allegiance to officialdom clashed with the one force capable of overwhelming it—the networks' desire to attract the largest possible audiences. TV journalists realized that what made the story gripping television was the human drama of the thirty-nine Americans held hostage. Who could forget the image of TWA pilot John Testrake answering a reporter's questions through the cockpit window, then ducking back inside when his captor waved an automatic pistol in front of his face? The networks wanted film of such moments, the more the better, and they wanted it before their competitors. If that meant broadcasting pictures that had been staged by hijackers, or cramping the negotiating position of the United States government, those were secondary concerns.

But the single most important reason why a press disposed toward reporting and reflecting the views of the governing class could make trouble for a President was that there were usually important disagreements within that class over how the nation should be governed. Republicans and Democrats alike, for example, agreed that the United States should maintain a global military posture to protect overseas interests and oppose Communism, but they frequently disagreed over such specifics as how large a force, what interests it should protect, when it should do so and how.

During the Reagan years, the debate over Central America was a perfect example. Official Washington disagreed over means, not ends, when it came to U.S. policy toward the region. Nearly everyone concurred that the Sandinista government in Nicaragua was a menace to U.S. interests; Communism and Soviet expansionism had to be resisted. There was also strong elite consensus against sending U.S. combat troops to fight there. But should the Sandinistas be pressured to alter their behavior through diplomacy and negotiations (many Democrats' preference) or should a CIA-created mercenary army be used to overthrow the government outright (the Reagan position)? The disagreement was over tactics, but the contending positions were deeply held and strongly argued, and were reflected as such in mainstream news coverage. Thus the Reagan administration found the press a compliant enough instrument when it came to demonizing Nicaragua as a dangerous Communist tyranny; few if any voices in official Washington disagreed with Reagan on that score. But the administration was less successful at generating uniformly positive cov-

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All of which recalls the point that the doctrine of objectivity often made the press a hostage to the political debate within official Washington. When strong disagreement existed within the establishment over a given policy, journalists could do story after story questioning the policy. But on issues where the elite consensus was broad and firm, dissent by the press was sporadic at best.

News media scholar Daniel Hallin offered a useful way of thinking about this phenomenon in his book on news coverage of the Vietnam War, *The "Uncensored War."* The journalist's world, he suggested, was divided into three separate regions, each governed by different journalistic standards. Those three regions he represented with a drawing of three concentric circles, in a figure resembling a doughnut. The innermost region, the "hole" of the doughnut, was the Sphere of Consensus. This was motherhood-and-apple-pie territory, encompassing values and beliefs neither journalists nor society as a whole regarded as controversial—the superiority of American democracy over Soviet Communism, for example, or the need for a strong national defense. "Within this region journalists do not feel compelled either to present opposing views or to remain disinterested observers," wrote Hallin. "On the contrary, the journalist's role is to serve as an advocate or celebrant of consensus values."

Nor did journalists feel bound to impartiality in the outermost region, the Sphere of Deviance. This region—"outside" the doughnut—was "the realm of those political actors and views which journalists and the political mainstream of the society reject as unworthy of being heard"—the Ku Klux Klan or the Communist Party U.S.A., to cite two extreme examples. Here, according to Hallin, "journalism becomes, to borrow a phrase from [social theorist] Talcott Parsons, a 'boundary-maintaining mechanism': it plays the role of exposing, condemning or excluding from the public agenda those who violate or challenge the political consensus. It marks out and defends the limits of acceptable political conflict."

Finally, the middle region was the Sphere of Legitimate Controversy. "The limits of this sphere," Hallin argued, "are defined

primarily by the two-party system—by the parameters of debate between and within the Democratic and Republican parties—as well as by the decision-making process in the bureaucracies of the executive branch." In other words, the limits were defined by the official Washington debate. It was only within this charmed region that journalists actually practiced the objectivity and balance they preached, and their virtue in this regard depended largely on where within the Sphere of Legitimate Controversy the issue they were covering was located. Near the border of the Sphere of Consensus, wrote Hallin, "objectivity involves a straight recitation of official statements. Farther out, as the news deals with issues on which consensus is weaker, the principle of balance is increasingly emphasized" and coverage featured more criticism of official policy.

Vietnam, the subject of Professor Hallin's book, was a good example of how, over time, the official consensus on a major public issue could shift, and with it, mainstream news coverage. Early in the 1960s, elite consensus was strong that the United States was right to fight in Vietnam and certain to win; as an issue, Vietnam fell just on the border between the Spheres of Consensus and Legitimate Controversy. Accordingly, news coverage, especially by journalists based in Washington, contained few criticisms of U.S. policy. The view that the United States did not belong in Vietnam was at this stage still considered part of the Sphere of Deviance and excluded from the news.

As time passed without any clear progress toward U.S. victory, doubts about the conduct (though not the rightness) of the war grew within officialdom, and Vietnam as an issue began drifting toward the middle of the Sphere of Legitimate Controversy. Proclamations by administration officials continued to dominate news coverage, but conflicting stories from reporters on the ground in Vietnam slowly began to increase in number and prominence. Although a grass-roots anti-war movement had risen up across the country, the idea of U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam continued to be ignored or dismissed by the mainstream press.

Not until Senator Eugene McCarthy's initially promising challenge to President Johnson for the 1968 Democratic presidential nomination did the anti-war position cross the threshold between the Spheres of Deviance and Legitimate Controversy and begin to be taken seriously. Shortly after, the Tet offensive of 1968

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brought to ruin the U.S. elite consensus that the war could be won. As Walter Cronkite's special prime-time broadcast both indicated and hastened, the center was turning against the war. As more and more American GIs came home in body bags, and as the anti-war movement grew in strength and influence, popular support for the war deteriorated further. Reaction among the elite was confused. Increasingly, official Washington split between "hawks," who believed in continuing and if necessary intensifying the war, and "doves," who urged various forms of disengagement. Just as the lack of dissent within the formal political system had made for uniformly positive press coverage of the war effort early on, rupture of the bipartisan consensus now made for relative turbulence. It is inconceivable, for example, that the press would have dared to publish the Pentagon Papers had not many "responsible" members of the American establishment—in the Congress, in business, in the academy—begun questioning the war by 1971. (Even so, all three television networks were apparently sufficiently intimidated by the Nixon administration's war on the press that they rejected the chance to break the story. And as Harrison Salisbury described in his book *Without Fear or Favor*, *The New York Times* nearly lost its nerve at the last minute as well.)

U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam eventually became the mainstream position in Washington. By 1972, the debate within the elite no longer centered on whether to pull out, but on when and under what conditions. Thus, in the space of approximately ten years, U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam went from being a "fringe" view that the press ignored to a mainstream view that the press implicitly endorsed. Whereas in the early 1960s the assumption animating U.S. news coverage was that the war in Vietnam should and could be won, by the early 1970s it was that the war was a quagmire from which the United States somehow had to extricate itself. Which is not to say that the press became a champion of the anti-war movement. Although the movement's goal of stopping the war was eventually embraced by politicians and hence the press, the analysis underlying that position, and in particular the view that the war was not just unwinnable but morally wrong, remained forever excluded from serious consideration, a permanent exile in the Sphere of Deviance.

Although news coverage clearly followed rather than led the

shift in opinion against the war, the press nonetheless soon came to be blamed for "losing" Vietnam. A similar myth grew up around the Watergate scandal. Each for their own reasons, right-wing press bashers and members of the press alike preferred to believe that Richard Nixon had been driven from office by a vigilant Washington press corps that refused to rest until all the facts about the bugging of Democratic headquarters and the subsequent attempted cover-up were brought before the public. In fact, with the exception of *The Washington Post*, the American press was scandalously late in coming to the story—for months, Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward of the *Post* were the only reporters pursuing it—and timid in its coverage. Moreover, as Robert Kaiser of the *Post* subsequently remarked, "Woodward and Bernstein would have died on the vine were it not for the official investigations they set off." In that sense, Watergate was a further illustration of how press coverage tended to follow elite opinion and action in Washington; not until Congress set up special committees to investigate did the rest of the press get fully involved in reporting the Watergate story.

Watergate and Vietnam nonetheless were seized upon by right-wing critics as further evidence that Nixon, Agnew and Company had been right all along: the national news media were too powerful, too negative, too aggressive, too liberal, too much. With Nixon now gone, the threat of the federal government's stripping news corporations of their broadcasting licenses had receded, but attacks on the freedom and independence of the press intensified from another quarter. A national press corps which seemed no longer to assume that the government was basically good and trustworthy posed a threat not only to politicians but to the stability of the broader social order. Those individuals and institutions who worried about such matters quickly mobilized in opposition.

"The most important new source of national power in 1970, as compared to 1950, was the national media," Samuel Huntington, a Harvard professor of political science and frequent government consultant, wrote in 1975. Huntington was one of dozens of scholars hired to explore the theme of "the governability of democracy" for the Trilateral Commission, a private group founded by banker David Rockefeller and composed of highly influential business, political and academic figures from the United States,

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Western Europe and Japan. It was the Trilateral Commission's view that the United States suffered from an "excess of democracy" which prevented the country from making the difficult and painful choices needed to set things right again. On the specific topic of the press, Huntington asserted, "There is . . . considerable evidence that the development of television journalism contributed to the undermining of governmental authority."

Backed by large corporate foundations, right-wing think tanks and other representatives of the American power structure, the attack on the press seemed aimed at convincing both the press itself and the public at large that journalists were out of step with the rest of the country. Toward that end, countless studies were commissioned, seminars convened and articles written. The misleadingly named pressure group Accuracy in Media was formed to campaign against alleged anti-business and pro-Communist bias within the press. The perspective and the intent of right-wing forces were made clear in an article, "The Power of the Press: A Problem for Our Democracy," published in 1977 by Max Kampelman, an adviser to conservative Democratic senator Henry Jackson who later was appointed President Reagan's chief nuclear arms negotiator. Accusing members of the press of not sharing the values of American society—"Journalists are reported to have an instinctive suspicion and distrust of authority, particularly governmental authority"—Kampelman argued that the time had come to limit the "relatively unrestrained power of the media."*

A number of press bosses seemed to agree. Fresh from her Watergate triumph, *Washington Post* publisher Katharine Graham called for a retreat from the journalistic aggressiveness that had earned the *Post* its Pulitzer. The press assumed an increasingly conservative hue through the 1970s as more and more columnists with right-of-center politics began appearing in major newspapers. As David Gergen noted in a 1981 interview with *Public Opinion* (the magazine he edited for the American Enterprise Institute during the Carter years): "In terms of the syndicated columnists, if there is an ideological bias, it's more and more to the right." Other signs of a shift to a form of journalism more accommodating to political and corporate authority were also in

* In a November 1987 interview, Mr. Kampelman asserted that the problem had only gotten worse over the intervening ten years.

evidence, most notably a steep decline in investigative reporting.

The assault on the press was in fact but a part of a broader rightward shift within the American power elite during the 1970s. Although the corporate agenda would not be fully implemented until President Reagan took office, its political ascendancy was clear even during the Carter administration. By the end of his term, President Carter had acceded to most of big business's demands, often reversing his previous stands in the process. On taxes, for example, he had promised progressive reform but ended up signing a law that, among other regressive features, cut the top capital-gains rate by more than 40 percent. He beat a similar retreat from his initial policy of aggressive enforcement of federal regulatory laws. But it was not only Carter who bowed to the political strength of corporate forces; Congress was an equal and eager partner. Unsatisfied with the 5 percent real increase in military spending proposed by the Carter White House in 1980, for example, Congress added more funds on its own, eventually enacting a 1981 defense budget with 9 percent real growth built into it.

With occasional individual exceptions, the news media joined in encouraging the pro-corporate economic policies, the arms buildup and the more aggressive foreign policy. As press historian James Boylan later wrote in the *Columbia Journalism Review*,

> Starting with the seizure of the Teheran embassy late in 1979 and the Russian occupation of Afghanistan the press had both reported and joined what George Kennan called the greatest "militarization of thought and discourse" since World War II. Roger Morris wrote in 1980: "American opinion this winter bristled with a strident, frustrated chauvinism—and, from sea to shining sea, American journalism bristled with it." . . . [T]he press, led by television, played the patriot, obsessively focusing on crisis and suggesting that America, not individuals, had been held hostage. At the same time, the press thus cannily painted itself as being as loyalist as the jingo in the street.

News coverage of Carter grew suddenly kinder immediately after the embassy seizure, but as months passed without the hostages being released, and as the domestic economy continued to deteriorate, the press seemed to turn on Carter with a vengeance. True to its habit of reflecting the thoughts and actions of official Washington, press coverage early in the administration had often

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portrayed Carter as weak, indecisive and incompetent. At the time, such charges had been based largely on his failures on Capitol Hill. Now they were being revived, with the added complaint that Carter seemed unwilling or unable to defend American honor around the world.

Contrary to the liberal press thesis, Carter was criticized by the news media by and large from the right, not the left. He was not, for example, attacked for agreeing to admit the brutal and widely hated Shah of Iran to the United States for medical treatment, thus precipitating the embassy seizure that proved his undoing, nor for sharply cutting federal aid to the poor, blacks and cities in 1980. He was denounced instead for not being tough enough, either abroad or at home.

One *New York Times* political reporter remembered hearing just such an attack on Carter from *Times* editor A. M. Rosenthal at the 1980 Democratic National Convention. "I was sitting in the stands waiting for a speech to start," this reporter said, "when suddenly Abe walks up and sits down next to me and launches into this incredible diatribe against Carter, all about how he despised Carter for his weakness, how he'd been a terrible President, and on and on. As I sat there listening to him, I thought to myself, 'I can't believe it—Abe's voting for Ronald Reagan. This New York Jew who grew up poor in the Depression, went to City College, and spent his life at a newspaper thought of as a bastion of liberalism is going to vote for Ronald Reagan.' "

(Mr. Rosenthal recalled no such conversation. He did say that he considered Carter "an ineffective President. But I'll always have a soft spot in my heart for Jimmy Carter," he added, "because he made human rights a major political issue.")

To a press already rapidly, if largely unconsciously, shifting to the right, the 1980 presidential election was the proverbial coup de grace. William Greider of *The Washington Post* called the election "quite traumatic for the press, editors and reporters. Not on a partisan level, as conservatives imagine, but because it seemed to confirm the message of the critics [that the press was out of touch with the rest of the country]. The general aura and dimensions of Reagan's victory were far beyond what the press imagined might happen. It was a sense of 'My God, they've elected this guy who nine months ago we thought was a hopeless clown.' Similar trauma went on in Congress, and throughout 1981

they were reacting in a similar way: 'Hey, there's something going on here we don't understand and we don't want to get in the way.' It was a semi-conscious kind of feeling that I know existed but never gets articulated, but was in everybody's head."

But if Reagan's victory startled many working journalists, it left some of their superiors positively overjoyed. In a speech delivered a week after inauguration day 1981, Associated Press president and general manager Keith Fuller enthusiastically welcomed the arrival of Ronald Reagan and all he represented. Asserting that Americans were ready to throw off the oppressive, degenerate legacy of the 1960s, Fuller interpreted the November election results as evidence that a nation was saying, "We don't believe that the union of Adam and Bruce is really the same as Adam and Eve in the eyes of creation. We don't believe that people should cash welfare checks and spend them on booze and narcotics. We don't really believe that a simple prayer or a pledge of allegiance is against the national interest in the classroom. . . . But most of all, we're sick of your self-perpetuating, burdening bureaucracy weighing ever more heavily on our backs."

For all the talk during the 1970s about the press being too powerful and aggressive for the nation's good, its gradual shift back to the traditional posture of deference suggested rather that it was indeed a sheep in wolf's clothing—a sheep that, consciously or not, ended up following the lead of its corporate superiors. As William Greider said about the major news organizations: "They're powerful institutions. Their own sensibility is that they do share in the governing process; whether that's right or wrong, that's how they look at themselves; therefore, they have to be responsible within that governing elite. . . . They perceived over a period of years that the sensibilities and direction of the governing elite were shifting, and they'll not long be out of step with that."

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