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THE MCGILL LECTURE

We've just completed a Presidential election about which you may think you've already heard too much. But I'd like to continue what did seem an interminable national discussion long enough to talk about the role of the press in 1980 and in the foreseeable election years ahead. There are at least two good reasons for doing so.

One is that electing a President nowadays is a process that preoccupies the press for at least a year—in the case just past, more nearly a year and a half, owing mostly to early starting candidates and the will-he or won't-he suspense in 1979 over Senator Edward Kennedy's intentions. Anything that takes up that much of our time and effort seems to me worth post-mortem, or maybe post-partim reflection.

The second reason is that reform and events have effected a profound change in our political life that leaves us with a media politics rather than a party politics. That is, newspapers, magazines and primarily television—not political parties—are the essential instruments of American politics, most especially Presidential politics, today. If that's the case, it's high time we in the press as well as academics and politicians should be thinking more seriously about what the press is doing—and a lot *more* seriously about what it should be doing. More about that later.

Let me dispose of one old wheeze about the press and elections before going on to more serious matters. This year, as always, the charge was heard that "biased reporting" was going on. I don't doubt that in some cases it was, journalists being at least as fallible as lawyers, bankers, economists, politicians and preachers.

But then I'm sure Ralph McGill was accused of biased reporting in the years when he was depicting the ills and injustices of the South with such courage and insight. Reporters these days are usually denounced for favoring liberals; but I don't think Senator Kennedy would agree with that. And there was no liberal in the general election to favor; if there was, he surely didn't win.

It may well have been that the television network news broadcasts gave more time to Jimmy Carter than to Ronald Reagan, as charged by Republicans; but Mr. Carter happened to have been President and so required more coverage. And I didn't hear Republicans making that charge in 1976, when it could have been made about network time for Gerald Ford. Then, the Democrats were doing the complaining.

So it goes—as with those who wrote me in 1972 that it was vital to the country that George McGovern should be elected, and that articles I wrote casting doubt on some of his positions hurt the cause and were therefore irresponsible and biased. I got some of the same kind of mail this year for not being responsible and unbiased enough to write articles in favor of Jimmy Carter.

The charge of biased reporting—even conceding that it does occur—is mostly the cross journalists have to bear when they try to report accurately and evenhandedly, thus offending those who think that anything that doesn't agree 100 percent with their views is biased and inaccurate. But to the extent that really biased reporting does occur, the great safeguard against it is the diversity of the American press; there are just too many newspapers and magazines and broadcast outlets for the occasional transgressor to have much effect. That's a kind of self-correcting diversity that those who clamor for "responsibility" in the press should ponder. For if someone *could* define responsibility and then enforce it, in all the thousands of instances and in all the thousands of news outlets when it would have to be done, we'd have one press speaking with one voice and no bias except that of those doing the defining and the enforcing.

That's not to say that the press always did a great job in the campaign just past; far from it. With rare exceptions, for example, the press failed its job of going behind the face of events and looking with skepticism at the conventional wisdom, when in the summer and fall of 1979 it mostly uncritically accepted—I'd say propagated—the view that Senator Kennedy would be unbeatable. Anybody who'd travelled the country in the last decade should have known there was profound opposition to him on personal grounds; at least one poll on which I reported showed nearly 40 percent of the respondents with a negative reaction to him; and nobody paid much attention to the facts that he'd never run outside of Massachusetts, and that none of the Kennedy family or its adherents had managed a national campaign since 1968—after which the Presidential election system had been so profoundly changed by primaries, federal financing and television.

The press encountered, of course, numerous criticisms for its campaign coverage—some of it justified. I offered one criticism myself, to resounding silence and, so far as I know, no support whatever. For

what it may be worth, I repeat—not least because I think Ralph McGill just might have enjoyed the iconoclasm of it—that I don't think reporters have any business playing the part of spear-carriers and interlocutors in these so-called Presidential debates that seem to be such important determinants of national elections today.

No self-respecting reporter would play a role in a candidate's rally, for example, or write a speech for him or her or introduce a candidate before a speech; at least, I hope no reporter would. Why, then, should the same reporter play a supporting role in what really are set-piece stagings in which candidates distort facts, spread misinformation and try to fit themselves into pre-determined images?

My esteemed colleague, Max Frankel, asked the question of Gerald Ford in 1976 that elicited the famous answer about Poland which probably cost Mr. Ford the election. Recognizing Mr. Ford's blunder at once, Mr. Frankel immediately fed him another question that gave the President a chance to correct himself; but Mr. Ford only repeated the mistake. It seems to me that Mr. Frankel acted entirely honorably here, since ostensibly the so-called debate was supposed to educate the American people, not trip up a candidate. But he was nevertheless open to the criticism that he had tried to help the President out of a bad spot. In any case he was an important part of perhaps the decisive moment of the 1976 campaign. I don't think we should expose ourselves to such possibilities; if we're going to have these shoot-out debates, which I deplore, reporters should be observers, not participants.

That's particularly true when the candidates have a degree of veto power over which reporters appear. I'm not suggesting that any of the reporters who've taken part in the debates in 1976 and 1980 when there was such veto power were easy marks or favorable to one candidate or another; the record shows otherwise—although who knows what might happen in the future? It's the *process* that bothers me—that those to be questioned can choose those who question them. In what other situation would anyone in the press acquiesce in that? I greatly fear there's a bit of ego involved here—that of reporters who don't mind some high-level national TV exposure, and that of editors and publishers who think such exposure increases the prestige of their publications or broadcast outlets.

Incidentally, and while I'm in a curmudgeonly mood, I'm not happy, either, about the stringent security provisions of recent campaigns, in which the press has consented without protest to the requirement that to cover a Presidential candidate, a reporter has to get a pass from the Secret Service—in effect, a working permit from the government. I understand the security problem, and I'm quick to say I know

of no one who's been denied a pass for political or other unacceptable reasons. But the fact remains that a government police agency now has a dossier on every reporter who travelled with a Presidential candidate and has acquired the power to license an important segment of the working press. Again, I have to ask—who knows where that could lead in the future?

An interesting, and I think substantial, criticism of the press has arisen since the election. Political observers, candidates, and just plain voters in the Western states have complained that early network projections of Mr. Reagan as the Presidential winner conveyed the impression that the election was over, so that Western votes would make no difference. In the late hours, therefore, a lot of voters in the West apparently stayed or went home without voting, with the consequence that a number of lesser Democrats lost who might otherwise have won—notably Reps. Ullman of Oregon and Corman of California. There's even the serious possibility—and my friend Bill Hall, the editor of the Lewiston paper in Idaho, is working very hard trying to show that this happened—that Senator Frank Church of Idaho, who lost by only 4,400 votes, might have won except for the early projections and, more important, President Carter's early and unwise concession.

I was working for the ABC Network on election night and our exit polls told us by about 3:30 p.m. Eastern time that a Reagan landslide was probable. But we considered exit polls not sound enough for projecting a winner; for that, we demanded actual results from previously selected sample precincts. NBC, by its own method, projected Mr. Reagan the winner just minutes after the polls closed in the East—still 5 p.m. on the West Coast and even earlier in Hawaii and Alaska.

This problem seems easily solved, and it ought to be, because techniques for projecting from small vote samples are getting more sophisticated and accurate all the time, and it's a mistake anyway to think that you can ban technology. You can't ban technology—you have to adapt to technology as it comes along and makes itself available to us. And I don't want to see the First Amendment hacked up by legislation to restrict network projections. Preferable would be legislation to require the polls to be open in every state for the entire 24 hours preceding a uniform national closing time—say 8 p.m. in the East. That would have late-day voters going to the polls on Monday evening on the West Coast. For their part, the networks would be wise to agree among themselves to project state and national winners only from sample results, not from less reliable exit polls; and then only after the national poll closing hour.

That 24-hour voting period might well be set for the weekend, if we wanted also to attack the problem of low voter turnout. Making it

easier for people to vote isn't the solution to that problem, but surely it couldn't hurt, and after all, having a national election on Tuesday is only habit; there's nothing sacred about it. It hasn't been written down on stones from Mount Sinai.

The network race to be first with a projected winner is a symptom of a far more serious election-year problem for the press—the tendency, I might say the fever, to cover one of the most important decisions a democracy can make as if it were a horserace. The one thing that everyone finally and incontrovertibly is going to know about an election is who won. And that's true even if the election is stolen or if there is fraud or corruption, because sooner or later someone is declared a winner. The one thing we'll finally know is who won; but there are many things that you don't know about an election while it's going on and may never know for months to come.

Yet, this year, as in most years, the press spent far more time guessing and predicting and surveying and pulse-taking and head-shrinking and soul-reading and omen-watching—in effect, trying like the networks to be first with a projected winner—than it did on any of those things that we *don't* or won't necessarily know about the 1980 election, or can't know until we've studied it further.

Certainly more time and space and effort were devoted to handicapping the horserace than to what we like to claim is our primary function—educating the public about the candidates and the issues and the problems facing the country, so voters can make intelligent decisions. Now I know the candidates themselves don't talk much about the issues; that most respectable newspapers run articles or series of them on at least the most identifiable issues; and I fear that probably not too many people read those long gray stories about tax policy, welfare reform and NATO.

But I think that makes my point. Have we newspapermen, editors, publishers, broadcasters, expended half the ingenuity and forethought and planning on *how* to educate the public as we have on covering the horserace? Where do we deploy most of our manpower—and usually our best manpower? Where do we put in most of the campaign budget? How many column inches go to the horserace and how many to education? Is the fact that candidates don't talk about issues an excuse for the press not to pay much attention? To the extent that we have been innovative and experimental—exit pollings, as a good example—hasn't it been mostly to help us cover the horserace in more detail?

Focusing on who's going to win doesn't mean only that we don't do our advertised job as well as we like to claim we do. Such coverage can have consequences we don't necessarily want. For example:

1. The major problem any independent candidate has is the public attitude that he's a minor candidate, since he has neither the Democratic nor the Republican nomination. This year for example, when he announced his independent candidacy, John Anderson was measured at about 21 percent of the national popular vote—thus giving numerical confirmation to his minor status. From then on, Anderson's poll standing declined steadily, with every loss of a point heavily chronicled by the press in its fixation on the horserace.

It's arguable, even likely, that the polls ruined whatever chance Mr. Anderson ever had, because the polls caused the press so frequently to depict him as a minor candidate, a declining one at that. Without these weekly measurements of win, place and show, showing him falling steadily back into the pack, Mr. Anderson's proposals and campaigning might have *expanded* his support. And it was also because of poll standing that he was admitted to the first debate, then excluded from the second—thus assuring his minor-candidate status precisely when it counted the most.

Some will say that the polls only measured what was in fact happening—only measured, in fact, his loss of support—and maybe so. I can't escape the worry, however, that it was too nearly the other way around—that the polls told us how we ought to regard the Anderson candidacy, as a minor candidacy. And for evidence I'd cite those persistent polls that kept up throughout the campaign, showing that many more people would have supported Mr. Anderson if they'd thought he had a chance. And the Catch-22 in that is that if they *had* supported him, he clearly would have had a chance.

2. Beyond the specific Anderson case, the American press in 1980 may well have covered the whole campaign too nearly by covering the polls—including those, like The New York Times/CBS survey, that we generated ourselves. And in doing so, we may well have misled our readers by picturing a *very close race*, right up to the last hours. But the significant facts were that this was by measurement of the popular vote, and the notion of a "close race" appeared only because of the large cloud of undecided voters that hung over the campaign all through September and October.

But the only true measurement of a Presidential election is the *electoral* vote; in 1948, after all, Strom Thurmond got a million votes and carried five states, while Henry Wallace got a million votes, too—and carried nothing. And I don't know of any *electoral* college survey that ever showed Mr. Carter with much chance to win; most showed he'd have to carry virtually all of the so-called battleground states, which was always unlikely, even to win a bare majority of the Electoral College.

As for the undecideds, when they make up 20 to 30 percent of those polled, how can anyone know whether it's really a close race or not? But the idea persisted, I think propagated by the press, that a close election impended. I don't know if that had any effect on voting behavior in the polling booth, but it certainly didn't do much for the credibility of the press—and we don't have enough of *that* to lose any. The remedy here, it seems to me, is a healthy dose of good old-fashioned, well-informed, experienced and intuitive reporting, with a big dash of skepticism about polling.

3. The fixation on the Presidential horse race, I'm afraid, led to at least two other kinds of inadequate press coverage. First, it caused us to overlook, or downplay, or at least not to emphasize, the conservative sweep that was coming in the Senate—transforming the makeup of that body, perhaps for years to come, perhaps with more important consequences than Mr. Reagan's election.

Second, again we didn't see, or at least see and report clearly enough, the cultural counter-revolution that was rising in this country, and that I think was greatly responsible for the Republicans' Senate and Presidential triumphs—probably for Mr. Reagan's landslide. I mean a widespread national reaction against perceived national weakness—a movement that somehow linked what it saw as moral decline (abortion, gay rights, the ERA) with political and military and economic decline (the Panama Canal "giveaway," the idea of being No. 2 to the Soviet Union and beholden to the Arabs) and lumped all of them together under the single heading of liberalism.

To sum up, concentration on the horserace seems to me to narrow our vision, limit our reliance on good, searching, observant reporting in favor of poll-taking, give our readers an inadequate account of what's actually happening and perhaps to affect the outcome of elections through these deficiencies.

Now let me come back to what I said in the beginning—that newspapers and magazines and primarily television—not political parties—are the instruments of Presidential politics today. And if that's the case, we in the press have to think more seriously about what we're doing and about what we *should* be doing.

The kind of media politics we have today is, of course, the direct product of the dominance of television in our national life. Television has become, in effect, the national nervous system; if something doesn't register there, on television, it hardly registers at all. A happening designed just to be covered by TV used to be called rather derisively a pseudo-event; now, if it *doesn't* happen on television, it's really a pseudo-event—in politics, it's hardly an event at all. And virtually everything a politician does, particularly if he has a large

constituency—say a whole state, or the nation itself—is done for television. Just for example, if Jimmy Carter holds a town meeting in Memphis, it's not just or even primarily for the audience in the hall or the Memphis newspapers—it's for a 3-state television market centered on Memphis.

Television is the major reason for party decline in America. Television, not party, identifies candidates in the public mind. Television, not party, gives candidates access to the public—more than they've ever had in the past, and greater reach. Television commercials probably deliver more information, good, bad, and in-between, about candidates and issues than any other form of political communication. Televised debates—or shoot-outs—may well be the determining factor in any Presidential election in which they take place.

This powerful new means of campaigning, combined with reforms that provide federal financing for candidates and primaries in three-quarters of the states, has utterly transformed Presidential politics. But whether press coverage has kept pace is not so clear; because *the press itself* is now the basic instrument of politics—rather than the urban machine, or the courthouse ring, or the party label, or the historical tradition or even ethnic and class identification.

Last January, George Bush won the Iowa Republican caucuses. A few weeks later, Ronald Reagan won the New Hampshire primary. From then on, these two candidates dominated the Republican nomination struggle and wound up forming the Republican ticket. In 1976, Jimmy Carter won in Iowa and New Hampshire and became a front-runner who was never headed for the Democratic nomination.

Yet Iowa and New Hampshire cast only twelve electoral votes; relatively few voters participate in the caucuses and primaries; and the Democrats are distinctly a minority party in both states. Yet both, in the era of reform, have assumed really commanding positions in the choice of party nominees. Presidential nominations have in effect been taken out of the hands of a few party leaders and put into the hands of a few voters in two small rural states.

This is possible only because of the press. Because these are the first two events of the political year—the horses breaking from the pole—the press descends en masse. The winners are publicized to the heavens. Faster than Spiro Agnew's ever did, their names become household words, their faces and voices the stuff of the nightly news, the saga of their rise the stuff of the American dream, their wives the feature story on every woman's page. All that, of course, affects the polls, and the voters in the next primaries; before you can say "Dr. Gallup" front-runners have been born on the front pages, the news magazine covers, the evening news broadcasts.

Nothing I've said will come as a surprise to any political reporter or editor in America, TV or print. They know they're making front-runners, that under state primary and federal financing rules other candidates will have difficulty catching up, or find it impossible; thus the press is to an uncomfortable degree *making the nominees* out of what ought to be no more than early leaders. They know they're doing it—not because they want to dominate politics but because they want to compete, be in on the top of the news, and cover the horserace with the rest of the boys. If the Washington Post is going to be out there in Iowa making a big thing out of someone who wins a thousand or so votes more than someone else, you can be sure The New York Times will be there, too, and the networks and what George Wallace used to call "the Time and the Life and the Newsweek."

I think we can do something about that. I don't think the American press has to be a collection of pitiful, helpless giants with no choice but to follow the leader like elephants trunk to tail. And we don't have to stop covering the news to do it. We can just begin covering the news from Iowa and New Hampshire for what it's really worth—a handful of delegates. For without the media circus with which we've surrounded these early tests, that *is* all they're worth.

In 1980, too, the national party conventions clearly became anachronisms—and that's what they'll be as long as the present primary system is in effect. No contest at the Republican convention; a rule at the Democratic convention that not only prohibited contest but deprived the delegates of any semblance of a representative function. In fact the convention in New York was so dull and meaningless that one New York Times editor told me that if he had it to do over again, he'd assign two reporters to the hall and let everybody else go about their business.

The decline of the convention isn't the responsibility of the press (except for those front-runners we do so much to create); it's a function of the system of primaries and legally pledged delegates. But here again, the press should begin covering these things for what they're worth. That's not much anymore. In fact, the press—led by television, for whose cameras conventions are really staged nowadays—might well take the lead in insisting on one or at most two-day conventions; and even then we should cover only what happens of a newsworthy nature—the Presidential roll-call, the vice presidential selection, the acceptance speeches. All the rest is propaganda for which we shouldn't let ourselves be used.

I've already suggested the importance of television commercials. Here again, there's no real dispute that these hard-hitting spots are far

more effective, flexible and cost-efficient than any other campaign device. Three examples:

When in mid-October, the Reagan campaign picked up signals that Mr. Carter was gaining ground in Oregon and Washington, where they had thought they were safe, they met the threat not with their candidate himself but by stepping up their TV ads. And they turned back the threat and carried both states.

And last spring, after George Bush won the Pennsylvania primary, he dropped the ads he'd been using about unemployment. The next primary was in Texas, where unemployment is hardly an issue, and Mr. Bush switched his spots to a series on oil and gas issues—a different image for a different state. Dial-an-image, you might say.

In North Carolina, voters elected a Republican who's confined to a wheel chair to replace Democratic Senator Robert Morgan. John East, the Republican candidate, conducted his campaign almost entirely by television commercials photographed to show him from the waist up. He made very few personal appearances. Now that the campaign is over and he's won, and his disability has been publicized, many North Carolinians are saying that they didn't realize he was handicapped until *after* they had voted for him.

I'm not one who laments this use of television commercials in politics. TV isn't going to go away, it's a splendid instrument of communication, and it's going to be used by people who know how to use it. Talk of restricting campaign commercials—banning them or something of that sort—is talk of restricting communication *and* the First Amendment. What the press can and should do, however, is to pay far more attention, from beginning to end, to candidate advertising.

Probably any alert news organization now does a story or two about commercials; sometimes they make news, as with Howard Baker's famous depiction of his exchange with the Iranian student last winter. But we in the press haven't yet come to regard a candidate's ads in the proper light—as one of the most important means of conveying his message, perhaps *the* most powerful means, far more so than his speeches, or most of his campaign appearances.

Difficult as it might be to do, the conception, production, ad use of TV spots, their content, strategic purpose, frequency of appearance, cost, public effects—all ought to be covered as thoroughly and skeptically as the candidate's actual travels and appearances. Because those spots are at least as important, if not more so. I'd go so far as to say that when a new commercial or a series of spots appears for a candidate, the press ought to cover that development as if the candidate himself had made a personal appearance or a policy speech.

I've been talking so far mostly about the press adapting itself to a new kind of Presidential politics. But I hope I've also made clear that I believe the press, primarily television, is the prime instrument of that new politics—that we have a media politics rather than a party politics. It follows, I think, that we shouldn't merely adapt ourselves to what party leaders and candidates and political activists have so far wrought—a developing system that's still in flux, and considerably in dispute.

In the next four years, we'll undoubtedly hear a great deal about further election reform. Should the \$1,000 federal limit on personal campaign contributions be increased? What about PACs—that new development in campaign financing that has such profound impact on congressional races? Should there be fewer primaries, grouped regionally? Or a single national primary? What can be done without offending the First Amendment to shorten Presidential campaigns? What about the usefulness, if any, of the Electoral College? We had an Electoral College landslide this time but a reasonably close election in the popular vote, when you put the Carter and Anderson vote together and measure it against the Reagan vote. And many other such questions.

But whatever further changes might be made, as things now stand, will be made by Democratic and Republican party committees, or perhaps by Congress or state legislatures. Those changes will tend to follow *party* interests. And that's one process to which the press ought not to adapt; we've acquiesced in it so far, but I hope no longer. After all, if they're going to play on our piano, shouldn't we have something to say about the tune and tempo?

I don't mean an occasional editorial or column advocating, say, regional primaries. I'm talking about a more concerted effort on the part of editors and publishers and broadcasters to exert constructive influence on the decisions of party or legislative committees about the political process. On the question of the national conventions, for example, the press has every right, perhaps even the duty, to say to the parties that we don't intend any longer to con our readers and viewers into thinking these propaganda shows, as now staged, are important; that we don't intend to be further used in that way: and that it's up to the parties either to make the conventions useful and vital again or to see them relegated in the press to the status of the minor events they now are. And there are other positions of equal or greater importance on which I think we could take similarly constructive stands.

I'm not advocating more power for the press in choosing the end product of the Presidential election system—the nominees and the final winner. I'm suggesting a greater voice for the press in making the

system itself, the process, more responsive to genuine popular will; less exhausting for candidates, public *and* the press; less likely to paralyze the top of the government for a year or a year and a half; perhaps more instructive for the voters and not so likely to induce apathy and revulsion; and not as subject to cynical manipulation and image-making by candidates and parties.

We won't be able to do all of that but these goals are legitimate and well worth pursuing whether or not we can finally win all of them. Baseball, after all, relies as heavily on the media as politics now does, and recently the World Series has been played mostly at night. That may not have improved the game, but it's surely more compatible with the needs and desires of the public that supports the game. And baseball, I might remind you, is more popular than ever before—outdrawing last summer on television, for instance, both the Republican and Democratic conventions.

There may be those who think that I've advocated here too high a posture for the press—that to act as assertively as I've suggested invites criticism, hostility, some form of restriction. There are *always* those who think boldness in the press is to be avoided, since it may risk restriction; but that kind of self-restraint poses the greater risk of self-censorship or self-emasculation. So in the spirit of Ralph McGill, I say let's be boldly assertive of our new responsibilities in the vital processes of American democracy.

Not that I'd for one moment claim Mr. McGill's posthumous blessing for any or all of the details of what I've said here today. For all I know he might have disagreed with me on many. He never hesitated to disagree. But I'm reasonably sure that insofar as I've spoken for the independence of the American press, emphasized its responsibility to educate readers, and called for it to move ahead innovatively towards a greater capacity to fulfill that responsibility—to that extent, I'm pretty sure Ralph McGill would have backed me to the hilt. His name didn't become a byword in American journalism, we aren't here today to listen to a lecture in his honor, because he ever shrank from new challenges, or old verities, however risky or unpopular. And we shall truly honor his memory only by following his example.