

Episodes, Incidents, and Eruptions

Nightly Network TV Coverage of Candidates '88

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Walter Lippmann wrote in his classic analysis, *Public Opinion* (1922: 364), "The press is no substitute for institutions." Instead, "it is like the beam of a searchlight that moves restlessly about, bringing one episode and then another out of darkness into vision." Lippmann observed, "Men cannot do the work of the world by this light alone." They cannot "govern society by episodes, incidents, and eruptions." He concluded, "It is only when they work by a steady light of their own, that the press, when it is turned upon them, reveals a situation intelligible enough for a popular decision." By "the press" Lippmann, of course, meant newspapers. But his appraisal is accurate even in an age when the glow of the TV set is the searchlight beam for many seeking clarification of public affairs.

This article examines the searchlight provided by TV news on the presidential candidates of 1988. Was the light steady, revealing a "situation intelligible for a popular decision," or was it a restless beam selectively focusing upon "episodes, incidents, and eruptions" limiting the capacities for popular governance?

Contemporary presidential campaigns are continuous, unending affairs. Even before Election Day 1988, Jesse Jackson announced that if Michael Dukakis lost on November 8, Jackson would begin his 1992 presidential bid the following day. Continuous or not, it is necessary to join other observers (Joslyn, 1984; Kessel, 1988; Trent and Friedenber, 1983) and draw arbitrary lines around the phases of the presidential campaign to understand TV news coverage of them. Adapting conventional distinctions, we divide the 1988 campaign into the early, pre-delegate-selection phase; the delegate-selection phase (with initial, crucial, and concluding contests); the party convention period; and the general election phase. The purpose is to describe how nightly network

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TV news—ABC, CBS, and NBC—collectively and individually served as the restless searchlight, sometimes bringing candidates and episodes out of darkness and into vision and, at other times, leaving them obscured in murky gloom.

The discussion that follows derives from a monitoring and content analysis of nightly network TV news coverage from New Year's Day through Election Eve weekend, 1988. The focus of that analysis was the varying patterns in both amounts of coverage and themes present in it. Unless otherwise specified, findings reported are from that analysis. Two independent studies supplement this analysis: one by the Center for Media and Public Affairs (see *Media Monitor*, 1988a, 1988b, 1988c, 1988d; Shaw, 1988; Lichter and Lichter, 1988a, 1988b); and one by the Media Research Center (*Media Watch*, 1988).

EARLY SIXES AND SEVENS IN CAMPAIGN '88

In the early campaign period of 1987 the three nightly TV network newscasts devoted a little less than 11.5 hours of airtime to coverage (*Media Monitor*, 1988). NBC led with over 4 hours, CBS had slightly less, and ABC fell short of 3.5 hours. What story did they tell of the early campaign, and who profited?

Recall that the Republican Six Pack had already formed: George Bush, Bob Dole, Pierre DuPont, Al Haig, Jack Kemp, and Pat Robertson. But the network searchlight knew only where George was. The vice president generated as many network reports as all of his five GOP rivals combined, and three times as many as either Dole or Robertson. Bush, however, had to seek comfort from the Babe Ruth axiom "I don't care what they say about me, so long as they spell my name right." Nightly newscasts spelled his name correctly, but in largely negative script, indeed, the most negative in the GOP field (*Media Monitor*, 1988a). Dole and Kemp, with far less coverage, fared better in 1987 network evaluations.

The GOP negative Bush story in the early campaign was but a blip on the screen when contrasted with the saga of Gary Hart and the Democratic field. Democrats dominated 1987 coverage by about two to one. At first it was a field of eight: Bruce Babbitt, Joe Biden, Mike Dukakis, Richard Gephardt, Al Gore, Gary Hart, Jesse Jackson, and Paul Simon. Hart withdrew, leaving NBC's John Chancellor to observe on June 25, "The seven Democrats now running have been called the

seven dwarfs. . . . But Jackson's numbers make him the strongest dwarf." Then, Biden withdrew; later Hart returned, yielding a "not so magnificent seven." Of the seven, Hart far outdistanced his rivals in TV coverage, generating four times more stories than Jackson, his closest rival as TV celebrity. Prior to May 1987 Hart's coverage was plentiful and neutral. Coverage then became melodramatic, a soap opera starring Gary Hart. Whereas a single TV story addressed Hart's character prior to May, after disclosures regarding Donna Rice a single week produced thirty-one stories assessing Hart's character in negative ways. Hart's subsequent withdrawal, and reentry, did nothing to improve the situation. He continued to receive negative coverage and accumulated almost as many critical evaluations throughout the remainder of 1987 as he had during the spotlighted Rice affair (*Media Monitor*, 1988a).

EPISODES AND INCIDENTS IN NOMINATION COVERAGE

Thus entering the 1988 campaign year, two negative scenarios dominated TV coverage—one Bush and one Hart. Over the course of the weeks before the national party conventions, the three nightly newscasts devoted more than twenty hours to Campaign '88, divided between Democrats and Republicans at a 53-47 ratio. In slightly less than 1500 reports (Shaw, 1988) averaging about a minute and forty-five seconds in length, Americans unwilling or unable to search elsewhere would learn from TV news about the future Leader of the Free World.

THE INITIAL CONTESTS: NEW YEAR'S TO CAUCUS DAY IN IOWA

Prior to the Iowa caucuses the networks' 1988 spotlight in the GOP contest was on George Bush. Bush's hour and a half total coverage was almost three times that of rival Bob Dole, more than five times that of Robertson, and nine times that of Kemp. In fact, Kemp, DuPont, and Haig were virtually invisible candidates, their campaigns largely undetected by TV's searchlight. Before the Iowa vote DuPont received a paltry 3.5 minutes of coverage, Haig a mere 6. References to Bush in evening newscasts were 61 to 39 percent negative over positive. What happened to Gary Hart in 1987 happened to Bush in 1988. Hart faced questions about "Monkey Business," Bush about Iran-Contra; Hart had Donna Rice, Bush Manuel Noriega.

The negatives were not evenly distributed across all networks. Well before the Bush-Rather confrontation on the *CBS Evening News* January 26, CBS led in critiquing Bush. As early as the second week of Campaign '88 Rather's spotlight was on what for Bush was clearly a black hole. After Bush survived a Kemp-Robertson coalition to win 57 percent of the Michigan caucus vote, both ABC and NBC credited Bush with "victory." CBS, however, which a week earlier had predicted—in Rather's words—"double trouble and a double bad day" for Bush, dismissed Bush's Michigan performance as a narrow escape of "the big wipeout that many had predicted"; there was still "double front-burner heat on George Bush," said Rather. And, whereas ABC's Peter Jennings opined that Robert Dole might prove the loser—referring to Dole as "Bob the Slasher"—the CBS eye remained on Bush: almost two-thirds of CBS coverage was confined to Bush. CBS kept the emphasis on Bush for Iran-Contra, termed his candidacy almost "desperate and haunted," and assessed editorial opinion as applying "a new round of heat" on Bush. The other GOP candidates—to the degree that they were covered at all in nightly newscasts—came in for both praise and criticism. But Bush was the only one to approach February 8 with an overall negative assessment. Compared with the 61 percent negative comments about Bush, 53 percent were positive about Dole, and 82 percent were positive about Robertson (*Media Monitor*, 1988b), the only other Republican candidacies covered extensively before Iowa caucusing.

Coverage of the Democratic Seven was no more equally distributed than of the GOP Six in the run up to Iowa. Al Gore's total coverage of three minutes made him the invisible man. Babbitt, Dukakis, Jackson, and Simon fared slightly better. Prior to Iowa the network searchlight focused primarily on Gary Hart, then Richard Gephardt. Hart received his last half-hour of fame. It was the fame of a fallen celebrity; 62 percent of assessments of Hart were negative (*Media Monitor*, 1988b). It ended with an NBC tableau featuring Hart wandering alone through a shopping mall in search of hands to shake in the closing days of the Iowa campaign, a tableau that also pictured Hart in a similar mall three weeks earlier surrounded by fans, admirers, and the curious. The juxtaposition said it all.

The other pre-Iowa front-runner in TV coverage, Richard Gephardt, fared better; network evaluations were equally balanced between positive and negative (*Media Monitor*, 1988b). In the early going CBS labeled Gephardt's campaign "dying," reborn only with \$300,000 in TV ads injected during the holiday season when his rivals took time off the

air. A week later all three networks discovered that polls showed Gephardt alive and well. ABC's Peter Jennings saw Gephardt "beginning to get some traction." Dan Rather spoke of "Big Mo" for Gephardt saying he "leads in the polls." NBC detected a bare Gephardt lead. Tom Brokaw reminded viewers that Gephardt is "at the bottom of another list"—attendance at congressional roll calls—but soon relented, speaking of Gephardt as "looking like a front-runner."

THE INITIAL CONTESTS: IOWA TO NEW HAMPSHIRE

History records that February 8 was good to Bob Dole and to Dick Gephardt. It will also record that there the shouting stopped for both. Dole's victory in Iowa was episodic; it earned him no windfall in TV coverage. During the week before New Hampshire, Dole received only 11 minutes of network nightly news coverage—4 less than Robertson, 17 less than Bush. Largely ignoring Dole, CBS kept after Bush: Dan Rather declared Bush "desperate" after his "meltdown in Iowa," his lead over Dole "dropping like a rock in the Granite state." Interviewing Al Haig after his withdrawal, Rather elicited a view that Dole was "head and shoulders above George Bush"; a CBS correspondent judged that the vice president was being forced to campaign "like the rest of them—like a candidate." Rival networks took a softer line: in an interview with Bush NBC's Tom Brokaw permitted the vice president to explain his view of Iran-Contra. ABC's Peter Jennings was nonjudgmental, saying of Bush driving an eighteen-wheeler, "He changed his campaign tactics today to emphasize—*emphasize*—the common touch. Yes, that really is George Bush hauling lumber and mingling with truck drivers." In spite of his Iowa setback, Bush's network assessments, once negative, became briefly positive before New Hampshire (*Media Monitor*, 1988b).

NBC cast a critical light on Robertson's Iowa boost. A Brokaw-Robertson interview led to an irritated exchange, and a Chris Wallace report hit Robertson's background as a "healer" and his "controversial" statements. CBS and ABC gave slightly higher marks to Robertson's rise from Iowa, but said the success was Iowa-bound rather than a portent of things to come. As far as DuPont, Kemp, and Haig were concerned, their candidacies remained in the murky darkness. In fact, Al Haig by withdrawing garnered more network airtime than he had throughout all of Campaign '88.

Dick Gephardt's Iowa victory, too, was episodic, earning no nightly news bonus. During the week before New Hampshire, Mike Dukakis

received more coverage than Gephardt. Together Dukakis and Gephardt had more news time in the week after Iowa than did the rest of the Democratic field combined. However, contrasted with both coverage time and assessments of contenders in the GOP field, network evaluations of the Democrats were markedly negligible and negative. Following Iowa, coverage time favored the GOP two to one, and whereas the majority of comments made about Republicans were favorable, about Democrats they were negative (*Media Monitor*, 1988b).

THE CRUCIAL CONTESTS: NEW HAMPSHIRE TO SUPER TUESDAY

Following New Hampshire it was not George Bush's campaign that sank like a rock in the Granite state but Bob Dole's. In the three-week period leading to Super Tuesday, Dole had only 15 minutes of accumulated coverage; 44 percent of network comments about his candidacy were negative (*Media Monitor*, 1988c). NBC treated Dole as CBS did Bush. John Chancellor found Dole's demand that Bush "stop lying about my record" a "stunning example of Bob Dole's greatest weakness, that he has a mean streak." Arguing that "appearances are more important than facts in the politics of presidential primaries," Chancellor singled out Dole's bad temper and his reputation as the "Ay-a-Dole-ah" as having "hurt him badly." Dole did better on ABC, but not much. That network judged Dole "brilliant" but "inscrutable" and struggling for "control of himself."

George Bush did badly in Iowa and received a media bonus; he did well in New Hampshire and found TV's dark side. His run up to Super Tuesday won him a half-hour of network time in three weeks, short of Pat Robertson's 50 minutes of coverage. Robertson received after New Hampshire more coverage in a three-week period than he had accumulated all year. However, 67 percent of all comments were negative (*Media Monitor*, 1988c). As after Iowa, NBC led the criticism. In virtually a-story-a-day, NBC coverage zeroed in on Robertson's denial of being a televangelist, his attack on George Bush's "dirty tricks" in linking Robertson to Jimmy Swaggart, and Robertson's law suit against Pete McClosky. ABC labeled Robertson "a little bit of a wacko in some areas."

In the countdown to Super Tuesday for Democrats, the networks continued to spotlight Dukakis and Gephardt. But they also illuminated for the first time the candidacies of Al Gore and Jesse Jackson. Both

Gore and Jackson received twice as much airtime in the three weeks after New Hampshire as they had in the prior two months. Yet before Super Tuesday the GOP race was still the principal one for the networks. All Republicans received over one hour and forty-five minutes of coverage; all Democrats received a little more than an hour.

If Gore and Jackson erupted to receive increased pre-Super Tuesday coverage, was the increase positive or negative? For Gore, network comments were evenly balanced (*Media Monitor*, 1988c). Peter Jennings used puns to imply a negative campaign: Democrats were learning “what it is like to be Gored,” and ABC reported on Gore’s “cut and slash attack.” Three-fourths of the comments about Jackson were positive; ABC reported minuses about Jackson’s candidacy, questioning his claim of close ties to Martin Luther King, Jr., and details of Operation PUSH; NBC was more upbeat and reported pluses; CBS offered a mixed picture from polls regarding Jackson’s chances. Among the other candidacies, ABC raised a charisma question about Dukakis: “honest and intelligent, but uninspiring, critics say.” Dick Gephardt’s candidacy received darkened network coverage; 60 percent of evaluations were negative—principally by ABC and NBC. NBC questioned Gephardt’s populist leanings, reported his financial support from business, and suggested Gephardt was an opportunist. The populist strategy, the network concluded, is just a strategy. ABC noted Gephardt’s flip-flop on issues: “No question Dick Gephardt can lead,” said the correspondent. “The question is, ‘Which way?’”

Following Super Tuesday the GOP race all but ended. All the invisibles dropped out; visible Bob Dole did so soon, and visible Pat Robertson retreated into relative darkness. At the time of individual exits from the race, none of the invisibles had amassed anywhere near the proportion of coverage they would have been expected to receive if the networks had treated the Six Pack with an even hand. The mediated Republican campaign had focused on Bush as dogged by Dole and Robertson. All other candidates need not have applied.

THE CONCLUDING CONTESTS: SUPER TUESDAY TO CALIFORNIA

Bush had no cakewalk after Super Tuesday. When former national security adviser Robert McFarlane pleaded guilty to misdemeanors connected with Iran-Contra in late March—before Dole’s withdrawal—CBS returned to the major theme of its GOP coverage. Said Dan Rather, “The political resurfacing of questions about what George Bush

did or didn't do and did and didn't say during the secret sending of U.S. arms to Iran were incorporated into a backdrop today for Bob Dole's campaign." NBC, however, took a different tact, noting that Bush could now "deal with the lurking remnants of the Iran-Contra affair without being sniped at by other Republicans." ABC ignored any Bush-McFarlane connections. And there were other matters that also kept Bush criticism alive on the networks long after the Republican contest was over. ABC's Sam Donaldson questioned in May why President Reagan would have "none of" an early endorsement of Bush; when endorsement did come Dan Rather called it "lukewarm," John Chancellor called it "ho-hum," and ABC said Bush aides tried to "conceal their disappointment." In mid-June networks returned to the Noriega connection, opining as well that Bush suffered from a serious gender gap and even that the prolonged drought would spell the end for Bush. (Having failed to establish a separate identity from Reagan, Bush would take the farmers' wrath in November.)

Democrat Al Gore did well on Super Tuesday. But like Dole and Gephardt after Iowa, Bush after New Hampshire, Gore reaped no bonus in media coverage. What Gore did receive from electoral success was virtually identical, critical reports on CBS and ABC. Both networks pointed to Gore's mimicking of the "fundamental change" and "politics of the future" messages of Gephardt and Hart. That judgment reached, the networks largely ignored Gore for a month until his attack on Dukakis as being "absurdly timid" for failing to criticize Jesse Jackson openly. "We're not choosing a preacher, we're choosing a president," said Gore. The attack got incidental attention from the networks. CBS's Leslie Stahl used the opportunity to ask whether criticism of Jackson was "racist." Interviews with Representatives Ron Dellums and Charles Rangel produced criticism of Gore. The Tennessee senator's other brief episode of renewed TV coverage came with New York Mayor Ed Koch's endorsement: CBS found Gore "groping for issues" and "perceived as a spoiler"; ABC likened Gore to a panderer; NBC criticized Gore for not having established a campaign identity, since "no campaign theme seems to stick convincingly." The New York primary came and went and Gore went with it, having accumulated less than an hour's coverage in Campaign '88, far less than Dick Gephardt, who had dropped out weeks earlier.

From Super Tuesday through the California primary TV news emphasized the Dukakis-Jackson contest. Dukakis did slightly better in hours and minutes of coverage (2:58 to 2:53); Jackson got the better

press. Neither candidate, however, faced overly critical coverage. By late March Dukakis won the network label of front-runner. For a month the only negative depicting his candidacy was another label, namely, "dull." Then, in early May, CBS listed Dukakis's perceived shortcomings in foreign policy. It constituted, said the report, the candidate's "Achilles' heel, the perception that on foreign affairs he's not just inexperienced, he's over his head." Another month passed, and a third negative joined dull and inexperienced: namely, the "Massachusetts Miracle" was no miracle; the curtain pulled aside revealed the Duke no Wizard. "The statehouse dome is golden but Massachusetts is in the red," said NBC. CBS found the Dukakis campaign going through "the dog days of summer." ABC's Peter Jennings noted that Dukakis faced "the problem of selling yourself very hard on one particular issue."

The Duke of Dull thus became Johnny One Note. In contrast came the "politics of passion" and the "campaign of hope" as the networks awakened to the Jackson presence. Through the first twelve weeks of Campaign '88 Jackson had received barely an hour of total coverage on the networks. Over a comparable period in 1984 Jackson had done better by 30 minutes. It took the Michigan caucus vote to move the network searchlight in Jackson's direction. First came surprise: "Jackson's surge is a mind-blower," reported Dan Rather. Next came quandary: Jackson "might wind up as the Democratic nominee," reported ABC. Then fear: "Jackson's surge scares some party pros," reported CBS. Threat followed: Jackson is attracting not only blacks but whites, reported ABC, and "the hierarchy sees him as a threat to the party's future." Then came the closing primaries. No longer was the Jackson story a presidential story. Now it was a vice-presidential story: to Jackson's followers, reported CBS twenty-five weeks into Campaign '88, "the vice presidency is becoming a symbol of acceptance or rejection."

As with the GOP contests, throughout the whole of Campaign '88 prior to the Democratic convention nightly network news coverage provided a picture of many candidates being called, few chosen. When the dust had cleared Bruce Babbitt had 18 minutes in the TV limelight, Paul Simon 36, Al Gore less than an hour. In all that coverage the networks made more than one thousand evaluative comments about the Democratic candidates. Although overall 58 percent of comments about Democratic candidates were positive, there was considerable variation from candidate to candidate. Most favorable coverage went to Jackson; 74 percent of comments were positive. The most negative went

to Hart; only 38 percent of comments were positive (Shaw, 1988). Unlike rain, positive comments did not fall any more evenly on the field than coverage time.

THE CONVENTION CELEBRATION

The national party conventions celebrate the two political parties—and major news organizations as well, especially TV news. Prior to the television era national conventions of the Republican and Democratic parties had clear-cut purposes: nominating candidates for national office, drafting party platforms, mobilizing support for party candidates at all levels, and acting as governing assemblies for each party. That changed after 1952. That year both parties selected Chicago for convention sites. One reason was tangible: the air-conditioning capacity of the amphitheater was the equivalent of a 165-pound block of ice per delegate, a boon in the summer heat and humidity. A more important reason foreshadowed things to come. Chicago was a strategic TV center, a factor figuring prominently in the calculations of planners of what became the first truly national video conventions.

As the political parties evolved after 1952, the purposes once served by party conventions yielded to those of the teleconventions. Statewide caucuses and primaries are now the focal point of the nominating process; party platforms are debated and compromises struck in advance of the convention; candidates and their media consultants mobilize their own bases of electoral and financial support—often independently of party efforts; and assembled delegates, acting as extras in the TV extravaganza, merely ratify the governing decisions of party leaders. Today's conventions legitimize the candidacies of nominees hitherto outside the established party order, such as Jimmy Carter in 1976; project an illusion of national unity among diverse, conflicting interests; and provide ritualistic expression of compromise and accommodation. In keeping with the shifting role of party conventions the amount of TV time devoted to reporting them has steadily declined. Whereas in 1968 the networks aired over seventy-three hours of convention coverage, in 1988 they spent only a third of that time. Moreover, viewers averaged watching over seventeen hours of coverage in 1968; that fell to a third of that total in 1988.

The tale of how the three major networks covered the July Democratic convention from Atlanta's Omni and the August Republican

conclave from the New Orleans Superdome is one unto itself. Let it suffice to say that each party entered its convention with detailed plans for projecting a desired image over the four-day media event, more detailed and painstakingly prepared than ever before. The Democrats sought a perception of unity—behind its nominee, among its factions, among its supporters. That is why the Omni was selected; that is why arrangements favored broadcast, not print, media. The Republicans sought an image of openness and inclusion, an image promoted by the vastness of the Superdome and media arrangements. Democrats in the Omni played arena football, the GOP in the Superdome a ground game honoring the Gipper.

The TV networks made clear at the outset that they would not be bound to show simply what the parties desired. And they did not. Or did they? The CBS story turned on the anchor: punditry between Dan Rather and Walter Cronkite, Rather and Eric Severeid, Rather and Bruce Morton, Rather and floor correspondents, Rather and interviewed guests. NBC opted for its “Convention Without Walls,” breaking away from the convention site to report prepackaged featurettes, then bringing citizens outside the convention into contact with delegates via telecommunications. ABC’s coverage promoted ABC—anchors, floor correspondents, pundits, and sages. How well did these network stories reflect the key messages offered by each of the two parties?

Democrats came closer to accomplishing what they sought than did Republicans. Absent from convention coverage were interviews with special interest groups supporting the Democrats—labor leaders, NEA members, ethnic groups, and the like. Instead TV interviews reinforced the unity theme, praised Michael Dukakis, and lauded his managerial capacities in working out compromises with the Jackson forces. The label “progressive” replaced “liberal.” The networks described Dukakis as liberal only a dozen times—ABC only once, NBC three times (*Media Watch*, 1988). Each night’s convention theme—keynote one evening, nostalgia and Jackson night another, roll call the third, and Dukakis’s acceptance—unfolded as planned. Unplanned by convention orchestrators was the “Three Amigos” emphasis of the networks, that is, a focus on Dukakis, Jackson, and Bentsen. Of the three Jackson stood tallest, receiving more coverage than either Dukakis or Bentsen.

The GOP was another story. The President’s Night on Monday went well, unedited and unscathed on the networks, although none of the three networks showed the video presentation cheering the Reagan

presidency in its entirety. But Tuesday's planned attack on the Dukakis Democrats and Wednesday's nomination night were both upstaged by the Quayle Hunt. "Bush finds himself under a cloud," said Dan Rather, "a cloud of controversy" that "has turned this convention upside down." Almost half the questions asked by TV correspondents in interviews during the GOP convention concerned Quayle. One-half of all CBS evaluations of Quayle were negative, 40 percent were so for NBC; only 10 percent of ABC judgments of the nominee were unfavorable (Lichter and Lichter, 1988a). Finally, whereas Democratic efforts to soften the liberal image succeeded, Republican efforts to tailor the GOP stereotype did not. Network labeling of the Democratic party at its convention was liberal over moderate by a 52-48 ratio; network labeling of Republicans was conservative over moderate by an 85-15 ratio (*Media Watch*, 1988).

The TV networks gave generally high marks to both presidential candidates for their acceptance speeches, having billed both in advance as the "most crucial speech of his political career." Sam Donaldson judged the Dukakis address to be "a speech of unity," which must have brought a smile to convention managers. A month later he said that Bush gave "a much better speech than Dukakis's." Tom Brokaw said Bush "accomplished all that he wanted to," and John Chancellor found the Bush address "a splendid piece of work." What Dukakis did for unity, Bush did for family. Both candidates went on to enjoy post-convention improvement in the polls, and the networks expressed astonishment.

THE GENERAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN

In approximately six hours of coverage through the first five weeks of the two-party campaign, the searchlight was on the GOP 60 percent of the time. The Quayle story overwhelmed coverage the first two weeks of the campaign. One-fourth of all nightly network coverage time concerned Quayle—his military service, his privileged status, his relationship with lobbyist Paula Parkinson. So dominant was the network version of the Quayle story for the first two weeks that it did three things, none advantaging the Democrats. For one, it eclipsed the campaign efforts of the Democratic ticket. Total network time devoted to Republicans over Democrats was at a two to one ratio. Second, it kept the basic Dukakis-Bentsen line on Quayle—criticism of Quayle's limited experience—in

the background. Third, and not so incidentally, the Quayle emphasis, although presumably a negative for the GOP, permitted George Bush to project a tough attitude by standing by his vice-presidential nominee.

As the Quayle eruption calmed, campaign coverage progressed to bloopers and bleepers. How important such matters are depends, in part, on what network one views. To CBS they were important. CBS led its newscast with the story of Bush's blooper over Pearl Harbor Day; moreover, correspondent Bob Schieffer, after nominating Bush for the "blooper hall of fame," stated that Bush went on for more than a minute before recognizing his error. Tom Brokaw at NBC saw it differently. The story appeared in the middle of the newscast, and Brokaw said Bush corrected his mistake "a few seconds later." ABC's Peter Jennings was more charitable. He said, "The man has one speech after another, and I can understand him making a mistake once in awhile."

Once Quayle and gaffes were put aside in early October, the major networks devoted their remaining ten hours of coverage of Campaign '88 to incidents and episodes, providing ample evidence of the "restless" press, but little of "a steady light." The litany is now familiar and easily recalled: the Pledge of Allegiance, Dukakis's use, or lack of use, of Jesse Jackson, the Noriega connection, whether Quayle should be called by Dan Rather "Dan Quayle" or "J. Danforth Quayle," negative advertising stimulating and countering negative advertising, winners and losers of candidate debates, the Bush Bandwagon, the Dukakis Revival, media critiques of media coverage, and over-orchestration of media events via photo ops, sound bites, delayed responses to reporters' queries, and omnipresent "spin doctors."

Distribution of airtime between the two major party tickets, which in the first six weeks of coverage was 60 percent GOP because of the Quayle story, balanced out by Election Eve, with a late focus on the alleged renewal of the Dukakis campaign. The GOP began the general election phase with the more positive coverage. The Center for Media and Public Affairs, which found that in the primary period Dukakis had received a better press than Bush (55 percent to 50 percent positive), found that in the first two weeks following the GOP convention Bush led Dukakis in positive coverage 44 percent to 26 percent, coinciding with Bush's movement ahead of Dukakis in opinion polls. However, over the long haul assessments evened out: Bush's coverage prior to the second debate was 30 percent positive, Dukakis's 31 percent, indicating negative evaluations of both by a two to one margin (*Media Monitor*, 1988d).

THE LIGHT THAT FAILED

What lessons can be drawn from this brief recapitulation of nightly network TV news coverage of Candidates '88? Certainly the restless searchlight of which Lippmann wrote comes to rest frequently. When it does it remains on some candidates far more than on others. To the degree that free publicity is important, TV news clearly gave more coverage to some contenders than others throughout 1988. Further, the TV news searchlight is not impartial when it does come to rest: Some candidates benefit from network labeling; others suffer. Nor are the TV networks equally judgmental or nonjudgmental: CBS critiqued Bush, NBC Robertson, and ABC was least judgmental. Until we have research on how regular viewers of different network newscasts evaluate contenders, however, little can be said of the consequences of network differences.

As Lippmann said, we cannot govern ourselves only with episodes, incidents, and eruptions. We need a "steady light" to render situations intelligible for decision. All three TV networks complained long and loudly in 1988 that "candidates," to quote Dan Rather, have gone "to great lengths to try to control the pictures and content of day-to-day press coverage." Rather is correct. They did. Politicians tamper with what TV newscasters think they should monopolize—the selection, control, and profit from pictures and content of campaigns. Newscasters tamper with what politicians think they should monopolize—the selection, control, and profit from episodes and incidents in the campaign. That in poaching on each other's turf they claim one another to be princes of darkness is beside the point. Neither provides the steady light to make situations intelligible for public choice.

John Hart, who has anchored for CBS and NBC, now anchors the nightly *World Monitor*. He has written that "journalists as human beings are always subject to the danger of their privilege." What privilege? "Their privilege is to taste the experience of other people's lives without paying any of the consequences." Therein lies a danger, namely, "the temptation to view the world as happening for their benefit. Disappointment in a slow news day turns to resentment" (Hart, 1988:10). Echoing Hart, one can also say that politicians, too, are subject to the danger of their privilege, the privilege of affecting other people's lives without accountability. Their danger is to view public office for their benefit. Disappointment with a bad press turns to resentment.

If there is a lesson in TV's mediation of Campaign '88, it is a simple one. Politicians who desire to shape TV news to their own ends should heed the warning of an experienced news anchor, Linda Ellerbee (1986: 3): TV news is a craft, not a calling, and "most important: it's not brain surgery. It's not nuclear physics. It's television. It's *only* television." In the same spirit, newscasters who wish to shape politics to their ends should heed the advice of a savvy politician, Harry Truman: "The Buck Stops Here!"

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