

Congress, the Press, and the Public

Thomas Mann and
Norman Ornstein, eds.
Brookings Books, \$36.95

By Ken Bode

"Congress-bashing has become a media pastime." That is the thesis of this collection of essays written mostly by academics and edited by two of

Washington's stud-duck analysts of Congress: Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein.

In an era when it has become fashionable, especially among politicians and professors, to blame the press for excessively negative coverage, cynical assumptions about congressional ethics, and emphasis on rumor and scandal over issues and institutional

process, the authors come up with some interesting findings.

Public support for Congress, as everyone knows, is at ground level, and the authors insist that the media's focus on celebrity, scandal, and sensationalism is one important reason. They are probably right. It should be remembered, however, that they write of a period that produced the S&L debacle, Speaker Jim Wright's forced resignation, numerous congressional indictments and convictions for bribery and other matters, a variety of sexual escapades, the John Tower and Clarence Thomas confirmations, Iran-*contra*, midnight pay raises, check-kiting at the House bank, check-dodging at the House restaurant, and the Keating Five—to name just a few. Obviously, journalists are going to cover scandals like these, and this coverage is bound to affect the way the public views the institution.

But first, the good news. Karlyn Bowman and Everett Carl Ladd show that over the past 50 years, people have begun to pay more attention to Congress and feel they know more about it. Herb Asher and Mike Barr measure varying levels of public support for the institution, and find that when Congress is actually functioning effectively in a highly public way, support goes up substantially. Over the past 20 years the two high-water marks of public support were in 1974 on the eve of the Nixon resignation, and in 1991, during the congressional debate on the Gulf War.

Examining the coverage of Congress from 1972 to 1992, Robert Lichter and Daniel Amundson find that 67 percent of all stories in that period focused on *policy*, not on scandal. Another 15 percent involved congressional investigations (of things like corporate price-fixing), seven percent involved election campaigns, and five percent covered confirmation hearings or were profiles of individual members.

Statement of Ownership, Management and Circulation

(Required by 39 U.S.C. 3685) 1. Title of publication: The Washington Monthly. 2. Publication number: 704640. 3. Date of filing: October, 1994. 4. Frequency of issue: monthly except combined January/February and July/August. 5. A. Number of issues published annually: 10. 6. Annual subscription price: \$39.00. 7. Complete mailing address of known office of publication: 1611 Connecticut Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20009. 8. Complete mailing address of the headquarters of general business offices of the publisher: same. 9. Names and complete addresses of publisher, editor, and managing editor: Publisher, Hilary Ross, 1611 Connecticut Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20009; Editor, Charles Peters, 1611 Connecticut Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20009; Managing Editor: vacant. 10. Owner: The Washington Monthly Co., an unincorporated joint venture between The Washington Monthly Corporation and The Washington Monthly Limited Partnership, of which The Washington Monthly Publishing Corporation is sole general partner. All entities at 1611 Connecticut Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20009. Owners of 1 percent or more of shares of The Washington Monthly Limited Partnership: Preston Brown, Washington, DC; Warren Buffett, Omaha, NE; The Elizabeth E. Chilton Marital Trust, Charleston, WV; Joseph Cole, Lyndhurst, OH; Alexander Ewing, Millbrook, NY; James Fallows, Washington, DC; Nancy M. Folger, Washington, DC; Gene Gordon, Bethesda, MD; Robert Hellawell, Demarest, NJ; Edgar Kaiser Jr., Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada; Phil Keisling, Portland, OR; Roger S. Kuhn, Bethesda, MD; Morton Mandel, Cleveland, OH; Matthew Nemerson, New Haven, CT; New Haven Terminal, New Haven, CT; Richard L. Ottinger, Washington, DC; Ann Peretz, Cambridge, MA; Tom Peters, Palo Alto, CA; Julien Phillips, San Mateo, CA; Joseph Rosenfield, Des Moines, IA; Estate of Sidney B. Sachs, Washington, DC; William Schulz, Phoenix, AZ; Fred Stanback Jr., Salisbury, NC; Estate of Philip M. Stern, Washington, DC; Estate of Stuart W. Thayer, New York, NY; Howard W. Young, Washington, DC. Owners of 1 percent or more of stock of The Washington Monthly Corporation: Estate of Timothy J. Adams, Washington, DC; Russell Baker, Leesburg, VA; Taylor Branch, Baltimore, MD; A. Whitney Ellsworth, New York, NY; Joseph Freitas Jr., San Francisco, CA; Murray Kempton, New York, NY; Suzannah Lessard, New York, NY; Estate of Peter Lisagor, Arlington, VA; Charles Peters, Washington, DC; PKL Co. Inc., New York, NY; John Rothchild, Miami, FL; Eleanor Rovere, Barrytown, NY; Hugh Sidey, Potomac, MD; Carole Lee Smith, Salem, OR; James C. Thomson Jr., Cambridge, MA; Estate of Carol Trueblood, Washington, DC. Owners of 1 percent or more of stock in The Washington Monthly Publishing Corporation: NY; Joseph D. Crowley, New Haven, CT; Kanawha Banking and Trust, Trustee of John D. Rockefeller IV, Charleston, WV; Fiona Beck, Washington, DC; John Spencer, Middlebury, VT; Estate of Carol Trueblood, Washington, DC. 11. Known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities: Marline Resources Company, 645 Madison Ave., New York, NY 10022. 12. Not applicable. 13. The Washington Monthly. 14. November 1994. 15. Extent and nature of circulation: (average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months) actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date. A. Total no. Copies (net print run): (35,827) 33,500. B1. Newsstands: (3,606) 3,605. B2. Paid mail subscriptions: (27,283) 24,150. C. Total paid circulation: (30,889) 27,755. D. Free distribution by mail (1,342) 1,037. E. Free distribution outside mail: (250) 250. F. Total free distribution: (1,592) 1,287. G. Total distribution (32,481) 29,042. H1. Copies not distributed: (1,196) 1,138. H2. Return from news agents: (3,278) 3,219. I. Total: (36,955) 33,399. Percent: (95%) 96%. 16. This Statement of Ownership will be printed in the November issue of this publication. 17. I certify that all information furnished on this form is true and complete. Kristine Norquist, Business Manager. 10/6/94.

Scandal coverage did rise near the end of the period, but so did the number of scandals—in 1989, network newscasts raised questions about the ethical conduct of 47 senators and representatives. Overall, though it sometimes may seem otherwise, matters of policy are by far the dominant part of congressional coverage.

Now the bad news. Public distaste for Congress is growing, and the more people know about the institution, the less they seem to like it. Contempt goes up with education—as does support for term limits—and C-Span viewers are more critical of Congress than non-viewers. The authors speculate that the congressional process itself causes this, that viewers find the procedures confusing and pointless and the voting process boring. But I think they underestimate the intelligence of the C-Span audience, which is balanced almost equally among Democrats, Republicans, and Independents. These people are far more likely than the general public to contact a member of Congress, make a political contribution, or even read a daily newspaper. C-Span recorded an 80 percent increase in viewership between 1988 and 1992, so the network must be doing something right. And 98 percent of C-Span viewers who were registered to vote in the 1992 presidential election did so. This may be the most intelligent, serious-minded, politically interested audience available anywhere. Because C-Span coverage is an unmediated transmission of congressional proceedings and campaign events, if this viewership is turned off on Congress, it probably is not due to cynical journalistic coverage.

One thing these essays point out repeatedly is that candidates, including incumbents, campaign for Congress by unremittably bashing the institution. In fact, an important reason incumbents continue to be re-elected while Congress slips lower and lower in public esteem is

because the veterans portray themselves as “local politicians, Washington outsiders, and staunch critics of Congress.” Since George Wallace began the trend in 1968, candidates for president, the House, and the Senate have mocked, scorned, and abused *Washington* even as they begged for money and votes to get there. Former Congressman Mickey Edwards once said, “It would be very helpful if we let some of our colleagues know they serve no useful purpose by denigrating an important institution in this country in order to make a few points back home politically.” So blame some of the declining reputation of Congress on the habits of its own members.

In their determination to lay the blame for declining public support of Congress at the doorstep of a scandal-mongering press, the authors—mainly Ornstein and Mann—overreach and weaken their case. “Among

groups of journalists,” they say, “radio talk show hosts emerge as the most hostile to Congress.” Now, some radio talk show hosts, like Diane Rehm of WAMU in Washington, undeniably are journalists, but she is no Congress-basher. But would you consider another Washington-area talk show host, G. Gordon Liddy, to be a journalist? Rush Limbaugh insists he is not a journalist, nor are most of the hundreds of local market Rush imitators across the land who mindlessly bash politicians, Congress, Washington, and Bill Clinton.

“Coverage of the House banking scandal,” the authors insist, “was as overdone and distorted by *The Washington Post* as it was on radio talk shows.” How can anyone who would write such a sentence imagine himself to be qualified to evaluate the media’s coverage of Congress? *Ken Bode is the moderator of “Washington Week in Review.”*

The Terrorist



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Political Puzzle

BY JOHN BARCLAY

The numbers indicate the number of letters and words, e.g. (2,3) means a two-letter word followed by a three-letter word. Groups of letters, e.g. USA, are treated as one word.

ACROSS

1. Clinton-pronounced guideline. (9)
6. Arbiter unites Oklahoma figure and erstwhile Reagan employer. (5)
9. Managed repose around noon for kitchen gadgets. (7)
10. In Vienna, I've televised a lack of sophistication. (7)
11. Len gave out the wonderful news. (7)
12. Render scepter its due. (7)
13. Separate strange nut, for example. (5)
14. Chosen! I don't mean "maybe." (9)
17. Important lane sites laid out. (9)
21. Furs thrown around, fox first, for striking collars. (5)
23. Made an error, turning moist before approval. (7)
25. Turn in awe for dirty player, at times. (7)
26. Plant the silt differently. (7)
27. After February 1, this public service would be a lost cause. (9)
28. Lariat thrown dropping a test. (5)
29. Court figure is English major from Florida? (9)

DOWN

1. Creeps out stealthily to make charge. (9)
2. Exercise, get lean to be very fashionable. (7)
3. Following early start, revenger travels to kind of forest. (9)
4. Letter in slope script. (7)
5. Making mart nut fit. (7)
6. Is not well after jets start and locks up. (5)
7. Pet seed is scattered at the bottom. (7)
8. Do in 7:30 time frame. (5)
15. New turn in rug-making—a better environment! (9)
16. Rye sorted carefully for vessel. (9)
18. Japanese treat him "as is" in new order. (7)
19. Kill new adaptation for outmoded office feature. (7)
20. Fifty Watusi dancing for action. (7)
22. Fickle follower has total in

hand. (7)

23. Set up totem for church music. (5)
24. A colt running around eight-legged. (5)

Answers to last month's puzzle:

C	R	I	M	E	B	I	L	L	H	A	I	T	I
R	N	G	C	I	Y	T	N						
O	B	S	E	R	V	E	M	A	S	T	E	R	S
A	T	E	T	O	T	M	I						
T	W	I	S	T	R	E	G	R	E	S	S	E	D
I	G	A	E	R	E								
A	C	A	D	E	M	Y	S	C	I	S	S	O	R
T	N							C	T				
B	L	E	A	T	E	D	C	U	S	T	A	R	D
I	R	E	O					T	O				
S	N	A	R	E	D	R	U	M	P	O	U	N	D
M	S	N	A	P	I	S	G						
U	N	S	H	O	W	N	D	B	L	I	Q	U	E
T	E	U	G	S	O								
H	A	T	E	S	E	L	E	C	T	I	O	N	S