



The Reporters

Citation

Sanders, Alex. "The Reporters." Shorenstein Center Working Paper Series 2005.3, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, 2005.

Permanent link

<https://nrs.harvard.edu/URN-3:HUL.INSTREPOS:37375915>

Terms of Use

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

Share Your Story

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

[Accessibility](#)

The Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press,
Politics and Public Policy

Working Paper Series

THE REPORTERS

By Alex Sanders
Shorenstein Fellow, Fall 2004

#2005-3

Copyright © 2005, President and Fellows of Harvard College
All rights reserved



THE REPORTERS

In election year 2002, I ran for the United States Senate. I was the Democratic nominee from South Carolina to succeed the legendary J. Strom Thurmond (R-SC). The Republican candidate was Congressman Lindsey Graham.¹ Unsurprisingly, I lost. The winners get to write the history, but the losers always tell the best stories. I have resolved to tell the story of my campaign in the form of a book. In doing so, I have struggled no less in art than life. As they say on FOX, I report, you decide. The working title is “The Losers Evening Prayer.” The title is derived from a well-known country music song.

In a voice soft and trembling,

She'd sing her song to cowboy
as a smokey halo circled round her raven hair.

And all the fallen angels and pinball playing rounders

Stopped the games that they'd been playing
for the losers' evening prayer.

The OakRidge Boys²

What follows here is a chapter from the book on reporters and the press. The chapter begins with a poem by Shelley.

* * * * *

Whence camest thou? And
whither goeth thou?

How did thy course begin?

And why?

Percy Bysshe Shelley³

Why? Why are you running? That is the candidate's most dreaded question: Why? Oh sure, the Bush League reporters, the recently-minted J. school graduates, earnestly ask their pathetic little Wheres and Whens, even the occasional How. Those are the open-ended, powder-puff questions we love so dearly. The real predators, however, the gimlet-eyed veterans of the Fourth Estate who stalk us to the grave, the ones that come at us when the light is in our eyes and sucker punch us when we least expect it, those rat-bastards always want to know Why. ("Rat-bastard" is a term of art in politics and journalism.) Why? Why? Why? Why are you running? They are unrelenting. Why are you running? They insist on knowing, and amazingly enough, we are all too often unprepared to answer that very fundamental inquiry. Maybe the question is too close to the bone. Maybe the question is too painful for us to ask ourselves ahead of time. For whatever reason, although the question is easily anticipated, even the most glib among us, especially the most glib among us, frequently cannot come up with an answer that sounds even halfway convincing.

When, in 1980, Ted Kennedy was engaged in trying to beat out Jimmy Carter for the Democratic nomination for President, Roger Mudd asked Kennedy the dreaded question on

national television, “Tell us Senator, why are you running?” The normally forceful and articulate Ted Kennedy looked stunned. He faltered, stammered, stumbled and was at last unable to answer the question. Thus ended Ted Kennedy’s last chance to become President of the United States.

There are, of course, the routine clichés the run-of-the-mill politicians parrot in a desperate effort to say why they are running:

“I want to give back to my community,” (a hopelessly pompous answer that not even the most gullible reporter has ever believed).

“I am running to save the world,” (an abysmally pretentious answer, whereby the candidate comes off sounding like Clark Kent about to burst out of a phone booth).

Then there is the somewhat more truthful answer: “I’m running because I enjoy running. Some people like to play golf; I like to run for public office,” (an answer I have sometimes given in other campaigns, but not really the truest answer).

For many candidates, the true answer to the question is simple: “I don’t know why I’m running. Somebody else may know. Perhaps, if you pay close attention, you will come to know. But, at the moment, I haven’t the faintest idea.” In forty years of politics, I never knew anybody with the gumption or courage to give that answer. Certainly, I never did.

Instead, I developed two other answers to the dreaded question why are you running. Both worked pretty well to deflect, if not actually answer, the question. Difficult questions are always best batted away. Although I gave the answers hundreds of times, no reporter in my experience ever found a way to publish what I said. The careful reader will immediately discern that I didn't really answer the question. I answered a different question, Shelley's question: "How did thou course begin? / And why?"

* * * * *

The zoo is as good a place to begin as any. In January of 2002, the Democratic National Committee sponsored the first big-ticket fund raiser for my campaign at the Riverbanks Zoological Park in Columbia, South Carolina. Tom Daschle, at the time the Majority Leader of the U.S. Senate, was the celebrity guest. The setting was positively glittering. Tables, beautifully adorned with fresh camellias, were set on linen tablecloths. Candles flickered. Crystal wine glasses tinkled. In the near background, wild animals – lions, tigers, and elephants – socially secure in their confinements, roared and trumpeted their disapproval at having their sleep so rudely interrupted. For some reason, the elephants seemed especially outspoken.

The assemblage was, in a word, heterogeneous. Black-tied corporate lobbyists mingled uneasily with union bosses, visibly uncomfortable in their blue serge suits and brown shoes. Members of the NAACP naturally gravitated to members of the ACLU. (Indeed, some in attendance, like me, were members of both groups.) Planned Parenthood was prominently

represented; the NRA was not. (I was almost certainly the only one present who was a member of both organizations.) By the rankest of coincidences, a group of gay activists were seated at the same table with starry-eyed coed volunteers and a contingency of Catawba Indians, elegantly decked out in their native dress and intent on building a gambling casino on their reservation. Democratic state legislators, South Carolina's only African American congressman, and other party stalwarts made up the balance of the crowd. I was clearly among friends. Democracy reigned.

Against this stellar backdrop, I proceeded to explain how I had come to undertake so quixotic a venture as an attempt to replace Strom Thurmond in a hopelessly Republican state. As every school child knows, the states are divided for political purposes into two groups. The red states are designated as Republican states and the blue states Democratic states. I characterize my venture as quixotic because South Carolina is easily the reddest of the red states – redder than red, crimson, fuchsia, magenta, a color all its own. I told a story.

Sometime in the spring of 2001, I got a call from United States Senator Fritz Hollings (D-SC), proposing that I run for the United States Senate seat being vacated by Strom Thurmond. I later learned I was the Democrat's tenth choice, after former S.C. Governor and U.S. Secretary of Education Dick Riley, Charleston Mayor Joe Riley, University of South Carolina President John Palms, multi-millionaire philanthropist Darla Moore, Ambassador to the Court of St. James Phil Lader, former Congress Butler Derrick, Congressman John Spratt, Liberty Life Chairman Hayne Hipp, and State Senator Brad Hutto. What an honor. I had just

seen the movie, Lord of the Rings. I hope you saw that movie. It's not just a children's story. It contains many lines of great literature. I thought about the little Hobbit, Frodo Baggins, the weakest and most pathetic member of the Middle Kingdom, when he was approached by the Wizard Gandalf, to forsake his idyllic life and undertake the most perilous quest imaginable, an almost hopeless endeavor of incalculable danger. I thought about what the little Hobbit said to the wizard, and I quoted his words to Senator Hollings. "I will take the ring," I said, "although I do not know the way." And Fritz said, "I am the way"

In the back of the room, just outside the candlelight, sat *Newsweek* chief political correspondent and NBC pundit Howard Fineman. Doubtless, he was there to cover Tom Daschle, not me. Still, I hoped to impress him. As I told the story of Fritz Hollings and Frodo Baggins, I squinted to keep my eye on him. He was frantically taking notes. To my great dismay, however, just as I got to the punch line, he put down his pen and reached fastidiously for his wine glass. Even at that distance, I could tell he was fish-eying me suspiciously. *Newsweek* never printed a word of what I said or, for that matter, anything else about my campaign.

"Did Fritz really say that?" a few utterly unimaginative reporters asked. "Of course, he did," I answered with as much indignation as I could muster. Of course, he didn't. But I got away with the story for a couple of months, because what I quoted Fritz as having said sounds exactly like something he would say. (Therein lies a lesson for another time.) Fritz Hollings' wife Peatsy has often explained their long and happy marriage as resulting from the fact that they are "both in love with the same man."

My campaign staff tried mightily to kill the story from the very first. They had developed a complicated answer for me, sort of a combination of “I want to give back to my community” and “I want to save the world.” They were, of course, horrified at my answer. “You’re in the Bible Belt,” they said, restating the obvious. “That’s a sacrilegious story. You are not only insulting Senator Hollings, you are making fun of Jesus,” they argued. “You’re also admitting you saw a satanic movie.” I ignored them, mainly because I was getting such a kick out of telling the story, especially when Fritz Hollings was present.

Ultimately, however, the story fell under its own weight. My research director came up with an inconvenient fact: the movie, “Lord of the Rings,” which I was purporting to quote, had not come out until the fall of 2001, well after I was claiming to have had the conversation with Fritz in the spring of that year. I had never previously allowed literal truth to get in the way of a good story. (I often speak in parables.)⁴ But now I was in the big leagues, and I had to come up with something else – something un-fact-checkable.

Why I am running, answer II:

In the spring of 2001, for the first time ever, my life had become entirely well ordered. Plans for my retirement were in place. I had bought a little house on Wadmalaw Island – the last of South Carolina’s undeveloped sea islands – where I could sit on the porch and watch the yachts on their way from New York to Miami and back on the Intracoastal Waterway. I had applied for Social Security. Everything was in order. For the first time in my life, there were no contingencies. Everything was perfect, and I was perfectly miserable. For the life of me, I could

not imagine why. Irrational depression is, of course, a clinically diagnosable disease. I was seriously considering professional help. Then I read something Charles Lindbergh had said. “I almost hated to see the lights of Paris,” he said, “because the night was clear, and I still had gas in my tanks.” (Here I fixed my gaze on a distant horizon.) I knew at once how he felt, and I knew how I felt. Then Fritz Hollings called.

Predictably, my campaign staff hated everything about the answer. “Do you realize you are confessing mental illness?” they asked. “Remember Tom Eagleton, for God’s sake. He got kicked off the ticket for Vice President because he had a history of mental illness. Another thing: Lindbergh was a notorious anti-Semite and a Nazi sympathizer. You sure pick terrific role models.” I surrendered. It didn’t matter. Reporters had given up on asking me why I was running and moved on to even less substantive matters.

If anybody is still interested, the truth is that the whole thing was Zoe’s idea. Zoe is my wife of more than forty years and my friend and companion for more than sixty years. We have a picture of ourselves holding hands when we were four years old. She has been omnipresent in my life. Every good idea I ever had was her idea or, occasionally, our idea together. Every bad idea I ever had was my idea all by myself. Running for the Senate was definitely her idea. Incidentally, everybody who has ever seen that picture has agreed it is the most boring picture they have ever seen. They say it really demonstrates a distinct lack of imagination to remain with the same person for sixty years. Snow geese aren’t that loyal, they say.

* * * * *

Having struck out with Howard Fineman, I proceeded in an ongoing effort to insinuate myself into the good graces of other reporters, both prominent and obscure. In the interest of complete candor, let me say, quite apart from politics, I dearly love to see my name in print, and I love to be on TV. (Politicians who vociferously court the television cameras are referred to, affectionately, as “lens lice.”) For over a year, the reporters and I danced together, and the experience was positively exhilarating. That is to say, I found a good deal of harmless fun in the pursuit of “good press.” But I succeeded in having an intimate relationship with only one journalist. She was none other than the inestimable Eleanor Randolph, editorial writer for *The New York Times*.

I first met Eleanor Randolph – tall, willowy, and strikingly attractive – on the top floor of the tallest building in Columbia, the capital city of South Carolina. We had an appointment for lunch at a non-exclusive, semi-private club – anybody can join and anybody does – named, appropriately enough, the Capital City Club. I had reserved a small private dining room overlooking the State House, which is built along the lines of the capitol in Washington but on a smaller scale. The interview had been her idea, not mine, and I was glad for the chance to meet an editorial writer for *The New York Times* on my turf, not hers. (To a Southerner, territory is important, especially when dealing with New York Yankees.)

The interview began routinely enough, except perhaps a little more gently than most, by no means the fierce confrontational interrogations the least competent reporters attempt to mount, lest they be mistaken for nice people. We skipped easily through the story of my life. I

was given the chance to express a political idea here and there, and I did, as persuasively as I could. I tried hard to avoid excessive modesty. By coffee, we had reached my childhood. Then something a little strange happened. We began to talk about her childhood. She was not a Yankee after all. She had graduated from Emory University in Atlanta, she told me, and her roots were deeply imbedded in the South.

We talked and talked about everything and about nothing. Before long, late afternoon was upon us. Outside the window, the shadows of the palmetto trees around the State House began to lengthen. The setting sun turned the State House dome from bronze to gold, the campaign seemed more and more a distant memory, and I felt as though I had known Eleanor Randolph all my life. Then, wholly unexpected and uninvited, a shockingly outrageous revelation sprang, fully formed, into my conscious mind: This purely wonderful woman is falling in love with me.

Wow! I instantly became an alpha male on beta blockers. What next? Is this a bad thing or a good thing? Definitely a good thing, I quickly decided. Now what do I say? What do I do? I was about to rethink my longstanding commitment to family values, when Eleanor Randolph answered all my questions. Momentarily distracted, I had looked away. She brought me back to full attention. She reached across the small table that separated us there in the Capital City Club, and she softly covered my hand with hers. Misty-eyed, she spoke.

“Excuse me, excuse me,” she said. “You remind me so much of my father.”

“That, Eleanor,” I said, “is not the most romantic thing a woman ever said to me.”

“But he was the sweetest, kindest, most wonderful man,” she said, as if the comparison to her father was the highest expression of endearment possible.

I have no clear recollection of what happened after that. I eventually returned to less embarrassing pursuits, like randomly cold-calling perfect strangers and asking them for money. (There may be more humiliating activities in life, but asking strangers for money is right up there.) Years later, in going over the event with her – mainly to make sure I had not imagined the whole thing – she reminded me that, apropos of nothing, I had proceeded to tell her a story involving my early life as a circus performer.

I have had a wildly varied life, resulting, I am sure, from seldom having ever planned anything for longer than a fortnight. At various times, I have been a lawyer, a law school professor, a state legislator, an appellate judge, and best of all, President of the College of Charleston, the most elegant institution of higher learning since the 12th century. I have also been, incidentally, a soldier, a soybean farmer, and a circus performer. Of all the things I have done, my exploits under the Big Top, such as they were, most definitely provoke the most interest.

“What exactly did you do in the circus?” I am always asked, a little skeptically.

“Have you ever seen the flying trapeze act?” I answer ambiguously.

“Yes, of course,” now more than a little skeptically.

“Well, I didn’t do that. But I did everything else you ever saw anybody do in the circus. I walked the tight wire, clowned, juggled, swallowed swords, ate fire – and I handled the animals,” I say. “I can still do all those things,” I quickly add. Sometimes I demonstrate.

“What animals did you handle? Lions, tigers, elephants?” they ask.

“Well, no. Dogs.”

“Dogs? You handled dogs?”

“Dogs” I repeat somewhat sheepishly. “But, I did clean up after the elephants.”

The truth is, I was never a circus star. When I was 16 years old, I performed briefly in a traveling carnival named, whimsically, “The World of Mirth.” My daughter, however, now 38 years old and a lawyer herself, was a circus superstar. She performed in the center ring of Ringling Brothers, Barnum & Bailey when she was only 7 years old.

“What did she do?” I am asked.

“She performed as a midget,” I say quite truthfully. “She was the bride of Mishu, the smallest man in the world. She eventually outgrew the role.”

As Kurt Vonnegut would say:

And so forth.

Little did I suspect the circus would suddenly reenter my life in the midst of my campaign for the United States Senate.

Late in the Spring of 2002, on a Saturday night, I found myself, enveloped in dread, on my way to make the graduation speech at Colleton Preparatory Academy, a tiny high school named for the Lord Proprietor Sir John Colleton, in the County by the same name. Sharing the car with me was Rutledge DuRant, my intrepid driver, the omnipresent Zoe, and our surrogate children: a small grey cat named Maggie and a canary named Neil Diamond. (For fairly obvious reasons, they could not be left at home together.)

An unstated question hung in the air like a bad smell: Why on earth am I doing this? The graduates numbered fewer than 35, their parents and grandparents probably fewer than a hundred. Nobody will ever remember anything I say, no more than anybody ever remembers what any graduation speaker says. I’m running statewide, the election is in 6 months, I have 3.5 million people to reach, and I’m on my way to speak to 135 of them. Whatever possessed me to

agree to waste five hours – including travel time – doing this. The answer is simple: I will agree to do anything a year in advance. I had agreed to make the speech a year earlier, long before I knew I would be running for the Senate. Now, a year later, I was profoundly regretting my hasty commitment. I had no idea something momentous was about to happen, something which would later lead Eleanor Randolph, of all people, to bring millions of dollars into my campaign coffers.

An obviously much distraught woman rushed up to the car as we pulled in to the parking lot of the high school. “You’ve got to help us, Dr. Sanders,” she said, addressing me by my academic title from the time I had been the President of the College. “My son is graduating tonight. He has been accepted at the College of Charleston, and he told us today he is not going. You’ve got to get him to change his mind. Please don’t let him throw his life away.” I could tell by the way she spoke that she considered admission to the College among the highest honors in life, and to pass up that grand opportunity would be unthinkable.

She then proceeded to tell me a compelling story, fraught with the pathos that only intergenerational conflict can invoke. “It’s all our fault,” she began. “We never should have taken him to the circus.”

“He was just a little boy,” she continued, “not more than five or six years old, and he had never been out of Colleton County. We drove all the way to Columbia where the circus was being held in the USC Coliseum. The trapeze artist, the acrobats, the lion tamer, the bright

lights, the band, and most of all the clowns, captured his attention for more than three hours. All the way home he said when he grew up he wanted to be in the circus.”

“Naturally we thought he would get over the circus as he grew older, like a child who says he wants some day to be a policeman or a fireman. But he never did. When he was in elementary school he began to teach himself circus skills. He learned to juggle. By high school, he had a clown costume, and he was performing at birthday parties. He became quite good. He had been a painfully shy child, but he opened up behind the mask of a clown.”

“Then, earlier this year, he sent a videotape of himself doing his clown act to Ringling Brothers, Barnum & Bailey Circus. We thought nothing could possibly come of it, but last week Ringling Brothers sent him a contract to join the circus as a clown. Now he says he is not going to college. He’s going to join the circus. You’ve got to stop him.”

I instantly reverted from politician to my earlier role as an educator. I sprang into action with a renewed sense of purpose and sought out the child. I had my work cut out for me. I was responsible for the life of somebody else’s child, an obligation ordinarily assumed only by teachers and physicians.

I found him surrounded by his classmates, all of whom were absolutely gleeful just to be in his presence. He was small for his age. He had a goofy expression, but I was later told he was a brilliant student, with grades that put him at the top of his class. He had assumed the posture

and demeanor of, well, a clown. He was most definitely performing. He was wonderful. I thought how proud I would be if he were my own child. I hated to interrupt his act, but I had something quite serious to tell him. I called him aside and spoke solemnly.

“Son,” I said. “Let me give you some advice. I speak from vast experience. I have graduated from two great universities. I have been the president of a third great school, the College of Charleston, where you have been admitted. You stand at a great crossroad in your life. What you decide will determine your future. My advice is this: *Don’t let anybody talk you out of joining the circus.*”

“Ringling Brothers, Barnum & Bailey is harder to get into than the Harvard Law School,” I said. “The College of Charleston has existed for more than two centuries. It will be here waiting for you. With the circus on your resume, you can get in any school. You will be just what admission officers are looking for.”

His face lit up like a Christmas tree. The last time I saw him, he was doing a little clown-like duck-walk across the stage to receive his high school diploma. The audience roared with laughter and lustily applauded. I heard that fall his church had chartered a bus to travel to Columbia to see him perform in the USC Coliseum, of course, as a clown in the Ringling Brothers Circus. My heart was filled with joy, although by that time my campaign was on a treadmill to oblivion. I had surely lost the vote of his whole family, all their friends, neighbors, and casual acquaintances. But I remain convinced I gave him great advice. His mother had,

very understandably, mistaken me for a college president. She had no way of knowing I was first a circus performer.

What does all that have to do with Eleanor Randolph, editorial writer for *The New York Times*? Actually, the story turned out to have everything to do with her. She told me when we spoke years later she had been mightily impressed by the story of the boy who joined the circus and the advice I had given him. I barely remember telling her the story. But I will never forget what she wrote.

Eleanor Randolph's analysis of me and my campaign was published, oddly, as a bylined opinion piece on the editorial page of *The New York Times*. She began by noting my "broad range of experience and ideas, politics providing only part of [my] impressive resume." She went on to say I have "ultra-conservative fiscal credentials." (Perhaps a bit overstated, but who's complaining?) She proceeded to quote me on the subject of fiscal responsibility, using one of my best lines: "They used to call Democrats 'tax and spend liberals,' and now we've got 'borrow and spend Republicans.' Tax and spend, that's like England. The model for borrow and spend is Argentina." She described my oh-so-clever campaign card, which was in the format of a baseball card with my statistics on the back. ("Save it," I said when handing them out. "It's my rookie card, and you can sell it on eBay.") She wrote: "In South Carolina, voters have begun to notice the cards, laugh at his stories, listen to his thoughtful or untempered responses and send money."

She observed that “Republicans have become aware that the ex-judge, ex-legislator and former educator isn’t easily characterized as a liberal.” She pointed out that I am a member of both Sons of the Confederate Veterans and the NAACP. She wrote that I had earned fans of all political views across the state, and I had raised plenty of money while doing so. She said further, “Even more important, Mr. Sanders is a masterly raconteur not a homogenized politician who has simply memorized the campaign consultant’s cue cards.”

She concluded by contrasting me with my opposition:

“Mr. Sanders, a tall, silver-haired man with the look of the college president he was for a decade, has more of the traditional presence of a senator than the boyish-looking Graham. Mr. Graham will stand on his Washington experience and his Republican credentials, while Mr. Sanders presents his stature, his experience and his unpredictable wit.”⁵

Could I have asked for more? I particularly liked the part that makes me sound like Fritz Hollings (“tall, silver-haired”). The result was nothing short of spectacular. I was instantly redeemed – albeit temporarily – in the eyes of my campaign staff. Invoking the awesome force of the editorial page of *The New York Times*, they lost no time in blast-faxing the piece nationwide. (“Blast-faxing” is a term of art in modern campaigns.) Every Democrat in America with a history of contributing big bucks received a copy. The money rolled in like a spring tide on a full moon at Wadmalaw Island. As I later read Eleanor Randolph’s adoring words, I

reflected that perhaps I had been right about how she felt toward me. I suppose I'll never know.
I never saw her again.

C'est la vie.

Or so they say.

* * * * *

Joe Klein, author of *Anonymous* and *Primary Colors*, has the keenest insight into the mind of the politician since Theodore H. White. I first encountered him in person as the plane was boarding for a direct flight from New York's LaGuardia Airport to Charleston, South Carolina. I recognized him at once, and he recognized me or did a good job acting like he did. Naturally, I decided to show off.

"Do you know what Strom Thurmond would do if he were on this plane?" I asked. "Watch this," I said. I proceeded to walk up and down the aisle, handing out my campaign propaganda to the other passengers and otherwise shamelessly inflicting myself on them until the flight attendant finally shooed me to my seat, across from the famous author, Joe Klein. He eyed me curiously, as you might regard a trained bear who had just performed a more or less routine trick, one you had seen done many times before.

To my great delight, I learned he was on his way to South Carolina to write about my campaign. I told him a story. Because we had more than two hours in the air together, I made it a long story but one having only a small point. Again, he appeared only mildly interested. He took no notes. For months thereafter, Joe Klein was constantly in my shadow or I in his. The story he wrote about my campaign in *The New Yorker* would include everything I told him on the flight from New York to Charleston and much, much more.⁶ More importantly, the story would define my candidacy and, even more importantly, define me as a person. I cannot even begin to describe here my travels with Joe Klein and all that happened during the fateful journey. He merits a chapter all his own, and he shall receive one. You will have to read the book. (This is what is known in the world of cable television as a “teaser”: “Famous Reporter Stalks Senate Candidate. Film at 7.”)

* * * * *

As a committed Christian and a lifelong South Carolinian, I am only afraid of three things: God, the Devil, and Bob Jones University.⁷ When I got the call from *Meet the Press*, I thought about adding Tim Russert to that list. He is beyond dispute the best of the Sunday morning gasbags. (I should know, before I quit drinking, I was something of a Saturday night gasbag myself.) I discussed my apprehension with my new best friend Joe Klein.

“I’m going on *Meet the Press*,” I said, “and I have no idea how to handle the indomitable Mr. Russert.”

“Let’s get one thing straight,” Joe said. “You are not going to handle Tim Russert. He is going to handle you.”

“That’s precisely what I’m afraid of,” I said. “He finds something outrageous you said in the past, projects your very own words on the screen, and makes you explain yourself. As you well know, Mr. Klein, I have a long and sordid history of saying things that not only were pretty outrageous but unexplainable as well.”

“Like what?”

“You remember the time I was asked my position on gays in the Boy Scouts, and I said all I know about gays I learned in the Boy Scouts? Suppose he asks me to explain that one?”

Joe said nothing. He was laughing unhelpfully.

“I can’t very well tell the truth, which is that without the Boy Scouts, the whole concept of gays would just be a rumor. Except for the Boy Scouts, I would have no firsthand knowledge. I can’t say that, can I?”

Joe gave my last question the slip. Apparently, he had learned something from all the politicians he had interviewed.

“Don’t worry about Tim Russert,” he said. “He’s a regular fellow. His daddy works for the sanitation department in Buffalo, New York.” (This was before Tim Russert wrote his best-selling book about his father.) “Tim just bought his daddy a new car. He told him he could have any car he wanted, his choice, no strings attached. He expected him to pick out a Mercedes or a BMW. You know what he picked? A Crown Victoria. How about that? Of all the cars in the world, he wanted a Ford.”

I mentally filed that tidbit of information about Tim Russert, and then I flew to Washington for my appearance on *Meet the Press*.

The limousine NBC sent to pick me up didn’t make me feel like a VIP. I felt like I was 17 years old and on the way to my senior prom.

The limo pulled into the circular driveway in front of the NBC studios. The driver hopped out and opened the door for me.

A drop-dead beautiful woman – a future anchorperson I’m sure – met me and ushered me into a room having all the ambience of an upscale beauty parlor. Another gorgeous woman began applying pancake makeup. “Please don’t make me look like I’m dead,” I earnestly beseeched her. I was feeling a little dead. I had just seen the latest Zogby poll, showing me behind 47 to 35. Whereupon, the great Tim Russert lumbered in, smiled broadly, and introduced himself.

I was ready for him.

“I’m Tim Russert,” he said, as if I might mistake him for some intruder who had wandered in randomly off the street.

“How does your daddy like the Crown Victoria you gave him?” I asked, without bothering to tell him my name.

“How in the world did you know that?” he asked in a combination of bemusement and amazement.

“That’s what we call in the trade opposition research,” I said. “That’s not all I know.”

My appearance on *Meet the Press* was, by all accounts, a triumph.⁸ Tim Russert never brought up the Boy Scouts. He allowed me to pontificate, largely without challenge. He was as kind and gentle with me as, say, Eleanor Randolph.

I am by no means suggesting Tim Russert toned down the interview as a result of what I said to him when he introduced himself. Nobody intimidates Tim Russert. Am I suggesting candidates push a little without waiting until they are pushed? Certainly not. Why would anybody think that? Okay, maybe I am suggesting that. Politics is a crude and brutal business.

Showing a measure of toughness is much preferable to coming on like the church lady on *Saturday Night Live* or Mr. Rogers in his neighborhood.

I was immediately made aware of the awesome force of *Meet the Press*. After my appearance, I took a cab directly to Washington National Airport for my trip back to South Carolina. (The NBC limousine was now nowhere in sight.) As I walked briskly through the airport, three complete strangers came up to me, independently of each other, to say they had seen me that morning on *Meet the Press*.

* * * * *

Lesley Stahl, grand impresario of *60 Minutes*, and her many minions at CBS, discovered my campaign late. But, once they did, they covered me flat out. In dealing with them, I violated at least two rules of all campaigns. (Before I began my own campaign, I didn't even know the rules.)

The first rule I violated is that reporters are never allowed to attend fund raisers. (An unfortunate incident earlier in the campaign had demonstrated the wisdom of the rule.) Throwing caution to the wind, I invited the *60 Minutes* film crew to film a major fund raiser at the home of Ambassador Weston Adams. Ronald Reagan appointed him Ambassador to Malawi. He lives in a mansion at the top of Saluda Hill in Wales Garden. He is a lifelong Republican. He is my oldest friend. The event at his home had an unlikely billing:

“Republicans for Alex Sanders.” A surprisingly large crowd turned out. David Broder, Pulitzer Prize winning columnist for *The Washington Post* was in attendance. Frankly, my motivation in having the film crew present was twofold: to show off my elegant friends to *60 Minutes* and *60 Minutes* to my elegant friends. Fortunately, the filming turned out to be entirely uneventful.

The second rule also involves fund raising. My fund raising message was essentially the same as the carnivorous plant in the *Little Shop of Horrors*: feed me. (When I was bored, I often said literally that.) I allowed *60 Minutes* to film what is supposed to be the most private part of a campaign: the actual asking for money. I took the precaution, however, of eliminating any possibility that the film would ever become a part of the program. How did I do that? I made the *60 Minutes* film crew a part of their own show. Here was my strategy. They had told me whatever they filmed had to be entirely spontaneous and completely “honest.” So, when I called prospective donors, I added something to my spiel, just to make sure we weren’t proceeding under any false pretenses, and incidentally, to ensure that what they filmed would never be seen on television.

“Hello, this is Alex Sanders,” I began as usual. “I’m calling to ask you for money. I’m running for the U.S. Senate, and I need your help.

Before the prospective donor could recover, I departed from the script.

“Another thing,” I said. “Right here with me as I speak is *60 Minutes*. Do you believe that? You and I are talking on national TV. Please don’t embarrass us both by turning me down.

Predictably, none of that ever made the show.

My interview by Lesley Stahl came the day after the fund raiser. I have often wondered why in the world anybody would agree to an interview by *60 Minutes*. Yet I did. Almost everybody does. Not even the most resolute politician can resist the chance to be humiliated on national television. Quite mysteriously, logic flies out the window, and the siren call of *60 Minutes* almost always proves irresistible.

The program, *60 Minutes*, unlike *Meet the Press*, is edited before being shown. As I sat knee-to-knee with Lesley Stahl for hours on end while the cameras rolled, I had a recurring thought: This woman can take my own words and make me look any way she wants. After the filming was over and Lesley Stahl and I were saying our goodbyes, I seriously considered saying to her: “Ms. Stahl, meeting you has been among the highest honors of my life, certainly the apogee of my modest political career. Being interviewed by you was a singular privilege. I will never forget our time together. But I want you to know something, Lesley: If you make me look like an ignorant redneck, I’ll hunt you down like an animal.” Of course, I never said anything remotely like that to Lesley Stahl.

Despite my reservations, I answered all her questions. She got me to tell her many things I never planned to say. I told her why my father hated *60 Minutes*. (“Week after week, they burden you with all manner of injustices you can’t do a damn thing about.”) I told her Strom Thurmond’s secret for political longevity and how he had once succeeded in turning my own mother against me. I will include that story in the chapter on Strom Thurmond. (Another “teaser.”) I declined, however, the opportunity to criticize Strom Thurmond directly (although, God knows, I had criticized him plenty over the years). “I have to be very careful not to offend Senator Thurmond,” I said. “If I offended him, he might come back in six years and run against me.” Strom Thurmond was exactly a hundred years old. He would not live six more years. But I had no way of knowing that at the time.⁹

The force of *60 Minutes* was made known to me even more swiftly than *Meet the Press* had been. The show was broadcast on the Sunday before Election Day. By that time, we were raising money over the internet. (Somehow, Howard Dean got credit for inventing internet fund raising.) We could sit and watch the money coming in on a computer screen. During the very time my interview by Lesley Stahl was on television, donations began to spike from all over America, and I began to think I might win.

* * * * *

Local reporters were even more important to my campaign. I'm sure more people in South Carolina read the South Carolina newspapers and watch the local news than read *The New York Times* or *The New Yorker* or watch *Meet the Press* or *60 Minutes*.

The Charleston *Post and Courier* is my hometown newspaper. I never expected to receive the endorsement of the editors, and I didn't. Schuyler Kropf, their political reporter, had bent my every word out of shape from the beginning of the campaign. (If there is a Church of the Perpetually Annoying, Schuyler Kropf sits in the front row.) Bill Davis, a reporter for the *Charleston City Paper*, a competing weekly, says the editorial policy of the *Post and Courier* ranges from ultraconservative to reactionary. There have been four great political issues in my lifetime: integration, civil rights, Vietnam, and Watergate. Unless I am badly mistaken, the editors of the *Post and Courier* got all four wrong. I got all four right. There was no reason to believe they would defy the odds and get my candidacy for the Senate right.

Other newspapers in South Carolina were divided in their endorsements. The editors of the *Post and Courier* were different, however, in how they went about making their endorsement. The others reviewed our qualifications in some detail before endorsing one or the other of us. The *Post and Courier* editorial never even mentioned my name. The editors of the *Post and Courier* bestowed on me the ultimate insult: they ignored me.¹⁰

I received the endorsement of the editors of *The State*, South Carolina's largest newspaper. Their political reporter, Valerie Bauerlein wrote such wonderful stories about me I

came perilously close to having a similar reaction to her as I thought Eleanor Randolph had to me. I wrote her a note: “Dear Valerie,” I said. “I’m going to spend the rest of my life trying to be as good as the story you wrote about me.” She is an extraordinary reporter and a beautiful person in every way. (In case you are wondering, Zoe has long since decided to tolerate my fantasies, knowing full well nothing will ever come of them.)

Lee Bandy, former Washington bureau chief and now a columnist for *The State*, is the dean of the South Carolina political reporters. He often wrote favorably of my candidacy and is largely responsible for my achieving such legitimacy as I was able to develop.

John Monk, front-page columnist for *The State*, wrote so many favorable profiles of me that I have come to refer to him as my biographer. He is a gifted wordsmith and, like myself, an adroit prestidigitator. No South Carolina reporter writes with his clarity and insight.

Dan Hoover, political reporter for *The Greenville News*, is reputed to have strong Republican leanings, like his newspaper. But he was nothing but fair in covering my campaign. I found other South Carolina reporters equally fair.

Of course, talk radio stations – hosts, guests, and callers alike – were uniform in viciously attacking me. I expected no less, and I actually reveled in their animus. I have long referred to them, collectively, as “W-LOW-IQ.”

(I may very well expand on the list of local reporters in the book.)

* * * * *

Reporters: you can't live with them, and you can't kill them. I, for one, have always loved reporters, and they have almost always loved me back. Politicians who complain about press coverage are like people who talk to their houseplants: the response is exactly the same. (The basketball player, Charles Barkley, once complained that he was misquoted in his autobiography.)

What are we to make of reporters? A good deal of errant nonsense has been published over the years about reporters and the press. Edward Bulwer-Lytton said, famously, "The pen is mightier than the sword."¹¹ His often-quoted maxim simply does not hold up to common experience. (Does anybody think Tommy Franks could have driven the Taliban out of Afghanistan by writing them a strong letter?) Quite obviously, Edward Bulwer-Lytton was a penman, not a swordsman. Perhaps, he intended what he said as advice to physicians, meant to exalt the writing of a prescription in preference to performing surgery. I can't think of any other sensible explanation.

Thomas Jefferson said, even more famously, he would rather have a free press without a government than a government without a free press.¹² (If I had to choose between a government without a Fox network and a Fox network without a government, I might reach a different

conclusion.) His statement begs the question: What would anybody need with a free press without a government?

Other Founding Fathers were not nearly so enamored of the press. With the strong support of John Adams, the Federalist-controlled Congress passed a series of laws known collectively as the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798. On the surface, the laws were designed to control the activities of foreigners during a time of impending war.¹³ Beneath the surface, however, lurked another agenda. The Alien Acts were never enforced, but the Sedition Act was. A number of newspaper editors were convicted and imprisoned under the law for criticizing the government.

Speaking of a similar Act in effect during World War I, Woodrow Wilson said, “The Sedition Act cut perilously near the root of freedom of speech and the press.”¹⁴ He might have said, more accurately, the Sedition Act uprooted freedom of speech and the press.

Over the years, however, we have come to realize any nation that practices self-government requires an educated and enlightened electorate, and reporters are the principal source of the information the electorate requires for casting an informed vote. More recently, the internet has begun to provide some competition for traditional reporting, and today some people read newspapers and watch television with the same skepticism the Russians once read *Pravda*. But, make no mistake, reporters still preside supreme in the court of public opinion. Perception is reality. At the very least, perception is the glamorous competition with which often bland

reality must contend. Reporters are the principal architects of how we perceive things. That's why I follow the advice of Mark Twain and never argue with anyone who buys ink by the barrel.

What should we require of these very important people? We give lip service to the desire for unbiased reporters, very much the same as we say we want unbiased judges. We really don't. What we want is reporters who have biases with which we agree. We, ourselves, are biased. That is not to say we are morally defective. Bias is not necessarily a character flaw. To purge the mind of all biases is to confuse the concept of an open mind with an empty mind. Biases should be the starting point of rational inquiry. The goal for the reporter should be to arrive at biases that have been well formulated, tested, and corrected.¹⁵ Fairness should be the gold standard of reporting. Objective truth should be the goal. We have every right to expect that of reporters. With a handful of inconsequential exceptions, I found the reporters who covered my campaign worked hard to be both fair and truthful. They almost always succeeded – which was all I, or any other politician, have the right to expect.

I succeeded in my quest for “good press.” I have been asked often how I charmed the reporters. A great deal has been written about politicians – from John Kennedy to Bill Clinton – who have been able to charm reporters. I'm not sure what that means. Charm seems to me an ill-defined human characteristic. In my experience, reporters react most favorably to politicians who are completely candid with them. In other words, they favor politicians who tell them not just the truth but the whole truth. Unfortunately, the voters don't always react the same way. That was my problem. Of course, a sense of humor helps with both reporters and the electorate.

In my lifetime, there have been three much-beloved presidents: Roosevelt, Kennedy, and Reagan. They had in common an unfailing sense of humor.¹⁶ Wit cannot, however, take the place of candor, and the illusion of candor will not suffice. Nor will proclamations of candor. (Politicians should never begin an answer with, “To tell you the truth”) Another thing: many reporters resent politicians speaking “off the record.”¹⁷ They often consider that as an attempt to manipulate them. One last piece of advice for politicians in dealing with reporters: Return their phone calls.¹⁸

What should reporters think of politicians? They should appreciate the fact that politicians and reporters occupy the same fragile lifeboat.¹⁹ They should recognize that politicians and reporters have something in common: Both are members of a profession that is neither licensed by the state nor legally restrained by any meaningful ethical standards. They should realize that what they think of politicians is approximately the same thing politicians think of them. They should understand that reporters and politicians are brothers and sisters under the skin. Reporters depend on politicians, and politicians depend on reporters, and the democracy depends on both. Politicians and reporters function, like the Medusa and the snail, in an exquisitely symbiotic relationship, and on the health of that relationship hangs the future of the democracy.²⁰

And that’s the scary thing.

ENDNOTES

¹ Lindsay Graham (R-SC) was first elected to Congress in 1994 and served continuously until he was elected to the Senate in 2002. He achieved his greatest notoriety as an impeachment manager appointed by the House of Representatives to serve as a prosecutor in the proceedings to remove President Clinton from office.

² The OakRidge Boys are one of America's premier country music groups. George Bush I, in a desperate effort to dispel the image he was some kind of a Chablis-sipping, brie-eating high-church Episcopalian, said his favorite food was pork skins and his favorite music group was the OakRidge Boys.

³ Shelly, Percy Bysshe. 1824. "The Triumph of Life." *Posthumous Poems*. London: Wrapt.

⁴ Much of the misunderstanding abroad in the world can be attributed to literal thinking. For example, the resolute literal thinker would be obliged to conclude that the New York Yankees have no players from the South, and the Cincinnati Reds adhere to the teachings of Karl Marx.

⁵ Randolph, Eleanor. 2002. "How to Succeed an Eighth-Term Legend in South Carolina." *The New York Times*, June 3, 2002, p.14.

⁶ Klein, Joe. 2002. “After Strom; Can a cracker-barrel fabulist capture South Carolina’s Senate seat?” *The New Yorker*, May 13, 2002, p.38.

⁷ Why am I afraid of Bob Jones University? Consider the recent letter of Bob Jones, III, President of the fundamentalist college of the same name, wrote President Bush following his re-election. “In your re-election, God has graciously granted America – though she does not deserve it – a reprieve from the agenda of paganism,” he wrote. “Put your agenda on the front burner and let it boil. You owe the liberals nothing. They despise you because they despise your Christ.” See Dowd, Maureen. 2004. “Slapping the Other Cheek.” *The New York Times*, Sept. 14, 2004, p.11 (quoting the letter).

⁸ *Meet the Press*. Debate between Lindsay Graham and Alex Sanders moderated by Tim Russert, Oct. 13, 2002.

⁹ *60 Minutes*. Interview between Lesley Stahl and Alex Sanders, November 3, 2002.

¹⁰ After the campaign was over, the South Carolina Bar Foundation awarded me the Bar’s highest honor, the DuRant Award. The award is given for public service. The story in the *Post and Courier* about my receiving the award said only that I had been a member of a law firm that no longer existed and was the losing candidate for the United States Senate in 2002. Thoughtful readers surely wondered why an award would be given for such minimum accomplishments. I am beginning to wonder whether the *Post and Courier* has something personal against me. After

the book is published, I doubt I will have to wonder any longer. Am I engaged here in a little “getting even”? Sure I am.

¹¹ Bulwer-Lytton, Edward George Earle. *Richelieu*. Act II. Sc. II.

¹² White, David. 2000. *The Cult of Incredibility*. The Nieman Foundation for Journalism, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

¹³ Ellis, Joseph J. “Intimate Enemies.” *American Heritage* 56 (2000: 80-89).

¹⁴ See Basgen, Brian. 1967. “Letter to Morris Hilquit.” *Helen Keller: Her Socialist Years*. New York: International Publishers (quoting Helen Keller quoting Woodrow Wilson).

¹⁵ The analysis of the nature of bias is from Barnhart, Joe E. and Steven Winzenburg. 1988. *Jim & Tammy: The Story of Charismatic Intrigue Inside PTL*. Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books.

¹⁶ See Simpson, Alan K. 1997. *Right in the Old Gazoo: What I’ve Observed in a Lifetime of Scrapping with the American Press*. New York: William Morrow (writing humorously about his relationship with reporters).

¹⁷ Politicians sometimes have a subversive purpose when they speak “off the record.” The politician is trying to get the reporter to say something the politician does not want to say himself or herself. In theory, such comments don’t count. But that is often not true in practice. I am

reminded of the story of a duel which was about to take place in a saloon out West. One of the antagonists was an unimposing little man, thin as a rail – but a professional gunfighter. The other was a big, bellicose fellow who tipped the scales at 300 pounds. “This ain't fair,” said the big man, backing off. “He's shooting at a larger target.” The little man quickly moved to resolve the matter. Turning to the saloon keeper, he said, “Chalk out a man of my size on him. Anything of mine that hits outside the line don't count.” P. Trachtman, *The Gunfighters* (1974).

¹⁸ There is really no way I, or anyone, can teach politicians how to charm reporters. A sports analogy explains why I can't: You can learn how basketball is played by reading a book about basketball, but you can't learn to play basketball by reading a book. I understand politicians and politics as well as Newton understood gravity: He knew how gravity behaves, but he did not know how gravity works; I know how politicians behave, but I have no idea how politics works.

¹⁹ Discussion papers by two previous Shorenstein Fellows have addressed the practice of reporters becoming a part of government and then returning to journalism. They have reached somewhat different conclusions. See McEnteer, James. May 1991. *Changing Lanes on the Inside Track: The Career Struggle Between Journalism, Politics and Government*. Discussion paper D-8, Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. (“Reporters who work in politics or government and then come back to journalism return with a strong sense of purpose and a greater ability to distinguish the possible from the ideal.”); cf. Wolfson, Lewis W. June 1991.

Through the Revolving Door: Blurring the Line Between the Press and Government. Research paper R-4, Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. (“Every able journalist who thinks of going into government inevitably erodes the unique role of the press.”).

²⁰ One of the strangest phenomena in nature is the relationship between a jellyfish called a medusa and a snail-like sea slug in the waters off Naples, Italy. When the snail is small, the medusa swallows it, but the snail is protected by its shell and cannot be digested. The snail then fastens itself to the inside of the medusa and slowly begins to consume it from the inside out. Eventually, the snail consumes the entire medusa. Thomas, Lewis. 1979. *The Medusa and the Snail: More Notes of a Biology Watcher*. New York: Viking Press. The story of the medusa and the snail is a metaphor for the interconnectiveness of living organisms with each other. I leave to others the determination of who is the medusa and who is the snail in the relationship between the reporter and the politician.