

## The wayward press

"The press is a child, essentially an immature institution," wrote Richard Reeves in his biography of Gerald Ford. "It's a lovable little thing, distracted by bits of color and light, eager and irresponsible, honest in its simple way. And it has trouble concentrating on more than one thing at a time."

Reeves was writing about how the press puffed up Ford in the weeks after his ascension to the presidency, ascribing qualities to him he never possessed, only to turn on him with equal excess after his pardon of Richard Nixon. But he might as well have been discussing the coverage of the 1976 presidential campaign. It was, to use a word worn out by Walter Mondale, a disgraceful campaign on both sides, and many of us said as much. Those of us with the latitude to do so called repeated attention to the lack of substance in most of the exchanges between Ford and Jimmy Carter and to the mean-spiritedness of the rhetoric which invested both campaigns. We believed, and we wrote, that the people deserved something better from the candidates for the nation's highest office.

With the election behind us, isn't it time to ask if the people also didn't deserve something better from those of us who covered it? In the public mind the press has come a long way in the last few years, from the whipping boy of the late 1960s to the hero of Watergate. But the way in which many of us described the central events of the 1976 campaign suggests a traditional preoccupation with sensation that contrasts oddly with our pleas for a more mature discussion of issues by the candidates.

\* \* \*

Exhibit A in the case against this year's campaign coverage is the celebrated *Playboy* interview with Jimmy Carter. Wow! He confessed to "lust in my heart." We were like small boys in some long-ago hick town come to see the naked lady at the carnival. Weeks later, in California, when a witless local politician asked a "lusty welcome" for the candidate, a number of reporters made a point of this phrase in their stories. "It was evident," wrote William Lee Miller in the *New Republic*, "that many commentators and reporters didn't even know that Carter had been applying a sentence from the *New Testament*; they never seem to have heard of or read the fifth chapter of Matthew; although one would be hard put to find a piece of writing of comparable length more fundamental to the history of the west."

While we were making too much of the *Playboy* interview, we were making too little of Carter's financial affairs. He withheld records of the contributions made to his 1970 gubernatorial campaign and his 1975 tax returns after promising to make them public. When he finally made this information public, revealing a huge tax break from the tax system he repeatedly had denounced, many of the details of Carter's profits were concealed by corporate returns which the candidate refused to disclose. A net worth statement had blank items and questionable valuations, raising far more questions than it answered. An hour spent at the courthouse in Americus showed the apparent invalidity of valuations used by Carter's accountants, but few reporters

bothered to pursue this issue. "Lust in my heart" had more of a ring.

\* \* \*

The singlemindedness with which some of us insisted in raising "Watergate" issues when they applied to Ford is also questionable. John Dean's supposed revelation that Ford had been programmed by the Nixon White House to quash a House investigation in 1972 was no revelation at all. Dean had testified openly to the same events before the Ervin committee. At the time of his confirmation as vice president, Ford testified that to the best of his recollection he had operated without White House direction. This may have been true or it may not have been true, but it was an old story repackaged for the edification of campaign audiences when Dean, a supporter of Carter, related it a few weeks before the election.

Again, the press reacted breathlessly. One prominent newspaper published an "exclusive" which told how Ford, as House minority leader, had sent a letter to Republican members of the House Banking Committee describing an early Watergate investigation as "irresponsible." The committee voted 20-15 on October 3rd, 1972 against holding public hearings on the Watergate incident, with six Democrats joining 14 Republicans to kill the inquiry. The story the following day by Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein in the *Washington Post* routinely mentioned the Ford letter asking GOP members of the committee to vote against the hearings. Even in 1972, the letter merited only a one-sentence reference in the 13th paragraph of the Woodward-Bernstein story. By what stretch of the imagination does this become the lead of a story in October 1976?

\* \* \*

Yet it can be argued that Ford also came off easy in his press coverage during the campaign. Many of us had said bravely after 1972 that we weren't going to be fooled by another "hiding in the White House" campaign such as Nixon waged against George McGovern in 1972. But when Ford, trailing badly in the August polls, decided to save campaign funds and bide time until the first debate by staying home and staging a series of well-managed phony events in the Rose Garden, most of us covered these as if they were news. Night after night, Ford's non-events received the usual three minutes on the evening news, which is what his strategists had predicted. On one occasion he issued a ringing statement on behalf of freedom of information while signing a "sunshine law" which his administration had done its level best to kill in Congress. Sadly, most reported the statement at face value, without paying much attention either to the limitations of the bill or to the hypocrisy in Ford's statement.

Reeves was right. We are, indeed, "distracted by bits of color and light" and we find it difficult to focus our attention on that which is not gaudy. In 1976 too many of us too often chose the baubles instead of the solid items of value which could have enlightened the voters and enriched a cheap and dreary presidential campaign.

**Available  
again  
and  
still a bargain**



## **The American Presidency in Political Cartoons: 1776 - 1976**

We sold 500 copies of this collector's item earlier this year and had to turn away orders for many more. Once again, we are offering this attractive volume to our readers at a discount price.

The 278 - page, paper-bound book contains 116 cartoons (some in full color) by the nation's most prominent political cartoonists from Thomas Nast to Paul Conrad. The book was originally published by the University of California Art Museum in Berkeley and has been reissued by Peregrine Smith Inc. of Santa Barbara and Salt Lake City.

The retail price is \$9.95 plus tax. It is available through the **Journal** for \$7.50 by mail including sales tax, postage and handling (or \$7 over the counter in our Sacramento office).

This is a book for periodic browsing. It makes an especially appropriate Christmas gift for anyone interested in history, politics, government, art, cartooning or Americana. The text was written by Thomas C. Blaisdell, professor emeritus of political science at Berkeley; Peter Selz, the museum's former director, and 13 students.

Send your orders to **Journal Books, 1617 10th St., Sacramento, CA 95814.**



*A man who believes in a politician knows what it was to have bet on the White Sox in 1919.*

— Murray Kempton