On Bended Knee

The Press and the Reagan Presidency

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One of the most extraordinary things about England is that there is almost no official censorship, and yet nothing that is actually offensive to the governing class gets into print, at least in any place where large numbers of people are likely to read it. If it is "not done" to mention something or other, it just doesn't get mentioned. The position is summed up in the lines by (I think) Hilaire Belloc:

> You cannot hope to bribe or twist
> Thank God! The British journalist:
> But seeing what the man will do
> Unbribed, there is no reason to.

—George Orwell

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"ALL THESE KILLERS"

"WE HAVE BEEN kinder to President Reagan than any President that I can remember since I've been at the *Post*."

So said Benjamin C. Bradlee, executive editor of *The Washington Post*, some four months before the November 1984 re-election of Ronald Reagan. Three years later, after the Iran-contra affair had shattered Mr. Reagan's previous image of invincibility, I asked the legendary editor if he still stood by his statement. He did. Stressing that this was "all totally subconscious," Bradlee explained that when Ronald Reagan came to Washington in 1980, journalists at the *Post* sensed that "here comes a really true conservative. . . . And we are known—though I don't think justifiably—as the great liberals. So, [we thought] we've got to really behave ourselves here. We've got to not be arrogant, make every effort to be informed, be mannerly, be fair. And we did this. I suspect in the process that this paper and probably a good deal of the press gave Reagan not a free ride, but they didn't use the same standards on him that they used on Carter and on Nixon."

Even with all that eventually went wrong—the Iran-contra scandal, the stock-market crash, the seemingly endless series of criminal investigations of former top White House officials—the overall press coverage of the Reagan administration was extraordinarily positive. It is rare indeed for public officials to express satisfaction with their press coverage—in the words of NBC News White House correspondent Andrea Mitchell, "Politicians always say they want a fair press, when what they really want is a positive press"—but the men in charge of media and public relations in the Reagan White House were, almost unanimously, quite pleased with how their President was treated.

James Baker, White House chief of staff during the first term

and Secretary of the Treasury during the second, told me, "There were days and times and events we might have some complaint about, [but] on balance and generally speaking, I don't think we had anything to complain about in terms of first-term press coverage."

David Gergen, former White House director of communications, confirmed shortly after leaving the administration in January 1984 that President Reagan and most of his advisers had come to believe that the basic goal of their approach to the news media—"to correct the imbalance of power with the press so that the White House will once again achieve a 'margin of safety' "—had finally been attained.

Most expansive of all was Michael Deaver, the first-term deputy chief of staff and a virtual surrogate son to the Reagans. Deaver wrote in his memoirs that up until the Iran-contra scandal broke, "Ronald Reagan enjoyed the most generous treatment by the press of any President in the postwar era. He knew it, and liked the distinction."*

How Reagan managed to elude critical news coverage for so long baffled many political observers, not least news executives and journalists themselves.

"I don't know how to explain why he hasn't been as vulnerable to the onslaught of the American press as some previous Presidents; it is a hard subject for me," said ABC News executive vice president David Burke. Agreeing with Ben Bradlee about the extraordinary kindness of Reagan's press coverage, he continued, "I wonder why. It isn't because he intimidates us. It isn't that he blows us away with logic. So what the hell is it?"

Burke, a former top aide to Senator Edward Kennedy, finally settled on a variation of the Great Communicator theory, long favored by journalists and White House aides alike for explaining Reagan's positive public image. The key, in this view, was Reagan himself. His personal gifts—an amiable personality, sincere manner, perfect vocal delivery and photogenic persona—made him the television era equivalent of the Pied Piper of Hamelin; he

* Even traditional right-wing press bashers were apparently not displeased with Reagan news coverage during the first six years of his presidency. A Gallup poll conducted in June 1985 found that only 21 percent of respondents who described themselves as "strong conservatives" felt that news organizations had been unfair to their President. Even during the Iran-contra scandal, that figure increased only to 42 percent.

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played a tune so gay and skipped ahead so cheerily that others could not help but trust and follow him. To attack such a man was unthinkable. "You just can't get the stomach to go after the guy," explained Burke. "It's not a popularity thing, it's not that we're afraid of getting the public mad at us. I think it is a perception that the press has in general of Reagan, that he is a decent man. He is not driven by insecurities, by venality, by conspiracies and back-room tactics."

Tom Brokaw, anchor and managing editor of the *NBC Nightly News*, also felt that Reagan got "a more positive press than he deserves," a feat for which Brokaw credited the White House staff as well as the President. "In part it goes back to who he is," said Brokaw, "and his strong belief in who he is. He's not trying to reinvent himself every day as Jimmy Carter was. . . . Ronald Reagan reminds me of a lot of CEOs I know who run big companies and spend most of their time on their favorite charitable events or lunch with their pals and kind of have a broad-based philosophy of how they want their companies run. Reagan's got that kind of broad-based philosophy about how he wants the government run, and he's got all these killers who are willing and able to do that for him."

The "killers" primarily responsible for generating positive press coverage of Reagan were Michael Deaver and David Gergen, and if they did not exactly get away with murder, they came pretty close. Deaver, Gergen and their colleagues effectively rewrote the rules of presidential image-making. On the basis of a sophisticated analysis of the American news media—how it worked, which buttons to push when, what techniques had and had not worked for previous administrations—they introduced a new model for packaging the nation's top politician and using the press to sell him to the American public. Their objective was not simply to tame the press but to transform it into an unwitting mouthpiece of the government; it was one of Gergen's guiding assumptions that the administration simply could not govern effectively unless it could "get the right story out" through the "filter" of the press.

The extensive public relations apparatus assembled within the Reagan White House did most of its work out of sight—in private White House meetings each morning to set the "line of the day" that would later be fed to the press; in regular phone calls to the television networks intended to influence coverage of Reagan on

the evening news; in quiet executive orders imposing extraordinary new government secrecy measures, including granting the FBI and CIA permission to infiltrate the press. It was Mike Deaver's special responsibility to provide a constant supply of visually attractive, prepackaged news stories—the kind that network television journalists in particular found irresistible. Of course, it helped enormously that the man being sold was an ex-Hollywood actor. As James Lake, press secretary of the Reagan-Bush '84 campaign, acknowledged, Ronald Reagan was "the ultimate presidential commodity . . . the right product."

The Reagan public relations model was based on a simple observation, articulated to me by longtime Reagan pollster Richard Wirthlin: "There's no question that how the press reports [on] the President influences how people feel about the President. People make up their minds on the basis of what they see and hear about him, and the press is the conduit through which they get a lot of their information." Because the news media were the unavoidable intermediary between the President and the public, Wirthlin, Deaver, Gergen, Baker and their colleagues focused their talents on controlling to the maximum extent possible what news reports said about the President and his policies. The more influence they could exercise over how Reagan's policies were portrayed in the press, the greater were the White House's chances of implementing those policies without triggering widespread disaffection or endangering Mr. Reagan's re-election chances.

To be sure, Reagan's was hardly the first administration to establish a public relations apparatus within the White House. But few, if any, administrations had exalted news management to as central a role in the theory and practice of governance as Reagan's did. Leslie Janka, a deputy White House press secretary, who resigned in protest after the administration excluded the press from the Grenada invasion, went so far as to say, "The whole thing was PR. This was a PR outfit that became President and took over the country. And to the degree then to which the Constitution forced them to do things like make a budget, run foreign policy and all that, they sort of did. But their first, last and overarching activity was public relations."

What made relations with the press especially vital to the success of Reagan's presidency was the fact that much of his agenda

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was at odds with popular sentiment. On the basic political issues of his day, Ronald Reagan was much farther to the right than the majority of his fellow citizens. (Contrary to the widely accepted conventional wisdom of the time, American mass opinion in the late 1970s and early 1980s was not galloping to the right. As political economists Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rogers have demonstrated, public opinion was shifting, if anything, slightly leftward during that period, with Reagan's policies themselves apparently providing some of the impetus.)

Reagan's 1981 economic recovery program, for example, combined significant cuts in social spending and federal regulations with fantastic tax reductions aimed overwhelmingly at the very wealthiest Americans. In the name of free enterprise, the administration advocated a massive subsidy program for America's corporations and rich citizens—not an easy thing to sell to average working- and middle-class Americans. Yet Reagan emerged from his first presidential summer gloriously triumphant, with Capitol Hill Democrats and Washington reporters alike convinced—falsely, as it happened—that he was the most popular President in decades.

The Reagan model worked so well that the relationship between the White House and the press will never be the same again. Long after Ronald Reagan has left the White House, the model of news management introduced during his tenure will remain behind, shaping press coverage and therefore public perception. Republican and Democratic candidates alike are relying on elements of the Reagan model in their respective quests for the presidency in 1988, and it is virtually certain to inform the media strategy of whoever succeeds Reagan as President in 1989.

David Gergen was so proud of what the Reagan apparatus accomplished that he told me it would be "worthwhile to institutionalize some of the approaches Reagan has taken toward press events, in order to make it work" for future Presidents. Jody Powell, President Carter's press secretary, and a man who knew a thing or two himself about manipulating the press, was convinced that future administrations would indeed copy the Reagan strategy of news management, but argued that the American people would be the poorer for it.

"There are a lot of people going to school on this administration," said Powell, "and one of the lessons is that the press's bark

is much worse than its bite. They'll huff and puff around, but in the end you can cut severely into the flow of information and manage it with a much firmer hand than we were able or willing to do. . . . If you as much as say to the administration, which is what the press is doing, 'Look, you can do this and there's not a damn thing we can do about it,' they're damn sure going to do it. It's too much of a temptation for frail mortals to bear."

Understanding the Reagan propaganda operation is essential if Americans are to make sense of what happened to their country and their politics during the Reagan era. But there is more to the story than slick skulduggery on the part of power-hungry politicos. Precisely because the Reagan PR model seems destined to become an enduring feature of presidential politics in this country, it is crucial to examine how the American press responded to it. After all, in the U.S. system, it is the job of the press to find and present the truth despite officially erected obstacles. As Tom Brokaw commented, "I can't point my finger at [the Reagan White House]. I think they're doing what they need to do, and if there's a failure, it's ultimately the press's failure."

Most of the more than one hundred and fifty journalists and news executives interviewed for this book rejected the idea that Ronald Reagan had gotten a free ride from U.S. news organizations, even as they hastened to add that neither had the press been too tough on him. Like the baby bear's porridge in the children's fairy tale, press coverage of Reagan had been not too hot, not too cold, but just right. If Reagan was popular, argued members of the press, it was because the American people liked him, not because the press had not done its job.

But this self-absolution by members of the press was contradicted by none other than the Reagan men themselves. Proud as they were of their efforts on President Reagan's behalf, more than one of his senior advisers believed that the taming of the press was less the doing of the White House than of the press itself. "I think a lot of the Teflon came because the press was holding back," said David Gergen. "I don't think they wanted to go after him that toughly."

This book tells the story of how top officials in the Reagan White House went about taming the supposedly savage beast known as the press and using it for their own political purposes. But it also tells how leading journalists and news organizations,

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with honorable individual exceptions, *allowed* themselves to be used. As much through voluntary self-censorship as through government manipulation, the press during the Reagan years abdicated its responsibility to report fully and accurately to the American people what their government was really doing. The result was not only a betrayal of American journalism's public trust but also an impoverished democracy. If these twin tragedies are to be reversed, we must begin by understanding how they came to pass.