were restrained-it criticized Ashcroft, not Bush or the White House, on the anti-terror legislation, and on the abortion editorials its language signaled to readers that the page disagreed but didn't want to make a big thing of it.

There is, further, the matter of tone. The conservative papers used harsher, sometimes far harsher, language toward Clinton, especially on political matters that they were clearly trying to rev up to scandal status; and their language became harder as the Clinton years wore on (of course, this may come to pass with the liberal papers and Bush if he wins a second term and/or gets embroiled in a major scandal). That joke the *Journal* made about Clinton and Latrell Sprewell and P.J. Carlesimo (Sprewell, then a guard for the Golden State Warriors, slugged and strangled Carlesimo, his coach, at a team practice) was rowdy and disrespectful in a way that one would virtually never find on the editorial page of the *Times*. It's also impossible to imagine that *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post* would publish, as if it were a piece of Soviet-era samizdat, a list of Bush task-force advisers and then implore their readers to write in with dirt on them-in faxes addressed to "Kremlinologists," no less. Indeed, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, if anything, more often take care to maintain a modulated tone when writing about Republicans, avoiding the personal and the *ad hominem*. In the editorials under study here, at least, both papers tend to maintain a tone of basic respect toward Bush, even when strongly disagreeing with him.

In sum, the distinction is between a traditional view of journalism as detached, independent, and unaffiliated (or at least less affiliated) with a particular political party, which is the liberal papers' conceptions of themselves; versus a more activist-oriented journalism that

envisions itself as being part of a cause, and sharing that cause with a political party. Indeed, this is reflected in the fact that the editor of *The Washington Times* editorial page, Tony Blankley, used to be Newt Gingrich's communications director. Would *The New York Times* name, say, Tom Daschle's communications director as its editorial-page editor? It's obviously inconceivable. In this respect, these editorials mirror the state of contemporary politics today: The Republican Party is more ideologically homogeneous than the Democratic Party, and conservatives have more "message discipline" than liberals on most issues. And that message discipline exists in the newspapers as well as in the party itself and its think-tanks.

One is slightly tempted to wonder which model is "better": Should the liberal papers become more like the conservative papers, or should the conservative papers become more like the liberal ones? In an ideal journalistic world, of course, the latter; it respects the traditional boundaries between a news organization and a political party or movement, and it respects the tradition of journalistic independence. That model of journalism reflects a 20th-century consensus about what constitutes fairness, basic accuracy, and civility in political discourse. That consensus was, in many respects, hard-won, because American journalism in the 18th and 19th centuries was, shall we say, not always a pretty thing.

But to modern movement conservatism, that consensus is nothing but a stalking horse for liberal hegemony, and it offers rules the conservatives have no interest in playing by. The conservative m.o., certainly, takes glee in subverting those rules, and it will not change. That leaves the liberal papers with a choice: reject or modify some of those old standards and become more obviously partisan, or stick with them and hope that what we're seeing now is a passing phase of which the public will tire. This is a conflict that will play out over years, even as it is

playing out on the pages of the nation's agenda-setting editorial pages every day.

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Appendix A: Raw Results.

How to read this chart: The first number in each box represents the total number of editorials each paper wrote on the given subject. Within the parentheses, the first number = positive editorials, the second = mixed, and the third = negative. So, for example, *The Washington Post* wrote 23 editorials about John Ashcroft during his first year; four were positive, six were mixed, and 13 were negative.

Policy:	NYT	WP	WSJ	WT
1. Clinton '93 Stimulus	15 (10-5-0)	29 (12-16-1)	16 (0-1-15)	24 (0-0-24)
Bush '01 Tax Cut	14 (0-1-13)	9 (0-0-9)	14 (11-3-0)	16 (16-0-0)
2. Clinton "Mend/End"	4 (3-1-0)	3 (1-2-0)	1 (0-0-1)	6 (0-0-6)
Bush/U. Mich. brief	3 (0-1-2)	1 (0-0-1)	1 (0-1-0)	4 (3-1-0)
3. Clinton Welfare	5 (0-1-4)	11 (0-3-8)	2 (0-1-1)	5 (1-0-4)
Bush Steel Tariff	1 (0-0-1)	4 (0-0-4)	4 (0-3-1)	2 (0-0-2)
4. Clinton Social Sec.	1 (0-1-0)	1 (0-0-1)	2 (0-0-2)	1 (0-0-1)
Bush Soc. Sec. comm..	2 (0-0-2)	2 (0-0-2)	1 (0-1-0)	4 (4-0-0)
5. Clinton prt'l.-birth veto	4 (2-2-0)	2 (0-2-0)	4 (0-0-4)	6 (0-0-6)
Bush stem-cell dec.	7 (0-2-5)	3 (0-3-0)	2 (2-0-0)	3 (0-3-0)
Politics/Process:	NYT	WP	WSJ	WT
1. Reno-1st year	33 (5-11-17)	14 (7-3-4)	16 (1-4-11)	18 (0-2-16)
Ashcroft-1st year	24 (4-7-13)	23 (4-6-13)	10 (9-1-0)	15 (10-2-3)
2. Clinton mandate	3 (2-0-1)	2 (0-2-0)	0 (0-0-0)	2 (0-0-2)
Bush mandate	4 (0-4-0)	2 (1-1-0)	2 (2-0-0)	3 (3-0-0)
3. Clinton & Baird	4 (1-0-3)	4 (0-2-2)	4 (2-2-0)	4 (0-3-1)
Bush & Chavez	2 (1-0-1)	3 (0-0-3)	1 (1-0-0)	5 (5-0-0)
4. Clinton, h.care, secrecy	4 (0-0-4)	1 (0-1-0)	8 (0-0-8)	7 (0-0-7)
Bush, energy secrecy	5 (0-0-5)	1 (0-1-0)	1 (1-0-0)	3 (1-1-1)
5. Clinton, Lann Lee nom.	6 (6-0-0)	6 (5-1-0)	10 (0-0-10)	12 (0-0-12)
Bush, Olson nom.	0 (0-0-0)	1 (1-0-0)	4 (4-0-0)	4 (4-0-0)

Appendix B: Support and Opposition Scores.

Key to reading parenthetical numbers, same as Appendix A. Corresponding percentages are below each number. Some percentages do not add up to 100 because of rounding.

B1. Liberal Papers on Clinton

	NYT	WP	Combined
Policy	29 (15 - 10 - 4) (52% -34%- 14%)	46 (13 - 23 - 10) (28%- 50%- 22%)	75 (28 - 33 - 14) (38%- 44%- 19%)
Politics/Process	50 (14 - 11 - 25) (28%- 22%- 50%)	27 (12 - 9 - 6) (44% -33%- 22%)	77 (26 - 20 - 31) (34%- 26%- 40%)
Total	79 (29 - 21 - 29) (37%- 27%- 37%)	73 (25 - 32 - 16) (34%- 44%- 22%)	

Grand Total, Liberal Papers on Clinton:

152 editorials: 54 positive (36%), 53 mixed (35%), 45 negative (30%)

B2. Conservative Papers on Clinton

	WSJ	WT	Combined
Policy	25 (0 - 2 - 23) (0% - 8% - 92%)	42 (1 - 0 - 41) (2% - 0% - 98)	67 (1 - 2 - 64) (1%- 3%- 96%)
Politics/Process	38 (3 - 6 - 29) (8% -16%- 76%)	43 (0 - 5 - 38) (0% - 12% - 88%)	81 (3 - 11 - 67) (4% - 14% - 83%)
Total	63 (3 - 8 - 52) (5% - 13% - 83%)	85 (1 - 5 - 79) (1% - 6% - 93%)	

Grand Total, Conservative Papers on Clinton:

148 editorials: 4 positive (3%), 13 mixed (9%), 131 negative (89%)

B3. Liberal Papers on Bush

	NYT	WP	Combined
Policy	27 (0 - 4 - 23) (0% - 15% - 85%)	19 (0 - 3 - 16) (0% - 16% - 84%)	46 (0 - 7 - 39) (0% - 15% - 85%)
Politics/Process	35 (5 - 11 - 19) (14% - 31% - 54%)	30 (6 - 8 - 16) (20% - 27% - 53%)	65 (11 - 19 - 35) (17% - 29% - 54%)
Total	62 (5 - 15 - 42) (8% - 24% - 68%)	49 (6 - 11 - 32) (12% - 22% - 65%)	

Grand Total, Liberal Papers on Bush:

111 editorials: 11 positive (10%), 26 mixed (23%), 74 negative (67%)

B4. Conservative Papers on Bush

	WSJ	WT	Combined
Policy	22 (13 - 8 - 1) (59% - 36% - 5%)	29 (23 - 4 - 2) (79% - 14% - 7%)	51 (36 - 12 - 3) (71% - 24% - 6%)
Politics/Process	18 (17 - 1 - 0) (95% - 5% - 0%)	30 (23 - 3 - 4) (77% - 10% - 13%)	48 (40 - 4 - 4) (83% - 8% - 8%)
Total	40 (30 - 9 - 1) (75% - 23% - 3%)	59 (46 - 7 - 6) (78% - 12% - 10%)	

Grand Total, Conservative Papers on Bush:

99 editorials: 76 positive (77%), 16 mixed (16%), 7 negative (7%)