

TAG TEAMING THE PRESS

HOW BILL AND HILLARY CLINTON WORK
TOGETHER TO HANDLE THE MEDIA



JAMES E. MUELLER

Tag Teaming the Press

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For our parents:

H. E. “Jim” Mueller, Lenore (Swan) Mueller,

James A. Hays, and Emily June (Van Horne) Hays

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Acknowledgments

Because of her illustrious career covering the White House, Helen Thomas is one of the most recognizable journalists in the world. She is also one of the most gracious. I've interviewed her for two books, including this one, and both times she returned calls promptly, answered questions forthrightly, and immediately granted a request for permission to use her quotes in the books. (This is a big deal in book publishing but something a lot of reporters are suspicious of because they routinely interview people and print their quotes with no more request for permission than a simple: "I'm a reporter, can I talk to you?")

In one conversation, I asked Thomas for advice on getting interviews from reporters. She said to be persistent and remember that journalists spend their lives interviewing people, so they realize they should cooperate when other writers want to interview them. Unfortunately, not all journalists share her sense of obligation, making me extremely grateful to Thomas and the other busy people who gave me their time to talk about their experiences with Bill and Hillary Clinton.

In alphabetical order, I want to thank Steve Barnes, Max Brantley, Dennis Byrd, Ernie Dumas, Ron Fournier, Paul Greenberg, Carol Griffiee, Tom Hamburger, Mel Hanks, Cragg Hines, Kathy Kiely, Carl Leubsdorf, Pat Lynch, Mike McCurry, Dick Morris, Rex Nelson, Bill Plante, Wayne Slater, Bob Steel, Helen Thomas, Douglas Turner, and Chris Usher. It was great fun to listen to their stories, and I hope I did them justice.

The main disappointment I had in writing this book—aside from the usual lament that a writer never has enough time to research and write—was the number of journalists I attempted to interview who were indifferent, uncooperative, or just plain rude. Some never responded to repeated queries for an interview, some strung me along before ultimately deciding not to talk, and

others said they didn't talk about the Clintons when they in fact had been quoted in other articles or books about the Clintons. One journalist refused to grant written confirmation of permission to publish quotes after the second draft was done, necessitating lengthy rewriting to pull those quotes. (I must admit that two journalists agreed to be interviewed but were not because we could not arrange a mutually convenient time, for which I take the blame.)

A certain amount of that type of difficulty is to be expected when conducting interviews. Indeed, in my own career as a newspaper reporter I encountered all kinds of uncooperative sources. And I had some similar problems when I wrote a book about George W. Bush's relationship with journalists called *Towel Snapping the Press: Bush's Journey from Locker-Room Antics to Message Control*. But the interview problems with the Bush book were minor compared to those I encountered in researching the Clinton book.

I don't know why getting interviews for the Bush book was easier. Maybe it was Clinton fatigue. Several Arkansas journalists said they had been interviewed so many times about the Clintons that they were tired of talking about them, and they speculated that uncooperative sources felt that exhaustion more deeply. Perhaps the Clintons seem more intimidating than Bush, and some journalists feared a backlash if they spoke frankly. Or maybe, as one Texas reporter said, people are friendlier in the Lone Star State than in the one that Hillary Clinton represents in the Senate. I leave the reader to come to his or her own conclusion.

I have an obligation as a journalism educator to point out where I think the profession could be improved. Journalists working today live in an era of unprecedented criticism, from both the left and the right, of their honesty, fairness, and news judgment. Opinion polls consistently show that public trust of journalism is decreasing and that the public has less confidence in the press than in most other public institutions. Why? One reason could be the arrogance, rudeness, and hypocrisy that I encountered in my admittedly small and unscientific sample. It stands to reason that the sense of unaccountability and self-righteousness that I faced is also encountered by members of the general public who happen to deal with journalists. Furthermore, that self-important attitude undoubtedly comes through subtly if not blatantly in the stories those journalists produce. It's an attitude that must change if the profession is ever to improve its standing with the public it purports to serve. Those who make a living by demanding that people talk to them should be able to cooperate when the shoe is on the other foot. To me, reporters who don't want to give interviews are like telemarketers who refuse to take calls at home. Bush and both the Clintons have each given the press reason to complain about access at times, but it's no wonder politicians also distrust reporters given the attitude of some members of the Fourth Estate. But again, that attitude makes me all the more grateful to the people who did grant interviews.

I wouldn't have had time to interview those people and write the book had it not been for the help of the administration of the University of North Texas. I want to thank Warren Burggren, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, Michael Monticino, associate dean of the college, and Susan Zavoina, chair of the Department of Journalism for arranging a reduced teaching load for me during the beginning of the project. Susan has been a friend as well as a colleague and has been greatly supportive of my research.

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Finally, this book could not have been written without the support of my wife, Catherine L. Mueller, who read a number of books and articles about the Clintons, providing me with valuable notes and ideas. She also edited and proofed the drafts while working at her own demanding job and taking care of our family. Her help illustrates the main theme of the book—that a couple can achieve more than one person acting alone.

Tag Teaming the Press

When one of Bill Clinton's press aides asked Kathy Kiely to come to Little Rock to interview the former president, she couldn't figure out what Clinton wanted.

Kiely had interviewed Clinton a number of times both as a reporter with the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, the state's most prominent newspaper, and also in her current job at *USA Today*. Still, the request didn't make sense because of the news angle the Clinton people suggested.

"It was the first anniversary of his library opening, and they said he wanted to have this interview to talk about what wonderful things his library had done for Little Rock, and I kept having to remind his press guy, I said, 'Well, okay, but remember, I don't work for the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* anymore, you know,'" Kiely recalled. "I work for *USA Today*, and they're not going to be as interested in urban renewal in Little Rock. But we did talk and I felt that at that point, I thought, well, why does he want to do this? And the only thing I could think of was he's auditioning for First Man. I mean, he's kind of trying to get out there and remind people of things about him and his administration that didn't have to do with bad stuff. So that was my instinct at the time, and I wasn't the only person he talked to. He talked to *Time* magazine, and so I think he was making an effort to get his name out there in a positive way that, and maybe I'm a terrible cynic, but I could only assume that part of the reason was so he'd be an asset, more of an asset to her."¹

Her, being, of course, Hillary. As is so often the case concerning the Clintons, they operate as a team, even when it appears they are operating independently. Whether running for office, raising money for campaigns, or, as this book will attempt to illustrate, dealing with the press, they use their often complementary strengths to help achieve common goals. Those strengths can

be something tangible, like a presidential library that extols a presidential record useful for the first lady running, at least in part, on positive associations with her husband's record.

Or it could be something more personal and direct. For example, Bill is an extrovert who loves to talk, sometimes too much. Hillary is more cautious, and for much of Bill's career she advised him on what to say to reporters and on occasion monitored his conversations with them.

When the *Houston Chronicle's* Cragg Hines got some time with Bill Clinton during the 1992 campaign, Hillary sat in the front seat of the car, obviously following the interview carefully. Clinton aide George Stephanopoulos arranged the interview, which was a feature story about Clinton's background as opposed to a hard-hitting piece on the campaign or policies. Hillary's attitude was in marked contrast to her husband, who was relaxed and loose, unthreatened by the subject matter.

"Hillary was, I mean, hawking every word he said," Hines recalled. "It was very interesting. I mean, you know, she was much more sort of parsing every word, and what did it sound like? And you know, here I am, I'm doing a profile and maybe—I can't recall exactly, but it was something that included his mother, so we were talking about her, and of course, [Hillary's] ears really went up when Virginia, I think, came into the conversation, because that was not, shall we say, always the most pleasant relationship."²

Hillary, the Yale-educated lawyer, who unlike Bill, had actually practiced law for a significant amount of time, brought the lawyer's discretion to their relationship. Bill, who had been governor of Arkansas for more than 10 years and attorney general for two years, brought the career politician's schmooze factor. Together they were a formidable team, although in the coming years they would discover how different the Washington press corps is from the state capital press and how they would both have to adjust their styles to the national stage. Soon enough Bill would have to realize he could not charm the national press like the Arkansas press, and Hillary would realize that lawyerly stonewalling sometimes enraged the media beast. But sitting in that car in 1992, the battles with the press over numerous scandals involving both public and private conduct were an unforeseen problem.

Together the Clintons worked hard to achieve the presidency, and although Hillary had led Bill's education reform effort in Arkansas and had also become a prominent lawyer, the couple's focus was always on Bill's political career. Just how intense a family goal it was is evident by the Clintons' reaction to Bill's upset loss in his 1980 re-election bid for the Arkansas governorship. Hillary's mother, Dorothy Rodham, said in 1992 that the election defeat was the only time she had seen her daughter cry as an adult.³

Virginia Kelley, Bill's mother, had a similar reaction. Kelley had her share of heartache in her life, losing three husbands, one of whom she remarried despite his spousal abuse, and she had to institutionalize her own mother for mental problems. But in an interview recounting her life to Hines, Kelley only teared up when she recalled Bill losing that 1980 re-election bid after his first term as governor.⁴

Bill was never defeated again, but the Clintons had plenty to cry about in terms of embarrassing news stories and harsh editorials. The press knowledge the Clintons acquired in the Washington, D.C., hard knocks school of journalism has been passed down to the current generation.

Max Brantley, a Little Rock journalist whose family has had a personal friendship with the Clintons, realized just how press savvy they had become when he saw Bill and the first daughter, Chelsea, on one of his last presidential trips to Little Rock. Brantley was granted an exclusive interview with Bill, and he saw Chelsea in the crowd of people. Brantley's daughter, Martha, and Chelsea were friends and had even gone to school camps together. Brantley hadn't seen Chelsea for a while, so he asked her conversationally how she was doing and what her plans were. She said, "Are you asking me this as Martha's father, or as a reporter?"

Brantley laughed when he recalled the incident later. "I mean she had a very sophisticated view, like her mother, and I [said], 'Well, as Martha's father, is fine, I was really just asking it as a personal aside.' But it would seem as if she had been well-schooled by her mother in press relations."⁵

Having a child, mother, and spouse schooled in press relations is not just a good idea for candidates but is really essential in the current media-saturated environment. Family members can hardly expect to avoid comment by someone writing on the Internet, even if the mainstream press agrees to keep hands off the children. And in the 2008 campaign, interviews with Rudy Giuliani's son about his parents' divorce indicate that those types of agreements—honored fairly well during the presidencies of Clinton and George W. Bush—are in the past.

On the other hand, most politicians welcome family members as surrogate candidates who can help cover more ground, raising money and enthusiasm at events the candidate can't make. If the family members are articulate, they can even soften some of the candidate's harsher imagery and appeal to a constituency that is skeptical of the candidate. For example, George W. Bush often called his wife, Laura, his best asset and a reason for voting for him. Laura Bush, the calm former librarian, lent a counterpoint of sophistication to George's cowboy, shoot-from-the-lip image.

Hillary, too, campaigned strenuously for Bill, although some impolitic remarks forced her to the background for a time during the 1992 campaign. In

response to a question about her working for an Arkansas law firm that did state business while Bill was governor, Hillary sarcastically said she could have stayed home and baked cookies and had teas. At about the same time, Republicans charged that a journal article she had written about 20 years earlier compared marriage to slavery. The public reaction was such that Stephanopoulos temporarily became a surrogate for Hillary, doing a *Nightline* interview to explain her position.⁶

Yet overall Hillary Clinton was a significant help in dealing with the press. Even the apparent missteps like the “cookies and teas” quotes could be a positive in some ways by taking potential negative press attention away from Bill. As long as pundits and reporters were attacking her positions, they were leaving Bill alone. But perhaps more importantly, Hillary was often a calming voice for Bill, offering reassurance, support, and counsel behind the scenes. When Bill raged about a negative article in front of a reporter from another news organization, Hillary took her husband out of the room so he could compose himself.⁷ When the press revealed allegations about a long-running affair Bill had in Arkansas, Hillary supervised the crucial *60 Minutes* interview that acknowledged he had “caused pain” in their marriage but that they were still a loving couple.⁸ Later, when Bill was president and faced the sex scandal that led to his impeachment, Hillary took to the media to argue that the story was the concoction of a right-wing conspiracy.

The media-handling partnership goes both ways. Bill got very angry during the 1992 primary campaign when one of his main rivals for the Democratic nomination, former California governor Jerry Brown, attacked Hillary about her work at the Rose Law Firm in Little Rock, suggesting improprieties because the firm did business with the state while Bill was governor. During a campaign debate, Bill moved toward Brown and said he didn’t want anyone attacking his wife. According to Sidney Blumenthal, after the debate a man had told Clinton that he should have punched Brown for picking on Hillary. “And he [Clinton] said, ‘Yeah, yeah.’ Clinton was extremely enlivened by this whole idea of physical combat in defense of his wife.”⁹

And when *New York Times* columnist William Safire wrote that Hillary was “a congenital liar,” Bill’s press secretary, Mike McCurry, said if Clinton wasn’t the president he would have punched Safire in the nose.¹⁰

Now that Bill is a former president and his wife a senator and presidential candidate, he is even more free to attack media coverage. In fact, Clinton’s finger-jabbing reaction to Chris Wallace’s sharp questioning during a FOX television interview in September 2006 can be seen as not only a defense of Bill’s presidency but of what at that time was still a potential Hillary presidential campaign—a campaign that would of course be closely associated with Bill Clinton’s record.

In fact, the Wallace interview was the initial inspiration for this book and its title. Whether Clinton's outburst was planned or not, it prompted an image of Bill entering the arena once again to defend his wife by defending their White House years together. Like two wrestlers who compete one at a time against a common enemy, Bill and Hillary have switched roles regularly throughout their shared political life, one in the ring while the other cheers and offers advice from the corner. In this dramatic bout called the 2008 presidential campaign, could Bill Clinton be the ultimate tag-teaming partner? He could be the ideal campaign aide: experienced, charming, and able to raise funds, wow crowds, and spin and plant stories with the showmanship of P. T. Barnum and the fervor of Billy Graham. What reporter could refuse a phone call from a former president of the United States who wanted to suggest a new story or a different angle on an old one?

On the other hand, Bill could be the ultimate nightmare partner for this match—a family member whose scandalous behavior brings just the wrong attention at just the right time for the opposition. This is the scenario that had some Democrats wondering early in the campaign if it would simply be better to nominate a candidate not named Clinton—a candidate who would not spark memories of Whitewater, Filegate, Travelgate, and countless “bimbo eruptions.” Conservative columnist Michael Medved even suggested satirically a number of options for Hillary, including shipping her husband overseas as a goodwill ambassador or keeping him out of sight in their Chappaqua, New York, home with the excuse that he was too ill to campaign. Medved, writing at about the time of the funeral for former president Gerald R. Ford, went so far as to joke that the best solution for Hillary would be if Bill died because she would get the attention from the state funeral and sympathy from the public.¹¹ Medved's over-the-top satire does have some basis in fact in the sense that Hillary's popularity usually went up when she was seen as the long-suffering victim of Bill's philandering.

Hillary wrote in her memoir, *Living History*, that she decided to stay with Bill because she loved him and “cherished the years we had spent together.”¹² But Hillary has often appeared conflicted about just what Bill's role should be in their shared political fight now that she has tagged him and jumped into the ring herself. When she accepted the nomination for Senate at the New York State Democratic convention in 2000, she vacillated over whether to have Bill present. Her aides disagreed, some arguing he would overshadow her, with others saying it would look strange for a candidate's spouse not to appear at such a traditional event. In the end, she wanted him with her. His appearance on the stage turned out to be a sort of compromise because he stood by her but did not speak, an extraordinary thing for a president to do at a public event.¹³

Political experts, too, are unsure what role Bill would have in a Hillary presidential campaign (or administration). Mark Halperin of ABC and John F. Harris, former *Washington Post* reporter and Bill Clinton biographer, wrote an engaging and thorough analysis of the campaigning styles of Bill, Hillary, and George W. Bush but could not come up with a good answer for how Bill might affect the 2008 election. They argued that Bill could be an asset because he is “the best political strategist in the Democratic Party,” but on the other hand, he might be too close to his wife to give her the best advice, and his aides might fight with hers.¹⁴

Some writers have looked to past political marriages for clues to how Hillary and Bill might handle the 2008 campaign. *Dallas Morning News* Washington Bureau Chief Carl Leubsdorf noted that voters have gotten “two for the price of one” long before the Clintons popularized the saying in the 1992 campaign. He pointed out that Woodrow Wilson’s second wife, Edith, practically ran the White House after Wilson’s incapacitating stroke, and that Eleanor Roosevelt was a major player in Franklin Roosevelt’s administration and “served as his eyes and ears around the country.” Leubsdorf wrote that a spouse can both help and hurt a candidate, citing Judi Giuliani as an example in the latter category because she has had multiple marriages, and Rudy Giuliani’s children reportedly blamed her for their estrangement from their father.¹⁵

“No presidential spouse was ever as influential or controversial as Mrs. Clinton,” he wrote. “While her handling of health care proved a minus, her decision to stick with Mr. Clinton after the Monica Lewinsky scandal probably helped him maintain popularity.”¹⁶

The Clintons’ situation is also comparable to that of a pair of Texas governors, Miriam (Ma) and James (Pa) Ferguson who served in the early part of the twentieth century. Pa Ferguson was impeached and removed from office in 1917, but his wife won election in 1924, campaigning on the idea of two governors for the price of one. According to Texas historian Kent Biffle, Ma “deferred to Pa for decisions and oratory. His desk was next to hers in the Capitol.”¹⁷ The Fergusons also shared a common scandal—handing out questionable pardons. The Fergusons granted so many pardons for favors that the process was referred to as “buying a bull from Farmer Jim.” Biffle noted that the Fergusons pardoned mostly poor folks, but Bill Clinton’s last-day-in-office flurry of pardons included “millionaires and a billionaire—tax evaders, high-profile dope dealers and variously enriched scam artists.” If the Clintons campaign together in Texas, they won’t be able to avoid reminders of the Fergusons, Biffle concluded.¹⁸

Bill Clinton certainly tried to avoid campaign talk when he came to Texas to speak in suburban Dallas shortly after his wife’s announcement that she

would run for president. The *Dallas Morning News* reported before the speech that it was shrouded in “secrecy”—so much that executives from the event’s sponsor AEG Live and spokesmen at Clinton’s New York foundation would not return calls about it. Tickets were available for purchase by the general public, and the press was encouraged to buy tickets but not invited to cover it. One spokesman for AEG Live told reporter Gromer Jeffers Jr. that Clinton would talk about global issues, but, “He’s not going to stand there and talk about Hillary all night.”¹⁹

He didn’t have to. The crowd reaction when he casually mentioned her name showed the obvious association between the Bill Clinton presidency and the Hillary Clinton presidential campaign. Toward the beginning of his speech, which focused on economics, energy, and health care, Bill mentioned following the news from “the little town in New York where Hillary and I live” as a way of showing the interconnected nature of the modern world. But at the mere mention of her name, he was interrupted by such cheering that he had to acknowledge it and said, “Your applause means I won’t get to see her often over the next year.”²⁰

After he had described the main problems facing the world, Clinton asked rhetorically who could fix them. Someone in the crowd shouted “Hillary!” which prompted more laughter and cheers. Bill chuckled and said he couldn’t say anything or he’d have to file a Federal Election Commission form for this speech. He did admit that he had gone to the New York State Fair in Syracuse with Hillary. “That’s the one place that a governor from Arkansas can help the senator from New York,” he said. “I’m good at the state fair.”²¹

Bill is also good at some not-so-subtle media bashing. Urging the crowd to focus on finding solutions to the troubles he described, he warned them not to let the media distract them with “personal attacks” on leaders. If the press tries to do that, “We should tell them to take a hike,” Clinton said. “We need to get back into the solution business rather than name-calling.”²²

The speech was a preview of how Bill could be an effective surrogate. Give a speech to stir up the faithful, reminding them of the successes of his administration. (Clinton said upon the enthusiastic greeting he received that, “It’s quite obvious we have 90 percent of the Democrats in north Texas out here.”²³) Avoid press queries and still wind up with two stories in the local daily newspaper even while suggesting that any bad press coverage is a distraction of real issues.

Will that early 2007 speech be the pattern for Bill’s role? The phrase bandied about by pundits and reporters, including a number interviewed for this book, is that Hillary’s run is *sui generis* (“of its own kind”). Because the situation is unique, nobody knows for sure, including the Clintons, how Hillary’s connection to Bill will affect her race, or for that matter, her presidency if she wins. On

the surface, it seems that the Clintons' complementary styles of handling the media would be an advantage.

Kiely said whether the situation is good or bad for the Clintons ultimately depends on how the public sees their relationship. "If you drain everything out of it, you could say, well, this could be an advantage, you know, I mean, he could fill in her lacks and vice versa," Kiely said. "But I think it's a lot more complicated than that with the Clintons, because first of all, he's a former president, okay, so how are people going to feel about that, basically giving a former president kind of a back door third term? Is that how they're going to perceive it? We don't know, you know. If they do, that could be a downer. On the other hand, people really like Bill Clinton, he's popular, so maybe that's an upper. On the other hand, do people really want to go through the whole, like, picture of Bill Clinton in the Oval Office again, and what could he be doing there?"²⁴

Kiely said that if the New York experience is a precursor of Hillary's presidential campaign, Bill will make few public appearances in the beginning because the campaign staff will be worried about how his presence will be received by the voters.

"There are so many firsts here," Kiely said. "You know, she's the first serious woman candidate who really has a shot. She's also the first first lady to try to do something like this. So being the first woman is complicated enough. Then you say the first first lady, so she's really trying to go back to the White House, and she's got this husband who served two terms . . . and then there's that whole, you know, Bill Clinton sex life issue, so I mean, it's just very, very complicated."

Because Bill is such a knowledgeable politician, he can give her campaign tips, she said. "To the extent that he can advise her behind the scenes and be helpful to her, that has to be a plus, but whether or not he's going to be a plus in a public way, I think, remains to be seen," Kiely said. "It's hard for me to figure how they're going to do that. It's so complicated."²⁵

Ron Fournier, who covered the Clintons for the Associated Press in both Little Rock and Washington, also said it was difficult to say whether Bill would be an advantage or a disadvantage for Hillary in dealing with the media.

"You know, I can't predict the future," Fournier said. "In a way, it would be an advantage that gives her another way to get a message out. It's another body to have in another city. It is, you know, two voices for the price of one. There's nobody who I've ever been around politically who has a better tenor and a gut for what to say and how to say it to connect with people. So it's a great advantage. The potential disadvantage is, again, he doesn't know when not to think out loud. He will test drive messages in front of people. And that

got him in trouble as president and could get him in trouble as potential “first man.” I don’t know whether the advantage will outweigh the detriments of that. That’s what I can’t tell you. But there are huge numbers on both sides as advantages and disadvantages.”²⁶

The ultimate extent and affect of Bill’s work on Hillary’s campaign is beyond the scope of this book. Indeed, the 2008 campaign proved to be so fluid that Hillary’s campaign had died and been resurrected at least twice while the book was being edited. The conventional wisdom in the Spring of 2008 was that Bill had been a detriment by making impolitic remarks about Hillary’s rival, Illinois Senator Barack Obama. The argument went that Bill had alienated voters who wanted a change from “politics as usual” by making denigrating remarks about Obama and his victory in the South Carolina primary. Obama went on to a series of primary victories that only stopped on March 4, after Bill had been relegated to low-profile events. But the conventional wisdom was wrong so often in the unusual 2008 campaign (on the Republican side, frontrunner Rudy Giuliani withdrew without winning a single primary, and left-for-dead John McCain secured the nomination after a lengthy battle with surprising runner-up Mike Huckabee) that there is little reason to place confidence in the early assessments of Bill’s role.

The first half of the primary campaign emphasized how risky it is to make predictions, especially when they involve resilient but controversial politicians like the Clintons. While we can’t predict the future, we can look to the past for clues about what might happen. More importantly, we can look to the past to help us understand the present. This book focuses more on the latter—examining how the Clintons dealt with the press and how their relationship with the press evolved as the institution itself changed. Love them or hate them, the Clintons are among the most fascinating political couples in American history. In 2007, Hillary officially entered the media ring while a popular former president left to work the corner and the crowd. For political journalists who are used to facing candidates of varying skills but spouses who play a supportive rather than an active role, this presidential campaign will be a unique challenge.

When it was suggested to Fournier that the 2008 campaign would be a particularly fun election to watch, he readily agreed.

“You know, I would cover this one for free,” he said.²⁷

NOTES

1. Kathy Kiely, telephone interview by author, tape recording, 26 January 2007.
2. Cragg Hines, telephone interview by author, tape recording, 1 March 2007.

3. Jeff Gerth and Don Van Natta Jr., *Her Way: The Hopes and Ambitions of Hillary Rodham Clinton* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2007), 68.
4. Hines, interview, 1 March 2007.
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We to They

Bill Clinton, who spent most of his presidency tormented by press investigations into assorted scandals, actually considered being a journalist himself while he was a college student.

Clinton was studying at Oxford, but the draft and possible service in the Vietnam War were interfering with his ambition of a political career. Anyone who has even casually followed Clinton's career is aware of the draft dodging allegations and the self-absorbed letter he wrote to the University of Arkansas ROTC commander admitting that he tried enrolling in that program to maintain his "political viability within the system."

What is less well known is that Clinton was so worried that his efforts to avoid the draft would ruin his political career that he "seriously considered" becoming a journalist as a second career choice. He told Gary Wills in a 1992 interview that being a reporter would have allowed him to "at least comment on the great events of my time."¹

Mel Hanks, an investigative reporter who covered Clinton for KARK television in Little Rock, said he had heard a similar story from one of Clinton's aides when he was governor. Hanks, who like many reporters experienced both Clinton's charm and his temper, said the anecdote reflected Clinton's ambivalence toward the press.²

"I always thought on one hand he had a love/hate relationship with us," Hanks said. "On one hand, he kind of understood what we did and wanted to be part of that. But on the other hand, he had a lot of personal interests and professional interests that he thought we might be endangering or challenging, and he considered us to be, if not outright enemies, at least someone to really be cautious of."³

In his memoir, written more than 10 years after the Wills interview, Clinton noted that his fellow Rhodes Scholar, Rick Stearns, told him his temperament was unsuited to politics. “He said my gifts were more literary, that I should be a writer because I wrote better than I spoke, and besides, I wasn’t tough enough for politics,” Clinton recalled. But the future president dismissed the idea, thinking at the time that he was at least tough enough to handle politics, and “I didn’t think I could do anything else as well.”⁴

His future first lady was at about that same time exploring her career options while studying at Wellesley College. According to Roger Morris, author of a political biography of the Clintons, Hillary “helped out” at one of the new alternative newspapers in Boston some time during her last two years at Wellesley.⁵ Hillary didn’t mention the work in her memoir, writing instead that her choice of careers upon graduation was between grassroots social work with Chicago activist Saul Alinsky or getting a law degree. She chose the latter, believing, as she wrote, “that the system could be changed from within.”⁶

Although many journalists insist that Hillary Clinton can be as charming—if not more so—in private interviews as Bill Clinton is at public events, few have ever said she enjoys reporters or interviews.

“Bill was always friendlier with the press than Hillary,” said Max Brantley, a reporter who has covered them for years for Arkansas newspapers and whose family was friends with the Clinton family. “Hillary has had a deep suspicion about the press that probably deepened as the years went on. I think she kind of took the view that you could never satisfy the media. If you give them information, they just want more . . . so I think she had an inclination to be more guarded about what they did.”⁷

Although the Clintons may have had differing attitudes about how best to relate to the press, they both grew up as baby boomers in an American society that was evolving into a media-saturated culture. And like most educated people of their generation, they absorbed media content and adapted to the development of new forms of communication. Both wrote about following the news as kids in their memoirs.

“They were people who read voraciously—books and newspapers,” Brantley said. “I mean they were believers in newspapers insofar as their being sources of information. What the *New York Times* said, what the *Washington Post* said, was important to them. They were consumers of the printed word.”⁸

Clinton aide George Stephanopoulos described their bedroom in the governor’s mansion in Arkansas as including two nightstands: “one for him, one for her—both loaded down with novels, magazines, issue papers, and spiritual books. I hadn’t yet met Hillary, but seeing the night tables made me picture the two of them propped up late at night, passing their reading back and forth, arguing, laughing, educating each other, sharing a passion for ideas.”⁹

The Clintons' lives spanned fantastic changes in the American media. When they were born, newspapers were still the dominant news medium for most Americans, and radio was a prime entertainment medium, although Americans came to rely on the new broadcast medium for breaking news during World War II. But both newspapers and radio were soon challenged by television, which also helped lead to the demise or decline of mass general-interest magazines like *Life*, *Look*, and the *Saturday Evening Post*.

The Clintons also witnessed changes in how the press related to celebrities and politicians, becoming ever more intrusive and ever more in opposition to the government, helping to bring down the presidencies of Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon while publicizing the civil rights movement and the protests against the Vietnam War. Much has been made of the fact that the Clintons were the first baby boomer couple in the White House and were a product of the tumultuous societal changes their generation experienced. *Newsweek's* Howard Fineman, for example, wrote that Bill Clinton would be the "first sensitive male" president: "He's the first President to have attended both Lamaze classes and family therapy (as part of his brother's drug rehabilitation). He can speak in the rhythms and rhetoric of pop psychology and self-actualization. He can search for the inner self while seeking connectedness with the greater whole."¹⁰

But both Bill and Hillary realized that individuals were connected to this greater whole through the mass media that they grew up consuming. For Bill, the media connection started with newspapers; when he was only about four years old, he was reading headlines.¹¹ But he also vividly recalled that his family got a new television in 1956 when he was 10 years old. He enjoyed watching baseball and popular kids' shows like *Howdy Dooddy*. "But strange as it was for a kid of ten years old, what really dominated my TV viewing that summer were the Republican and Democratic conventions," Clinton wrote in his memoir. "I sat on the floor right in front of the TV and watched them both, transfixed. It sounds crazy, but I felt right at home in the world of politics and politicians."¹²

In a few years he would be in that world, when, during a trip to Washington as a representative of Boys Nation from Arkansas, he briefly met his idol John F. Kennedy at the White House. The moment was captured in a photograph and video that have been reproduced so often as to be a cliché of Clinton's destiny (or tragedy). At the time, the photograph was reprinted in the *Hot Springs Sentinel-Record*, making him a local celebrity. The photo also was printed in the Hot Springs High School yearbook, and Clinton often signed that photo when autographing the book. He also used it as an opening line, saying, "Shake the hand that shook the hand of John F. Kennedy."¹³

In a few years Clinton had graduated from a cheesy pickup line to actually working on a real campaign, and the job led to his first television appearance.

Clinton, who was home for the summer from Georgetown University, volunteered for the 1966 Frank Holt campaign for Arkansas governor. The campaign staff assigned him the job of driving Holt's wife and two daughters around the state in search of votes. Even as a college student, he seemed to know the media as well as the politicians. At one point they saw a rural house on fire and helped evacuate the residents and their puppies. As Clinton biographer David Maraniss related the incident, Mrs. Holt ordered them to leave before the firefighters arrived, even though Clinton tried to convince her to stay because it would be "good press."¹⁴

Clinton mentioned the episode in passing in his memoir, but left out his thoughts at the time on the publicity value. He focused on a TV appearance and some speeches he gave on Holt's behalf. The campaign bought time for a 15-minute TV show that featured Holt's college volunteers explaining why they supported him. At the time, Clinton wrote to his girlfriend that he "looked ugly" but that many people said the show was "the best political program they had ever seen."¹⁵ Later, writing in his memoir, Clinton merely recalled that he enjoyed his first TV appearance; he wrote more about the speech he gave for Holt in his boyhood home of Hope, where he noted that he "even got a nice write-up in the local paper, the *Hope Star*."¹⁶

Holt lost the race, but Clinton won a connection that would prove vital to his career—he was recommended for an internship in the office of Arkansas Senator J. William Fulbright. One of Clinton's jobs was to read newspapers and clip pertinent articles for the senator and his staff. For nearly two years, he regularly read the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Washington Star*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Baltimore Sun*, and *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*—the last to give the staff news from the "heartland."¹⁷

At about the same time, Clinton became a news subject himself, at least back home, where he became somewhat of a local celebrity in Hot Springs, Arkansas, because he had won a Rhodes scholarship. Steve Barnes, a long-time Arkansas television reporter, was then graduating from high school, and Clinton was invited to speak at his church. The young scholar spoke about the evils of McCarthyism. "I thought his timing was off," recalled Barnes. "He delivered a few remarks, and went into this—nothing inappropriate about it—but he began to talk about McCarthyism, and I'm glancing out at the audience, and it's mostly folks in their 50s and 60s and older who thought McCarthy may have been onto something, so I'm not sure that it went over terribly well."¹⁸

Nevertheless, biographer Morris noted that a newspaper reporter who interviewed Clinton seemed impressed with the young student who had made Hot Springs proud in 1968. But with the arrogance of youth, and in what was certainly among Clinton's first formal interviews, the future president struck

a “slightly unctuous and condescending pose,” saying the Oxford education allowed the students to “have a great advantage over rank-and-file people in our country.”¹⁹

Four years later, Clinton was still in school—this time studying law at Yale—but he was already more than a rank-and-file college student with a prestigious scholarship. He took time off from his studies to join the national staff of the George McGovern presidential campaign. After the national convention, Clinton was assigned to help coordinate the campaign in Texas, and part of his duties included dealing with media in that region. Barnes, meanwhile, had started working as a television journalist for a Little Rock station, a fact that didn’t escape the media-savvy Clinton.

“He looked me up,” said Barnes, who added that he thinks he was the first person to interview Clinton on TV in Arkansas. “I don’t know how he knew who I was, but I was working in journalism. I was one step above cub reporter, but he looked me up. We went to coffee, and he filled my head full of McGovern, and I remember kind of thinking, ‘I’m not sure he believes what he’s saying or not, but he makes it sound convincing.’ McGovern had no chance of carrying Arkansas or Texas, either one, and I suspect he knew that, but he had an agenda. That’s all. He had a job to do for McGovern, and he was doing it, and that happened to coincide with his plan [to go into politics] as well.”²⁰

Clinton was apparently a little smoother than he had been as an Oxford student telling the home folks what the learned people thought. “I hate to use the word glib, but he was quick on his feet,” Barnes said. “He parried well. As I recall, to any suggestion that McGovern had faced a really uphill struggle in the South, he had a quick enough response, which was, ‘Nobody said it would be easy.’”²¹

It was on the McGovern campaign that Clinton and Hillary first worked together in politics. After Hillary completed a summer law clerk job in California, Bill invited her to join him in Texas. Hillary didn’t work with the media, instead first spending her time registering voters in Austin, and finishing up by helping Betsey Wright run the San Antonio campaign. Wright, an experienced Democratic operative from Texas, later became a key Clinton press aide during his governorship and part of his presidency, famously responsible for handling the “bimbo eruptions”—the various allegations of real and imagined affairs that dogged Clinton’s career. Hillary devoted a scant three pages of her 528-page memoir to the McGovern campaign, but she admitted that it did give her a healthy respect for the importance of the local campaign workers to the national effort and what it takes to get ready for a visit from the candidate.²²

She wrote her memoir more than 30 years after the campaign, and one of the main impressions she recalled was the importance of organization and

preparation—something she would be known for in her approach to interviews and public appearances.

“This was my first time to see an advance team in action,” she wrote. “I learned that they operated under tremendous stress, wanted all the essentials—phones, copies, a stage, chairs, sound system—to appear yesterday, and that in a tight or a losing race, somebody has to be responsible for paying the bills.”²³

The McGovern campaign was her first experience working for a Democratic candidate, but not her first foray into presidential politics. Hillary was raised in Chicago in a Republican family, and as an eighth-grader went with a friend to some questionable neighborhoods to check voter lists with addresses to investigate fraud in the 1960 election. She found evidence of fraud, but enraged her father for going in potentially dangerous areas without an adult.²⁴

But the disobedience had been for what she thought at the time was a good cause and was emblematic of her interest in social activism and politics. Her activism led to a couple of media appearances before she even went to college. When Hillary was 12, she and some friends raised money for the United Way, and her hometown newspaper, the *Park Ridge Advocate*, ran a photograph of the kids turning in the money.²⁵

In high school, she belonged to a Cultural Values Committee organized by the administration to resolve clique issues that had led to fights at the school and at sporting events. The committee came up with recommendations to ease the conflicts, and several students, again including Hillary, appeared on a Chicago TV show. Hillary wrote that the experience was not only her first on TV but also her first involvement in “an organized effort to stress American values of pluralism, mutual respect and understanding.”²⁶

What she didn’t acknowledge but was undoubtedly true was that it was also her first experience in noting the power of the media in communicating your ideas. She developed that idea further at Wellesley, when she read *In the Human Grain* by Walter J. Ong, an associate of Marshall McLuhan, the legendary author of *The Medium Is the Message*. Hillary biographer Gail Sheehy pointed out that Ong wrote about new media creating a “global village” with “electronic town hall” meetings, and that these types of meetings were in fact what Bill Clinton used to great effect in his presidential campaigns. According to Sheehy, “Hillary thought Ong’s book was one of the most important she had ever read.”²⁷

The lessons stayed with Hillary and can be seen as an influence on her later work. When in 1996 she published *It Takes a Village*, her book about how to improve society to create a better environment for children, she noted the significant impact media has on children both for good and ill.²⁸ When she ran for Senate in 2000, she sparked her campaign with a “listening tour” of New

York cities, gaining publicity and votes with similar town hall–style meetings. Her 2008 presidential campaign started with the same type of call for dialogue, urging voters, “Let’s Talk.” She followed that theme through much of the primary campaign, doing best in question-and-answer events, small settings compared to the packed arenas typical of Barack Obama events, which were often compared to rock concerts. The different settings illustrated a criticism of Obama’s campaign made by Hillary and her supporters—that it was mostly show, not substance, and that Hillary offered experienced leadership.

The media effects studies must have had such a long-lasting impact on Hillary because she saw them in action when she was a college student, particularly during the riots at the Democratic convention in Chicago in 1968. Hillary interpreted the student/police fighting as real-world evidence of what had been classroom theory, Sheehy wrote. The protest leaders had tipped off the television journalists that there would be an event worth covering, then provoked the police. The ensuing coverage of the police beating the students illustrated the students’ point that something was wrong with the system. “Now she was seeing in flesh and blood how the country’s political consciousness would be reshaped by the clever manipulation of television.”²⁹

But Hillary wasn’t just an observer of media effects while she was a college student. She also had some of her first lessons in how to deal with the press directly. As president of the student government, she was both interviewed by the student press and a user of it. Sheehy wrote that Hillary would take the editor of the student paper with her to meetings with the university president, “prepping her before the meeting and working her over afterward,” to get stuff done.³⁰ She even got some coverage in the national media for her commencement address in which she criticized the politics of the main speaker, Senator Edward Brooke of Massachusetts. *Life* ran her picture in its June 20, 1969, special issue on commencement addresses.

At Yale Law School, Hillary was associate editor of *The Yale Review* and worked on a whole issue devoted to the Black Panther New Haven trial.³¹ But unlike her husband, she never expressed an interest in a journalism career, preferring instead to, as she said, change the system from the inside.

Her first big chance at effecting that change came with her work as a staff member for John Doar, a moderate Republican from Wisconsin who was the chief counsel for the House Judiciary Committee for its inquiry into the potential impeachment of President Richard Nixon. Doar placed an extreme emphasis on secrecy. Moore described the committee’s offices, prepared to Doar’s specifications, as “a grated, guarded, wired fortress” and noted that Doar demanded “mute confidentiality with respect to the media and the public.”³²

Hillary recalled Doar’s secretiveness admiringly in her memoir: “There were never any leaks from our investigation, so the media were grasping for

any nugget of human interest to report.” The press targeted Hillary for one of those nuggets because she was one of the few women involved and so was newsworthy, at least as a feature story. When a reporter asked Hillary about her position, she knew she “would never be let out in public again” by Doar, who had gone so far as to warn his employees to not keep diaries and to put trash only in specially designated containers.³³ Years later, she contrasted that experience with the impeachment investigation of her own husband’s scandals. People inside the office of Special Prosecutor Kenneth Starr had apparently leaked information to the press during the investigation,³⁴ and Starr released grand jury information in the Starr Report. The Doar committee, however, had followed the “letter and spirit of the Constitution,” she wrote. “That investigation was carried out under tight security and confidentiality for eight months before articles of impeachment having to do with President Nixon’s actions as President were presented to the Judiciary Committee.”³⁵

Hillary’s subsequent reputation for secrecy and avoiding the press can be traced to her work on the Nixon impeachment inquiry. Hillary’s future actions, like urging Bill to withhold Whitewater documents and the way she banned reporters from her health care meetings, make more sense when viewed with a knowledge of her history.

Brantley acknowledged that Hillary is usually blamed for the Clintons not cooperating with *New York Times* reporter Jeff Gerth on his initial Whitewater investigative stories, whetting the media’s appetite for the then dormant scandal. Hillary argued against appointing a special counsel to investigate Whitewater, and events proved her right in that case as it turned into a “10-year-nightmare,” Brantley said.

“She just has a suspicion of the press and a belief that they’re—you know I don’t know what drives it—my guess would be that it would be just the thought that newspaper guys are just out to get a story, and the best story is a negative story not a positive story,” he said. “But in general, it’s better to be open because secrecy looks like you’ve got something to hide,” he said. “But Hillary came out of the Watergate era, where she’d been on the Watergate investigation and knew that the roots of that began with investigative reporting in the *Washington Post*.”³⁶

After Nixon resigned on August 9, 1974, Hillary left Washington to follow Bill to Arkansas in time for his first run for public office, a congressional race against John Paul Hammerschmidt, whom Bill thought would be weakened, like most Republican candidates, by Watergate fallout. Hillary brought her organizational skills and the lessons in secrecy she had learned on the impeachment committee to the campaign. Even her family moved down to help, her brothers hanging posters and her crusty Republican father, Hugh Rodham, manning the telephones.³⁷

Whether it was Hillary's doing or not, the campaign workers displayed a messianic zeal around Bill, assuming everyone would love the candidate as much as they did, wrote Clinton biographer Roger Morris. The staff would beg reporters to come by for a story and tell them they hoped it would be a good one. "Clinton staffers would commonly project a bitter animus toward political opponents or even partial critics and recoil angrily, almost as if betrayed, when a journalist covering their champion did not soon enter in."³⁸

Despite the devotion of his followers, Clinton lost in a close race. But he had gained a statewide reputation and a sense among Arkansas politicians and pundits that he was a comer and would soon hold statewide office. Hillary, too, took the defeat in stride and married him in 1975. They temporarily settled in teaching jobs at the University of Arkansas Law School while Clinton planned his campaign for attorney general, which he won handily the next year.

That year, 1976, the Clintons had finally moved from progressives working outside the system or for maverick candidates working to get in charge of the system—like McGovern—to being part of the system. They were the establishment, no longer the idealistic students making intellectual critiques of it. Their role vis-à-vis the press would be forever changed as well, although they didn't quite realize it because the press had appeared to be on their side. In reality, the press was undergoing its own changes, and those changes would lead it to oppose anyone who was in power. While Bill and Hillary and other liberals of their generation were protesting against the war and in favor of civil rights, the press had shifted from being friendly with government officials—almost to the point of being part of the government—to being a de facto opposition party, focused on conflict and investigation.

When the Clintons were outside the system, they were on the same side as the press, which, in the eyes of 1960s progressives, was one of the main heroes of Watergate and Vietnam and would be an ally when they took the reins of power. Bill Clinton said as much in an interview after he had left the presidency: "Those of us of a certain age at least grew up with this almost . . . unrealistic set of expectations (of the press)."³⁹

Hillary was similarly disappointed when the Clintons went to Washington and consultant Dick Morris told her that she should dress in a more appealing way and learn to look warmly at the camera. Hillary didn't like it and said she had assumed that when she "came to Washington there would be all these liberated feminist reporters, and I could be myself." Instead, she found the D.C. press was "worse than Arkansas."⁴⁰

But Hillary was critical of the press as an institution even when she lived in Arkansas. Incredibly, only three years after working diligently on Nixon's ouster, she was arguing against the excesses of the press spawned by Watergate.

While Bill was attorney general, she gave a number of speeches on various topics, including her belief that the media was preoccupied with investigative reporting rather than simply reporting the news. “One of our problems is trying to control a press that is far out of line because of Watergate,” she said in a 1977 speech to the Little Rock Rotary Club.⁴¹

Bill, while he was president and undergoing his own Watergate-like press investigations, took solace that some earlier presidents had battled the press as well, although he wasn’t necessarily sympathetic toward Nixon. “He railed at the scandal mongers in the press with Jefferson,” recalled press aide George Stephanopoulos, who wrote that Clinton envied John F. Kennedy because “The press always covered up for him.”⁴²

The press did give Kennedy a major break by not writing about his affairs, but it was not so much a matter of covering up but of different standards about what was considered coverable, whether it was out of respect for good taste, individual privacy, or the institution of the presidency. The Kennedy years were arguably the high point of press/presidency cooperation in a relationship that was always fraught with the competing tension between those who want to report secrets and those who want to keep them. For much of the history of the United States, relations between journalists and presidents have swung back and forth between hostile partisans trying to bring down administrations that they saw as the enemy to unquestioning transmitters of the president’s policies—almost a public relations arm of the White House.

Clinton was right in finding kinship with Jefferson against the press because the sage of Monticello had held office during the period when newspapers were rabidly partisan. It was a period when editors routinely mocked the persons and policies of officeholders and even wrote about private matters. Jefferson even had his own Monica Lewinsky-style scandal when one editor wrote about his supposed relationship with a slave. Jefferson, the author of one of the hoariest quotes about press freedom—that he would rather live in a country without a government than a country without newspapers—early realized the power of the press and raised funds and recruited editors to defend his positions and attack his opponents. Jefferson, in a sense, had a “war room” like Clinton.

Although the extreme viciousness of the party press gave way to an emphasis on profits and a gradual professionalization of journalism, newspapers typically identified with a political party through most of the nineteenth century. As late as 1876, some Democratic newspapers, for example, accused the Republican president Ulysses S. Grant of murdering General George Custer at the Battle of the Little Bighorn by keeping troops on Reconstruction duty in the South instead of on the frontier. Some stories even suggested that Grant had presented Sitting Bull with the rifle that was used to kill Custer. Many

journalism historians believe the strict party loyalty of the press did not end until the 1884 election when Republican newspapers abandoned candidate James G. Blaine because of allegations of widespread corruption.⁴³

Even so, the rise of supposedly objective, or neutral, news pages did not always produce friendly presidential press relations. Historian James E. Pollard noted that although Theodore Roosevelt had established open and regular relations with reporters, Woodrow Wilson and Herbert Hoover had both reduced contact with the press—Wilson to avoid embarrassing questions during World War I and Hoover when relations became strained during the end of his term.⁴⁴

But Pollard's book, which was published in 1947, sounds almost quaint today as he asserted that "the relationship of the White House to the press and radio is an extra-legal fixture and nothing short of a genuine emergency could justify Mr. Truman or his successors in reducing its scope, much less abandoning it altogether."⁴⁵ Harry Truman's successors some 50 years later have not completely abandoned press conferences, but they certainly have reduced their number and scope and likely will continue to do so in the foreseeable future.

Pollard, writing in the glow of America's World War II triumph and before the stalemate in Korea, saw America's press system as the best in the world. "The heads of other states occasionally receive the press, and in rare instances, grant usually harmless and pointless interviews," he wrote. "The free and easy interchange of the stated White House press conference is without parallel. Just as its evolution was no accident, its preservation is a matter of deep importance to every American who has a genuine belief in the democratic process."⁴⁶

The once free and easy interchange became costly and hard for American presidents after the Kennedy administration that Clinton had so admired as an idealistic Boys Nation senator and envied as a beleaguered chief executive. What had happened? Vietnam, Watergate, and the growth of new media.

Government lies about the cause and prosecution of the war, coupled with the belief of many journalists that the war was unnecessary and unwinnable, marked the end of what had been collaboration between the press and government in prosecuting and reporting previous wars. The Watergate scandal destroyed any remaining trust between the press and the presidency. As Stephanopoulos wrote of reporters' suspicions about the suicide of Clinton aide Vincent Foster: "Our human reactions were read through the prism of post-Watergate politics: Every president is Nixon until proven innocent."⁴⁷

The proliferation of news outlets meant that the White House press corps had grown so large that no president could expect any comment, no matter how inconsequential or off-the-cuff, to go unreported. What had once been a sort of club of mutually respected professionals was now a viper's nest where

the pressure to get the story outweighed any privacy considerations. When Colorado Senator Gary Hart was forced from the 1988 campaign because of news stories about his affair with a model, the relationship between press and president (or candidate) had been reduced to that of combatants.

Clinton noted this change from the outside, as a governor contemplating a run in the 1988 national campaign. He asked journalists and friends, including Brantley, whether there was ever a time when “your past is past,” implicitly wondering whether his own affairs would be investigated.⁴⁸ At the last second, when the national press had been invited to his announcement of his presidential candidacy, Clinton backed out, saying the time was not right and he wanted to spend more time with Chelsea. But Betsey Wright told Gail Sheehy that she had had an intervention with Clinton, telling him he couldn’t run because of his “sordid record.”⁴⁹ When he did decide to enter the 1992 campaign, he had to run the gauntlet of “bimbo eruptions” and confess on *60 Minutes*, with Hillary by his side, to “causing pain” in his marriage.

Hillary’s presence at Bill’s side and, indeed, her guidance of his answers during the interview was an extraordinary help to her husband, and it was to be expected of a candidate’s spouse. But Hillary’s professional career as a lawyer and her formal position in the White House running the Health Care Task Force were among a series of unique things that made her different from previous first ladies. That difference made the White House press corps uncertain in how to cover her.⁵⁰

“Presidents’ wives customarily had been portrayed as symbolizing the heart, not the head, of an administration and were not the subject of news articles on governmental policy,” explained journalism historian Maurine H. Beasley. “Rodham Clinton, however, displayed a perplexing mixture of intellect and emotions and defied placement in any single reportorial category. Were her activities mainly political or social or symbolic? Should the scandals that dogged her be written off as dubious political intrigue or treated as subjects for serious investigative reporting? Should the stories of her husband’s infidelities affect her own coverage?”⁵¹

In the end, Hillary’s press coverage varied depending upon how she was involved in the news. If she was involved in scandal stories, she got the Watergate treatment. When she was involved in more traditional first lady duties, like entertaining, she got the lifestyle treatment. Because of her intense involvement in her husband’s career, she seemed to get more of the former than the latter. Hillary’s role was so noteworthy, in fact, that Beasley devoted an entire chapter to her in a nine-chapter history of the relationship between first ladies and the press.⁵²

Hillary could have avoided most battles with the press if she had been more like her predecessors. Like other first ladies, she doubtless would have been

pained by the mud slung at her husband, but she personally could have remained fairly spotless. One need only contrast her negative press coverage with coverage of Laura Bush, who remained popular despite her husband's troubles over the war in Iraq and other issues. But Hillary put herself onstage with Bill and that stage was one that, after Kennedy's presidency, needed chicken wire around it to protect the first couple from the incoming tomatoes and broken bottles. It didn't matter if you were a Democrat or a Republican, once you were on that stage, you were a target.

After the 1992 election, Barbara Bush and Hillary Clinton, whose husbands had waged a bitter, name-calling campaign, made peace on the day of the inaugural ceremonies. Barbara hugged Hillary and waved to a crowd of journalists on the South Lawn.

"Avoid this crowd like the plague," the outgoing first lady warned the incoming one. "And if they quote you, make damn sure they heard you."

"That's right," Hillary replied. "I know the feeling already."⁵³

Although Hillary shared a similar age and political beliefs with much of the White House press corps, she in some ways had more in common with the older woman she was replacing. And after eight years in the White House, she also would find a few commonalities with Barbara's son George W., at least in terms of the way they thought about and handled the press.

The Clintons and George W. Bush were of the same generation; Bill and George born in 1946 and Hillary in 1947. Bush, however, was a 1960s conservative, and never brought the idea to Washington that the press and he were on the same side. Any positive feelings Bush might have had about the national press were disabused by the way he felt his father was treated by journalists.

The Clintons had become part of the establishment they had railed about in the 1960s, when Bill was elected to office and Hillary became a high-powered lawyer. But the press on the local level, particularly in a small, rural state like Arkansas, was more intimate, friendly, and even in some cases, actively cooperating with and rooting for the Clintons' programs. Arkansas also had a miniscule Republican Party, so Clinton basically governed in a one-party state. During the presidential campaign, Clinton had presented himself as an outsider who would fix things in Washington. They could still feel like the outsiders battling on the same side as progressive journalists to shake up the system.

But to the press, the Clintons were part of the system the journalists had been reporting on skeptically, even cynically, since the 1960s.

The first President Bush had tried to befriend reporters, thinking they had some common ground, but in the end felt betrayed (as Barbara's comment showed) by negative coverage. George H. W. Bush, as a World War II veteran,

grew up in an era when the government and press cooperated to achieve national goals. After the Vietnam War and Watergate, politicians and reporters didn't trust each other, and the relationship became one of opposition instead of cooperation. No longer would the press hide infirmities like Franklin Roosevelt's polio or indiscretions like John F. Kennedy's affairs. No longer would politicians have a few off-the-record beers in a hotel like the elder Bush did in one of his early campaigns.

Dave McNeely, a longtime reporter and columnist for the *Austin American-Statesman*, once said that the key difference between how George H. W. Bush and George W. Bush related to the press was based on their generational experiences.

"Journalism changed when you had a generation of reporters who came out of World War II who referred to the government as 'we,'" explained McNeely. "And then following the Vietnam War/Watergate it spawned a generation—at least a decade, maybe a bit more—of reporters who referred to the government as 'they.'"⁵⁴

McNeely was talking about the Bush family, but the explanation applies equally to Bill and Hillary when they entered the White House. The Clintons had become "they."

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He Wants to Please

When talking about Bill Clinton and his legendary charm, there are two extreme descriptions. Longtime Arkansas newspaper reporter and columnist Max Brantley said of Clinton: “He has this habit of looking you straight in the eye. He crawls into your soul for maybe a minute or two, and then he’s looking over your shoulder for the next guy in the room that he’s going to do the same thing to.”¹

When told of Brantley’s description, Paul Greenberg, columnist for the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, said, “Only if you have a small soul.” Greenberg said Clinton could be boring because he talked so much. “His charm was always lost on me,” Greenberg said. “It seemed ephemeral, superficial, and so self-absorbed.”² Greenberg is a longtime Clinton critic—arguably the most intense in the Arkansas press—and Brantley’s family is friends with the Clintons.

But regardless where journalists fall on that continuum of Clinton opinion, they usually agree that Bill makes the best first impression they’ve ever seen. And that is not a statement to be taken lightly, because journalists meet a lot of charming politicians—people who are usually eager to get good press coverage. Many people who run for office, particularly at the national level, can “work a room”—move deftly from person to person like a bee pollinating a field of daisies, only in this case they are trying to cultivate relationships, whether they are with donors, voters, or reporters. Six years of partisan backbiting and a costly war have given the public a bad case of George W. Bush fatigue, at least based on the approval ratings midway through his second term, so it may be difficult to recall that at one time Bush critics had thought he hypnotized the White House press corps into soft coverage with his charm.³ In fact, a number of pundits thought Bush’s folksy style in comparison to the relatively stiffer Al Gore and John Kerry was a significant factor in

his electoral success. But as charming as Bush can be when he talks about sports or pets, bestows a nickname, or drops a self-effacing Bushism, he isn't quite up to Clinton's level.

Wayne Slater, chief political reporter for the *Dallas Morning News*, covered both Clinton and Bush. He said that although Bush is very good one-on-one, Clinton is the best he has ever met.

"I remember the first time I spent much time with Clinton was in 1992 when he was running for president, and the thing that struck me was that, not only was he such an engaging person but that he naturally wanted to please you," Slater said. "And so I remember at one point I was asking questions independent of the story I was writing to go for a graphic about your favorite—you know, what's your favorite color, what's your favorite movie, what's the last book you read and so forth and so on, and he was so gracious. And some candidates realize how goofy those things are and let you know about it, and I don't blame them, but Clinton was so gracious and at one point, I remember asking, 'What was the last movie you saw?' and he couldn't remember. Instead of just giving me a fake answer, which is what most candidates would do, he talked to [press aide] Dee Dee Myers, who was in the car—he said, 'Dee Dee, Chelsea and I went—what was the name?'—and he kept racking his brain to try to remember this movie that he had seen. He not only wanted to give me an expedient answer, he wanted to give me the right answer. He wanted me to have the right information, and the result of that is, and I think all . . . all my colleagues who spent much time with Clinton know that his ability, his sort of desire to want to please you, really pays dividends. That doesn't mean that all the stories were good about him because many of them were not, but he has that natural ability."⁴

Bob Steel, who covered Clinton as a television reporter in Arkansas, agreed that Clinton makes people feel special by focusing on them. "I mean when you are one-on-one with Bill Clinton, he is charming, and you're center stage [even if there is] a crowd around you." Steel saw Clinton at an event for former Arkansas governors and was amazed that Clinton remembered his name. "I introduced my wife. He took her hand, and put his hand on top of her hand and started talking to her, and she was mesmerized. I mean you could just see it in her eyes. I mean he is very personable. One-on-one, there is nobody in the world better."⁵

David Gallen acknowledged that as an alternative newspaper reporter in 1990 he had written an embarrassing passage about Clinton, in which he compared the governor to the "Sun King" and asserted that "if you look too long at him you will be blind, your senses flooded with his gold-spined brilliance. As e. e. cummings might have said of him, *Jesus he is a handsome man . . .* despite his too big head and hands and feet and his roomy, rheumy, allergy-

ridden nose.” When Gallen published a biography of Clinton four years later, he wrote it might seem difficult to “stand by” such writing, “but that is the kind of response Clinton evokes in people.”⁶

Chris Usher, a freelance photographer who has covered both Bush presidencies and Clinton for major newsweeklies, said Clinton’s charm is hard to describe, but he believes it is based on his interest in people.⁷

“What Clinton has is what I call his ‘it,’ and ‘it’ is that indefinable, the charm where I watch people who would sit there and badmouth Clinton, couldn’t stand the guy, talking about him, but they were going to meet the guy in this room or whatever, and by the time . . . he leaves, they’re like, ‘You know, he’s not that bad a guy.’ And he’s just got that magic kind of—he’s the perfect politician—I can’t explain it better. . . . He was always late but it’s mostly that he liked to talk to the little people, the guy with the broom standing on the side as he was walking down there, and then he would really talk to him for a while, saying, ‘Hey, do you know about these programs?’ He just wanted to see what some little guy [thought] that wasn’t set up in some room for him by the administration officials or whatever.”⁸

The effect, Usher said, is charismatic.

“He could melt an ice cube in the South Pole, man,” Usher said. “He’s a big, tall guy, and he takes command of the room the second he walks in, and it’s one of those things where you’re in peril and once he makes contact with you and gives you his attention, then you’re saved. . . . It’s not like he’s a deity, and it’s not like he’s a king and it’s not like he’s a president. It’s almost like he’s a shaman . . . you feel better for being in their presence but you don’t know why.”⁹

Reporters have long noticed that Clinton can move easily in different social circles, which is another hallmark of the excellent politician but one that Clinton has mastered better than almost any other. Carl Leubsdorf, the *Dallas Morning News* Washington bureau chief, said that both Bush and Clinton banter with reporters, but Clinton would continue to chat behind the scenes more often than Bush.¹⁰

“President Clinton, you know, on one level he was very friendly with a lot of reporters, I think it’s fair to say. He always remembers who you are and you may not see him for two years, but he’ll know exactly who you are, and so on that level, a lot of reporters had relationships with him, I think,” said Leubsdorf, who acknowledged that Bush will tease reporters at press conferences, but it didn’t go much beyond what the public sees. “But Bill did like to schmooze, and he liked to schmooze about almost any subject. He knew so much about so many things. I mean, I remember one year they had a party out on the White House lawn for the press—I think it must have been in summer or spring—for the press corps, and I was sitting with Clinton for a while and

the NBA playoffs were on, and he was talking at great length about the NBA, because he knew all about the NBA. And so there was almost no subject that would come up that he didn't know something about. I was always struck by that."¹¹

Clinton tailors his message not to each crowd but to each person, swinging from good old boy to wonk in a few seconds.¹² Many of Clinton's associates have noted his uncanny ability to read people. Biographer David Maraniss described how Clinton applied this skill to getting good grades at Georgetown University. Clinton habitually talked with professors after class to the point that his friends teased him for brownnosing, but they also realized that he was able to figure out what the professors thought was important and what they would put on exams. One classmate "marveled at how Clinton could figure out what was important to a professor and pick his brain, raising points of special interest to the teacher . . . doing what came naturally to him . . . working the room."¹³

Clinton was brilliant at human relations because he worked different people based on who they were. Professors profess. They spend years immersed in a study of their field and then try, often vainly, to transmit that knowledge to uninterested undergraduates. Rare is the professor who can resist the student who listens intently to the lecture and wants to engage in the subject afterward. Reporters, on the other hand, spend their lives covering the often unattractive processes of government, seeing politicians come and go and gradually becoming convinced they know more about the topic than the officials they cover. Many reporters are flattered by a politician's recognition of their knowledge by asking them for advice.

Leubsdorf said the Clinton administration, like other administrations, tried to "co-opt" the press by inviting journalists to White House functions. Leubsdorf and his wife, Susan Page of *USA Today*, were invited to a dinner where Leubsdorf sat at the same table with Bill Clinton and senators Carol Moseley Braun and Barbara Mikulski. His wife sat at Hillary's table. Few reporters attended, so it felt like being invited "to the equivalent of a State dinner" at the White House, Leubsdorf said.¹⁴

Not all reporters got that kind of treatment. Clinton was savvy enough to know who to work on. Ron Fournier said that as a young Associated Press reporter in Arkansas, he was not a "player" whom Clinton would try to butter up with policy discussion. "There were some reporters who he would call up and ask for their advice, and I think it was basically as a way to flatter their intelligence," Fournier said.¹⁵

Tom Hamburger, who covered Clinton in both Arkansas and Washington, said Clinton often flattered reporters by showing interest in what they wrote. When Clinton was governor, Hamburger, as a Washington correspondent,

wrote a series about how southern states were shortchanged in federal money spent on social services compared to defense because the powerful southern senators like Strom Thurmond were on defense committees but not social service committees. "I don't know if it [the series] was any good, but Clinton feigned great interest in this, and he asked me and my co-author to come by his office, by the governor's office, as I remember," Hamburger said. "Anyway, he stopped us some place and talked about it, and we met with some members of his cabinet." Clinton, Hamburger said, knew reporters are flattered when they know you've read their stuff and want to talk about it. "It was cool. He was really good at that."¹⁶

Rex Nelson, who covered Clinton in Arkansas and as a Washington correspondent, said Clinton was so good at maintaining relationships with the press that he borrowed at least one of Clinton's tactics when he left journalism for public relations.

"Occasionally he would have reporters over to the mansion for lunch, for breakfast, and especially if you were a . . . small-town editor or reporter, that was pretty impressive," Nelson said. "I know when I was editor of the Arkadelphia paper that I was invited up for lunch or breakfast on a couple of occasions along with a group of other editors to the mansion."

Nelson started the same type of program when he became Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee's director of communications. "We instituted pretty much a monthly luncheon with reporters and editors from around the state, because I remember that as having been so effective to me when I was a reporter. That's one thing, frankly, that I just stole directly from the Clinton administration."¹⁷

But sometimes Clinton's tactics were as simple as remembering a journalist's name. According to Ernest Dumas, a longtime Arkansas newspaper journalist, Clinton used that ingratiating style even when he was running for Congress in 1974. One day during that campaign, Dumas happened to be in the secretary of state's offices, where candidates had to file for election, when he noticed Clinton "striding" through the room.

"As he approached, he shouted my name and walked over and introduced himself," Dumas recalled. "And he said he was a big admirer of mine, of my writing, my coverage. That's standard. Everybody does that kind of stuff. But at any rate, it struck me that he would know who I was because my name, my picture didn't appear in the paper much, so anyway, obviously that makes you feel good."¹⁸

Dumas said that Clinton's extraordinary memory allows him to recall people he's met even just once in the checkout line at Wal-Mart. "He doesn't forget anyone," Dumas said. "That is perhaps the biggest secret of his political success: He never forgets anybody. Never."¹⁹

Brantley said a few other politicians have that same “parlor trick” ability to remember names and details about people they meet. But with Clinton, it doesn’t appear to be a trick because he is intensely interested in people. “With Bill, you felt like for a second, that he was connecting with you.”²⁰

Pat Lynch, who interviewed Clinton on his Arkansas radio show, agreed that his knack for names was important to his success. “Oh, my goodness, Bill Clinton is a remarkable person,” Lynch said. “He has an amazing, almost a startling memory for faces, and Bill Clinton can seriously remember people for 20 years or longer. He has excellent recall, and those two things alone give somebody a tremendous advantage socially, because as human beings, we love to be talked to by name and to have somebody remember us personally. I think here in Arkansas, Arkansas being a small state, even today is very much a state which relies on retail politics. That is, that the politician goes to the pink tomato festival and goes to the Christmas parade one place or another, and the politician goes to the various county fairs and to the coon supper at Gillette. And you know, there’s just, you know, in real rural life in Arkansas being very strong as it is, there’s a tremendous amount of ground that has to be covered, and the successful politician in Arkansas is the retail politician.”²¹

Clinton’s retail skills—making personal connections—extended even to the families of journalists. One time Clinton and Mel Hanks, a Little Rock television reporter, were playing phone tag to try to get Clinton’s comments for a story. Clinton finally tried Hanks’s home, reaching not Hanks but his wife, Debby, who had recently given birth to their son, Jeff Clinton Hanks. Clinton talked to Debby, who he had never met before, for about 15 minutes about the baby. “[The name] was just a coincidence, but he said, ‘Did you name your baby after me?’ My wife said he was such a flirt and so ingratiating,” Hanks recalled.²²

Clinton was equally accommodating with the girlfriend of Joe Quinn, KTHV-TV anchor in Little Rock. Quinn remembered that during one of the gubernatorial campaigns they were in a Tastee Freeze in downtown Nashville, Ark., getting a burger, running late. Quinn called his girlfriend, who was a big fan of Clinton’s, and Clinton spent 15 minutes on the phone with her after he had ordered.²³

Other reporters, particularly when they first met Clinton, were awed by his breadth of knowledge. Sol Levine, a CNN producer, recalled a conversation on a plane ride with Clinton in which he started explaining the intricacies of world banking and went beyond the journalist’s comprehension. Levine compared Clinton to Reagan and recalled that it was “neat” to be covering someone who mastered such detail.²⁴

Fournier said the national press was more easily impressed on first meeting Clinton because they didn't see him every day like the Arkansas reporters did. "By the year he ran, we used to have all the political reporters, you know, the guys who were doing the job I had a year ago [national political reporter] come down to Little Rock in . . . '91 and '92, to interview Clinton, and they'd stop by the press room, and me and Joan [Duffy] and the gang would load them up with what we knew about Clinton and the rumors about women and what he'd done good for the state but what hadn't gotten done and basically load them up with the good and the bad and the ugly," Fournier recalled. "And they'd be taking notes and 'Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you,' and they'd go upstairs, and we'd think we had them properly jaded, and about an hour later, they'd come almost floating down those marble stairs, you know, 'Oh, man, he's the smartest guy I ever knew, and you didn't tell me he was,' you know, 'He knew everything about welfare reform,' and he would just charm them all to hell. And one after another, we'd see that happening. It was like a parade of political reporters coming in and being co-opted by what is a very intelligent, very charming man. But obviously when you're covering the governor, you see different sides of him. You bump into him in a hotel bathroom or you see him chewing out a lobbyist or a staff member in the hallway, or you know, there were times he'd get very pissed at me over something I'd write and then you'd see that purple temper. Then it would blow over right away and he never held it against you, and the next day he'd be working [you] over again, but you would see, you know, we saw a more edgier Clinton than he could let anybody see as president."²⁵

Biographer Gallen noted that most Arkansas reporters were surprised at Clinton's strained press relations during his first term in Washington because he had spent so much time cultivating the press in their state. Most reporters who covered Clinton in Arkansas felt "courted" by the governor, Gallen wrote. "Sometimes the recruitment air was thick enough to make some of us uncomfortable."²⁶

Philip Martin, an *Arkansas Gazette* columnist, said Clinton had a "rock star quality" but like Gallen, said the familiarity at times was "almost embarrassing."²⁷ The attempt to overwhelm people with his knowledge and attention sometimes backfired. Maraniss, writing about Clinton's Georgetown University days, blamed his loss for student council president his senior year in part on his being seen as "a shade too smooth."²⁸

That too-smoothness affected reporters as well as college students. Fournier, for example, had conflicting thoughts about Clinton's personality. "I found him to be, yes, very charming, one of the smartest men I've ever been around," he recalled. "I had a hard time covering him because I,

especially then [in Arkansas], I didn't know squat about politics, and I just don't have his intellectual heft. It was very intimidating because I couldn't keep up with the guy, but I also found him to be . . . in a way, he could be boorish. He would have the press over to his mansion at Christmas and you would ask a question, 'So how's the weather?' and for 45 minutes, he talked. He was a guy who was used to having everyone sitting on his every word." Looking back on it, Fournier realizes that Clinton put so much effort into spending time with reporters "because you were someone who could help him down the road or hurt him."²⁹

Greenberg had a similar impression, only more so, saying Clinton "can be a frightful bore."³⁰ Greenberg gave as an example the time Clinton button-holed him at a party they were both attending in 1988 during Michael Dukakis's ill-fated presidential campaign against George H. W. Bush.

"He got me aside in a corner and was detailing every mistake Dukakis had made or was making in that campaign, right down to what Dukakis should have said at every juncture of the presidential campaign," Greenberg recalled. "I mean, he went on and on, and I can't cite my sources, but I have spoken to other people who also have not been able to get away from him."

Greenberg speculated that people who are charmed by that type of conversation have a high tolerance for boredom. Greenberg, an editorial writer and columnist, said he did not think Clinton was trying to influence his writing but rather was just performing, practicing for his own presidential run.

"Maybe I have a very low one, and [reporters] have a higher boredom capacity . . . they were interested in the nuts and bolts of politics and government in a way that other people aren't," Greenberg said when speculating on why his reaction to Clinton is different from that of many others. "Maybe I'm a minority of two or three, instead of one, but I have heard this from other people. He must have gone on for an hour. The room was full of people, and people who surely would have been interested in what he was going to say. He was governor of the state at the time."³¹

Carol Griffiee, a longtime Arkansas newspaper reporter who was also active in freedom of the press issues for the Society of Professional Journalists, was part of Greenberg's self-described minority. "Oh, I've heard that," she said when asked about Clinton's reputation for charisma. "I don't understand it, because he never did have that for me. I've been told that he fills a room when he walks into it. He never did for me. I just have to go on what other people tell me, because he did not strike me that way."³²

Griffiee said she always tried to maintain a professional distance and was well aware that Clinton was trying to ingratiate himself with her.

"I felt that he was always trying to do that, but he never could do that with me," she said. "I'd be tracking him through the halls of the Capitol when the

General Assembly was in session, and I'd be wanting to ask him a question about such and such and such and such, and he'd wheel and turn on his heel to me, and say, 'Well, what do you think about it?' Well, it always startled me when he did that, and I didn't like it. I think he thought that I thought my opinion was so hot and so good that I wanted to say it, but I didn't really, and when he did that, it was a miscue on his part. I always saw him as a figure to be covered. I did not want to befriend him. I just wanted to cover him."³³

Hanks thought Clinton was more cautious around investigative reporters like himself than with beat reporters who he saw more often or editorial writers who shaped public opinion. "While he was charming, we always had a kind of distance," said Hanks. "He knew we were out there to dig deeply. I think he had the best relationships with columnists."³⁴

Overall, Clinton seemed to get on well with the Arkansas press corps. Maria Henson, an *Arkansas Gazette* reporter, said he seemed to enjoy associating with reporters and having a good time.³⁵ After his last re-election to governor in Arkansas, TV reporter Susan Rodman remembered him "partying" with journalists at a pizza joint until 4 a.m., although Hillary retired earlier. He didn't drink but poured pitchers of beer for the scribes.³⁶

It wasn't the only instance in which Bill socialized with reporters without his wife. *Memphis Commercial Appeal* reporter Guy Reel remembered Clinton leaving his family to schmooze reporters at a restaurant, apparently to the displeasure of Hillary, which he said was a common sight for reporters. Hillary, he said, "always looked like she was steamed about something."³⁷

The conventional wisdom about the differences between the two Clintons is just that—Hillary is cold while Bill is warm. He is the extrovert; she is the introvert. He is the glad-handing front man, while she is the cautious lawyer. Aside from the fact that they are both lawyers, and Bill can be as calculatingly shrewd as Hillary, the reality is more complex. While more than a few reporters who've covered Hillary describe her as cold or reserved—a label almost never applied to Bill—most say that her personality wears better than Bill's. Once you get to know Hillary, these people say, she is actually more charming than Bill because she is more forthright and less interested in herself.

Here again, it is possible to go to Greenberg and Brantley for differing opinions. Brantley, whose wife was a college roommate of Hillary's, said the former first lady is warm and funny in private but doesn't show that side in public like Bill does. "She's gregarious and has an interest in people, but she's more discerning. Bill has catholic tastes. He loves everybody. I think Hillary, if anything, is more like me, for lack of a better comparison. I don't want to meet everybody. I'm more interested in meeting and talking with people who are interesting to me. And I think, to input values to her, I would guess she is more like me in that regard."³⁸

Brantley said her reputation for coldness is a caricature. “This sort of cold, scheming, heartless bitch—she is no-nonsense, she’s driven, she’s energetic, she’s accomplished—I think [this] part of her image derives from the fact that some people aren’t comfortable with women like that,” he said. “Part of it derives from her extreme caution and what she says because what she has learned is that overly casual conversations and looseness with information can cause you to come to grief. I have the benefit of having seen her in relaxed settings, and you know, I find her . . . she’s got a great sense of humor. She’s warm. She’s funny. She laughs loud. She’s got a lightning brain. I find her fun to be with. She doesn’t threaten me. But I mean we have been friendly, so I understand that I come at it from a different point of view. But I think in a way it’s a shame that she’s had to discipline herself to be so careful and to be so programmatic in how she speaks and addresses things because I think she’d do fine being herself, but I think politically she’s decided that she has to be rigidly disciplined. I’m not sure, I think it comes off as being that way. But she’s got another side that’s pretty good.”³⁹

Greenberg, on the other hand, described Hillary in terms of her native Chicago. “She lacks the warmth even in anger of the South Side, I would say. She’s definitely a Cubby and not a White Sox person,” Greenberg said. “There’s a certain coldness to Hillary.”⁴⁰

Nevertheless, he noted that she had “always been a perfect lady” to him. “I remember by chance my late wife and I ran into Bill and Hillary out with Chelsea at the Chinese restaurant across from the University of Arkansas. It was late at night, because I had just finished teaching a course in editorial writing, [I’d] do that, and then we’d have supper in a fairly deserted Chinese restaurant, and there were Bill and Hillary and Chelsea. Like any other family that had missed supper, I guess, and were making up for it at the Chinese place . . . an American institution, a late supper at a Chinese place. [We] got into a discussion maybe with Hillary about Chelsea’s—I think it was her math homework. I think it was algebra, but she was just like any other concerned mom. Gossiped a little about kids at school, the teachers. That may stand out in my memory, because it was the only time I really saw her very warm and outgoing.”⁴¹

A reporter who covered Hillary during the New York senate campaign had a similar observation. Ellen Wulfhurst of Reuters said she got the sense that Hillary didn’t like reporters even when she was telling them thank you for covering her the day after she had won the election. “She’s not very likeable,” Wulfhurst told Beth Harpaz, an Associated Press reporter who covered the race. “She’s very, very distant. She’s in one room, her emotions are in another.”⁴²

But Noreen O'Donnell, who covered the race for the White Plains, N.Y., *Journal News*, attributed Hillary's style to reserve rather than coldness. "She's not a backslapping person. She behaved how a reserved person would behave."⁴³

Joshua Green, who profiled her for *The Atlantic Monthly*, also described her as more reserved or cautious than cold and compared her interview style to that of a lawyer trying to persuade a jury. Green concluded that she wants the contact with the press, but that "Something politely tells you, 'Please step back.'"⁴⁴

But that reserved attitude didn't necessarily hurt her with the Arkansas press. She did not have a lot of direct contact with reporters—doing obligatory interviews about the Governor's Mansion or other traditional first lady stories—but when she did talk to the press, reporters often appreciated her straightforward manner.

Dennis Byrd, who covered the Clintons in Little Rock for the Associated Press, said he has heard the stories about Hillary being cold compared to Bill but said that was not his experience. "I did not find her to be anything but charming," Byrd said. "She was forthright. She was matter-of-fact, but not cold, and I don't think as a reporter you can ask for a whole lot more than for someone to be honest with you, and I liked her a lot. Still do."⁴⁵

Arkansas television anchor Gina Kurre said Hillary was actually better than Bill at making a connection with reporters because she did not talk about herself as much as Bill did. They would both ask about reporters' kids, for example, but Bill would make the connection and then move on.⁴⁶

Griffie also said Hillary was more straightforward. "They handled the press differently," Griffie said of the Clintons. "Hillary, up until she went to the Senate, was much more direct. You didn't get the feeling of slipperiness around her that you could get with Bill."⁴⁷

The most frequently reported episode of Hillary using charm to affect coverage was her solicitation of John Robert Starr, the powerful editor of the *Arkansas Democrat*. Starr criticized Bill Clinton so intensely during his first term that it no doubt contributed to Clinton's humiliating defeat by Frank White in 1980. Hillary made an effort to befriend Starr, often eating lunch with him and providing him inside information. More detail about Hillary's relationship with Starr will come in a later chapter, but it is sufficient to note here that a number of Arkansas journalists think it was instrumental in influencing *Democrat* coverage. Hillary's relationship with Starr illustrates that she knows how to work the press when she wants to.

Hillary can be every bit as solicitous of reporters as the most conscientiously charming of politicians. Bill Clinton served reporters ice cream on his campaign plane in 1992,⁴⁸ and George W. Bush's photograph appeared on the cover of *Brill's Content* during the 2000 campaign serving drinks to his scribes under the headline, "The Charm Offensive." In similar fashion during

the 2000 Senate campaign, Hillary sent a package of candy to her reporters and at another time handed out doughnuts.⁴⁹

Hillary has also shown herself to be adept at other accommodating gestures. A *New York* cover profile of Hillary started with a description of the senator jumping out of her van in heavy West Village traffic and dashing to the interview with Secret Service agents scrambling to keep up, all so she wouldn't stand up the interviewer. When she arrived, she appeared delighted to be at the restaurant, and said, "I've never been here before!"⁵⁰

Harpaz, who wrote a book about covering the 2000 New York senate race, admitted that she was thrilled when Hillary addressed her by her first name and that Hillary knows how ingratiating that little familiarity can be.⁵¹ Hillary also was aware of the comings and goings of the beat writers around her, asking Harpaz what she had done on her vacation when she had been absent from the campaign for a time. When Harpaz blurted out that she had spent her time off potty training her two-year-old, Hillary turned to the rest of the scribes and said, "This woman deserves a round of applause!"⁵²

Later on, Hillary, who knew Harpaz was reluctant to go on campaign road trips and leave her children, gave the reporter a copy of *Dear Socks, Dear Buddy*, personally inscribed to her two boys. The gift caused Harpaz some conflict-of-interest angst, but she later learned that Hillary gave small gifts like hats and buttons to many reporters. Harpaz wrote she couldn't decide whether the gifts were "a nervy assumption on her part that we would care, or a thoughtful gesture on her part that *she* cared, or just some innocent but slightly misguided effort to generate goodwill by distributing favors from her little party."⁵³

Many reporters might waste sleep analyzing such actions, but the general public seemed more receptive to her charm. Griffie said that Hillary can do a great job winning a live crowd with a speech. She cited as an example a speech Hillary gave to the National Federation of Press Women when Bill was governor. "I was director of it, and I got her to speak—be one of our keynote speakers at a luncheon," Griffie recalled. "She came in, and I took her up to the podium, turned her over to the one who was going to introduce her, and she stood up there—now mind you, these are old press biddies—and she spoke without a note for 30 minutes on women's rights, and absolutely I could hear a pin drop in that room, so don't tell me she can't be mesmerizing."⁵⁴

Douglas Turner, a Washington columnist for the *Buffalo News* who has covered Bill Clinton as president and Hillary Clinton as New York senator, disagreed with the conventional wisdom that Bill is better at the so-called "retail politics"—things like greeting individuals in a crowd. "She is better than he is at working the rope line," Turner said. "She has tremendous patience. I saw her standing on her feet for two hours. And every person was someone

she had been waiting to meet all her life. It didn't matter, who—little old ladies in walkers—everybody.”⁵⁵

Harpaz, who saw both Clintons at a reception line at the White House after Hillary's victory, was surprised that Bill seemed like a “robot” while Hillary demonstrated the memory for face and detail usually ascribed to Bill. She remembered Harpaz's husband even though she had met him once very briefly on the campaign.⁵⁶

Turner said he liked her on a personal level. “I've always liked her personally,” Turner said. “I'm 75, older than she is, but I find her attractive. She's a good-looking girl. She flirts with you a little bit. I think a lot of guys feel that way. I consider her a friend, if you can be a friend with someone who is in public office.”⁵⁷

Turner thought the difference between Bill and Hillary comes across through the media. “The difference here is that in Bill Clinton you had a guy who could charm the skin off a snake,” Turner said. “He loves people. At least I think he loves people.”⁵⁸

But Hillary is more charming one-on-one because she seems real. “She has that hard edge that makes you think you are hearing the truth,” said Turner. “But the persona outside is not that charming.”

Bill's charm comes through the media, he said. “Something happens when you put a TV camera on her. She comes on rather harsh with a cadence almost like a Gregorian chant,” Turner said. “When the camera is on him, it might as well be Jimmy Dean selling sausage.”⁵⁹

Hillary, however, can close the sale if she can work on the customer long enough. Ron Fournier, who covered the Clintons in both Arkansas and Washington, said that nobody in America is better in the first 15 minutes of meeting someone than Bill Clinton, but that Hillary impresses you the longer you know her. “The first 15 minutes, you get the double-handed handshake and the deep blue eyes, or actually the light blue eyes zeroed in on you—the charm offensive—but for some people, you'll notice after 15 minutes that now he's looking over your shoulder at a more important reporter or a better-looking woman or more important politician,” Fournier said. “Hillary—I always thought that first 15 minutes—her first impression isn't very good. . . . On TV, she doesn't come across very good, but the more you get to know her, I have always found her to be much more interesting and a much more complicated person, and a much easier and better person to have a conversation with over dinner. I've always thought I'd rather sit down and have a beer with Hillary than Bill.”⁶⁰

USA Today's Kathy Kiely also thought Bill's charm was not as long-lasting as Hillary's. People who talk about Bill's magic personal affect are talking about a brief encounter, the rope-line experience, as opposed to in-depth interaction, she said.

“The president being the president, has to shake hands with about 80 zillion people at every event, and I think what people are talking about is people coming away from that feeling like they had some kind of a personal connection,” Kiely said. “Okay, that is very different from—and I think he was good at that. But . . . Hillary probably does not give that impression. On the other hand, if you look at Clinton’s record with Congress, there were a lot of votes he should have won that he didn’t win, and my theory on that is Clinton and his, if you go one step beyond the superficial rope-line contact and into the kind of conversations you have, say, with reporters or with members of Congress, I never felt that he made connections very well in those settings, that people came away feeling like he wasn’t necessarily listening. And I think that is reflected in his relationships with members of Congress.”⁶¹

Bill reminded Kiely of one of her college professors who was great at large lectures but terrible at a small graduate seminar. “This guy’s personality was so dominating that it filled up the room, sucked out all the oxygen, and you never felt like you were there, you know,” she said. “And I felt like that’s the way Clinton is, and I think members [of Congress] felt that way, too, and I think that’s why he was less successful in persuading Congress a lot of times than he should have been, because for all his reputation of being charming on the rope-line and all of that, when he actually got into a conversation with people who felt like they ought to be treated a little bit like equals, he was just sort of blowing past them. And I don’t think it was intentional, I just think that’s the way he is.”⁶²

Hillary, on the other hand, is better at one-on-one conversations, and that’s why she’s been successful in the Senate.

“She has a completely different personality, and she’s not charming but she will charm you,” Kiely said. “She has, I mean, she has absolutely won over people in the Senate who thought they were going to hate her, and I just think that’s a function of a very different personality. Clinton may be great on the rope-line and he may win over people who he’s going to see for ten seconds, but the people who you have to do business with, she does better.”⁶³

But does the politician’s fitness as a dinner partner translate into good coverage? In other words, does charm matter?

Mike McCurry, who as one of Bill Clinton’s presidential press secretaries was tasked with handling media, was skeptical that the personality of the news source has much impact on coverage.

“I think it establishes some rapport, but it really depends on the reporter,” McCurry said. “There were some reporters who were certainly charmed by Bill Clinton in private and then turned right around and wrote the same negative column they would have written anyhow. But there were others who, getting to know him better and understanding his thinking better, actually would

give him some benefit of the doubt. I felt on balance, having those kinds of conversations helped improve the coverage, but good reporters are going to report as they see fit at the end of the day.”⁶⁴

Which Clinton is more charming in which circumstance, then, might not really matter in terms of press coverage.

“I would be hard pressed to kind of rate one versus the other on the charm meter,” McCurry said. “I mean, I think they both are very effective in private in kind of establishing rapport and connecting with the people that they’re talking to. I mean, they’re just fun to be around, both of them. They’re different people, obviously, but they’re both fun to be around, and I think reporters who get those kinds of encounters with them enjoy them. But I personally just think that most reporters are careful about that and don’t let that overly influence their coverage. In fact, to the opposite—I think the more you look like you’re familiar and social with the candidate, the more you work harder to demonstrate to your colleagues that you don’t give any quarter. I used to joke that Brit Hume, who was famously kind of a conservative guy, he was one of the most fair television reporters on the White House beat because he bent over backwards to demonstrate that he was not letting any bias show in his reporting, whereas those that were supposedly the liberal-biased press, I think, were tougher on Clinton.”⁶⁵

One of the main tenets of American journalism is objectivity—the idea that reporters will be fair and keep their personal feelings out of their coverage. Under that theory of objectivity, personal feelings shouldn’t enter into news coverage. But journalists, as much as their critics might claim otherwise, are human beings. And in covering politicians they are covering fellow human beings, not watching paramecium divide under a microscope.

When asked how the perception of Hillary’s coldness could affect press coverage, Brantley suggested it could hurt. “Well, she doesn’t have a lot of people in the press who love her,” Brantley said. “You might find commentators who respect her, who defend her, who say she gets a bad rap at times, but you don’t—I can’t think right off hand of any major commentator/reporter who I would put in the Hillary fan club. And from a strictly public relations point of view, it seems to me that’s not so great.”⁶⁶

Still, many reporters say the charm factor only has significance on the margins. It won’t buy good stories, but will at least take that extra step to make sure the politicians’ side is represented.

“I’ve always felt that the best thing a politician can do is earn the benefit of the doubt, to have reporters willing to at least listen to your side or what your aides say is your side, and just stopping to think, ‘You know, maybe they’ve got a point here,’ again, just earning the benefit of the doubt,” Fournier said. “So yeah, this would happen: I would think I’d have a story,

‘Oh, boy, I’ve caught this little item in a bill that he snuck in there.’ And if he wouldn’t talk to me, I would just go write what I knew. But he would always talk, and he’d always have an explanation. And he would talk and talk and talk until he thought he had you convinced that it wasn’t a story, and there were times when I’d come back to the little press room and think I had him saying something, and I’d listen to it on tape and realize, ‘Well, no, darn it, he’s left himself a loophole here,’ and then I’d go back and find him in the hallway and I’d interview him again, and ‘Oh, okay, I’ve got him now,’ and I’d go back and listen to it, ‘No, I don’t quite have him.’

“You know, again, he was a smart guy who could sell ice to Eskimos and he would sell himself and his policies to everyone including reporters, so yeah, there were times when he would at least buy himself the benefit of the doubt where you’d go out and at least make an effort to get his side in the story because you knew he was accessible and he had an explanation for everything. But I didn’t know of anyone who was in the tank for him and would write flattering stories just because he was next to them in the hallways.”⁶⁷

Nelson, too, said a charming personality might get a politician the benefit of the doubt. “Well, I think like everything else, an officeholder-reporter relationship is just that. It’s about relationships, and at least—I mean, you might not be directly influencing a particular story—but I think human nature is such that it’s easier to write negative things about people that you really don’t know and that you really don’t have to face. The more you know somebody; my experience has been the more you give them the benefit of the doubt on certain issues.”⁶⁸

Usher said that the willingness of Clinton to come to the back of Air Force One on long trips and chat with the press did help influence how journalists felt about him. “It certainly affected my attitude, mostly because we’re all in it together and you know, with him and a lot of the people in his administration, they would come back and once everyone was in the hotel or whatever, they’d come down and we’d all sit around and drink wine until 2:00 in the morning and talk about crap that was other than politics, other than White House, other than—and just be people kind of off the clock,” Usher explained. “And this new [Bush] administration, never have they really allowed themselves to completely let their hair down. So finally now, they will actually consume alcohol with us and have a few, but for the longest time, it was like they wouldn’t even socialize with us, and definitely [more of] an aristocratic kind of feel that we’re the help, that we’re the enemy in some capacity and that we’re to be treated with kid gloves to be safe, you know. It’s like they have the Kevlar gloves on.”⁶⁹

Hanks, who did many investigations of Clinton's Arkansas administration, said reporters might get "twangs" when they are dealing with a tough story about a source who is nice to them.

"When someone is nice to your family and is polite to your wife and everything, it's hard not to identify with people you cover when they are nice to you," Hanks said. "And you get more flies with sugar than you do with vinegar and that sort of thing. It's only human, 'Oh, you talked to my wife the other day. Yeah, that's nice, she really enjoyed that'—that sort of thing. But you put that aside when other things come up if you really have to get a story because the competition is so fierce. You better get that story or someone else will beat you to it. So any kind of fond memories and maybe pulling your punches because of fond memories—that idea kind of goes out the window a bit because of the competition involved."⁷⁰

Hanks recalled having to ask Clinton a question about Fahmy Malak, the Arkansas state medical examiner who, among other controversies, was accused of covering up for Clinton's mother in the case of a girl who died on the operating table while Clinton's mother was administering anesthesia. "It was tough to ask him a question because of that personal contact," Hanks said. "He probably knew how to play the press pretty well. And he knew that we were just human, too, and liked to be liked just like anybody else did."⁷¹

Which style of handling reporters is better? Bill's rope-line charm or Hillary's directness?

"Oh, I think schmoozers do much better," said Kiely. "They tend to do much better because they're easier to talk to. On the other hand, I mean, I think Hillary is the kind of person who doesn't distill well into a sound bite, and that's just; there are a lot of politicians like that. I think like everything she does in life, she's working at it, and I just don't think she's as much of a natural as her husband, but she's certainly trying and trying to get better."⁷²

The Clintons' different personalities have distinguished their approaches to journalists. The gregarious Bill, with his catholic taste, uses his charm on everyone. The more reserved and cautious Hillary uses her charm more discriminately and thus more effectively in the long run. Some of the most skeptical and experienced of journalists find Hillary more honest simply because she doesn't try to be smooth. But the problem for Hillary is that her innate caution and distrust of the press has led her to control access much more strongly than Bill, and while reporters can shrug off the surliness of news sources, they can't tell someone's story completely without cooperation from the source.

The Clintons' differing approaches on that topic is the subject of the next chapter.

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She Wants to Control

While Hillary Clinton was famous for wanting the press to give her a “zone of privacy” even though her husband was in the most public of professions, Bill Clinton would talk so much to reporters that they would sometimes conspire to avoid him.

Rex Nelson, a Washington correspondent for the *Arkansas Democrat* when Clinton was governor, worked out an informal agreement with Maria Henson, the correspondent for the *Arkansas Gazette*, to handle Clinton’s overloquaciousness. “When one decided, ‘Governor, we’ve got to go,’ and walk away, the other would do the same, because he’d be up there, and he’d talk for an hour, sometimes, if you wanted him to, and often you had to get back on deadline and produce your story,” Nelson said.¹

But then a *Commercial Appeal* correspondent from Memphis showed up one day for a Clinton press session, necessitating a whole new deal. “Of course, we were afraid to leave, because we didn’t want them having something that we didn’t, and we said, ‘We’ve got to cut [the other reporter] in on this deal, so he’ll know when to leave,’” Nelson said with a laugh.²

Ron Fournier, who covered Clinton as president and governor, said governors tend to be relatively accessible to the press in most cases, but Clinton was extremely so. The Associated Press desk was near a window in the Capitol press room from which the reporter could see the exit from the governor’s office. One of the informal duties of an AP reporter like Fournier was to let other reporters know when Clinton was going home for the day so they could catch him for any last-minute questions.³

During the legislative sessions, Clinton would actually stop by the press room on his way out to see if any reporters had a question for him. “We were usually so tired of talking to him, it was like, ‘Oh, no, please, just leave.’”

Fournier once tried to tease Clinton, telling him he had a question and then in a serious voice asked, “If there’s a popup behind the third baseman in shallow left field, whose ball is it?”

Fournier’s audience of reporters snickered.

But Clinton didn’t laugh. He thought about it and bit his lip in his characteristic way. “Well, I don’t play much baseball, but wouldn’t that be the short-stop?” Clinton said. “Wouldn’t the shortstop have the best angle on that ball?”⁴

But did Clinton talk a lot to White House correspondents?

“Oh, God,” said CBS’s Bill Plante. “I mean, it is, on these long trips overseas where you have an eight- or ten- or 12- or 14-hour ride home, it’s not unusual for presidents to wander back from the front of Air Force One back to where the press cabin is and have a little session usually off the record, but people came to dread it when Clinton would do it, because he would come back, sit down on the floor and spend an hour and a half talking. . . . And it’s the responsibility of the reporters who are on that flight to basically report what he says even if it’s off the record, you got to say it’s off the record but you’ve got to give a sense of what was said, and you have to write it all down for your colleagues. . . . So instead of sleeping or eating or watching a movie, you’ve got to listen to the president blather on.”⁵

Arkansas television reporter Steve Barnes said Clinton was always ready to talk.

“I’m not sure that he ever turned down a request for an interview,” Barnes recalled. “If it was like a long, lengthy-sit-down and it just simply couldn’t be scheduled, he would let you know that he would reschedule it, and it would be rescheduled. He’d find some time. He would stop between speeches. He would stop in the hallways of the Capitol, in the corridors of the Capitol, in the parking lot. Bill was always responsive to a request, if not necessarily the question.”⁶

Arkansas television investigative reporter Mel Hanks said he would rate Clinton “high” in terms of accessibility, but that he tended to be careful in what he said during interviews. “Because he knew I was an investigative reporter, I think he was much more guarded,” Hanks said. “He was much more . . . open with the columnists who would write about his administration. And I think he was much more forthcoming with them. Whenever I would talk to him, I think he always thought, ‘What’s your angle? What are you out to get me on?’”⁷

The problem with being accessible is that it can get a source in trouble. One of the most valued skills for politicians is “message discipline,” knowing what point you want to say and sticking to it no matter what question you are asked. The best politicians can easily “bridge” from a topic they’ve been asked about to the topic they want to talk about without appearing to be evasive.

George W. Bush, for example, is known for being a particular bulldog in this area to the great frustration of the journalists who cover him. Bush was a long shot to win his first race for governor of Texas in 1994 against the popular incumbent, Ann Richards. But Bush developed four campaign themes and never quit talking about them no matter how much reporters tried to get him off topic. Liberal columnist Molly Ivins nicknamed him “Shrub,” and Richards at one point obliquely called him a “jerk.”⁸ But Bush refused to respond to the personal shots and kept talking about his campaign themes until he won a surprising victory. He brought this talent to the White House to the great frustration of the national press. Bush demonstrated his message discipline in several press conferences, most notably on March 6, 2003, the last press conference before the invasion of Iraq, in which his controlled responses were so frustrating that one reporter called the White House press corps “zombies” for not being able to break through.⁹

The Clintons both have the message discipline skill, but Bill sometimes doesn’t employ it, either because he can’t resist talking or he enjoys the verbal battle too much, teasing journalists to see if they can catch him in a misquote. Hillary, indicative of her more reserved personality, is more like Bush than her husband in the area of access and message discipline, but the latter was a skill she learned through hard experience with a few off-the-cuff remarks that turned into damaging stories. She learned rather quickly from interacting with the national press that even a comment about baking cookies could be translated into an insult to stay-at-home moms.

Bill, who had much more practice than Hillary facing the media, could control an interview when he wanted to. Little Rock radio host Pat Lynch said Clinton was very media savvy. “Clinton certainly taught me a few things, which is that no matter what the question is, answer the question that you wish had been asked,” Lynch said. “And I remember watching the first time that Dan Rather interviewed him right after he became president, and I remember thinking, gosh, and Dan Rather can’t get a straight answer out of him, either.”¹⁰

John Reed, a reporter with the *Arkansas Gazette*, also thought Clinton’s apparent accessibility was planned, including what he wanted to say. What Reed had thought at the time were spontaneous hallway interviews in hindsight were probably planned by the governor. Clinton knew what he wanted to say and the kind of news he wanted to make, according to Reed.¹¹

Arkansas newspaper reporter Carol Griffie said Clinton could be difficult to cover because of the way he spoke. “In terms of covering him you had to cover him long enough to understand what he meant when he said something, because Bill Clinton had his own language. I understand what he meant when he said, ‘It all depends on what the definition of is, is,’” Griffie said, referring to

Clinton's infamous testimony about his relationship with Monica Lewinsky. "I remember my brother, who moved [to Arkansas] in '94 after being a dentist for years, and is a right-wing Republican—hates Clinton—I was always having to interpret what Bill Clinton said for my brother, because he simply didn't understand him. It does take a knack of listening real carefully to him for a long time to understand what he's saying and where he's going, because he does speak his own language. And the definition of is means, 'Is it going on right now?' not 'Has it gone on yesterday or tomorrow, or is it going to go on tomorrow?' It means 'Is it going on right now?' It just takes understanding that—knowing how his mind works on that kind of stuff—to cover him."¹²

Clinton could be a tough interview, but a reporter could get information with the right questions, Griffie said. "I got to the point where I could understand Clinton-speak, so I didn't have the kind of trouble that I heard other reporters grouching about, and they sure did grouse about how slippery they thought he was, but I didn't find him that way."¹³

Griffie said he was good at staying on message, particularly in the case of pushing education reform. "I would say he's very good at that, and he did that for ten years running, here—he and Hillary—and if it weren't for him, I don't think Arkansas would ever have made the kind of progress it has made on education, public education, and I'll tell you why. This state, because of its history, and it's a natural thing, has had a low, low regard for education throughout its history, and that's why it has such sorry statistics when it comes to education. This state was settled by trappers and hunters who didn't have any use for, as I say, pointy-headed . . . intellectuals who could read and write—and that has just carried over from generation to generation to generation, but anyway from 1983 on, he and Hillary talked nothing but public education, the need to improve public education, the need to add some value for public education, and it finally got through, a little bit, and that's, in my opinion, the basis of the progress that Arkansas has made. You've got to build a base. You've got to change attitudes, and to their credit, Bill and Hillary saw that it was an attitudinal problem, and they went out and changed it, but in order to do that, they had to stay on message, and they did so for ten years. It was very difficult. I was covering environmental issues, primarily, for the *Gazette* during the period after he was defeated the first time. . . . It was very, very hard to get Bill Clinton's attention for anything but education. That's the degree to which he stayed on message."¹⁴

Clinton picked up on the idea of message discipline after he had been defeated for re-election for governor in 1980, partly because he decided he had set so many goals for his first term that he ended up not accomplishing many of them. His aide Betsey Wright told him to focus on three things, not 150, so he could better communicate with voters.¹⁵ Another reason for the voters' rejection of Clinton had been the perceived image of his staff as being unshaven

hippies in conservative Arkansas. Clinton's campaign became so protective of its new clean image that staffers made a sloppily dressed reporter wear a sign indicating he was with the press so no one would think he was a member of the campaign.¹⁶ The message was that the staff was clean-cut and mature, and that message was enforced through image as well as words.

Paul Greenberg noted that when Clinton was in campaign mode, he could be extraordinarily disciplined. Greenberg cited a memo made public in 1980 written by Clinton aide John Danner as an example of how Clinton and his team tried to control his message. It recommended things like having the staff call opinion leaders and speak from a script about important issues. The memo suggested the administration bypass the press by developing its own information programs.¹⁷

Greenberg wrote that Clinton was so scripted for his presidential campaign that when you asked him a question you could "almost hear the governor's agile mind rippling through the stack of index cards that contain his standard response." Greenberg described it as "a little eerie to ask him a question a few months apart and get the same answer word-for-word."¹⁸

When interviewed for this book, Greenberg reflected that Clinton could be sometimes rambling and sometimes focused. He acknowledged that Bill could stay on message, but didn't think it was necessarily planned. "I don't think he does it in an organized fashion, but he had superb instincts," Greenberg said when asked about Clinton's knack for message discipline. "I remember talking to Julius Long many years ago—Huey's brother, Julius Long—and I asked him why he [Huey Long] was such a great speaker and why he so captivated audiences in rural parts of Louisiana, and Julius said, well, he would try it out from whistle stop to whistle stop . . . and he would try out all these different things, and when the old boys would take their hands out of their overall pockets and applaud, he would know that he had hit it. I think Bill Clinton has that kind of instinct. In fact, the indecorous phrasing that Mr. Julius used was, if you've ever seen a little dog go after a great big bitch, he tries and tries and tries, then he hits that spot, and then he goes and goes and goes, and that's the way Huey did it."¹⁹

Unfortunately for Clinton, he sometimes goes too far in his conversation with reporters. *Newsweek's* Mark Miller said Clinton liked to play "gotcha" with the press, trying to avoid traps reporters would set to catch him in misleading statements. He would give technically correct answers on things like the draft but then keep sparring with reporters. Campaign aide James Carville warned Clinton that he would get caught, but Clinton merely replied, "Yeah, but they haven't caught me yet."²⁰

There's no doubt that Clinton, who relished the intellectual bull sessions at Oxford and Yale, enjoyed matching wits with reporters. Other presidents, notably Clinton's idol, Kennedy, but also both Roosevelts and to some extent

Reagan and George W. Bush, liked teasing the press. But a better explanation for Clinton's loquaciousness is simply that it is his personality. He has much more energy than the average person, and he loves to talk. Since reporters are in a sense paid to listen to the talk of politicians, they are always going to be an attentive, captive audience.

"It was wild because the guy would make up—he was late for everything—he'd make up the schedule as he'd go along," said the *Los Angeles Times's* Tom Hamburger, describing Clinton on the campaign trail. "He'd go all night; he just exhausted the reporters. I mean, he was so unpredictable . . . he'd stop and talk to reporters, and he'd always work the rope line and find something interesting, find people to talk to, and a day later, you couldn't leave because there'd be some story that would come up. . . . He was such a spontaneous, curious guy; the trips were just exhausting and the day was unpredictable."²¹

Exhausting is a common word journalists use in describing traveling with Clinton. Photographer Chris Usher said the press would sometimes start flying with Clinton in the morning, traveling across the country to events and be up until two a.m. "Clinton would just go 24-7," Usher said. "We'd be exhausted with Clinton. Absolutely exhausted."²²

Wayne Slater of the *Dallas Morning News* said he once pretended to go to sleep just because he was too tired to listen any longer to Clinton, who had exhausted everyone else on the flight into real sleep, including Hillary. "But Clinton still wanted to engage because he was a very social person," Slater recalled.²³

Clinton's behavior was a stark contrast to that of other presidents, especially the early-to-bed George W. Bush.

"My favorite example when people ask me the difference between him and Bush is that, well, first of all, Clinton, if the flight was over three hours, he would always come back on the plane, on Air Force One and chat with us," Usher said. "He would always come back and lean in and, 'Hey, how you guys doing, what's going on?' Bush, I've heard he's been back there once. I wasn't there that day, whenever it happened. I was on that secret trip to Baghdad, and I thought for sure that he would come back and swat our backs, you know, we'd all slap backs and say, 'Hey, we did it.' But all he did was invite the pens forward and no photos."²⁴

Clinton, however, came back to chat on the return flight from a lengthy trip to several countries. "We'd done this, like, ten-day trip to India and some other places out over there . . . and we had come back, and we were like wheels down that evening before, and boom, at 7:00 a.m., we were already on the plane and headed out to L.A. or somewhere for another thing," Usher recalled. "And most of us were the same people that were on the trip and so everyone on the plane was completely zombied and totally knocked out. And the presi-

dent comes back, and normally I usually never say anything because, you know, the writers always have something, ‘Hey, Mr. President, what’d you think of the blah blah blah?’ and then I just sit there and watch it go down. But this time they were all with their mouths agape and asleep, and he just comes back, and I was like, ‘Hey, sir, well, how are you handling the jet lag after the India trip?’ and he said, ‘Aw, man, I couldn’t sleep at all last night, I read three books.’ I said, ‘Oh, what’d you read, sir?’ And he said, ‘Oh, I read blah blah and I read this other one blah blah, then I read this fascinating book about the Anasazi Indians. Do you know that they blah blah blah,’ and went on, and I was like, ‘Well, that’s really cool, sir,’ and talk, and about eight, ten days later or whatever, it’s announced that he got together with Babbitt in the Interior and they’d put aside that ancestral Anasazi Indian land—and protected it from natural gas exploration and that kind of stuff. . . . He was educating himself on what he was planning to write off on, make sure it was worthy, and that’s something that no one would necessarily know about, and I didn’t know it from the books that I’ve seen him carrying. Most of the time it would be a book that would be like the equivalent of *The Da Vinci Code* . . . whatever the best seller is or something about Jefferson or some of his idols. You know, he was big into Gandhi and Jefferson and those type people.”²⁵

But making conversation with reporters—even about books—can sometimes cause a politician trouble. Late one night on the campaign plane in 1992, reporter John King got into a conversation about a book Clinton was reading at the time, *The Prince of Tides*. Another reporter came in late to the conversation, and a story subsequently appeared saying that Clinton was so afraid of the press that he would only talk about things like books. King said later he thought it was a “cheap shot,” and so did Clinton, who told King that the episode was an example of why he had become less accessible during the campaign.²⁶

But even though Clinton knew that it was better to be careful, he apparently couldn’t help himself. He had been loose with reporters since his first campaign back in 1974 when he talked about confidential internal poll results, much to the chagrin of his staff. His aides wrote a memo to the entire staff warning them about talking with reporters, although the memo was an oblique way of trying to get Clinton to watch his mouth.²⁷

Clinton’s spontaneous nature always seemed to get the best of him. One reporter said Clinton had a hard time controlling himself and cited as evidence that he criticized presidential rival Ross Perot, who at that point had dropped out of the 1992 race, leaving his supporters ripe for Clinton to pluck. There was no benefit for Clinton in criticizing Perot, but he couldn’t stop himself from answering press inquiries about him.²⁸

Despite being burned by his own comments on the presidential campaign trail, he couldn’t curb his appetite for conversation as president. John F. Harris,

a *Washington Post* reporter, argued in his book about the Clinton presidency that Clinton was not a deceptive politician. “On important matters, his real sentiments always surfaced, no matter how the staff tried to keep him ‘on message.’”²⁹ Harris cited as an example a Clinton foray to the rear of Air Force One, where once again he talked too long to reporters, eventually producing a gaffe. Clinton, talking about the national mood, said he was trying to get people out of their “funk”—a word that made his quote sound too much like Jimmy Carter’s disastrous “malaise” speech. Clinton had to recant the remark several days later.³⁰

Clinton had no more control over his staff than over himself. All White House administrations are prone to leaks as staff members jockey for influence and power by releasing information anonymously to reporters—information they hope will promote themselves or deflate their rivals. CBS White House correspondent Bill Plante explained that leaks often are generated when there are internal divisions, like there were in the administration of Ronald Reagan. “They had two camps, California conservatives and the core pragmatic people who were aligned with Nancy Reagan, [James] Baker and [Michael] Deaver, so I mean, it was, every day was Christmas for reporters,” Plante said. “You call up somebody on either side, whip it all up.”³¹

Clinton’s White House was equally festive for reporters. “Everybody felt free to advance their own agendas, which they all thought were compatible, of course, with his,” Plante said. “There was no internal discipline about who would say what or who was allowed to talk to the press, and they attempted it from time to time, but the attempts were feeble and nothing was ever enforced. The whole place was very free form, people would go in and out of the Oval Office; there were lots of demands for his attention. He was famously tardy, and he would get interested in something and go off on a tangent and spend a long time doing it, and everybody would be waiting to do the next thing on the schedule.”

Bush, in contrast, brought a lot of people with him from Texas instead of staffing his administration with Washington careerists. Bush also exercised his Harvard Business School training to run the White House. “You know, he’s proud of his business school degree,” Plante said. “He believes that he can manage them, that he can delegate. He knows what he wants to see coming up and he’s quite willing to administer the discipline going down when he feels it’s called for, so given that, you know, people don’t, for the most part, speak out of turn.”³²

Edward Chen, who covered both Bush and Clinton for the *Los Angeles Times*, said one “very top” Clinton official, whom he declined to name, told him he was amazed at the success of Bush in controlling leaks. “This person told me that when President Clinton would have a meeting on some subject

and there would be some discussion and some back and forth, at the end of these sessions it was almost always said by somebody, a chief of staff, or senior person, 'Let's please leave this discussion in this room.' That is, not leak it, you know, not talk to the press about it. But almost always, more often than not, this person told me they would read about it the next day in the paper."³³

It's likely that reporters covering Hillary won't have as much to put in the paper. While Bill tends to be undisciplined, Hillary is controlled, and that personality difference shows up in all aspects of press relations, whether it is talking too much, talking too often, or letting the staff talk too much.

On the question of talking too much in interviews, Fournier said Hillary is more careful than Bill, who will sometimes "road test" ideas by thinking out loud, even in front of reporters. "She thinks and acts a lot more linearly than Clinton does," he said. "She's a much more, 'Okay, I've got to do number one, then two, then three, then four, then five, and as I do one through 20, here's where I'll be at 20.' And she'll work right through that barrage."³⁴

Nelson said Hillary was much more concise. "Very straightforward, very to the point," he said of Hillary. "Whereas, Bill Clinton would take seven minutes to answer a question, she might take 45 seconds to answer the same question."³⁵

Bill Clinton wasn't very good at message discipline. "He always wanted to talk about everything," said *Dallas Morning News* Washington bureau chief Carl Leubsdorf. "She'll be better at that."³⁶

USA Today's Kathy Kiely said Hillary was the type of source who was very businesslike in answering questions. "You really have to dig if you want to get more than just a perfunctory answer," Kiely said. "You have to sort of stay on them and keep asking, whereas other senators will sit there and just start expanding on their answer and tell you maybe things you didn't think to ask about. Hillary is much more cautious than that, but I wouldn't say she's any more cautious than some members of the Senate. You know, there are some senators who are in that category. There are some politicians who are in that category. She is not as comfortable, I would say, in the public role as—her husband's a very public man."³⁷

Women politicians in general are more cautious, Kiely said.

"There are very few women politicians I can think of who let themselves really relax, like an Ann Richards [former Texas governor]," she said. "Ann Richards was very comfortable, she was comfortable being . . . outrageous. Most women politicians are not like that, because it's just harder to be a woman politician. You know, you're judged on so many things and just generally it's harder to be a woman anything. You know, I mean, it's just harder because the standards are higher and any little quirks of your personality tend to be judged negatively rather than somebody looking at it and saying, wow,

what an unusual, interesting personality. You know, people just tend to be negative about it, so I think women politicians generally tend to be more uptight. So you start from that and then you just figure Hillary's personality is just going to make her more that way. She's just more self-contained."³⁸

In her memoir, Hillary wrote how she learned early in the 1992 presidential campaign that reporters take comments out of context. According to Hillary, Bill was joking when he introduced her to a crowd in New Hampshire, citing her decades of work on children's issues as evidence that she would continue to fight for those causes as first lady and the voters could "buy one; get one free." But the phrase soon was used instead to support her "alleged secret aspirations to become 'co-President' with Bill."³⁹

"The 'buy one, get one free' comment was reminder to Bill and me that our remarks might be taken out of context because news reporters didn't have time or space to provide the text of an entire conversation," she wrote. "Simplicity and brevity were essential to reporters. So were snappy lines and catchphrases."⁴⁰

Another unintentional snappy catchphrase was coined when NBC's Andrea Mitchell asked Hillary whether it was ethical to work for a law firm in Little Rock that did business with the state while her husband was governor. Hillary said she could have stayed home and baked cookies and had teas but instead pursued her career. Her aides suggested she try to explain the remark to the press. "On the spot, I had an impromptu press conference," she recalled. "But it had little effect."⁴¹ Still, in later years, it became somewhat of a joke. In 2007, the Hope Visitor Center and Museum in Clinton's Arkansas hometown gave away copies of a recipe entitled "Hillary Clinton's Chocolate Chip Cookies." Fitting Hillary's penchant for detail, the recipe included a nutritional analysis stating each cookie contained 67 calories. Of course, it would have been much better for the campaign if the recipe had been released in place of the caustic comment.

Mitchell wrote in her memoir that the cookie incident was emblematic of Hillary's role in the campaign "as a lightning rod" for criticism. "The lesson Hillary drew from the experience was to become even less accessible to reporters—except when she knew she was in control and could charm them, as she did later in her successful bid for a Senate seat in New York," Mitchell wrote. "She was, and is, a formidable campaigner. She is now a virtuoso at taking the media attention she attracts and making it work to her advantage. But it took years for her to perfect those skills."⁴²

The years on the presidential campaign trail and in the White House were spent in a cold war with reporters over access. On occasion, Hillary would bend to appear to accommodate journalists, but she never really became comfortable—or at least showed the appearance of comfort—until she spent con-

siderable time campaigning for herself for the Senate. As was noted in chapter 2, Hillary worked in extreme secrecy on the Watergate impeachment investigation, which was her first serious foray into government work. It's no surprise she carried that attitude into the national arena when Bill ran for president in 1992.

During that campaign, Hillary "shut down" internal discussions on how to deal with press queries about Clinton's avoidance of the draft. Her decision actually hurt the campaign because the staff didn't develop a formal strategy. Biographer Gail Sheehy asserted Hillary's habit of protecting Bill's secrets had been done so often that it "seemed to paralyze her judgment when it came to revealing almost anything at all."⁴³

It was a philosophy she would follow for much of the White House years. For example, it took Helen Thomas, the dean of White House correspondents, six years to get an interview.⁴⁴ "I thought that she was really blocking us out," Thomas said. "She thought the press was . . . I don't know, I won't go so far as to say, the enemy, but she really avoided us and gave us her widest berth and so forth. She never understood our role, I don't believe, or if she did, she didn't care about it, and I don't think she thought of herself as needing the press."⁴⁵

Hillary's attitude was often in contrast to Bill's attitude, or at least what he said to the press. Bill told reporters during a 1994 press conference that his was an open White House. "I want the American people to see that this White House is different," Bill said. "There's no bunker mentality." But at this same time, Hillary's attitude was to keep the press at bay. According to Sheehy, Hillary jokingly referred to "full disclosure" as "open kimono."⁴⁶

Hillary certainly kept a tightly drawn kimono during her ill-fated Health Care Task Force, the only major White House program she ran for Bill. Hillary ran it somewhat like she had seen Doar run the impeachment team some 20 years earlier. The secrecy policy that Hillary approved forbade interviews with staffers and instructed them to guard task force documents, reminiscent of the way Doar had specially designated trash cans for sensitive material to prevent leaks from garbage-can-scrounging scribes. Hillary's task force staff would not permit some documents to leave the offices and numbered copies of certain memos. The task force even kept phone numbers of its staffers secret from each other so reporters couldn't get them.⁴⁷ Hillary addressed the secrecy charge in her memoir by claiming the process was open because hundreds of people participated in it, "but the press, which was not invited to the meetings, jumped on the issue."⁴⁸

Nevertheless, after the health care failure and a resulting negative media image, Hillary admitted she had given White House reporters too little access and held a press conference to defuse charges flying about the Whitewater issue

and other scandals. Hillary wore a black skirt and pink sweater—no open kimono—but still an outfit that some reporters wrote was calculated to soften her image. Hillary wrote that her clothes were usually a last-minute decision and before the press conference she had simply felt like wearing the outfit.⁴⁹ Whatever the reason, the clothes were striking enough that the session entered Clinton lore as the “Pink Press Conference.”

Hillary ate crow at the press conference, essentially apologizing for not providing better access. She agreed that her reluctance to provide information to the press had made things worse by giving the impression she had something to hide. She tried to explain that her penchant for secrecy came from her parents’ advice to not listen to others.

Hillary said that while that was good advice, it may have led her to be less understanding of the interests of the press and the public in Bill and herself. “So, you’re right. I’ve always believed in a zone of privacy. And I told a friend the other day that I feel after resisting for a long time I’ve been rezoned.”⁵⁰

It was a temporary rezoning. Hillary still tended to keep journalists away from her or tried to control what they could write about. In 1995 she took an extended trip without Bill to various countries including India and Pakistan. A number of women journalists told Sheehy it was exciting to go with the first lady on the expedition, which CBS’s Martha Teichner called a “chick trip.” But they were “darkly warned” that none of the conversations on the long flights could be reported.⁵¹

A few years later, during the Lewinsky scandal, Hillary pulled the kimono tight again. Her aides put reporters in a “press pen” 50 yards from the first lady, maintaining a “cordon sanitaire around her” when she traveled.⁵²

The press pen, however, backfired when she tried it in New York. At one of her first public events when she was contemplating running for Senate, her aides put up a velvet rope at a party at Le Cirque restaurant. A publicist warned that the New York reporters were not used to being kept behind ropes, and *New York Post* columnist Neil Travis left when he saw the setup. Bill Clinton aide Lanny Davis said of the debacle that Hillary would need to learn how to deal with the press.⁵³

She was still learning some of those skills by the time she ran for the Senate against Rudy Giuliani. She started off slow by using a unique tactic for controlling the way journalists reported her message: the listening tour. Hillary, a native of Illinois and a first lady of Arkansas, had to overcome her carpetbagger image of moving to New York just to take the Senate seat. She embarked on a tour of the state, including the Republican areas upstate, ostensibly to listen to the voters’ concerns and to introduce herself at a variety of community town hall-type meetings.

Journalists Mark Halperin and John F. Harris, in their book anticipating the 2008 campaign, called the listening tour “the most inspired move” of Hillary’s Senate campaign for several reasons, not least of which was the way it deftly handled reporters. The tactic helped Clinton avoid the national press, which could not complain she was ducking questions because she was answering them in town hall–style meetings. The format of the campaign trip also tended to focus coverage away from questions about her controversial tenure as first lady and instead was successful in sometimes “shaming reporters” into writing about policy.⁵⁴

She also improved her interview skills. A friend warned her how tough Giuliani would be, but Hillary replied that one thing she had learned in the White House was how to hold her tongue. Instead of blurting out sarcastic remarks that could be taken as insults to stay-at-home moms, Hillary was able to keep her cool even when Giuliani baited her over religion—a topic Hillary is passionate about. Hillary was “quaking with rage” when Giuliani accused her of “desecrating religion” for supporting the right of the Brooklyn museum to display a controversial painting of the Madonna that had dung on it. But she responded in a controlled manner, saying she was “appalled” at Giuliani’s attack on her faith.⁵⁵

Giuliani dropped out when he discovered he had prostate cancer, and his replacement, Long Island congressman Rick Lazio, was not as good a campaigner as the former New York mayor. Hillary was almost always able to stay in control and on message, even during a debate when Lazio crossed the stage and challenged her confrontationally to sign a mutual pledge against accepting certain types of campaign contributions.

By the time she had finished her first Senate term, she had, as Andrea Mitchell wrote, perfected her press skills. This was never more evident than in an *Atlantic Monthly* cover story by Joshua Green, who noted the difficulty in just securing an interview, which “requires the Zen patience and preternatural psychological abilities of a hostage negotiator.”⁵⁶

Green also noted Hillary’s extreme caution in the interview itself. “When Clinton prepares to answer a reporter’s question, there’s a split-second pause when you can almost see her imagining, floating cartoon bubbles above her head, the worst-case headline that a candid answer could yield, and then pitching her reply in the least-objectionable terms.”⁵⁷

For example, Green asked Hillary to compare herself to Bill as a politician in light of the fact that one observer had called her disciplined and a deep thinker. Hillary “visibly recoiled” at the question Green wrote, and he guessed that she imagined the *New York Times* headline for an incautious reply would be “Clinton Calls Husband ‘Shallow,’ Undisciplined.” Instead, she said simply, “I don’t talk about that.”⁵⁸

And so it went for the rest of the interview, Green probing and Hillary deftly brushing off the questions with friendly but innocuous replies. The only time he managed to rattle her came when he asked her about her caution in her Senate votes, pressing her for when she had taken a risk on an issue. Hillary's response was revealing of her understanding of her need to be careful with the media. "Everything I do carries political risk because nobody gets the scrutiny that I get," she told Green, adding that she doesn't have any margin for error, but she has accepted that fact.⁵⁹

Although Hillary has learned to live with the need to be cautious in what she says, reporters have trouble accepting the dearth of quotable material. Chris Smith, in a *New York* magazine cover story, noted she was friendly but "depressingly, off the record. Clinton doesn't say anything remotely controversial or derogatory." Although she is talkative and pleasant, "even Clinton seems bored with what she's saying." Smith wrote that the challenge for her campaign "will be to turn the unscripted Hillary loose now and then, to trust the human Hillary who's turned up in every remote corner of New York."⁶⁰

Hillary remained scripted to the end of the interview. "She's looser and warmer than I'd expected," Smith wrote, but concluded that, "We'll never get a straight answer from her, at least on the record." Smith tried one last time, asking "the back of Clinton's expensively blonde head" as she walked away why a Democratic voter should hope she runs for president in 2008. Many other reporters had tried to get Clinton to announce her intentions early, and Clinton laughed "loud and hard" at Smith's effort. "Oh, I'll talk to you about that if I ever make such a decision," she said. "Good try, though! That was clever!"⁶¹

The banter, even if an improvement over sarcastic remarks about cookies, is not enough for reporters. They prize contact with the source, and although Hillary grants perhaps more than she did as first lady, many reporters believe she is too inaccessible, and the teasing interviews are too few.

Bill and Hillary have fundamental differences in the way they handle access, said Douglas Turner, a columnist for the *Buffalo News* who covered both the Clinton White House and Hillary as New York senator.

"Their styles are entirely different," he said. "Under Bill Clinton, we had a remarkable level of access in '93 and '94. We met regularly with his chief of staff, Leon Panetta. We had an organization of regional reporters from Cleveland, Buffalo, Pittsburgh, Chicago, and St. Louis, that quadrant—we called ourselves the Rust Belt group—we were called in for periodic briefings with Panetta, [economic advisers] Mickey Kantor and Bob Rubin. We had tremendous access for regional reporters, and we got access to everybody. We were invited over to the White House in groups every few weeks. They took us seriously. It was a sign of the openness of Bill Clinton's administration. There

was nothing like it before or since for regional reporters. We had hard passes—we could go in and out of the White House easily. We found it extremely valuable. It was wonderful, then it closed down with the Lewinsky scandal.”⁶²

But the Rust Belt reporters never saw Hillary Clinton, even when she ran Bill’s health care reform effort, for which, as noted, she kept press contact to a minimum. She has also tightly controlled access for reporters to her Senate office, and in that respect she doesn’t compare favorably with her predecessor, Daniel Patrick Moynihan.⁶³

“Hillary runs an operation that has a lot less access,” Turner said. “We had had the pleasure of covering Pat Moynihan. You could talk to anyone on his staff. You could call his office and get any information. It was like having your own congressional research service. You could call Moynihan’s office and get sophisticated data. They were just really helpful. Moynihan ran it like a university.”⁶⁴

Moynihan had monthly on-the-record sessions in his office on serious policy issues. “He was back lighted in this dimly lit Senate office with these opaque lampshades. I called them séances, and the name stuck,” Douglas recalled with a laugh. “It was great fun and gave us a feeling of community in the New York State press corps. We would call each other and help each other, verify information to make sure we got it right. It made Washington reporting for us a much richer place—not in terms of money—but it gave us a sense of vocation, which is a treasured thing for a reporter. It wasn’t just a job. He had class. He was so gracious. He gave us a sense of dignity. We all miss him.”⁶⁵

Later, when Moynihan became ill, he quit holding the press sessions, but reporters could still get him on the phone. “When Hillary was elected, we asked her for these sessions,” Turner said. “I think she would be a better candidate, a better senator, if she did them.” Turner said Hillary held only two similar sessions, and joked that they’d be called “The Douglas Turner Memorial Briefings.” But she didn’t hold any after October 2001.

Other stories have compared her access unfavorably to other senators, including her rival for the Democratic presidential nomination, Barack Obama. Hillary declined an interview for a *Washington Post* story about the competition developing between her and Obama in late 2006 as the two positioned themselves for the upcoming campaign. The writers noted that she rarely banters with reporters. One anecdote described how Obama “lingered by the elevators near the Senate floor, feeding quotes on Medicare and tax cuts to a gaggle of scribes. Clinton rushed by a few minutes later, flanked by staff members, and heading straight onto a waiting elevator.”⁶⁶

Like magazine writers Smith and Green, Turner didn’t find her very revealing in the sessions he did have with her, although she was pleasant. “She

had a great manner,” Turner said. “I went to her office twice. It was great fun being with her. She told stories. It was like visiting an old statehouse politician who would pull open the drawer with a bottle of Jack Daniels in it. No news developed out of it, but there were some tremendous anecdotes.”⁶⁷

She doesn’t show that side much in public or on-the-record interviews. What reporters see instead is rigid discipline, and it may come at a price. “She is extremely disciplined in her approach,” Max Brantley said. “She will not be taken off topic. She’s going to stay on topic. She’s going to be an idiot savant on everything down to farm commodities of whatever upstate New York county she’s in, and she’s going to do her homework and get it done. I just think—and I say this as somebody who believes she has it—I think people, and reporters are people, at the end of the day and the beginning of the day, want humanity out of politicians. And they want to see a human side. And I happen to think Hillary has a reasonably attractive human side, and if she’d show it a little more she might be better, but for whatever reason she has decided that’s not safe. And I guess if you look back at the record it might be she just doesn’t have a real good touch.”⁶⁸

Brantley pointed out that often a casual remark of Hillary’s has generated intense criticism, like the time in the *60 Minutes* interview when she said of her marriage that she wasn’t “some little woman standing by her man like Tammy Wynette.” (Even country singer Wynette jumped on Hillary for that one, and got an apology from the recalcitrant candidate’s wife.)

“(Hillary) talks about chocolate chip cookies and the next thing everyone is tearing her apart whether she’s lying about it—says she’s a New York Yankees fan and a Cubs fan, and they tear her apart about that. Said she thought about enlisting in the military, and everybody—well maybe she was lying about all of that—and in which case, pound the crap out of her,” Brantley said. “Fair enough. Or maybe she was telling the truth about those things and the reward she gets for revealing a human side of herself is unshirted hell. I don’t know. It is not easy being Hillary, I think.”⁶⁹

Hillary has tried to avoid the fires of media hell through controlling her staff as well as herself. When she was first lady, she frequently railed against leaks, scolding anyone who gave the press information without clearing it with her first.⁷⁰

“You know, they all try to control leaks,” said *Dallas Morning News* Washington bureau chief Carl Leubsdorf. “I have a theory about what makes a leakier White House. My theory is that the more the White House staff is composed of people who are—the White House staffs tend to be two kinds, loyalists who are the people who are very loyal to the person who’s in charge, come in with that person and basically they’re there to protect and help that person. And the other group are the hired hands. The hired hands are the peo-

ple who are the up and coming young Democrats and Republicans who want a job in the White House because that's the next step up the ladder, and Bill Clinton had a lot of hired hands and Reagan had a lot of hired hands, and their White Houses were pretty leaky. And George Bush, in his first two years, the senior and this Bush had a lot of loyalists and they ain't leaking. So to the degree that a President Hillary Clinton would surround herself with the loyalists who are the ones in the campaign, they will be much more controlled about that because they're looking out for the president and the candidate rather than for themselves."⁷¹

Hillary believed the leaks in the Clinton administration came from young advisors more concerned about themselves than the president.⁷² Hillary won't have that problem because, as a number of sources said, she is surrounded by loyalists.

"She will have a rigidly loyal, superbly disciplined team of people who will probably reflect the Bush team in the degree to which they cooperate with the press in terms in leaks," Brantley said, who added that his opinion was based on watching Hillary's campaign from afar. "It appears to me that she has an intensely loyal, well-disciplined team of people who have utter loyalty toward her, and they are not going to be the source—it's not a pack of people carving each other up like Bill's group was, racing to be the first one to leak something. I'll be very surprised if Hillary has that same kind of (problem). Every now and then you'll see a little story developing in which it's typically Adam Nagourney (of the *New York Times*) quoting some unnamed person who is said to be close to the Clintons, but what I think those people are is really people twice removed from the true inner circle, but who are wannabes who are just outside and are trying to gain some favor with the press."⁷³

Hillary's staff is not the type to provide anonymous quotes. "I mean that just ain't the way it works," Brantley said. "I don't think her people are going to be like the Clinton White House—just all these guys self-aggrandizing themselves—she's got a different kind of person around her that is crazy about her—they love her."⁷⁴

When told of Brantley's description of Hillary's staff, Turner said, "True enough," and added that someone told him Hillary's people "would walk on hot coals for her."⁷⁵

Kiely said the amount of leaks is controlled only in part by the personality of the boss, but that outside circumstances also play a role.

"I will say that Hillary inspires tremendous loyalty among her people," Kiely said. "It's really remarkable, and I can think of very few politicians who have such a really, really loyal staff. There are very few leaks."

Kiely cited as an example that there were no leaks of her announcement of her presidential exploratory committee. "I think one of the other things that's

notable about her is that even people who leave her staff to go on and do other things, almost all of them are kind of on call, and you'll find them coming back. If she's on a trip, and suddenly you see somebody you haven't seen for a couple of years, and they volunteer for a few days—they've taken some time off from their job. The people who work for her are very, very loyal to her, so I think that, again, gets to this issue of that (the Clintons are) very different. He has this image of being very charming on the surface but behind the scenes, he can be very tough. She has this reputation of being kind of an ice queen because she's not as affable and not as slap-you-on-the-back kind of a pol as he is, but her staff, you know, the people who work with her day in, day out, are incredibly loyal, which tells you she must be a pretty good boss. And there's not a huge turnover on her staff, you know, it's not some rapidly revolving door. I mean, that's another thing, there are some people in the Senate who I can think of who, every two months, they've got a different press secretary, a different chief of staff. She's still got the same people she started with."⁷⁶

Hillary's organization is different from other presidential candidates, according to *New York's* Smith. "Her team is frighteningly disciplined; no one talks out of turn or without prior approval, and even when they do, aides repeat the same anecdotes almost robotically."⁷⁷

Smith's description was very similar to how the *Los Angeles Times's* Chen described the Bush White House in its most locked-down years. Bush's aides and cabinet officials were so in sync that it was almost spooky for White House reporters. "It's sometimes a little eerie when it happens, but I know I would call the White House on something, on some matter, and get a particular set of answers and rhetoric, and then I would call one of the agencies and talk to a person there and that person basically would give me the same thing, often using the same words and phrases," Chen said. "Of course, it's no accident. They plan these things. They have morning conference calls to talk about . . . what to talk about."⁷⁸

Hillary, of course, has been able to study both administrations, and it looks like she patterns her access more after Bush's than her husband's. Like Bush before he ran for president, Hillary saw someone she loved eviscerated by the national media and then had two terms in office on her own (she as senator, Bush as Texas governor). She can see that the politician can gain great control over the message if only he has the discipline and will to do so.

"I equate her much more along the Bush lines," Usher said when asked to compare Hillary's press relations with those of Bush and Bill. "I mean, she would have it like Bush, I'm sure, if she could. She really doesn't care that much for us. I mean, she has her favorite people and she believes that there needs to be some press coverage, but the way she would rather have it is

someone that knows the rules and knows how to be, that she is comfortable with . . . than to have this whole mess of the press corps, you know, one photographer from each wire, another one from each magazine, and everybody running around, writers and TV and booms and mikes. I totally understand that aspect of it, but wherever the president is, it has to be a public thing, and they just want us to get as little as possible because they really don't care."⁷⁹

Plante also thought a Hillary administration would be similar to Bush's in terms of control. "I think that's exactly right," he said. "I wouldn't argue with that for a minute. I mean, there's a very controlling aspect to Hillary because she knows exactly what she wants, she's very focused and she really doesn't want to be distracted getting there or doesn't want to get, doesn't want her message to be distracted from."⁸⁰

Fournier said that while Hillary was more disciplined than Bill, some of that might be attributed to the differences in the type of organization rather than the personality of the principles. "Any Senate staff is going to be more disciplined than any White House staff, and any first lady's staff is going to be more disciplined than any White House staff," Fournier said. "I suspect that she will always have people around her who are more loyal to her than Bill Clinton did, at least in Washington. If you go back and look at his staffs in Arkansas, they were incredibly disciplined. Not a lot of leaks came out of there. I was really good at breaking stories out of the Clinton White House. I hardly broke any out of the Clinton governorship, and they were very loyal. He had people who worked with him for a long time down there. When he got to Washington and the people he brought with him were relatively new to him except for people like Bruce Lindsey, because someone like Bruce Lindsey, you now, never leaked. The people who leaked were folks who had been part of his political orbit for only a couple years. Well, I think Hillary learned from that, I think she puts a higher premium on loyalty now than Clinton did, but then again, Clinton probably learned a little bit, too, and if he were to be president for a third term, he might surround himself with more loyal folks. But I think because of the thinker she is and because of the lessons she learned, my guess is she would have a more disciplined staff and organization than Clinton, but it'll still have its own divisions and breaks."⁸¹

Certainly a Hillary administration would have some leaks and get off message in some cases. But tactics like message discipline and controlling leaks are essentially a function of personal characteristics. If the politician is disciplined in his personal life, he has a better chance of translating that to media skills.

Bill Clinton was a brilliant politician when he campaigned, but as governor and president, he constantly undermined himself with poor self-control. "I think he has a supreme sense of what he needs to say," the *Houston Chronicle's* Cragg Hines said when talking about Bill's capacity for message discipline. "I

think he could get a little off message and become a little defensive, but generally he had a strong sense of the message of the day, you know, or the message of the week, and kept to it. Did some sort of sideline thing that was of his own making get in the way of that? Well, yes, of course, they did. . . . That's why he, I think, became so exasperated [because] in his own mind, he was a master of the message, but you know, whatever it was, zipper or whatever else, got in the way."⁸²

Wayne Slater once attended a White House dinner where the entertainment was a female singer who performed a number of Cole Porter tunes. "After the entertainment in the East Room, Hillary disappears, but Clinton's still moving around," Slater recalled. "There were governors and different people who were there, and you go out in the White House, and they have the band set up and there's dancing. And so I was kind of wandering about, and I wandered down one of the hallways where these pillars are, you know, not that far away, I see Clinton, the president of the United States, who is leaning into this woman—he's got this singer down at the end of the hall, and he has one hand against the pillar, leaning into her with his face quite close to her, it's just intimate, just talking, conversation, and it looked totally inappropriate. But the thing that struck me was, he's doing this, like, semi-public. I mean, if I could walk around and see this, my God . . . he's, in a weird way, so undisciplined. All he was doing, on the one hand, was just talking to her, I understand that, but there was a kind of body language—it was Bill Clinton with a full court press—and it just struck me as kind of odd. Let me guarantee you, Hillary Clinton will never make those kinds of mistakes. Seriously, you'll never see her do anything other than what seems calculated and for public consumption, I'll bet you."⁸³

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Azalea-pink Rage and the Book of Accounts

Bill Clinton was elected president in 1992 with the image of a happy-go-lucky “Bubba” from Arkansas. During the campaign he played the saxophone on Arsenio Hall’s television talk show, answered a question about his underwear style on MTV, and demonstrated a fondness for McDonald’s hamburgers and Fleetwood Mac music—two middle-of-the-road tastes in their respective areas of popular culture.

But the image belied a mercurial temper.

Few of his temper tantrums occurred in public or were caught on TV when they did, so most episodes didn’t make it into the media. In fact, *Nightline* reporter Chris Burrey said Bill’s flashes of temper were “maybe the most under-reported or unreported story of the campaign.”¹

American politicians must exude a man-of-the-people friendliness to succeed with voters and journalists, but the reality is that they must also be driven, demanding people who don’t suffer fools lightly to get to the top level of power. Once they have climbed that greasy pole to the ultimate political prize—the White House—it’s sometimes difficult to control the rages of modern life that lesser citizens succumb to but must keep in check. As long as the politician can keep his intemperance out of immediate public view, he’s free to vent at will because there is no one to hold him accountable except the voters.

Photographer Chris Usher said he noticed at times an imperious attitude among Bill, George W. Bush, and Hillary. He’s seen all three lose their temper with various aides. “[Hillary] does consider herself presidential, and that is one thing I notice about all of these people—and I see it more so with Bush, but even with Clinton—even when they’re like a person of the people and really get down and clear brush and do all this stuff, they still consider themselves a

demigod, you know, in some small id ego kind of thing that comes out, that comes through just now and again,” he said.²

Sometimes irritation explodes into a temper tantrum. “Hillary can be extremely affable and nice and pleasant, you know, like a den mother,” Usher said. “I’ve seen her that way. I’m not sure if it’s an act or not sometimes, but I’ve also certainly seen that when she’s irritated, I mean, she is a bitch on wheels, man, when she wants shit done and all of that, and the same goes with Bill, though, too. I’ve seen him snap plenty of times, too, and he’ll get pissed and when his Diet Coke isn’t cold or something, it’s like, ‘Goddamn it . . . get me a fucking Diet Coke,’ you know, and just go off. I can’t say that I’ve ever heard Hillary use profanity other than ‘damn it,’ but she definitely has a short fuse that I’ve seen.”³

Reports of the Clintons yelling at aides and fighting with each other have circulated for years, although the Clintons and their partisans often discount them as politically motivated attacks or gossip. George Stephanopoulos, for example, called *Unlimited Access: An FBI Agent inside the Clinton White House*, a “work of fiction” written as part of a “smear campaign.”⁴ A story about Hillary tossing a lamp at Bill in the White House got so much publicity that the first lady was asked about it by the press. She dismissed it as a sort of urban legend, saying there were variations in which she had thrown a Bible or a Mercedes-Benz.⁵ The incident, which was supposedly heard by a Secret Service agent, has been repeated so often as to enter the lore of Clintoniana, and whether true or not, fits logically with the numerous accounts of their combative marriage. Hillary has also been accused of cursing at her Arkansas state trooper bodyguards and Secret Service agents, in one case allegedly hurling a book at the agent driving her presidential limousine.⁶

But Hillary could usually keep that sort of rage behind the darkened windows of the limousine and would not direct it toward reporters. In fact, the Clintons’ differing personalities were reflected in the way they expressed displeasure with journalists just as surely as it was reflected in the way they tried to charm them. The disciplined Hillary usually kept the source/reporter relationship very professional. Disagreements were expressed calmly or through aides.

But the outgoing, emotional Bill, the candidate who never forgot a person’s name or information, would as often as not confront the reporter directly. Sometimes he would write notes on the offending newspaper copy and send it to journalists or write them a detailed letter, like the one Rex Nelson received when he was sports editor of the *Arkadelphia, Arkansas*, newspaper. Clinton had come to the area to watch a high school basketball game with his buddy, Eddie Sutton, who, as the coach at the University of Arkansas, was trying to recruit one of the players. Nelson wrote a column arguing it was in-

appropriate for the governor to take sides in the recruiting process by sitting with the University of Arkansas coach when Arkansas State University was also trying to get the player. Because he worked for a small paper, Nelson thought Clinton would never even see the column.

“Lo and behold within days I got . . . a long handwritten—actually I remember it was on Governor’s Mansion stationery—note from the governor explaining that he loved basketball, and he’d just been asked by Coach Sutton to come down, and he really wasn’t taking favorites, and it was this long letter which was very interesting,” Nelson recalled. “He was very sensitive to any media criticism in that first term and somewhat thin-skinned actually, and that was an excellent example of that.”⁷

Clinton had a sudden and volcanic temper that would erupt on unsuspecting reporters whenever he believed he had been unfairly dealt with. The tantrum would usually end as quickly as it began as Clinton, the ultimate political animal, would try to smooth things over.

“The thing about his temper, it would flare up at reporters, but my sense and certainly my experience, it was never a long-lasting thing,” Nelson said. “He realized that he really needed you, and in contrast, obviously if you were covering state government, and he was the governor of the state, you needed him also, so it was not a long-lasting smoldering thing.”⁸

Ernest Dumas, the Arkansas newspaperman who recalled being complimented by Bill when he barely knew him, was the target of Clinton’s temper when he was one of the editorial writers for the *Arkansas Gazette*.

Dumas said that one morning he had gotten to the office early and was settling in with a cup of coffee when he got a call from Bill Clinton, who didn’t bother saying hello before letting Dumas have it. Dumas recalled the conversation went something like this:

“I can’t believe you would write such a piece of shit as this,” Clinton said.

“Wait a minute, Governor, what in the hell are you talking about?” Dumas replied.

“This goddamn editorial this morning,” Clinton said.

“What editorial?” Dumas asked as he flipped through the paper to the editorial page, which usually carried three or four unsigned editorials.

“Well, this lead editorial at the top, the first one here,” Clinton said, referring to one that, as Dumas recalled, was critical of Clinton’s education policy.

“Well, I didn’t write this editorial,” Dumas said.

“You didn’t?” Clinton said.

“No, no,” Dumas said. “Jim Powell wrote that. He’s back here. Let me get him.”

Dumas explained that the writer was sitting near him and would be glad to talk to the governor. But Clinton declined the offer and then chatted with Dumas

for a half hour on other subjects, not wanting to let the conversation end on a bad note. At the end of the conversation, Dumas said he would tell the writer about Clinton's complaint, but Clinton said, "No, don't do that. You'll ruin his day. I've got it out of my system. I don't give a damn."⁹

Arkansas columnist Paul Greenberg described Clinton's temper as a "hissy fit" that never bothered him because it seemed so petty; and furthermore, Clinton lacked the moral authority to make the recipient feel guilty. "It's not as if George Washington were losing his temper or Abraham Lincoln was losing his temper," Greenberg said. "It comes and goes just like a spring shower, and I don't think it means a thing. Bill Clinton could yell at me all day long. I don't think it would faze me, but if Laura Bush happened to look at me sideways, I'd feel a little guilty and disturbed. I would examine my own behavior."¹⁰

Greenberg was the target of Clinton's wrath when he suggested that the governor abused his power by appointing a commission of his cronies to look into the business affairs of his political rival Sheffield Nelson. Greenberg included the episode in his book on Clinton called *No Surprises*, writing that Clinton's anger couldn't be characterized as "rage" because it seems petty, as if it is coming from an "empty core." Clinton "does turn the prettiest shade of azalea-pink at these moments, adding a touch of color to what might otherwise be just another drab press conference."¹¹

Greenberg, recalling the incident later, said Clinton's temper was for the audience. The governor shook Greenberg's hand on the way out of the meeting, adding to the feeling that the incident wasn't very serious. Clinton asked Greenberg who he would have appointed if he were governor.

"Well, all I could say was 'Anybody,'" Greenberg recalled. "I think I said a bunch of used car dealers would have been better than the people you appointed, not because they're bad people, but because obviously they're Democratic Party *apparatchiks*, and whatever they fathom would be dubious from the start."¹²

Clinton's disinclination to leave a bad impression after an initial burst of anger was part of his belief that he could win over anyone with his personality, said Steve Barnes, a television journalist who first covered Clinton when he represented the George McGovern campaign in Arkansas in 1972. "Clinton would blow and then cool off very quickly," Barnes said.¹³

Early in Clinton's presidency, the White House held a press conference for Arkansas reporters, and it happened not long after the first *American Spectator* story appeared about state troopers helping Clinton carry on affairs while he was governor.

"Most everybody there was a familiar face to him, and so he delivered a little impromptu address on what the issues were and how the administration

was trying to address them, and he looked over at me for the first question,” Barnes recalled. Clinton might have thought he was among old friends and was surprised by what he took to be an unfriendly first question. Barnes asked him whether he ever used the state troopers in the manner described in the article.¹⁴

“He got as red as his Christmas tie,” Barnes said. “He had an ugly tie [in case Chelsea gave it to him, it was a very beautiful tie]. But it was one of those horrid Christmas ties, and his face got as red as the tie. They were indistinguishable, and he . . . snapped, ‘No. That’s all I’m going to say about it,’ and went on to the next question.”

Later in the same press conference, Barnes asked Clinton to explain his relationship with Cliff Jackson, a former friend of his from Oxford who later supplied damaging information to the media about Clinton’s efforts to evade the draft.

“I said, ‘Did something happen between you two gentlemen at Oxford to cause this great breach?’” Barnes said. “Clinton just laughed. He chuckled over that. It doesn’t necessarily mean he appreciated the question. He didn’t. He wasn’t mad any longer.”¹⁵

Arkansas newspaper reporter Carol Griffie also said that Clinton didn’t stay mad, at least in their relationship. “He doesn’t hold grudges after a while,” she said. “It’s just a flash temper.” His temper flashed at her when they argued about his chronic lateness.¹⁶

“Oh, boy, we got into it in 1978,” she recalled. “I’m not the kind of person who likes to sit around and wait for people. To me, it’s thoughtless if you’re not on time, thoughtless disregard for others, and I clocked him during that campaign for governor. He was an average of 26 minutes late for everything. We got into it. I can’t to this day remember what it was about, but we had it out on the Fourth of July. It’s hotter than a firecracker up there. It was up in—I can’t remember if it was Lawrence County or Clay County or Greene County, but it was up in northeast Arkansas—and we got into it. I think the basis of it was that I was just damned tired of waiting for him, because it was so hot.”

Clinton, Griffie said, never held a grudge about the argument. “But he also knew from that point on that I wasn’t just going to take every bit of crap he wanted to throw out, either,” she added.¹⁷

Arkansas television journalist Mel Hanks found that Clinton didn’t feel much need to be cordial to him. Clinton didn’t want to see Hanks at a social function at either the Governor’s Mansion or the White House.

Once Hanks went to the governor’s Christmas party with other people from his television station at around the same time he had done a story suggesting that Clinton’s state medical examiner, Fahmy Malak, was incompetent.

“When I showed up at the Christmas party,” Hanks recalled, “Clinton looked at me and said, ‘What are you doing here?’” It was obvious to Hanks that Clinton wasn’t joking. “So I said, ‘Oh, good to see you, too, Governor.’”¹⁸

When Clinton became president, Hanks attended a journalism conference in Washington and decided to call Clinton’s chief of staff at the time, Mack McLarty, who had once been part owner of the Arkansas station that had employed Hanks.

“I knew Mack pretty well,” said Hanks, who had brought his teenage son to see the capital. “I called McLarty’s office, and Mack said, come on over to the West Wing and we’ll show you around, and that was the same day they were going to announce the appointment of Madeleine Albright as secretary of state—the first woman secretary of state—so it was kind of a momentous day. He said, ‘Come on, you can be with the president when they announce Madeleine Albright.’ So we went over there, and the atmosphere changed. We went into the West Wing, past the Marine guards into the interior lobby, and my son and me waited for about 45 minutes, and pretty soon Mack comes out and he looks rather nervous, and he says, ‘Nice to see you. How’s everything going?’ And he met my son. And we talked for a while, but it was obvious that he was saying ‘Can you leave now?’ without really saying it.”¹⁹

Hanks and his son left without seeing the ceremony or Clinton, and he learned from another source later that Clinton had overruled McLarty because he was still angry over some of Hanks’s stories. Hanks’s wife later told him he was naïve.

“My wife said, ‘What do you expect? You did all those stories about him and now you expect him to welcome you with open arms in the White House?’” Hanks recalled with a laugh.²⁰

But Hanks liked the fact that Clinton was upfront with his anger. “One thing is, a lot of politicians hide their bad temper and then get back at you secretly,” Hanks said. “And at least dealing with me he was never secretive and would always, when he was mad, he’d let you know it, and then he’d move on. So I thought that was admirable.”²¹

The Associated Press’s Dennis Byrd said he admired the way Clinton handled an interview in which he had misspoken. “I don’t really remember the specifics, but it was an education issue, and the answer he gave to my question was a flip-flop—different than he had answered other questions about education, and so obviously that became the lead of the story when I got back to the AP bureau,” Byrd recalled.²²

Clinton called Byrd that night at home after the story had been transmitted over the wire, telling him he had misspoken and asked what he could do about it. Byrd said he couldn’t change the original story, but could put in an update that Clinton had clarified his remarks in a later interview, and that’s what happened.

"I thought he handled the situation really well. . . . He could have ruined his relationship with me by demanding or being heavy handed about wanting to change what he said."²³

But most reporters experienced Clinton's heavy-handedness at some point, even Max Brantley, whose family has been friends with the Clintons for a number of years. Brantley was on the receiving end of Clinton's temper at a news conference. "He burns hot, but he burns quick," Brantley said. Hillary, on the other hand, "remembers." Brantley laughed and explained, "She keeps a book of accounts, I think, whereas Bill kind of moves forward."²⁴

When Hillary wanted to settle accounts with the press, it was not with the explosive temper of her husband. Hillary doesn't use the purple-faced, raging, finger-wagging displays of her husband. Her methods are much more subtle, using press aides and surrogates to let journalists know their stories are being checked carefully.

Hillary's biographers Jeff Gerth and Don Van Natta Jr. noted that her Senate aides complained to the *New York Times* about a story that misquoted Hillary as criticizing Democrats when she was talking about Republicans. Later, Hillary ran into the reporter, Ann Kornblut, who was dressed casually. Kornblut had been on vacation, and Hillary teased her over her outfit, telling her she looked like she was still dressed for Barbados. Kornblut said she felt intimidated by Hillary's detailed knowledge of where she had gone on vacation.²⁵

Of course, a journalist could also interpret such a comment as a politician's interest in the reporters on the beat. As noted earlier, remembering reporters' names and details about them is often a charm tactic of politicians like Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. Perhaps the Kornblut incident was another example of Hillary's attempt at humor failing her.

The Associated Press's Ron Fournier said Hillary will be friendly but honest about what she thinks about a story. "You know, to this day Senator Clinton's someone who, if I bumped into her in the street, she would say 'Hi, Ron,' and ask about my kids. . . . It would be very charming and courteous," he said. "But if I wrote something bad about [the Clintons], she would tell me, 'I think that was unfair and here's why,' and bend my ears back."²⁶

Hillary didn't bend radio journalist Pat Lynch's ears back but did let him know she didn't like one of the questions he posed to, as he said, "get her blasted off center" on his radio show. Bill Clinton had been governor for a number of years at that point, and Lynch asked Hillary something like, "Mrs. Clinton, your husband has been governor of Arkansas since 1978. Tell me, are you as sick of him as the rest of us?"

Hillary scolded Lynch for asking a mean question, and defended Bill by saying that there was leadership and "followership," and he had laid out an

agenda for people to follow, and there was only so much anyone could do. “I don’t know that she raised her voice, but her disapproval of the question was pretty abundantly clear, and she was probably understandably displeased with the question,” Lynch recalled.²⁷

Little Rock TV reporter Tom Atwood said Bill liked sparring over pointed questions, and reporters sometimes got better answers by provoking him. But Hillary did not like confrontational questions and once responded “I can’t believe you asked that” to one of his queries.²⁸

She also found it hard to believe how much the media investigated charges of infidelity against Bill. “Rumors are a dime a dozen. I could stand out here and start ten of my own,” she told one reporter in frustration while pointing to a Little Rock street. “They are titillating, but the fact that they get into the mainstream media just amazes me.”²⁹

Hillary was particularly upset when the mainstream media began covering Gennifer Flowers, the woman who sold her story of her long-running affair with Clinton to the *Star* tabloid during the 1992 presidential primary. Flowers had worked for the same television station that employed Hanks, and his station was the only one that had footage of her on the job.

“It was the first time in my career where they actually ran promos of a news series before I had written one word,” recalled Hanks, who then used his announcer’s voice to describe the promos: “‘Learn about the mystery of Gennifer Flowers. What is she really like? Coming up Tuesday on Eyewitness News.’”

Hillary saw the promos and, of course, didn’t like them. “[She] said, ‘I think this is ridiculous. This is tabloid journalism.’ And that was the only time in my entire career that she commented on any of my stories,” Hanks said. “And that hadn’t even aired yet.”³⁰

But rather than criticize a story directly, Hillary will more frequently let her press aides do the slamming, which is the usual practice for high-level politicians. In that way she is more like George W. Bush than she is like her husband, who often fumes directly at journalists. Bush will occasionally snap at journalists with a sarcastic remark, but he lets his aides tell reporters if he doesn’t like a story. The *Dallas Morning News*’s Wayne Slater, who covered Bush extensively as governor and presidential candidate, never received a temper tantrum from Bush but did get calls from aides complaining about stories.³¹

A good example of the contrasting styles of Bill and Hillary Clinton is to compare how they handled press concerns with Ernest Dumas. Bill, of course, let Dumas have it in no uncertain terms when he thought Dumas had criticized his administration in an editorial. But when Dumas was quoted as a source in a *New Yorker* piece about Hillary, he never heard from her directly.

Hillary's press secretary, Lisa Caputo, did call and asked Dumas if he had been quoted correctly in the article.

Dumas said he thought Hillary told Caputo to check the accuracy of the quotes because several of her friends told her they were misquoted. Dumas said his own quote might not have been verbatim but was an accurate reflection of what he thought. Caputo thanked him, and that was that. He didn't take it as an intimidation tactic.³² Nevertheless, it was a reflection of the way Hillary Clinton's team followed coverage closely, even when she was not a public official.

Sometimes her aides put on more direct pressure. Douglas Turner, a columnist for the *Buffalo News*, covered Hillary as senator and wrote several critical pieces, including a book review of John F. Harris's biography of Bill, *The Survivor*. Turner mentioned the book's criticism of Hillary and also wrote a column quoting Helen Thomas's charge that Hillary tried to deny access to reporters.

"I never stopped criticizing her," Turner said. "Eventually, I was removed from covering her in 2005. There is no doubt in my mind that someone complained about me."³³

Turner said that Hillary's press aides who were easiest to deal with were replaced over the years. "The press secretaries who stick are the ones who make her operation more opaque, they are more protective," he said.³⁴

Turner said Howard Wolfson, one of Hillary's press aides during the 2008 presidential campaign, was not a good choice. "He's a volatile guy," Turner said. "He can make enemies quickly. He likes to tell you off. Howard gets defensive."³⁵

Turner cited as an example how Wolfson reacted to comments made about the Clintons by David Geffen, a Hollywood mogul who had been one of the Clintons' biggest fundraisers during Bill's presidency but had since had a falling out with them. "Wolfson took a story that would have been over in one cycle and stretched it out over a week—just dumb," Turner said.³⁶

Geffen was mad at the Clintons over a variety of issues, but most observers trace the falling out to Bill's last-minute pardon of fugitive tax cheat Marc Rich—one of a host of controversial pardons he granted his last day in office. Geffen was upset that Rich was pardoned but not Indian activist and convicted murderer Leonard Peltier, whom Geffen had been trying to get released from prison. Geffen also didn't like Hillary's 2002 vote to authorize Bush to attack Iraq.

For the 2008 campaign, Geffen switched his support to Barack Obama and called Bill and Hillary untrustworthy in a sensational interview with *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd. The most repeated quote, among several slamming the Clintons, was that "Everybody in politics lies, but they do it with such ease it's troubling."³⁷

Instead of ignoring the story, Wolfson gave it “legs” (second-day leads for reporters to write about) by attacking Obama, insisting that the Illinois senator should disavow Geffen’s insulting remarks toward the Clintons and return the money Geffen raised for him at a Beverly Hilton reception. Wolfson said the incident reflected on Obama’s character. “How can Senator Obama denounce the politics of slash and burn yesterday while his own campaign is espousing the politics of trash today?”³⁸

Obama, of course, refused to return the money and asked why he should apologize for someone else’s comments. His press aide said the campaign would not get in the middle of a fight between the Clintons and a former donor. Hillary, when asked about the episode, said only: “I sure don’t want Democrats or supporters of Democrats to be engaging in the politics of personal destruction.”³⁹

Looking at the incident through the prism of press tactics, you could say, as Turner did, that the best response would be the least response. Let the story die. It’s a tactic that worked well for George W. Bush through much of his first five years in office. Bush, through his lack of response to questions, denied a number of damaging stories the fuel of back-and-forth sniping they needed to keep them alive on the front page. The tactic, however, can backfire if the politician lets his opposition or the press define him in a negative way, as happened with John Kerry’s delayed response to Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, the activist group that succeeded in damaging public perception of his war record.

The Hillary campaign tactic was to fight back, and it was one that Dick Morris, a longtime political consultant for the Clintons, approved of. The attack was an attempt to sully the main thing the inexperienced Obama had to sell—“purity”—the idea that he is a fresh face better than the old money-grubbing pols like the Clintons. Morris wrote admiringly of Wolfson “running around busting kneecaps” while Hillary remains above the politics of personal destruction, even though she has long been an expert on digging up dirt on opponents.⁴⁰

“Hillary and Wolfson are a match made in heaven,” Morris said. “After decades of being Bill Clinton’s designated attack dog, Hillary needed one of her own. She’s the good cop to his bad cop. His Darth Vader, unsmiling countenance sends chills down the spines of the American public. But his glare complements Hillary’s grin and makes it unnecessary for the former First Lady to bare her own fangs, except to smile.”⁴¹

But Wolfson’s confrontational manner can be best understood within the context of Hillary’s lifelong ability and willingness to fight, and her expectation that her people do the same. One of the most often repeated tales about Hillary’s childhood is her confrontation with a girl who was bullying her

when she was only four years old. She came home crying to her mother, who chastised her by saying, “There is no room in this family for cowards.” Hillary promptly went back and smacked the kid, earning the respect of the other kids and her family members, who proudly repeated the anecdote for various biographers.

That childhood lesson stayed with Hillary when she became a political wife. She fought against her enemies with everything she had. Morris said Hillary was the Clinton who was ready to use attack ads to try to salvage Bill’s disastrous 1980 re-election bid. Morris said that when Bill refused to use the negative ads and lost the race, “the Hillary Doctrine emerged: Answer attacks. Always, always, always, always answer. No matter how low the blow—or, for that matter, how truthful the criticism—always answer.”⁴²

When Bill was beset by his various bimbo eruptions, Hillary was the one who rallied the troops. After Gennifer Flowers held her press conference, complete with sensational tapes of Bill talking with her, Hillary organized the campaign strategy of going on the offensive against Flowers, the Republicans, and the press. Bill had been ready to discount the episode because he thought no one would believe Flowers since she had been paid for her story by the tabloid *Star*. Stephanopoulos recalled that Hillary’s fighting attitude was “inspirational” at a time when others were down.⁴³

In fact, during the 1992 campaign, Hillary was the one who came up with the name of the much vaunted “war room,” a group of aides who were always ready to respond to attacks and counterattack, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.⁴⁴ During the ultimate Clinton scandal—the Monica Lewinsky affair—Hillary came up with the idea of an information control operation run out of the Democratic National Committee. The operation countered allegations, and surrogates warned of a “day of reckoning” for those who reported unconfirmed rumors.⁴⁵

That fighting philosophy has transferred to her own political operation. *New York’s* Chris Smith described the operation as “a team of tough, resourceful fighters” who “give off a pervasive sense of embattlement that contributes to their leader’s reputation for coldness.” Hillary’s aides have nicknamed her “the Warrior,” which they regard as a compliment.⁴⁶

Indeed, Terry McAuliffe, longtime Clinton friend and former chairman of the Democratic National Committee, frequently praised Hillary’s toughness in speeches promoting his book and her candidacy on a 2007 tour. He contrasted her with 2004 Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry, whom he said did not respond fast enough to the charges of the Swift Boat group. Hillary would respond faster and tougher, McAuliffe said. “We will hit you back so hard your head will spin for a week,” he said.⁴⁷

Midway through the 2008 primary, rival Barack Obama’s head was spinning from smacks applied from the Clinton camp over things like his lack of

experience, his association with indicted Chicago businessman Antoin “Tony” Rezko, and his favorable press coverage. Obama’s momentum stalled and Hillary won the big Texas and Ohio primaries. Hillary (and Bill, although he was keeping a low profile at that point in the campaign) complained repeatedly about biased coverage in favor of Obama. Hillary even joked about the bias in the February 27 debate with Obama, referring to a “Saturday Night Live” television skit that poked fun at press coverage of her rival. Hillary said that she usually got the first question in their debates and said, “Maybe we should ask Barack if he’s comfortable and needs a pillow.”

Perhaps the heads of journalists, too, started to spin after the continued complaints about favoritism. But there was no doubt that Obama faced tougher coverage at about this time. It’s debatable whether reporters got tougher on Obama because of Hillary’s attacks on their professionalism or simply because they were just ready to go after the frontrunner. Obama faced so many hard questions in a March 3, 2008, press conference that he fumbled for answers and complained about Hillary’s “kitchen sink strategy”—throwing everything at him in hopes that something would work. He awkwardly cut the session off, complaining he had answered enough questions and saying he was running late. The *Washington Post*’s Dana Milbank noted wryly that Obama had appeared during the press conference to speak “like a man who had just been hit on the head with a heavy piece of porcelain.”⁴⁸

Hillary no doubt appreciated the press problems of her rival, but it likely didn’t change her overall opinion of the Fourth Estate. There is little question that Hillary considers the press in many ways to be the enemy. She certainly has a low opinion of it.

Just how low was evident in a conversation she had with a friendly Arkansas journalist, Gene Lyons, shortly after Bill had announced he would run for president in 1991. Lyons ran into the couple at a University of Arkansas football game and told them they would sacrifice their privacy by running. Bill was indifferent, but Hillary emotionally castigated the Arkansas press as “weasels” who were “working off childish grudges.” Amazingly, this was before the Clintons had undergone the full treatment by the national press. “She just talked about her fear of and contempt for the press and characterized them as a bunch of emotionally damaged malcontents, basically—people who make their living hurting other people,” Lyons told author Jerry Oppenheimer.⁴⁹

Later, during the height of the Flowers scandal, Hillary told her aide and friend Carolyn Huber, that: “The press doesn’t believe you have any feelings. They sure don’t believe in the Bible.”⁵⁰

Hillary’s sentiments are strikingly similar to her husband’s opinion of the press. When campaign consultant Morris asked Bill why the press was so crit-

ical of Hillary and him, Bill replied that, “They resent us because we are the same age as they are, we’re all baby boomers, and they’re just jealous and envious.”⁵¹ According to Morris, Bill saw each story as a reflection of the reporters’ biases. “They love to destroy people,” Bill told Morris. “That’s how they get their rocks off.”⁵²

Morris, who has known the Clintons since the 1970s and worked closely with them through most of their electoral battles, said neither one gets on well with the press.

“Neither Bill nor Hillary really try to develop relationships with reporters,” Morris said. “Both are ill at ease with them and prefer to keep them at arms’ length. Actually, neither one really reads the newspapers. Bill, in the White House, liked to read magazines like *Atlantic Monthly* and *New Republic* but eschewed newspapers. He would often not know of front page stories in the *NY Times* or *Wash Post* [sic] that everybody else was talking about. Hillary has a firm policy of never reading bad news articles. She feels that it undermines her, and it is part of her discipline to avoid them (at least it was in the ’90s).”⁵³

He added, “Both rely on aides, lawyers, and staff to spin the media for them and are very conscious of answering attacks promptly and aggressively. But they like to hide behind staff when dealing with the media.”⁵⁴

The Clintons’ aggressiveness toward the media has ebbed and flowed over the years. When the Clintons first arrived in the White House, Hillary wanted to move the reporters to the Old Executive Office Building, which would have been “political suicide.”⁵⁵ But press aide George Stephanopoulos did close the hallway leading from the West Wing to the press room, essentially confining the press to the basement. It angered the press, particularly long-time UPI correspondent Helen Thomas, who said the way had been open since Kennedy’s administration. Stephanopoulos illustrated the attitude of the Clinton administration by writing in his memoir that Thomas sounded like the “Wicked Witch of the West” and that the journalists were “babies” about it.⁵⁶

David Gergen, a longtime Washington political operative, was brought in to try to get the administration’s press relationship back on track in 1993. One of Gergen’s first moves was to persuade Hillary to reopen the corridor between the press room and the West Wing, and she agreed to that and to do more interviews. “The war against the press was moving toward a truce,” Gergen wrote.⁵⁷

A truce, but no lasting peace. More scandal coverage and more bitterness followed. After Clinton’s re-election in 1996, McCurry urged Hillary to reach out to the press. She said she’d try but was doubtful it would work because their previous efforts had resulted in “cynicism and more negative coverage.”⁵⁸

And of course at the time of the Monica Lewinsky scandal, Hillary famously blamed the Clintons’ troubles on a “vast right-wing conspiracy,” including conservative media. She was voicing what both she and Bill believe,

and it didn't improve relations with the mainstream press that was reporting on the scandal.

In the 2008 campaign, Hillary sometimes complained about press coverage, but usually in a light or even teasing manner. Her surrogates and aides, like Wolfson in the Geffen spat, played the heavy. Unlike Bill, she usually, as Morris said, kept her fangs hidden. In a sense, it was a new role for her because throughout most of Bill's career, Hillary often was chewing up opponents for her husband.

How she did that is the topic of the next chapter.

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Tag Team: Enter the Secret Weapon

The press conference by Bill Clinton's main rival in the 1990 gubernatorial primary did not promise to be a scintillating one. But it turned out to be one Arkansas journalists have not forgotten. If they weren't there themselves, they've heard other scribes talk about it.

The candidate in this legendary event was Tom McRae, former head of the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation, Arkansas's largest charitable foundation. But his political experience was limited to serving as an aide to then-governor Dale Bumpers in the early 1970s. The press described him variously as patrician, erudite, and professional, but never as a great stump speaker. Meredith Oakley called him "politically naïve" and wrote that he was "a gangly, affable, intellectual sort who was most uncomfortable pretending to be a back-slapping politician."¹

Nevertheless, Clinton had been governor for 10 years and had about worn out his welcome, giving Arkansans a dose of Clinton fatigue.² McRae's focus on Clinton's long tenure and obvious interest in national office was giving the unlikely candidate a real chance to unseat the incumbent and thus ruin Clinton's chances for the presidency.

The state press dutifully showed up for the press conference at the state Capitol to hear McRae hit Clinton on teachers' salaries, the environment, and his extensive out-of-state travel. Belying his stilted image, McRae's props included a cartoon of a nude Clinton with outsized head, looking like a bobble-head doll. But this cartoon Clinton was no kid's toy; the caricature's shame-faced governor stood with his legs crossed and his hands over his crotch. The caption read: "The emperor has no clothes." The clothes were labeled with the various campaign issues like "teacher salaries."

Clinton was in Washington that day, and McRae addressed that fact in his opening remarks, saying “Since the governor won’t debate me, we are giving our own answers.”³ What happened next startled the reporters, who were expecting a run-of-the-mill press conference, and the candidate, who was expecting all eyes on him.

“All of a sudden you hear this woman’s voice saying: ‘Well, you used to say nice things about him,’” Ron Fournier of the Associated Press recalled. “It was Hillary. We turned around, and here’s Hillary with a sheaf of paper in her hand, and it was basically a sort of talking points put together by the staff of all the nice things McRae had said about Clinton. . . . And it was very disarming to McRae because he didn’t expect it, and if it had been Clinton—it would have been easier for him to hit back at Clinton. A little tougher to get in an argument with the first lady who was the spouse.”⁴

Hillary called McRae’s press conference a “stunt” because he knew Bill was out of town and couldn’t debate him. McRae replied that Bill had refused to debate him. But Hillary pointed out that McRae had not appeared at another debate two weeks earlier. Hillary, who never smiled, aggressively defended Bill’s record and chastised McRae for criticizing him during the campaign when he had praised him in many of his foundation reports. “I went through all your reports because I’ve really been disappointed in you as a candidate and I’ve really been disappointed in you as a person, Tom,” she said.⁵

McRae, the professorial policy analyst, was no match for Hillary.

“He was totally flummoxed, just gasping for air,” said Little Rock television reporter Steve Barnes.⁶

Hillary quickly turned McRae’s event into publicity for her husband. The television cameras and the focus of the debate swung back and forth as she not only rebutted his charges but aggressively promoted the administration’s achievements, notably using the word “we” to describe them. For example, to McRae’s charge that state teacher salaries were 50th among all states and the District of Columbia after seven years of Clinton as governor, Hillary quoted a report that showed how education in Arkansas had improved. Hillary said she and Bill were proud of the record and that, “We’ve made more progress than any other state except South Carolina, and we’re right up there with them.”⁷

Hillary so dominated the situation that she got McRae several times to admit that Clinton had a good record in many areas. “The issue is not whether he’s done good things,” McRae said. “The final issue is, shouldn’t somebody else be given a chance to try?”⁸

The event, which was attended by a dozen journalists, was the dominant story in Arkansas the next day. The front pages of both Little Rock dailies featured three-column photographs of Hillary and McRae debating. The event was covered by local TV as well.

Afterward, the Clintons and their press aides gave conflicting accounts about how much, if any, planning had gone into Hillary's appearance. Hillary had initially said she "may have heard" about the conference but didn't remember until a reporter mentioned it when she "coincidentally" was at the Capitol.⁹ Bill's spokesman, Mike Gauldin, said the Clintons had discussed her attending the press conference, but that it wasn't part of any campaign strategy. "She wanted to go to see if Tom would look her in the eye and repeat the misrepresentations he's been putting out," Gauldin said.¹⁰ Bill said Hillary had just gone to "stare" at McRae but couldn't stand it when he produced the nude cartoon.¹¹

But Morris wrote that he and the Clintons were concerned about McRae's television commercials—one of which showed people waving good-bye to Clinton as he left on another out-of-state trip, and another that showed Salvador Dali-like clocks stretching time out endlessly. Morris's polls showed that voters liked Clinton but thought he had been in office too long, and McRae was "gaining steadily." Morris advised Clinton that the election must be changed "from a referendum on you to an election between you and McRae."¹²

According to Morris, Hillary was the one who came up with the idea in the meeting on how to change the focus of the campaign. As Morris recalled the meeting, Hillary said: "If I take him on, it will get a lot of publicity, but it won't necessarily signal a deep concern about the race by you. It will just be your wife expressing her anger at attacks on her husband."¹³

Planned or not, most observers credited Hillary with a knockout, some going so far as to suggest it was mean because she took advantage of a man who was so much less poised than she was. *Arkansas Democrat* managing editor John Robert Starr, who admitted in his column about the press conference that he was a Hillary fan, wrote that her appearance was unjustified no matter how McRae had provoked the Clintons. "What she did was gauche and overwhelmingly unfair," Starr wrote. "She knew that McRae is ill-equipped personality-wise to handle any kind of confrontation. Not content to depend on her wit, she came with an armory of weapons drawn in a four-page prepared statement, knowing she would catch McRae with his bare allegations hanging out."¹⁴

Columnist Paul Greenberg in fact described it like a boxing match: "Bam! Kapow! Scratch! Total Demolition!—Hillary Clinton, spouse and knight errant of the incumbent governor, had materialized in the state Capitol to stand by her man. Or rather in his place."¹⁵ Greenberg, noting that Bill said his wife gave McRae "a good lickin'," wrote that the governor sounded like "a fight manager recounting a protégé's debut at Madison Square Garden."¹⁶

McRae and his supporters tried to put the best face on his "lickin'" by claiming it actually got him a lot of publicity, and suggesting that Clinton was

so scared he had to send his wife out to do battle for him. “It may be what they were doing was a smoke screen to get me to participate in a personal campaign,” McRae said. “It told me they’re very concerned about the momentum I’m building.”¹⁷

But the challenger’s campaign lost whatever momentum it had. Clinton won the primary easily, besting second-place McRae by about 80,000 votes out of about 495,000 cast for the four Democratic candidates. The margin ensured Bill would not face a run-off election for the nomination, and he went on to defeat Republican Sheffield Nelson in the general election by about 100,000 votes.

Many journalists credit Hillary’s press conference crashing for tipping the campaign’s momentum to Bill. Hillary had told Starr earlier on the day of the press conference that she was angry and disgusted that the press had allowed McRae to make false attacks, especially about “her baby”—education reform, and to inflate his own record.¹⁸

Since the press wouldn’t do its job, Hillary did it for them. Hillary, in effect, had taken on the role of investigative reporter and taken over the press conference, giving the real reporters a story they could not ignore.

“It wasn’t a violent move, obviously, but moving in on his news conference, coming up to the podium—was kind of in his face,” Fournier said. “She was very confrontational about it, and McRae was really put back on his heels. And I think if you go back and look at the coverage of that race, I recall that being kind of one of the turning points. She was someone who you didn’t see a lot of, but when there was something really big that needed to happen, you know, when he needed a secret weapon, he’d kind of pull her out with the press.”¹⁹

McRae’s gain in the polls was enough of a risk to unsheathe that weapon. “I guess they thought McRae was making some inroads with some of the criticism he was making of Clinton,” said columnist Max Brantley. “He was certainly the more liberal candidate in that race. And she went to the Capitol and just called him out in public and said, ‘You know, Tom that’s not the truth.’ She knew he was going to be there. It was staged. It was done knowing she would seize the stage from him. And whether they thought it was necessary—you know the rap always was they polled everything down to the minutest level—so whether there was movement they thought they needed to address or whether Hillary just personally took affront, took offense at something he said, I don’t know to this day. But I think she knew instinctively that Tom was this old, courtly Southern gentleman type and probably wouldn’t get into it with a lady, and didn’t really. Was just kind of flustered, caught by surprise. She would take on political opponents. No doubt about that.”²⁰

In fact, Hillary would take on not just political opponents, but members of Clinton’s staff, journalists, and anyone else who got in the way of Bill’s political success.

Bob Steel, a former Little Rock television reporter, recalled with a chuckle the McRae press conference, in which he said Hillary “jumped Tom McRae pretty good.”

He said she was “very defensive” whenever anyone criticized Bill.

“It was a role,” he said. “It was once in a while that she would jump somebody, but I think she played a very vital role in his political campaigns. She was not cooking cookies.”²¹

In fact, long before she cooked Tom McRae’s goose, Hillary had filleted another candidate for Bill—Frank White, who was the only man to beat Clinton in a re-election bid. The humbling defeat came just as Bill’s political career seemed to have limitless potential. After a near-upset of a longtime congressional incumbent in 1974, Clinton had been elected attorney general of Arkansas in 1976. In 1978, when he was only 32, he handily won the governor’s race and gained national attention for being the youngest governor in the country.

But two years later, he was, as many wags noted, the youngest ex-governor in the nation, brought low by a combination of mistakes made in youthful arrogance and events over which he had little control. One of those events was rioting by Cuban refugees—placed at Fort Chaffee by President Jimmy Carter—a situation that White used to great advantage with some deadly effective television commercials featuring the rioters, who at one point had escaped the fort and panicked the residents of nearby towns.

Bill essentially went into seclusion after the defeat, not granting a lengthy interview about his defeat until about two weeks after the election. He did address the Arkansas Society of Professional Journalists about a month after the election, acknowledging that journalists had a difficult job in deciding what information to publish. He challenged the reporters to fight against the type of censorship of ideas that might be sponsored by the Moral Majority, a religious group that had contributed to the election of White as well as President Ronald Reagan. Revealing perhaps a hint of bitterness about his defeat, Bill said politicians tend to “pander to these people.”²² But he didn’t criticize the press for its coverage of him. “On balance, I have gotten a fair shake,” Bill said.²³

Hillary, however, disagreed in some of her comments at a symposium at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock to discuss the election with White and others. Bill had been invited to attend, but declined.

To use the metaphor for which this book is named, Hillary went into the arena, tagging the exhausted Bill so she could wrestle in his place with what the Clintons believed was his mudslinging opponent and a hostile press. An observer described Hillary as “feisty” and only “semi-gracious in defeat.”²⁴

She attacked the media, giving it part of the blame for her husband’s defeat, saying that the press criticized Bill for hiring out-of-state aides while ignoring the fact that White had used non-Arkansas workers supplied by the

Republican Party. "If Bill Clinton had done that, it never would have gotten off the front page of the papers," Hillary told the crowd.²⁵

When Bill ran against White in 1982 to regain the governorship, Hillary continued fighting for Bill. On one occasion she jumped White in a foreshadowing of her evisceration of McRae. She was substituting for Bill at a political rally in North Little Rock. White was also at the rally, mingling with the crowd and trying to ignore his rival's spouse. Hillary would have none of it. She got on the platform and, as biographer Rex Nelson described it "lit into him," yelling, "Frank White, I hope you're still out there to hear this."²⁶

White told Hillary biographer Gail Sheehy that there was no way to win against Hillary because a man arguing with her would look like a bully. Clinton campaign manager Paul Fray credited Hillary's ambush tactics and trial lawyer skill with beating White for Bill. "She gets up there on that stump, and she could kick the dog shit out of you," Fray said.²⁷

White refused to debate Bill and in vain tried to avoid Hillary. Bill mocked White for arranging his speaking schedule so he wouldn't have to appear in the same venue with Hillary. "If Frank's smart enough not to speak at the same time as Hillary, he might not be smart enough to be governor," Bill said. Hillary laughed when told of the incident and said White would probably try to avoid being in the same room with two-year-old Chelsea Clinton, who "could debate him and win."²⁸

Bill, with Hillary's help, won the race handily. It would not be the last time they would encounter White, however. The 1986 governor's race was yet another Clinton-White rematch. One of the issues was Clinton's ties to Dan Lasater, a contributor under investigation for drug trafficking. Once again, Hillary interrupted a press conference to show the reporters how to do their jobs. This time, however, it was her husband's press conference.

Hillary broke in when Bill was asked about an employee of Lasater's who was indicted for cocaine trafficking. "There have been no charges filed," said Hillary, who was standing behind the reporters. "The grand jury is still convened." A reporter then said that one person had been charged, and Hillary remained quiet for the rest of the session.²⁹

After the press conference, she asked *Arkansas Democrat* reporter Pam Strickland when she would question Arkansas senators Dale Bumpers and David Pryor about Lasater's past campaign contributions to them. Strickland told her that their brothers, unlike Bill's brother Roger, had not appeared before the grand jury.³⁰ The conversation continued for several minutes, and Hillary lectured the reporter "on the propriety of covering grand jury investigations."³¹

In a telephone interview the next day with the *Arkansas Gazette's* Maria Henson, Hillary apologized for interrupting the press conference. "I apolo-

gize for that,” Hillary said. “I just really misheard your question. . . . My mouth started before my brain did.”³²

But she continued to press her point that journalists should check Lasater’s donations to other politicians, and that she was concerned about White’s allegations. “I am just amazed that White and [Darrell] Glascock spin out of their imaginations just this increasing string of stories,” Hillary was quoted as saying, adding that she wished the press would do “more screening” of stories.³³ (Glascock was White’s political strategist.)

According to Clinton biographer Roger Morris, the outburst had the intended effect of chilling news coverage of the Clinton-Lasater connection.³⁴

But when Bill ran for president in 1992, and throughout his presidency, Hillary could no longer crash press conferences and directly waylay Bill’s opponents. Tactics that are acceptable on the state level don’t play as well in the national press. Candidates in presidential races do use their spouses and children as surrogates, and they often snipe at each other in statements to the press. But crashing each other’s events would just seem inappropriate. In presidential debates the spouses usually sit attentively in the front row; they don’t shake their fists at each other.

But that propriety didn’t keep Hillary from playing the bad cop to Bill’s good cop. And that role for most of Bill’s presidential campaigns and administration involved putting a lid on the so-called “bimbo eruptions”—the numerous reports of Bill’s infidelities. Hillary was the one who usually organized the defenses against these stories, attacked their veracity, and lent credibility to Bill by the mere fact that she was his wife and she was defending him.

The two best examples of this genre were Hillary’s role in the Gennifer Flowers and Monica Lewinsky scandals. Flowers, as was mentioned in a previous chapter, was a broadcast journalist and nightclub singer Bill had associated with in Little Rock. Her story was first reported in the tabloid *Star*, which had paid her for her account of the relationship. At a crucial point in the 1992 primary campaign, Flowers held a press conference and released tapes of herself and Bill speaking intimately on the telephone.

Hillary wrote in her memoir that she knew the Flowers story had put the staff “into a tailspin” so she conducted a conference call reminding them that they were working because they believed Bill could make a difference. She ended the call by saying, “Let’s get back to work.”³⁵

Her tactic was successful, and foreshadowed a pattern that would continue, according to Clinton aide George Stephanopoulos, who wrote in his memoir, “If she was standing by her man, then so were we.”³⁶

In one of the most famous events of the campaign, Bill and Hillary appeared on *60 Minutes* to try to defuse the infidelity story, which was killing

Bill in the polls. They very carefully admitted to problems in their marriage, but not much more, and the crisis passed. It would not have passed so successfully without Hillary's oversight. She coached Bill in what to say and watched him carefully during the interview so that he did not go too far in admitting wrongdoing. She even helped set up the hotel room for the interview, including the camera angles. *60 Minutes* reporter Steve Kroft told Sheehy that Hillary appeared to be in control. "If you didn't know she was his wife, you'd have thought she was his media consultant," Kroft said.³⁷

Hillary was certainly one of Bill's main consultants in the Lewinsky scandal, which led to Bill's impeachment and might have led to his removal from office had she not helped craft his defense. Again, in one of the more famous images from the Clinton years, Hillary physically stood by Bill nodding when he made his finger-wagging statement that he did not have sex with Lewinsky.

Not long after that statement, Hillary said in an interview with Matt Lauer on NBC's *Today* show that Bill was the victim of a "vast right-wing conspiracy"—a phrase that has since entered the public lexicon to the point that some conservatives have adopted it as a badge of honor to belong to it. Typical examples of this mockery are *The Official Handbook of the Vast Right-Wing Conspiracy*,³⁸ which includes a test whether the reader really is a member of the conspiracy, and *The Vast Right-Wing Conspiracy's Dossier on Hillary Clinton*,³⁹ a critique published in time for the 2008 campaign. But although Hillary was mocked in some quarters for the paranoid language, it did serve as a warning shot to journalists that their work could be interpreted as biased. Indeed, the comment served as a rallying cry for Bill's political base during the impeachment crisis and in later years. Many Clinton apologists now use that phrase to dismiss any criticism of Bill and Hillary as just more nonsense manufactured to harm their political careers.

Hillary herself believed events proved her theory correct, at least judging by her memoir. She devotes about 20 pages, according to her index, to the right-wing and its influence on the Clinton scandals.⁴⁰

Brantley said Hillary rarely went after the press directly when she was in Arkansas, but the right-wing comment proved to be right on. "The choice of words may have been a bit overmuch, but I happen to subscribe to her theory that there was certainly a right-wing echo chamber that was funded through any number of Richard Mellon Scaife organizations, and sympathetic publications and the *Wall Street Journal* opinion page," Brantley said. "There were talking points issued, and they were followed slavishly. I mean it didn't take a genius to figure out what was going on. I still hold the mainstream press accountable for dereliction of duty for being manipulated by the right-wing organs on that. I mean Whitewater was nothing; it was nothing. It was a snipe hunt. Ten years proved it was a snipe hunt."

Ultimately it was not Whitewater but Bill's attempted cover-up of his dalliance with intern Monica Lewinsky that led to impeachment. Bill was working late during the budget battle with Republicans and asked Lewinsky to bring him a pizza. The brief encounter led to an affair that almost brought down his presidency. "But for an exposed thong and a roving eye during a budget crisis, it would have ended at absolutely, totally nothing," Brantley said. "What did happen had no relation to why the prosecutor was in place. And there was utter, total exoneration on everything else."⁴¹

Although total exoneration has eluded him, Hillary has always helped Bill to at least survive his various scandals by manipulating media coverage and attacking opponents through the press. But she has also played a management role behind the scenes, riding herd on his aides. She's been doing this since his first campaign in 1974.

Bill had challenged John Paul Hammerschmidt for his congressional seat, believing he could beat the longtime Republican because of his ties to Richard Nixon, who was embroiled in the Watergate scandal. Hillary and Bill were not yet married at that time, but she came to Arkansas to help manage his campaign, although some Clinton aides thought her confrontational style was more of a hindrance than help for the morale of the staff.⁴² Bill ended up losing a close race.

If she unintentionally contributed to his defeat, it didn't matter because Bill won by losing. No one expected the political neophyte to defeat the incumbent Hammerschmidt, and when Clinton came within about two percentage points of an upset, he gained a statewide reputation that would launch him to his first elected office in 1976, Arkansas attorney general.

Hillary, by this time married to Bill and teaching law at the University of Arkansas, again helped manage that campaign, in part by doing things like setting up Bill's political rallies with the appropriate number of decorations and cheering supporters. She also added to her acerbic reputation. One attorney who worked with her said she called Bill all the time: "She was a cold-blooded heifer, telling him exactly what he had to do with this group and that, who to dump and who to charm to win that election, no matter who backed them before."⁴³

Bill became a popular attorney general and was well positioned for a run for governor in 1978. Hillary campaigned actively for him. Rex Nelson noted in his biography of Hillary that she was an excellent speaker who could often defuse touchy situations. He cited as an example that Hillary calmed an angry crowd of government workers who were incensed over Bill's quote in a newspaper story that many state employees weren't busy. "Hillary claimed the remark had been taken out of context and explained that Bill had meant to criticize state management practices, not employees."⁴⁴

Despite the occasional misstep, Bill easily won the governor's office, and the couple's plan for his career was on track. Hillary could pursue her law career

while he pursued his political career. But the plan was derailed by Clinton's first-term mistakes, which included Hillary's keeping her maiden name, a modern conceit that offended many Arkansas voters.

After Bill's 1980 gubernatorial loss, Hillary became more involved in protecting and advancing Bill's political career to the point that she readily adopted Clinton as her last name. As one of the first steps in re-taking the governor's office, Hillary brought back Dick Morris as a consultant, telling him Bill needed him to help resurrect his career. Bill had fired Morris in 1979 because he didn't want to use polling and campaign tactics to govern, but with the 1980 defeat, he needed to re-focus. Morris described Clinton after the re-election loss as a pitiable figure who told him it seemed strange to have to do his own laundry now that he no longer lived in the Governor's Mansion. "He seemed so out of place, a big man cramped into a little office in a local law firm, walking out to the corridor to see whether he could borrow a secretary to do his typing for him."⁴⁵

Morris told Hillary biographer Gail Sheehy that Hillary at that time decided to change her focus from her own career to managing "their joint political career."⁴⁶ But after his re-election, she became involved publicly in a major way by leading Bill's education reform efforts, which included teacher testing, a facet of reform not popular with the Democrats' traditional base of the teachers' organizations. As she demonstrated on the campaign trail, she was an excellent speaker with the ability to handle controversy.

Little Rock television reporter Bob Steel covered her while she was stumping for reform and said she was an excellent news source.

"She was terrific," he said. "She was always accessible, very well spoken, good quote, very, very bright, smarter than most people I've ever been around, to be honest with you, including him [Bill]. Or as smart—I mean he's a very bright person, and she's a very bright person, so she was a good quote."⁴⁷

In a format that would presage her listening tours to get to know New York voters in her first Senate run and the "let's talk" theme of her presidential campaign, Hillary held a series of successful public hearings on reform throughout Arkansas. Radio host Pat Lynch said Hillary's performance as spokeswoman was crucial to passage of reform in the Arkansas legislature.

"Mrs. Clinton went out and had hearings in 75 counties—that's how many there are in Arkansas, they've got 75 counties in the state—Mrs. Clinton went out and had hearings in each of those counties about school standards and took people's opinions on things so that there was, by the time the legislature met, there was solid support for an increase in the sales tax of a penny, and there was a general sense that the curriculum should be improved and public schools should be improved," Lynch said.⁴⁸

She testified in front of a legislative committee with such knowledge that, in a story that has become part of the Clinton lore, Representative Lloyd George said, “I think we elected the wrong Clinton.” Later that year he said in a less-repeated story that he was going to print bumper stickers that read: “Clinton for Governor. Hillary, That Is.”⁴⁹

When Bill became president, he put Hillary in charge of reforming health care with the expectation that she would have the same success she had with education reform in Arkansas. Her task force developed a huge bill that was roundly criticized by the health care industry, Republicans, and others and never made it through Congress. Hillary’s leadership image was tarnished by the episode, and she had to take a less formal role in the rest of Bill’s administration, exercising her influence mostly behind the scenes. What is often forgotten is that her initial performance as spokeswoman for health care before Congress was similar to her performance before the Arkansas legislature. The *Atlantic’s* Joshua Green, in fact, said her testimony made her the “administration’s first star,” and that press coverage portrayed her as “the more dynamic and impressive Clinton.”⁵⁰ Failure came when Hillary and her partner in the process of writing the legislation, Ira Magaziner, enforced secrecy while developing it. Perhaps if she had held a listening tour the legislation might have passed in some form.

But a managerial role, more than that of spokesperson, is the one Hillary fulfilled throughout most of Bill’s career. One of Hillary’s role models is Eleanor Roosevelt, but journalist John F. Harris said her role in the Clinton White House was more like Robert F. Kennedy’s. Hillary, like Robert Kennedy, was the president’s protector, and like him, she skeptically judged aides, especially press aides George Stephanopoulos and Dee Dee Myers, both of “whom she regarded as too immature and too worried about currying favor with the Washington press.”⁵¹

When the *Houston Chronicle’s* Cragg Hines went to Little Rock to cover the 1992 campaign, he found that it was obvious Hillary was trying to protect Bill from inquiring reporters.

“I worked in Little Rock, I had many friends in Little Rock across the political spectrum,” he said, describing the experience. “You would go and talk to friends or people you knew who were friends of Bill . . . and people would tell you explicitly, mincing no words, that Hillary had told them personally—you know, one-on-one, it wasn’t like orders that came down in a memo or something—that Hillary had told them to be very careful, to be cautious in dealing with the press, to judge every word they told the press, and in some ways, I think this was sort of a lawyerly instinct, but it also reflected she did not trust the media to carry out the great message of Bill.”⁵²

But more than a protector, Hillary has been involved in all aspects of Bill’s career, including press relations. She has done what needed to be done.

Brantley said the couple always planned that Bill would have a successful political career. “During the time Bill was governor, Hillary was certainly a full partner in their public life,” Brantley said. “From the beginning, she had a long ambition to be in elected office. But the decision was made both by virtue of place of birth, and I think probably recognition that men would have a better chance at public office at that time, that Bill would be the first to pursue public office. And she came home and did the things that were necessary to support him in that role. One was finding a good-paying job so she could be a breadwinner because the governor of Arkansas made a relatively small amount of money. But at the same time throughout their life I mean there is a synergy between the two—I hate to use that word—it’s kind of a clichéd word but I think it’s true—where they’re both voracious students and acquirers of knowledge. And, of making contacts with people. And two people, together, can do a whole lot more than one, particularly with the intellect and energy that both have. In the days before computers, famously Hillary would go somewhere on a trip and meet people, and one of the things she would do on the plane ride back was fill out index cards with names, phone numbers, contact points, information that would be useful, that all ended up feeding this vast Clinton data bank that was written about eventually that they carried to the White House with them that was sort of this . . . kind of a whole Clinton network.”⁵³

In Arkansas, Hillary didn’t have that much direct contact with the press, Brantley said. “She gave the standard feature stories on the first lady, whatever you had to do, or were forced to do as first lady—decorating the mansion for Christmas or whatever,” he said. “She didn’t refuse to talk to the press. . . . Hillary was polite and friendly but guarded. Bill did most of the direct relations.”⁵⁴

But when she had to do direct relations, she did it, and did it well. It’s one of the interesting ironies of the Clintons’ tumultuous relationship with the press that the first time Hillary—so often derided for her cold, calculating personality—helped rescue her charismatic husband’s career, she did it through her personal charm, befriendng the man the supposedly more charming Bill had alienated—the man many observers considered the most powerful journalist in Arkansas, John Robert Starr.

Starr had been harshly critical of waste and incompetence in Clinton’s administration. In particular, he criticized a state Energy Department retreat for wasting taxpayer money. Bill defended the retreat in a speech in which he said “it was a shame that a lazy, lousy journalist like [Starr] could attack a dedicated public servant like [Energy Department Director] Paul Levy.”⁵⁵

Starr responded by writing that he “never saw anything as ridiculous as Clinton defending the indefensible.” Bill, ignoring the political truism that

you shouldn't pick fights with a man who buys ink by the barrel, responded in a speech two days later that Starr was "a regional bigot" because he had called Levy, who was from Massachusetts, "a Yankee import." At that point, Starr recalled in his memoir, "the gloves were off."⁵⁶

Starr laid a solid blow to Bill by establishing in March 1980 a "boondog-gler of the month" award for the worst example of waste in government. Starr wrote in the column establishing it that he named it the "Sweet William Award" after Bill, who helped inspire it. The statuette would be a bust of Bill and would be cast in lead because it was "the most base of metals." It would be inscribed with the slogan "Don't forget the corkscrews" to memorialize the Energy Department retreat, for which Levy had approved the purchase of 50 corkscrews for the state employees to use on their bottles of complimentary wine. A cartoon of the statuette, featuring a long-haired, smug-looking bust of Bill over the slogan and the Sweet William name, illustrated the devastating column.⁵⁷

About a week later, Starr wrote a column about Arkansas governors being the butt of jokes, and of course included several about Bill. The first paragraph related a joke Starr said was circulating the Capitol: What's the difference between Bill's cabinet and a Boy Scout troop? The Boy Scout troop has adult supervision.⁵⁸

Starr wrote in his memoir that he never claimed his columns led to Bill's 1980 loss, but he knew that Bill and many others thought they were decisive.⁵⁹

A number of things contributed to the 1980 loss to Frank White; the rioting Cuban refugees at Fort Chaffee that scared voters and a hike in car license fees that angered them were two significant factors in addition to the inexperience and arrogance that Bill's youthful administration displayed. But poor press relations was undoubtedly a factor as well. Following the election, Meredith Oakley wrote that appointing the extremely competent Patty Howe to be press secretary "was one of the few nice things Clinton ever did for some of us in the news media." Oakley wrote that her inquiries to the previous press secretary were often printed in her rival newspaper before she ever got the answer. Bill might have been re-elected had Howe served longer.⁶⁰ Certainly the Clintons believed they had to work on their press relations, and since Starr was the most powerful journalist in the state, the rapprochement would have to include him.

"Before Clinton ran for—returned to politics in 1982—he told people he could not run, he did not want to go back into office, to run again, and be governor again, and have one of the two state-wide papers just savaging him every day when the whole editorial pages, the cartoonists, the columnists, and the news pages were all just a steady scream against him and his staff and his cabinet," said Ernest Dumas, an editorial writer and columnist for the rival

Arkansas Gazette. “And he just couldn’t ask people to serve again if that was going to be the case, and I think that it was probably Hillary that said that he could personally turn that around, and she realized that John Robert Starr was the key because he was so dominant at that paper, and he was an overwhelming personality at that paper. So that’s what they set out to do, and they did it.”⁶¹

Hillary made an effort to befriend Starr, often eating lunch with him, calling him, and feeding him news tips. Arkansas journalists disagree on the details and impact of the friendship, but all acknowledge that Starr reduced his criticism and sometimes even supported Clinton in succeeding years.

Brantley, who at the time also worked for the rival *Arkansas Gazette*, said the strategy worked. “Hillary began to pay court to him, I think. Called him. Talked to him. They fed him some tips from time to time. I remember seeing her out at lunch with him one day, and I mean for those of us deep in a newspaper war it was kind of disgusting that somebody would kowtow to Starr, but then we’re not politicians,” he said. “It was successful. Starr had a much, a much more, softer tone toward Hillary than he did with Bill, and I think at times wrote some things that were a result of her lobbying on points to see things in somewhat different ways. I remember—and I know this was so and I know this was true—Starr of course is dead now and can’t defend himself, and I think there’s some people who would take exception to this—but I remember this very clearly.”

What Brantley remembered was a column he wrote about the possibility of Clinton announcing his presidential candidacy in 1991. Brantley wrote, based on his own discussion with Bill Clinton, that Hillary thought he should run for president. “Well, Starr went nuts that I would have such a piece of information in my column, and he wrote a column more or less saying it must be nuts, it must be wrong, it must be made up because he simply didn’t believe that Hillary held such a view, because if she did, she would have told him—which told me all I needed to know about the success she’d had in working with Starr, who was a difficult guy to work with, but . . . you find a lot of tough guys are prone to apple polishing, to use the polite word.”⁶²

Both Bill and Hillary sought him out because he was powerful, but Hillary was more effective in some ways because Starr was one of the few journalists she talked to extensively. Starr acknowledged in his memoir that he changed his opinion of Bill in part after meeting Hillary at a local political roast where Bill was cutting but Hillary was pleasant, even though he had written a lot of “nasty” things about Bill, who he was sure in turn had said many similar things about him to Hillary. “She impressed me with her intelligence and quick wit,” Starr wrote, “and I said to myself, ‘If a lady like that would marry Bill Clinton, he can’t be all bad.’”⁶³

The Starr episode was a rare instance of Hillary using charm to attain her press goals, especially on behalf of Bill. As this book has pointed out, her forte is control and discipline and a toughness to ensure things get done.

Bill himself has always been effusive in praise of his wife and crediting her for his success. And a crucial part of being elected and governing is handling the press. Hillary helped.

The danger for a politician is that too much help can make a candidate look weak. Oakley wrote in a column after the McRae ambush that Hillary had dominated both Bill and his opponent. "It was as fine a figurative castration as I've ever seen," Oakley wrote. "Clinton is going to catch a lot of grief about lacking not only fire in the belly but steel in his spine. Why else would he send his wife to do his dirty work?"⁶⁴

Arkansas voters, however, must have seen the two Clintons as truly two for the price of one, because Bill easily dispatched McRae after Hillary cut him down to size. On the national scene, it was a different story. Hillary came across in public as too domineering and at some political rallies seemed to spend as much time at the microphone as Bill. The campaign kept her out of sight for a while until they could retool her image to fit more of the traditional cookie-baking first lady style.

The role of spouses is a delicate balance for the candidates. They want surrogates who are dynamic enough to help them get elected, but they don't want ones to overshadow them. In the case of Hillary helping Bill, she had to be careful not to be unfemininely dominant of the leader of the free world.

The 2008 campaign brought an even greater problem for Bill: trying to avoid overshadowing Hillary. All presidential candidates have to show they are tough enough to be commander in chief. The first woman president would have the double burden of overcoming the stereotype that a woman could not be that tough. A dominant husband won't help fight that stereotype. But for good or ill, Bill has also fought for Hillary's career. How he has done that is the subject of the next chapter.

NOTES

1. Meredith Oakley, *On the Make: The Rise of Bill Clinton* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 1994), 391.

2. Dick Morris, *Behind the Oval Office: Getting Reelected Against All Odds* (Los Angeles: Renaissance Books, 1999), 62–63.

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Tag Team: Enter the Rock Star Surrogate

Whenever she runs for office, whether it's the Senate or the presidency, Hillary Clinton has access to possibly the best campaign aide in U.S. history—a man who is one of the best political strategists of his generation, someone who has been actively working with the media for more than 35 years, and one of the most attention-getting surrogates ever to hit the trail for a candidate. . . . All politicians use the more presentable members of their families as surrogate campaigners, and just like most married couples, political spouses provide career counseling and advice—some pieces of advice more valuable than others. In Bill Clinton, Hillary has a one-of-a-kind spousal support system.

“Oh, yeah, this is completely different,” said the *Dallas Morning News's* Wayne Slater. “This is totally different than everything we've seen before it, where a spouse or family member is just a surrogate. However skilled those surrogates are, they are, whether it's a first lady or whether it's one of the children, or in the case of George Bush, his father even, but in the case of Bill Clinton, here's a guy who has been there. Here's a guy who has longstanding relationships with reporters.”¹

Political reporters, who are political junkies, would especially enjoy talking shop with Bill, he said. “It's almost like talking to the key advisor in a campaign who understands the full political dynamic in a way that often surrogates don't,” Slater said. “So this isn't just a surrogate. This is a guy who understands the playing field. That doesn't guarantee you great stories, but I think in the right way, he's the kind of guy who can get to reporters and talk with them, and it could be very persuasive and at least have the media consider Hillary's point of view—a story, an idea that's beneficial or favorable to Hillary.”²

As a former president, Bill Clinton can generate media attention for Hillary just about whenever he wants, and he can use that attention as a vehicle to promote his wife and punish her opponents.

“He is certainly more of a front man than she is,” said Arkansas journalist Max Brantley. “But it’s going to be a delicate balancing act for him, not to overshadow her. It is a cliché to say in the political world: he is its leading rock star. He still is. I mean our convention here is just one of thousands of examples. He can bring out a crowd who will hang on his every word, and hang as long as it takes to touch the cloth. That could pretty rapidly overshadow a presidential campaign. So he has to find some way to work his magic and not step into her spotlight. And I think that’s going to be hard.”³

The convention Brantley referred to was the Association of Alternative Newsweeklies, which Bill addressed on June 17, 2006. The speech, which included some standard themes on globalization, has become a sort of stump speech for him in his ex-presidency. But the speech illustrates how he can be a help for his wife’s campaign. His mere presence in front of this sympathetic crowd tended to remind people in Hillary’s base, and in this case, editors who reach a lot of people in that base, of good things about his administration.

Alan Leveritt, who introduced Clinton, cited statistics on low unemployment and inflation and high home ownership and budget surpluses during the Clinton years. “Bill Clinton understood government and he understood how to make it work for the people,” Leveritt said. “And he brought a level of competence to government that the current occupants of the White House can only envy.”⁴

The introduction, which concluded with a joke about the Republicans ending the country’s “long nightmare of peace and prosperity,” could have served as a political speech for the 2008 campaign. Bill’s speech—although he coyly said that he didn’t even know whether Hillary would run or not—was both a not-so-subtle endorsement of her possible candidacy and a plea for the assembled editors to cover her correctly.

Bill, under the guise of talking about politicians in general, lectured the gathered journalists about how to cover candidates. He flattered the crowd by praising the alternative papers, which he said “are filling a void in American political life, for citizens, because they tend to first of all cover both local as well as national and international issues in a way that’s more community oriented and more designed to shed light than heat.”⁵

The political right, however, has been successful in getting the national political press to “turn every conflict and every person into a two-dimensional cartoon,” he said. Bill first cited Republican presidential hopeful John McCain as an example of someone who had been turned into a cartoon. McCain, Clinton said, was “lionized by the press as a moderate” for his positions on

issues like global warming and campaign reform, issues usually anathema to the Republican base. But when McCain, who has some deeply held conservative positions, speaks at Jerry Falwell's university, people criticize it as a politically motivated speech rather than something in support of deeply held beliefs. You can disagree with the speech, but don't turn him into a cartoon, Clinton said.⁶

But the politician who has been most cartoonized has been Hillary, who has been portrayed as "some left-wing crazy" largely because of her efforts on health care reform, Bill said. The reform was actually moderate but was reported as left-wing, and that liberal label has stuck. "Therefore anytime she does something that's not the most liberal thing in the position, it's a character problem subject to calculation," Bill said.⁷

He said her support of President Bush in the Iraq War—a position criticized passionately by many on the left—was an example of taking a principled position that is then ascribed to political calculation. But Bill said the example of criticism of her that "tickled" him the most was a report that called her speech on climate change "too wonkish—which I loved, 'cause that's what we need, we need wonks, we need to know what the heck we're going to do."⁸

Bill suggested that the press tried to give the 2000 election to Bush by accusing Gore of being "inauthentic" about his positions on issues like climate change. The press was doing the same thing to Hillary by analyzing, for example, her recent climate change speech not on its content, but from its political impact—whether Hillary was "desperate" to give a climate change speech at about the same time as the release of Gore's climate movie, *An Inconvenient Truth*.

"The truth is, she gave 80 percent of that speech six months ago, and I thought it was the finest speech she'd given since she'd been a Senator," Clinton said. "It got no press, you know why? It was the same day Scooter Libby was indicted." (Libby was a Bush administration official convicted of perjury in connection with the investigation of the alleged outing of a CIA agent.) The end result, Bill said, was that the press coverage of Hillary's speech was "a political story rather than a substantive story."⁹

Bill urged the journalists to think about the way they cover candidates. "Try to go at what people are advocating, try to go at the positions they're taking, explain it to people. And if you editorialize about it, if you think it's wrong, say it's wrong. But don't fall into the next step, don't . . . don't contribute to the cartoonization of American political issues and American political figures."¹⁰

Criticism of the news media's trivialization of serious issues is nothing new. Scholars and pundits have long derided the coverage of political campaigns, for example, as often little more than horse race coverage of who is

ahead in the polls. And presidential press scholar Louis W. Liebovich argues in his study of the press and the modern presidency that reporters today would not recognize a great speech like the Gettysburg Address because—as Clinton described the coverage of Hillary’s climate change speech—they would focus almost solely on how the speech was designed to play politically rather than its substantive message.¹¹

But criticism coming from a popular former president arguably has more impact than the same critique coming from a scholar or columnist. In this way, Bill can play the bad cop to Hillary’s good cop, criticizing her opponents, negative press coverage, and even individual journalists while she remains stateswomanlike, above the infighting and focusing on how she would handle the country’s problems. This role is an especially important one for Bill because one of Hillary’s weaknesses as a campaigner, according to journalists Mark Halperin and John F. Harris, is that she sometimes “does her own rhetorical dirty work,” criticizing Republicans harshly herself rather than letting a surrogate handle it. They cited as an example a speech in which she compared the way the Republicans ran Congress to a “plantation.”¹²

Bill, as we have seen in examples from the introduction, has a long history of defending Hillary. He chastised former California governor Jerry Brown for criticizing Hillary during the 1992 campaign and even suggested, through a spokesman, that he’d like to punch a columnist who called her a liar. Former Clinton political adviser Dick Morris wrote that Bill “believes in his soul that she is one of the best people he knows and is unshakably of the opinion that she can do no wrong.”¹³ Given such feelings, it would be entirely logical for Bill to react angrily to any press criticism of his wife, especially since he has a volatile temper that he is not afraid to reveal to journalists, even if he liked to hide it from the public as president.

He might also quite understandably lose his temper over criticism of his administration, which in the 2008 campaign was an implicit criticism of Hillary. The former first lady, after all, was so closely involved with Bill’s presidency that she had an office in the administrative West Wing rather than the East Wing, where previous first ladies kept their offices. In an example cited earlier, Bill went after FOX news reporter Chris Wallace for asking him whether he thought his administration could have done more to catch terror mastermind Osama bin Laden. The September 2006 interview got considerable publicity for Bill’s emotional reaction, including jabbing a finger at Wallace’s notes.

Some journalists thought Bill was just being Bill, or just being a husband.

“Everybody was so surprised by that, you know—wow, a temper, the Clinton temper, we hadn’t seen that before,” said former Arkansas television reporter Mel Hanks. “I used to see it all the time. That’s exactly like I knew him.

I guess he was on his good behavior as president because we seldom saw him lose his temper as commander in chief, but with Chris Wallace, I said that's the kind of Clinton I'd seen many a time, the red face, the pounding finger, his index finger on Wallace's knee—I mean I've experienced that many times, at least several times, and that was no surprise at all to me."¹⁴

Arkansas newspaper reporter Carol Griffie thought Bill's tantrum was the result of built-up anger over a week of criticism of his administration's policy on terrorism. When asked if she thought he would take on a sort of bad cop role in Hillary's campaign, knocking down reporters like Wallace, she said: "No, not totally. He may lose his temper every now and then. He's good at that, but I think you just have to cross Bill sometimes . . . for him to explode like that, because—generally Bill is a good-natured guy. I mean, that's the way he wants to come across, but he does have a temper, and he does have a point beyond which you cannot push him, and I think Chris did."¹⁵

USA Today's Kathy Kiely also thought Clinton's anger at Hillary's critics might be the natural reaction of a husband to someone criticizing his wife. "People always want to read all this Machiavellian stuff into the Clintons' relationship, but if you look at other political families, you know, some of that same dynamic exists there, so that's what makes me believe it's . . . probably just a very human reaction, like if somebody attacks your mother or your kid or something, you're going to be much more likely to punch them in the nose than if they just attack you. And I don't know why that is, but it is," she said. "It's just going to be an interesting test for Clinton . . . whether his human instincts are going to overcome his political instincts."¹⁶

OpinionJournal.com editor James Taranto argued that Clinton was angry because he was "used to sycophantic interviewers" and thus could not calmly handle "Wallace's moderately tough query." Taranto cited an interview in which Wallace himself said he didn't believe Clinton had planned the attack because the former president threatened to fire his press aide if he had another interview like the one with Wallace.¹⁷

Of course, Wallace was an eyewitness, so his account must be given serious consideration. However, it simply strains credulity to believe that a former president who has been dealing with media as a professional politician for about 35 years, a former president with assistants to arrange interviews and prepare him for them, would have been surprised by any question, let alone something based on the news events at the time. Clinton no doubt felt some genuine anger at a question suggesting a failure of his administration, and, given his mercurial temper, it's no surprise he went into a genuine rage. He certainly could be aware of the effect of his temper at the same time he was indulging it. Indeed, we've seen in previous chapters how Bill could be clever at picking the time and place of expressing anger, whether he wanted

an audience, as he did when he complained about Paul Greenberg's column, or vented his spleen privately with Ernest Dumas.

But regardless of Clinton's intent, a presidential tirade can be significant. George H. W. Bush, for example, shed his label as a "wimp" during the 1988 campaign by tangling with Dan Rather, who had asked Bush a question about his role in the Reagan administration's Iran-Contra scandal. Bush responded in part by angrily asking Rather if his journalistic career should be judged only by the time he stomped off the set over a perceived slight, leaving his station with blank air. The famous interview is widely perceived as one of the turning points of the 1988 campaign.

Clinton adviser James Carville, one of the masterminds of the 1992 race and its vaunted "war room," urged the 2004 John Kerry campaign to send emails to the press when they had problems with stories because reporters react to complaints. "When it comes to the media, intimidation works," Carville said. His ideas were part of training advice for press secretaries at the Democratic national convention, where the press secretaries were urged to bully the reporter into writing a favorable makeup story for an unfavorable one or "scare him into changing his tone." The speakers included conservative-turned-liberal writer David Brock of Media Matters, a left-wing group formed to police the press for conservative bias.¹⁸ Hillary has served as an adviser to Brock's group.

When the Wallace interview is examined in the light of standard campaign press tactics, it looks like a useful defense of Hillary, whether Bill's loss of temper was calculated or not. According to FOX News, Bill had been invited on Wallace's show with the ground rules that half of the interview would be devoted to Bill's Global Initiative foundation and half to any topic Wallace wanted to bring up.¹⁹

Bill appeared on the show already smarting from a recent ABC docudrama called *The Path to 9/11*. It included material critical of his administration's efforts to catch Osama bin Laden. Bill referred to the ABC movie when Wallace asked him why his administration hadn't been able to "connect the dots" and put Osama bin Laden "out of business" before 9/11. Bill said ABC "just had a right-wing conservative run in their little 'Pathway to 9/11,' [sic] falsely claiming it was based on the 9/11 Commission report, with three things asserted against me directly contradicted by the 9/11 Commission report." After defending his administration's efforts, Bill attacked Wallace, "You did FOX's bidding on this show. You did your nice little conservative hit job on me."²⁰

Clinton accused Wallace of asking him questions that he wouldn't ask the Republicans about their failures to get bin Laden before 9/11. "You came here under false pretenses," Clinton told Wallace, accusing the reporter of luring

him onto his show to talk about climate change. The former president even criticized Wallace's demeanor.

"You've got that little smirk on your face, and you think you're so clever," Clinton said.²¹

When Wallace segued into questions about Clinton's global project, he told the president he had always intended to ask him about it. "No, you intended, though, to move your bones by doing this first, which is perfectly fine," Clinton said, adding that he didn't mind talking about trying to catch bin Laden, but he didn't like "one-sided questions." Clinton said the reason he was being asked these questions was that a "disinformation campaign" by the right had sought to create the impression that he didn't do enough to fight terrorism.²²

Clinton urged Wallace to ask Republicans the same questions. "If you're going to do this, for God's sake, follow the same standards for everybody . . . and be flat—and fair," Clinton said.²³

Wallace's interview was fair because he asked Clinton about his administration's record on 9/11 when the subject was on the public's mind because of the ABC movie. Someone as media savvy as Clinton should have expected the question. But Clinton served notice with his attacks on Wallace's motives, methods, and general professionalism that questions probing the competence of his administration in fighting terror would not be taken lightly. Just as important, his fighting words served to rally the Democratic base, just like Republicans tend to relish one of their own, like George H. W. Bush, taking on Dan Rather. A number of left-wing commentators praised Clinton for putting down Wallace and by extension, FOX News. For example, left-wing comedian and commentator Bill Maher said on *Larry King Live* that Clinton "showed everybody in that Democratic Party how it should be done."²⁴

Clinton was showing that style in other interviews as well. In fact, by the summer of 2007, he had done it at least three times, which is enough of a pattern to suggest it had become a sort of stump response. In an appearance in San Francisco, Bill shook his finger at KCBS's Mike Sugerman when the veteran newsman interrupted him. Sugerman had asked Clinton a question about Iraq, but the former president wouldn't get to the point. Sugerman, who was limited in time, broke in to ask Clinton what he specifically would do in Iraq, and Clinton lost his temper. Sugerman said Clinton gave him the same look he gave Wallace, using "the exact same finger. It was scary."²⁵

As was his practice in Arkansas (and sometimes in Washington), Clinton called the journalist later to make up, saying he would bring his horn next time to play with Sugerman's group of journalists called the Eyewitness News Band. Clinton also tried to explain his finger-pointing display. "Hillary is getting hammered on her vote [on the Iraq War], and I wanted to help explain it."²⁶

At the Aspen Ideas Festival, Bill, wearing a “Hillary 2008” lapel pin, savaged journalist and author Elizabeth Drew when she posed a version of the Wallace question about why, according to the 9/11 Commission, his administration didn’t pursue bin Laden more vigorously. “Congratulations on speaking the talking points of the Republican National Committee,” Bill said, using almost the same language he had used on Wallace. “Let’s just go through the facts . . . I did not turn down one request for use of force. . . . Did I fail to get him? Yes. Did I try? Yes.”²⁷

James Bennet of the *Atlantic* noted that Bill was addressing a friendly, liberal crowd, and that Drew was no friend of the Republicans. But instead of comparing his record to Bush’s, Bill answered by “feeding [Drew] to the supportive Aspen crowd.” His attack elicited applause and laughter from the audience.²⁸

Bennet wrote that several women told him they were offended by Bill’s treatment of Drew, and he was puzzled why Clinton was so confrontational. Several sources told Bennet that Bill was truly sensitive about this topic. Bennet himself theorized that Bill, as an ex-president, was not used to being challenged. He noted that Bill also demonstrated “prickliness” when he was asked by another journalist whether voters wanted change. Bill replied that all candidates would represent change, so that phrase was “just a cheap little slogan.”²⁹ Bill’s comment was made months before Obama’s campaign, which used a variety of “change” slogans like “Change we can believe in” and “Obama for Change,” took the lead in the Democratic race. But Hillary’s campaign used the argument Bill had made months before when it fought back against Obama, claiming his campaign was more about words than deeds—it was based on a slogan.

At any rate, political strategy rather than personal sensitivity is a better explanation of the former president’s behavior with reporters. Bill, in fact, has criticized the media coast-to-coast for Hillary. At a March 2007 fundraiser in Manhattan, he said the venerable *New York Times* had not done enough reporting on Barack Obama’s position on Iraq, repeating what has become his standard plea to treat all the candidates the same. “The message point of that day was that the *Times* is not being fair to Hillary,” one observer told *Newsweek* magazine.³⁰ About a year later, *Newsweek* addressed Bill’s role as “attack dog” in the campaign, including a graphic of the former presidents battles with reporters, complete with an “anger level” meter ranging from “miffed” to “volcanic,” the latter its description of the Wallace interview. In fact, the story led by describing Bill berating a *Newsweek* reporter who asked him to respond to critics who suggested he had tarnished his legacy by attacking Obama. The story quoted anonymous Clinton campaign advisers, one of whom thought the “attack dog role” was part of a planned strategy and one who didn’t.³¹

The danger, however, is that Clinton's strength in taking on critics could make his wife look like she can't fight her own battles, an especially tough problem for a female candidate vying to be the commander in chief during a global war on terror.

"Well, I think, where necessary, he'll do it," Brantley said when asked whether Bill would take on a "bad cop" role. "But you've got to be careful not to emasculate the candidate, to use a bad word for a female candidate. I mean she's got to be tough, too. She just can't let him be her Dick Cheney. You know, she's got to show she's up to the task as well. But anybody who thinks that he won't be a part of the process is just wrong. He will be involved every step of the way in talking it out, working it out."³²

Whether Bill's part of the process will include media criticism is hard to say, said Mike McCurry, one of Clinton's White House press secretaries.

"I guess the general proposition there is a correct one, that when Bill Clinton was president, Mrs. Clinton sometimes was in the position of defending him against critics, and I suspect the reverse will be true during the campaign, and when she's under attack, he will be right there to respond," McCurry said when asked whether Bill would be the bad cop. "But I think that's just kind of the nature of this amazing role reversal they're going to have as he's basically out there, a spouse of a candidate."³³

When asked the same question, columnist Paul Greenberg said there might be some merit to the idea of Bill taking on the role of press critic.

"You'd have to be a fly on the wall to know whether they actually decided to take the bad cop/good cop strategy, and if they did, did they do it consciously or unconsciously?" Greenberg said. "Just judging from one's own experiences here at the paper, we've got our tough guy reporters and our more analytical types sitting around. . . . Some of us want to take a harder view and others, a softer view. I don't think it's a calculated strategy. It's so often a consequence of one's own personality, and both of the Clintons have very strong personalities, and each one can play each role."³⁴

Former Arkansas newspaper reporter Rex Nelson said Hillary's attack on Tom McRae could be seen as a good cop/bad cop routine, but that he didn't think the Clintons spent a lot of time working on that type of strategy. "I think there are instances where they do, but they have very different styles, very, very different styles," Nelson said. "There are certainly some incidents of that, but I doubt they spent a lot of time discussing press relations with each other because they have very different styles, and I'm sure they both have a lot of confidence in their own style."³⁵

CBS White House correspondent Bill Plante said he could imagine Bill Clinton taking on the media for Hillary, although he pointed out that Hillary has plenty of press aides who could fulfill the same role. He said he has

interviewed some and that they are very aware of trying to limit press damage for Hillary. But Bill could take on the media critic role if that is how Hillary wants to use him.³⁶

“He could go out on talk shows and take a hard line with the opponents and let her be much more conciliatory. I mean, I can see that happening,” Plante said. “You know, say she’s nominated, and if they’re comfortable with putting him out front, which is a whole other discussion that would have to happen first, but he would go out on *Face the Nation* or *Meet the Press* and criticize the opposition, the candidate or the party or whatever, for something they’re doing, in a way that she couldn’t.”³⁷

Arkansas radio host Pat Lynch said that Bill definitely would play the tough role if Hillary is attacked. “If he needs to come down on somebody hard for attacking her, he can find a number of different ways to do it, and sometimes, you know, the best way to slice that is with a scalpel and not a meat axe,” Lynch said. “He could use just the straight-on sledgehammer approach, but he can also wrap himself in the dignity of the presidency and use a more deft and subtle hand to somewhat refute the person and, you know, as a former president, if he’s careful, he can also belittle people. You know, you have to be careful in how you—you have to not look overt because nobody likes a bully, but if you are a former president, there are some ideas that you can just dismiss out of hand as being ridiculous on the surface and it would probably have some traction.”³⁸

Bill easily dismissed 9/11 conspiracy theorist hecklers at campaign speeches for Hillary, skillfully using them to demonstrate his toughness on defense issues and Hillary’s competence. In Minneapolis in October 2007, one heckler said 9/11 was an inside job. Bill fired back: “How dare you? I live in New York and I know who did that. You guys have got to be careful, or you’re going to give Minnesota a bad reputation.”³⁹ In January 2008, Bill was cheered for chastising a similar heckler, saying, “Nine-eleven was NOT an inside job, it was an Osama bin Laden job. . . . So we heard from you, you go away.” When the heckling started again, Bill said Hillary had helped pass bipartisan legislation for 9/11 victims. “You ask them if they think it was an inside job, or whether they are glad they had a Senator like Hillary Clinton who gave them a chance (so) they could stand up (and) start their lives again.”⁴⁰

Aside from dismissing critiques of Hillary, Bill can be valuable in providing press advice to her campaign. But just like having Bill play the bad cop could backfire if it makes him look like a bully or, even worse, makes Hillary look weak, Bill’s role as campaign adviser has good and bad possibilities.

Reporters Mark Halperin and John F. Harris called Bill “the best political strategist in the Democratic Party” when analyzing his possible impact on Hillary’s candidacy. But on the other hand, they noted that Bill might be too close to his wife to give the best advice, and his aides might fight with hers.⁴¹

Indeed, the *New York Post* reported that there was already a split between the New York and Washington elements of Hillary's campaign in May of 2007.⁴² Factionalism is a curse of many political campaigns, and having Bill and his aides fight with Hillary's aides might add more trouble than the advice is worth.

The *Buffalo News's* Douglas Turner thought the advice wouldn't be worth that much anyway. "I don't think that he knows the press that well. His press relations ended badly," Turner said, referring to the scandal over the last-minute pardons Bill granted as president. "And it's been 10 years since he had good relations — 1997 to 2007. . . . But Bill's lessons on how to work the press are not current. Things have changed so much, even since the 2004 election."⁴³

Steve Barnes, an Arkansas broadcaster who has covered Clinton since his first race back in 1974, said it's not certain that Hillary will use the advice. "What's his profile going to be in that campaign?" Barnes said. "Will she, in fact, turn to him? Just because he offers advice, does that mean she'll take it? She's her own person."⁴⁴

Expert opinions are split as to how much useful advice Bill provided in Hillary's two Senate campaigns. The Clintons themselves largely ignore the subject in their respective memoirs. The index for Bill's *My Life* lists exactly four pages out of a 969-page book as referring to his campaign help for Hillary. Readers who go to those pages will find about a sentence on each page mentioning that Bill went to some events for Hillary or was happy to support her career.⁴⁵ In similar fashion, Bill is a ghostly figure in the part of Hillary's memoir that describes her 2000 campaign. She wrote little more than the statement that Bill "was anxious to be helpful, and I welcomed his expertise."⁴⁶ The Clintons' accounts are significant for what was not mentioned; they didn't write much about each other, leaving the impression that Hillary was independent of Bill other than for traditional spousal encouragement.

But other accounts of Hillary's Senate campaigns indicate that Bill had a larger role. John F. Harris wrote in his history of Bill's presidency that during Hillary's first Senate run in 2000, Bill proudly came up with the rationale for her to give to women voters, who, according to campaign polling data, wondered why she had stayed with him despite the Lewinsky affair. When Hillary joked that she wondered why herself, Bill said it was because she was a "sticker" — staying with the things she cared about.⁴⁷ Beth Harpaz, who covered the race for the Associated Press, assumed that Hillary was getting behind-the-scenes advice from Bill. Harpaz noted that whenever Hillary shut off press queries with the stock phrase "I'll leave that to others to characterize," she knew she must have gotten a reminder from Bill about how to handle journalists.⁴⁸ Halperin and Harris concluded that Bill's presence "loomed over the race from start to finish" as he gave his wife plenty of advice and the use of his advisers, but his role was downplayed in public.⁴⁹

The campaign literally cut Bill out of the race by removing the name “Clinton” from a banner at a rally. Michael Tomasky, of *New York* magazine, noted in his book how even such a simple act became complicated because of the complex effect of having an ex-president for a candidate’s spouse. Tomasky wrote that Hillary’s staff cut out the “Clinton” because they wanted the more folksy image of just the name “Hillary.” Pundits, however, suggested that she did it to distance herself from her husband, who at that time was still suffering from the Lewinsky scandal. But if “Clinton” had been left on the banner, Hillary would have been accused of running on her husband’s name, Tomasky wrote.⁵⁰ The first name branding continued through her presidential campaign, as posters, bumper stickers, buttons, and pins—including one worn regularly by Bill—say just “Hillary.” If “Clinton” is printed on the campaign material, it is usually in smaller type.

Toward the end of Hillary’s first Senate campaign, Bill’s advice had become somewhat irrelevant. He was a good politician, but not as familiar with New York issues as Hillary had become. A source told Tomasky that Bill in fact made Hillary nervous during one of her early debate preps because he was always interrupting her, telling her she was answering questions the wrong way. At a later debate prep, after she was more confident, she interrupted his interruption by telling him, “No, Bill, that’s not the way we do it in New York.”⁵¹

Bill followed a similar pattern of staying in the background in the 2006 Senate campaign, something Arkansas reporters who covered the couple for years were not used to seeing.

“I did notice that on election night when she won the Senate—I was watching his body language and he was very deferential,” said former Arkansas television journalist Bob Steel. “He didn’t say a word, and he stood in the background. It was so weird to watch. And so that will be the role that we see in public. I think they’re too close for it to be different behind closed doors, but I think . . . he will not be out front. He will be deferential and in the background if she were to win the presidency, but he would definitely play a role if she wins. She would seek advice. And he is a brilliant politician. Say what you want about Bill Clinton, but he knows politics and he knows how to win.”⁵²

Slater also thought Bill’s chief contribution would be supplying advice.

“The biggest contribution that Bill Clinton will make in this is his understanding of everything, frankly, political, but certainly the media,” Slater said. “I mean, it isn’t that he is going to be talking to that many reporters and his sort of friendly engaging schmoozing will be such a great benefit to her, though that will happen. It’s his political advice. He is one of the premier political minds in the country, and the problem I see for the Clinton campaign going into 2008 is

that there is a sense that this could be the year of authenticity—that voters are looking for something real, for something authentic. Hillary Clinton, while on the one hand may argue that that’s her message, that’s not going to be her message. In fact, there is some sense that Hillary’s campaign may appear to be over-managed and in that way run counter to the idea of authenticity.”⁵³

Slater’s thought was echoed by the author Melinda Henneberger, who interviewed women around the country about the 2008 race. She said women voters were turned off by Hillary’s cautious, calculated approach to campaigning. Many women told Henneberger that they didn’t think Hillary was real; that she would say anything to get elected.⁵⁴

“To the extent that (Bill) is a factor, he seems to be an asset; many women, centrists in particular, said they wished they could vote for him a third time,” she wrote. “Nor did gender seem to be an obstacle—as on the contrary, women across the political spectrum declared themselves beyond ready for a woman in the White House. Instead, it was the issue of authenticity that they returned to again and again.”⁵⁵

Slater said Bill is the type of politician who would recognize this mood. Bill would make recommendations to handle it and would have the influence within the campaign to get those recommendations followed, he said.⁵⁶

Kiely, too, thinks Bill could give Hillary valuable advice.

“He’s really a great politician, and even the people who hated him as president . . . say he’s a great politician,” Kiely said. “And so to the extent that he can advise her behind the scenes and be helpful to her, that has to be a plus, but whether or not he’s going to be a plus in a public way, I think, remains to be seen. It’s hard for me to figure how they’re going to do that. It’s so complicated.”⁵⁷

It’s complicated in large part because Hillary’s campaign has to figure out the equation to balance Bill’s pluses and minuses. On the one hand, he’s popular, but on the other hand, he’s carrying the baggage of all his scandals. On the one hand, he’s charming and can schmooze reporters, but on the other hand he talks too much and can go off message.

The schmooze factor could be a help, although it couldn’t completely make up for Hillary’s innate coldness, said Griffee.

“Bill contributes to Hillary a factor that I think Hillary just lacks,” Griffee said. “Even though I like Hillary—she’s fine—she lacks warmth, and she will never acquire it, because it’s just not in her personality. It’s not in her ego. She lacks the kind of warm and fuzzy that the American electorate likes. Bill gives her that.”⁵⁸

One of the best kinds of warm fuzzies for journalists is an exclusive story. When Hillary got in trouble during her first Senate campaign, Bill took time out from the Camp David peace negotiations to personally call New York

Daily News columnist Michael Kramer and publisher Mortimer B. Zuckerman to plead her case. Jerry Oppenheimer's book *State of the Union* had just been published with an accusation by former Clinton aides that Hillary had used an anti-Semitic slur during Bill's 1974 congressional race. Although the alleged incident happened more than 25 years ago in another state, it was significant for Hillary's race because of the size of the Jewish vote in New York.

"In 29 years, my wife has never, ever uttered an ethnic or racial slur against anybody, ever. She's so straight on this, she squeaks," Bill told the *Daily News* in his folksy style.⁵⁹

But Bill didn't hold back when talking about Oppenheimer and his sources for the anecdote—1974 campaign workers Paul Fray and Neil McDonald. Kramer's column noted that Bill "went out of his way to discredit" them. Bill said they weren't credible because Oppenheimer had worked for the tabloid *National Enquirer*, Fray had become irrational during the 1974 campaign, and McDonald was a business failure.⁶⁰

Bill's talks with the *Daily News* had an added bonus to the goal of defending Hillary. By giving the exclusive interview to the *Daily News*, Bill punished the conservative *New York Post*, which had been driving the slur scandal.⁶¹ Bill's ability to make phone calls and dole out scoops in a folksy way should help whenever he campaigns for Hillary.

Slater traveled with the Clintons for three days on a plane during the 1992 race and noticed the extreme contrast in their styles. "She never said more than five words at a time," he recalled. "She put on her sunglasses, she was icy cold. . . . She was just absolutely awful. Now, this was before the Jennifer Flowers [story], before the scandals had broken, but it was clear that she was there as a kind of cold, autocratic protector of her husband and she had . . . absolutely no people skills or reporter skills."⁶²

Slater said that even now as a candidate, Hillary is so guarded that Bill could be a help in smoothing things with reporters. "I really think that [Bill] Clinton, understanding sort of the mood of the electorate [desiring authenticity], will be in a position not only to talk to reporters and maybe kind of play the good cop, which may come a little bit, but more importantly, will really be the kind of experienced advisor inside the campaign that will say, 'Look, you've got to do this—got to talk to them, you need to ease up here.' Now whether she'll pay much attention to that, I don't know, but I think that may be the ultimate contribution that he makes."⁶³

Bill was already making that contribution some six months before the first primary. While campaigning in Iowa in early July 2007, the Clintons stopped at a Dairy Queen near Grinnell, Iowa. Their campaign staff had told the press that there would not be any stops on that part of the trip, so no reporters were at the restaurant to witness the Clintons interacting with voters—the press had

been in a campaign chartered bus that drove ahead of the Clintons. Clinton press aide Mandy Grunwald told the press that the campaign was filming the stop for a possible commercial. The *New York Times*'s Patrick Healy wrote on his blog that reporters might start leaving the campaign bus to tail the Clintons so they won't miss future stops.⁶⁴

The next day, the campaign stopped at a Dairy Treat in Nashua, Iowa, where Bill made up with the press by plunking down three \$20 bills and offering to buy malts for every reporter. Healy wrote that he initially ordered a vanilla but changed to a chocolate after Hillary and others teased him about his plain choice.⁶⁵

Bill said since he was not a candidate, there was no conflict of interest in him buying malts. Still, Healy wrote, apparently tongue-in-cheek, that he would check with his editors about whether he should reimburse the campaign. He noted that the Clintons teased the reporters from the *New York Post* and its rival tabloid, the *New York Daily News* that they should share a malt, but they declined the offer.⁶⁶

Columnist Robert Novak noted that the light mood on the Clinton campaign contrasted with the aloofness of Hillary's main rival Barack Obama, who did not let any of the 30 reporters covering him into his SUV, and cut one press conference to 10 minutes.⁶⁷

Of course, the more contact with reporters, the more chance that a gaffe will be printed. Healy's blog entries of the ice cream stops indicate that more than ever in the Internet age, everything the candidate does will be reported and analyzed.

Former Arkansas television reporter Mel Hanks thought Bill would enjoy the press relations in his new role, perhaps too much.

"I think it would be a lot more relaxed, unless something happened to remind people what happened in his administration, and he would have to defend himself again," Hanks said, adding that Bill relates well to journalists. "I think it probably would be the best of all worlds for him. He would have all the attention he wanted, but yet he wouldn't necessarily be responsible for the policies. I think his relationship with the press would be pretty relaxed, and pretty open, in fact almost to the detriment of Hillary. She might want to tell him to shut up sometimes. He does have quite a tendency to go on and on."⁶⁸

Hanks laughed when he made that last remark, but it won't be funny for Hillary if Bill goes off message. Ron Fournier, who covered the Clintons for the Associated Press, said that when Bill speaks, there is a risk that the Hillary campaign won't be able to control the points he makes.

"Bill Clinton is someone who has a habit of thinking out loud too much, and he learned to get more disciplined and do less of that when he became president, and he's going to have to be very careful about it," Fournier said.

“He’s not even lead messenger now. He doesn’t want to be saying anything [detrimental], and my guess is he won’t be able to help himself, that he’ll step out of line occasionally. But you know, he’s also one of the smartest turf operatives in town. I think he’ll know at some level that he’s got to be careful what he says.”⁶⁹

Lynch said he did not think Bill’s scandal baggage would hurt Hillary.

“The circumstances and the situation change,” Lynch said, noting how popular Clinton has become as an ex-president. “The attacks on him were so severe, so personal, it was so harsh that he’s been immunized. I mean, none of that, none of that works anymore on Bill Clinton, and so he’s got an immunity there. He is becoming even more popular as former president, and I think that he and Hillary Clinton have learned a lot in the school of hard knocks, and I think they’re both a lot more media savvy now than they were 15 years ago. And certainly Mrs. Clinton . . . you can just see that she, I think she’s slicker, I think she carries herself better, and she’s obviously very popular in New York State . . . I sense that she may have a real possibility of being elected president and I also have the sense that Bill Clinton will know how to play his cards during the campaign. And I don’t know how that hand will be played, but . . . she has him as the secret weapon, and I think they’re smart enough to know how to use the secret weapon. It’s impossible to know how circumstances will come together, but I think they’re both pretty hip to getting good coverage by now.”⁷⁰

Lynch, speaking before Hillary formally announced her candidacy, said the Clintons have so much versatility in their political playbook that Hillary would “mess up” if she didn’t run for president.

“They’re both inside-the-beltway experts,” Lynch said. “They have those kind of strong connections now. So that gives them a tremendous advantage, and you know, Clinton can even posture himself closer to Little Rock if he needs to, hang around the Presidential Library and look like he’s not an inside-the-beltway insider. And of course, they’re both insiders, but it’s all public perception.”⁷¹

The conventional wisdom is that John Kerry and Al Gore didn’t take full advantage of Bill’s popularity when they ran in 2000 and 2004, and that Bill’s campaign help might have made the difference in those elections. But no one knows whether Bill will turn out to have been an asset or a detriment to Hillary in 2008. Will he remind voters of good times or scandal?

Helen Thomas, longtime White House correspondent, said Hillary’s formal announcement of her campaign, which she did alone over the Internet when most politicians line up their families with them, was significant.

“I think he’d love to play an important role, but I think it will be up to her whether she lets him,” Thomas said. “I mean, in the case of the Gores run-

ning, I think that they kept Clinton out of it, and I think that Al Gore's wife, Tipper, didn't want Clinton there because of the scandal and so forth."⁷² She added, "But I think he's very popular and he loves the limelight, and I think he'll be a big help."⁷³

The *Houston Chronicle's* Cragg Hines also thought Clinton would be an asset, even though some observers believe he is a polarizing figure. "Is he polarizing? Yes. But let's say that Hillary is even more polarizing," he said. "There's nothing she can do about him, he's there, so you might as well use him to whatever benefit is to be gotten out of it. She also knows that her numbers, at least in the past, have never been stronger than when there is something in the media about Bill out catting around. Her numbers have [always] been higher when he was in some modicum of trouble."⁷⁴

So Bill's press role could be to get in trouble to drive Hillary's numbers up out of sympathy for the wronged woman?

"I don't think it will be by intention, let's put it that way," Hines said.⁷⁵

Whether another scandal will blow up in Bill's face during Hillary's campaign is a subject of intense speculation in the media and no doubt inside Hillary's campaign headquarters as well. Although, as Hines said tongue-in-cheek, a Bill scandal could help by driving Hillary sympathy numbers up, it could also remind voters of the soap opera aspects of the administration that they would just as soon forget. In January the tabloid *Globe* revived such memories with a cover story salaciously claiming that Hillary had ordered Bill back to sex rehab. Echoing the *Star's* stories that nearly derailed Bill's 1992 campaign, this story included pictures of Gennifer Flowers, Monica Lewinsky, and Canadian politician Belinda Stronach.⁷⁶ The *Globe* in a breathless "world exclusive" reported in February 2008, when Hillary's campaign was falling behind Obama, that the Clintons would divorce if she lost the election.⁷⁷

The problem for Hillary is that such "stories"—true or not—are bound to keep floating during the campaign. Bill's reputation sometimes can overshadow any good points he is making for his wife. The same Aspen audience that laughed with Bill when he attacked reporter Elizabeth Drew laughed at him at the same appearance when he said he did a lot of serious reading in bed. "It was an innocent remark but some people couldn't help taking it a certain way," a Clinton administration official told columnist John H. Fund.⁷⁸

Slater said he has gotten the sense from his reporting that Clinton aides are concerned about a possible scandal. "I get the sense that, despite their public pronouncements, that there is a concern inside there, will Bill behave? Is he going to do something that will, because he's not fully engaged, that will embarrass or damage, not intentionally, the Hillary campaign? That's kind of a weird thing, and I don't know how that fits in the mix, but we'll see."⁷⁹

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Knee-jerk Liberal Press or Republican Noise Machine?

In 2007, a number of new books came out about Hillary Clinton, indicating the public's interest in her campaign. The titles included an anti-Hillary polemic by Bay Buchanan (Pat Buchanan's sister) and lengthy biographies by famed Watergate investigative reporter Carl Bernstein and Whitewater investigative reporter Jeff Gerth and his partner Don Van Natta Jr.¹ But a title that may be more indicative of American political discourse in 2007 was the *Hillary Clinton Voodoo Handbook* by Turk Regan. The handbook included a packet of pins and a Hillary doll with labels to help the user ruin various parts of Hillary's campaign. For example, placing a pin through the label in "Tonya Twist"—on the back of the doll's left hip—would supposedly cause Bill to have an affair with Tonya Harding, the ice skater best known for attacking a rival athlete.²

Clinton fans might well say that the book reflects the deep level of irrational hatred that has tormented Bill and Hillary since they entered the national scene. But the fact is that both baby boomer presidents, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, have presided over one of the most rancorous periods in American politics. Both presidents inspired devoted followers and dedicated opponents. And both sides claimed the press was unfair. Clinton partisans say Bill was hounded by a right-wing cabal that spewed vitriolic talking points about his personal and business affairs, including those of the first lady, and that those talking points were picked up by the mainstream media. Bush partisans, on the other hand, claim liberal reporters highlight his every gaffe to try to make him appear stupid, and emphasize bad news, particularly about the war and the economy, while downplaying good news.

Clinton fans can find support for their side by the mere fact that every aspect of Bill's life was investigated and reported upon. Common sense dictates

that if liberal reporters were really in the tank for Clinton, they would not have reported his scandals so tenaciously. However, common sense also dictates the dominance of liberal political leanings among American journalists, shown in myriad studies, will have some effect on news coverage to the detriment of a conservative like Bush.

Who is right?

Clinton friend and Arkansas newspaper journalist Max Brantley is dead certain the media has collectively been much easier on Bush than Clinton. He cites as an example that reporters did not do a good job investigating allegations that Bush did not honorably fulfill his Air National Guard service during the Vietnam War. He called Bush's coverage during the 2000 campaign "a sleigh ride."³

"And 2004 was somewhat of a replay," Brantley said. "There was a little bit more inspection than there had been in 2000, but when I think of Bush's Guard record against what was done to Bill Clinton over his military service, the national press should hang its head in shame, except the *Boston Globe*. The record is absolutely, abundantly clear that he did everything he could do to avoid service in Vietnam, that he had political connections to do it, and in service he failed in any number of areas to carry out the duties of an Air National Guardsman, and he got off scot free. And I thought if Bill Clinton had done the things he [Bush] had done, he'd have been hung out to dry. I'll go to my death believing that."⁴

But a number of other journalists believed that their comrades on the national level gave Clinton favorable coverage because he was a member of their generation and shared their politics.

Arkansas columnist Paul Greenberg wrote a piece asking whether the press was biased and answered himself: "Is a bluebird blue?" Greenberg argued that the Clintons were on the same side of social issues as most elites, including many who work in the media. "The culture gap hasn't been this clear since the Lost Generation took on the Holy Rollers in the '20s, and H. L. Mencken was covering William Jennings Bryan's last stand at the Scopes trial."⁵

Greenberg argued that the press treated Anita Hill, who testified that conservative Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas was a sexual harasser, like a heroine, but dismissed Clinton accuser Gennifer Flowers as a joke. Greenberg concluded by imagining that the press coverage of George H. W. Bush would have been much more critical if he had presided over the execution of a mentally ill black man as Clinton had done. But that prisoner, Greenberg wrote, "is not only a dead man but a forgotten one."⁶ (The prisoner, Rickey Ray Rector, was a mentally disabled man who was put to death on Clinton's watch as governor. Critics on both the left and the right accused Clinton of using the episode to show he was tough on crime.)

Hillary, too, thought she was a victim of bad press. In fact, when she went on the national stage with Bill, she claimed the press always chose to run photos of her that made her look mean.⁷ But Greenberg compared Hillary's 1992 campaign coverage to that of Marilyn Quayle, the wife of Bush's vice president, Dan Quayle. He noted that both were strong-willed, accomplished women who had reputations for pushing their husband's careers. Greenberg thought Hillary got better press than Marilyn Quayle because of the "liberal biases of the Beltway press" that liked a strong liberal woman but not a conservative one. "When a forceful, aggressive liberal—or even a moderate one—gets her dander up, she's a Portia come to judgment. When a forceful, aggressive conservative starts firing back, she's a scheming Lady Macbeth."⁸

One of the beltway woman reporters admitted a bias. Margaret Carlson wrote that female journalists were offended by Marilyn Quayle's statement that women should stay home to take care of their children. They could not be objective in such a case, Carlson wrote.⁹

There is no doubt where the Clintons come down on the debate. The Clintons, like almost all people in public life, believe they have been ill-treated by the media. In fact, their frustration with the press is one thing Bill Clinton and his chief Republican rival during much of his presidency, House Speaker Newt Gingrich, could agree on. Reporter Elizabeth Drew noted that when Clinton and Gingrich met at one event, they both complained about the media. Drew wrote that Clinton seemed jealous that Gingrich could break through the static of the media like no one he had ever seen.¹⁰

Even though by most accounts Bill got along quite well with the Arkansas press, his complaints about the unfairness of journalists date to his time as governor. Greenberg wrote that as governor, Clinton's standard tactic, after first ignoring or dodging an issue, was "Blame it on Them Lyin' Newspapers." Greenberg cited as an example Clinton's reaction to stories that one of his department heads had not filed a Code of Ethics statement as required by state law. "The young governor seemed outraged that not all of the Arkansas press was prepared to treat him with the one-eyed deference of an editorial in the *Arkansas Gazette*."¹¹

When he ran for president, Bill's attitude became more bitter, especially when he realized the press would look into accusations of marital infidelity. Bill "railed against the prurience of the news media" in a session with political operatives in Washington shortly before his formal announcement to run in 1992, complaining that the media wasn't interested in issues.¹²

During the 1992 campaign, he was angry that the media had changed the rules on writing about candidates' affairs since Gary Hart was caught with his mistress in the 1988 campaign. It was no longer necessary for the "legitimate" press to catch you in the act, Bill said, now they would accept the word of

someone like Flowers, who was paid for her story. “I think it is almost blood lust,” he said in *Newsweek*’s book about the campaign. “I think it is an insatiable desire on the part of the press to build up and tear down. And they think that is their job—and not only that, their divine right.”¹³

Bill called the press arrogant because journalists acted as if it was up to them to determine who should win elections. “And they can justify anything, *anything*, under the guise of the First Amendment. And there ain’t no way to win with it.”¹⁴

Bill was furious at what he called the “knee-jerk liberal press.” Bill used that pejorative term in what was mostly a fawning interview with Jann Wenner and Bill Greider of *Rolling Stone*, a big Clinton supporter. But Greider made the mistake of not being fawning enough. At the end of the interview, he told Bill that he had gotten a call from a Clinton supporter who was disappointed in Bill’s first year in office. The man asked the reporter to ask Clinton what he was “willing to stand up for and die on.” Bill’s face reddened and his voice rose as he told Greider that it “is the press’s fault, too, damn it,” and raged about how hard he and his administration had been working. The press, Bill said, had led people to believe he had no convictions.¹⁵

“But I do care that that man has a false impression of me because of the way this administration has been covered,” Bill said. “It is wrong. That’s my answer. It is wrong. I have fought my guts out for that guy, and if he doesn’t know it, it’s not all my fault. And you get no credit around here for fighting and bleeding. And that’s why the know-nothings and the do-nothings and the negative people and the right-wingers always win. Because of the way people like you put questions to people like me. Now that’s the truth, Bill.”¹⁶

He later also complained to Dick Morris that “white liberal guilty reporters” were biased against him in favor of General Colin Powell, a possible Republican rival for the 1996 election. The press wouldn’t ask Powell tough questions, Bill said.¹⁷

In fact, Bill believed the whole press system was failing. He told White House reporters in an informal conversation aboard Air Force One that journalism was breaking down because traditional news had to compete with what he called “near news”—more entertainment than news and like near beer.¹⁸

Bill was so disgusted with the press that he literally teared up with laughter when Russian president Boris Yeltsin, who had been drinking, criticized American journalists at a joint press conference. Yeltsin told reporters that he had read stories predicting his meeting with Clinton would be a disaster. “You’re a disaster!” Yeltsin scolded the journalists.¹⁹ A photograph of the moment was available in 2007 as a postcard at the Clinton Museum Store in Little Rock. The postcard doesn’t reference what prompted the laughter, so few

tourists are likely aware of its literal illustration of Clinton's feelings about the press.

After his re-election in 1996, Clinton apparently believed that divine guidance was needed to solve the rift between him and the press. The president asked a church congregation to pray for politicians and the media, which he said had fallen into the depths of cynicism.²⁰

Hillary, of course, had long believed the press was biased against the first couple. During the 1992 campaign, she floated the rumor that George H. W. Bush had had an affair. According to biographer Gail Sheehy, Hillary changed topics during an interview "and purposefully planted [the] toxic tidbit in my tape recorder." Hillary told Sheehy that the Washington establishment, including the press, protected each other, and that is why they would "circle the wagons" for Bush.²¹

The Clintons' staff in 1997 actually compiled a 331-page report called "Communication Stream of Conspiracy Commerce" that purported to show that the administration's bad press was the result of the flow of ideas from right-wing groups to the mainstream press.²² Of course at the height of the Lewinsky scandal, Hillary had given wide publicity to this idea with her iconic quote suggesting the scandal was the work of the vast right-wing conspiracy.

Hillary wrote in her memoir that public discourse had become dominated by "reactionary pundits and TV and radio personalities," which was one reason she decided to write a newspaper column for a time while she was first lady. "Despite the right-wing mantra denouncing 'liberal media bias,' the reality was that the loudest and most effective voices in the media were anything but liberal."²³

Hillary obviously was making the argument often voiced by the left that although surveys consistently show rank-and-file journalists as overwhelmingly liberal, they are counterbalanced, if not overwhelmed, by what David Brock called the "Republican Noise Machine."²⁴ This machine includes a number of conservative talk radio hosts, the most famous of whom is Clinton critic Rush Limbaugh, but also the FOX News television network and conservative newspapers and websites. Other liberal press critics, most notably Eric Alterman, argue that even if many individual journalists are liberal, the owners or heads of media companies are interested in profits above ideology. In fact, one chapter of Alterman's *What Liberal Media? The Truth about Bias and the News* is titled "You're Only as Liberal as the Man Who Owns You."²⁵

Conservatives rely on anecdotal evidence, like Greenberg's comparison of the coverage of Hillary and Marilyn Quayle, but also are bolstered by the preponderance of statistical evidence on the political leanings of journalists. To cite one example, Joseph Hayden, in his account of Clinton's relationship

with the press, noted that 90 percent of journalists in one survey said they voted for Clinton in 1992, and only 3 percent said that they believed the Republicans' Contract With America plan for the 1994 congressional elections was a serious proposal.²⁶ He concluded that the press also favored Clinton in the 1996 election over Republican Bob Dole, but added that it didn't matter in the end because Dole ran such an inept campaign.²⁷

The liberal tilt of the media has continued beyond the Clinton presidency. Evan Thomas of *Newsweek* famously said that the media wanted John Kerry to defeat Bush in 2004, and that it was worth 10 points in the election.²⁸ Conservative columnist John Leo wrote that a Pew Research Survey that showed self-identified liberals outnumber conservatives in American newsrooms by about 5 to 1 was evidence the news business should be worried about diversity of ideas. But Leo argued that the underlying truth is so well known that a sensible headline for the survey would be "Researchers ferret out the obvious yet again."²⁹

As obvious as the dominance of the working press by liberal politics is to those who look at the statistics, the question remains whether the politics of working journalists have any impact on coverage. Again, Clinton partisans would argue that the mere fact of the intense scandal coverage of his administration is *prima facie* evidence that the press did not give Clinton a break. Many in the press will argue that because of the professional ethic of detachment, reporters who have the same political leanings of the person they cover will be harder on that person just to show they are not biased in favor of him. Conversely, those who are politically different from the person they cover will strive to appear fair and not partisanly critical.

If that philosophy is true, then a liberal press corps should have been tough on Clinton and easy on George W. Bush. Indeed, a number of scholars, pundits, and media critics have argued that Bush, at least until the federal government's inept response to Hurricane Katrina, got softball coverage because of a combination of his personal charm, intimidation of recalcitrant reporters, and the natural reluctance of reporters to criticize a president during wartime.

Helen Thomas, longtime UPI White House correspondent, argued in her book *Watchdogs of Democracy?* that her colleagues didn't ask Bush the hard questions on the eve of the Iraq War.³⁰

They had no such qualms asking Clinton the hard questions that they would not have asked either President Bush, she said in an interview for this book. "I think they were very tough on Clinton," Thomas said. His father (George H. W. Bush) always acted offended when he was asked a question he thought was inappropriate, she said. "He tried to, you know, put them down and shame them if he thought the question was out of line or something, and he would . . . throw back insults, you know, calling a reporter a squeaky wheel

and that kind of thing. Well, I never heard Clinton—he didn’t insult in rebutting. He took a lot on the chin, I think, and he was, in his own mind, I’m sure that he was very upset, but he somehow took it.”³¹

Thomas said the press corps should ask all presidents tough questions in order to fulfill its function in the democracy.

“I think it’s always right to be tough, but I think you ought to spread it out, you know,” she said. “Don’t just go light on somebody because they’re intimidating or because of 9/11. All of a sudden you don’t ask any questions that should be asked. I wrote a book panning my colleagues because they went into total retreat, as did Congress, on the questions that should be asked at a time when we were in real trauma. They rolled over and played dead.”³²

Or at least the living dead.

One of Thomas’s colleagues, Terry Moran of ABC news, said reporters were so complacent at Bush’s last formal press conference before launching the Iraq War that they looked like “zombies.”³³ The performance of the media at the March 6, 2003, press conference was widely panned by journalism critics and became a kind of symbol for the fecklessness of the press in covering Bush. An *American Journalism Review* cover story entitled “Are the News Media Soft on Bush?” emphasized the press conference and suggested that several factors, including a weak opposition party, a number of strong right-wing broadcast shows, and a sensitivity of reporters to charges of “liberal bias” indeed “softened the adversarial coverage that defined Bill Clinton’s presidency.”³⁴

On the other hand, conservatives continued to believe the press was biased against Bush and was far tougher on him than on Clinton. For example, conservative media critic Brent Bozell wrote following the 2003 press conference that the reporters were tough to the point of “lecturing” the president.³⁵

Back to the question at the beginning of this chapter: Who is right? Was the press as tough on Clinton as it was on Bush? Presidencies are always hard to compare because each one governs in different historical times—even consecutive presidencies like Clinton’s and Bush’s face different circumstances. Certainly Bush, at least at the time of this writing in early 2008, was not involved in the types of sexual scandals that led to Clinton’s impeachment. But both presidents led the country into optional wars—Clinton in the Balkans and Bush in Iraq. Because leading the country to war is the most important decision a president can make and the most serious topic journalists cover, it stands to reason that an examination of press coverage of that process would provide an indication of how journalists treat the chief executive. The importance of presidential press relations cannot be overstated in this situation. While the president is commander in chief of the armed forces, he is not a dictator. The president must use his persuasive powers to communicate to Congress and the

public, largely through the mainstream press, the significance of the mission. Without that public support—support that must be acquired through communication of purpose, necessity, and goals—the people will not follow the president and will eventually pressure him to end or curtail military force or defeat the president and his party at the ballot box.

A comparison of Bush's controversial 2003 press conference with Bill Clinton's March 19, 1999, press conference, which was held immediately before he launched the air war against Serbia, would shed some light on how the White House press treated each president in similar circumstances.³⁶

Clinton ordered U.S. military forces into action a number of times during his administration, including intensive air attacks on Iraq, but his air war against Serbia was his most intensive use of force and threatened to draw the United States into a costly ground war. Clinton's March 19, 1999, press conference thus provides the best comparison to Bush's March 6, 2003, press conference. Granted, there are many differences between the two situations. Clinton's use of the military was done with the cooperation of NATO, while Bush's action used a coalition that included Great Britain but not France and Germany. Clinton's press conference occurred in the shadow of his impeachment and the winding down of his presidency while Bush's press conference was held at a time that the nation was focused almost exclusively on the Middle East and Bush was about midway through his first term. The country had been attacked by radical Islamic terrorists before Bush ordered the invasion of Iraq, so he could make an easier case for its impact on immediate U.S. national security interests than Clinton could when ordering forces to the Balkans. Nevertheless, both presidents faced the difficult task of persuading their countrymen of the necessity of war. Clinton's war turned out to be virtually bloodless for the United States, while Bush's initial lightning war turned into a long, bloody occupation of Iraq. But it is important to remember that at the time of Clinton's press conference, many feared a wider war with significant casualties. Reporters at both press conferences had a solemn obligation to hold the presidents accountable for their plans, no matter how they might personally feel about the president or his politics.

Press conferences in fact have become one of the most important methods by which a president communicates with the public. Despite the phenomenal growth of new media—giving the public a vast choice of information and the president a vast choice of outlets to reach the public—the formal press conference remains one of the few forums where the public can see the president get live questions from people who have not been scripted in advance. The president who masters this format—even if he thinks the reporters are obnoxious—knows he is demonstrating confidence, knowledge, and leadership to the public.

White House reporters also feel the pressure of the event. Although the job looks glamorous from afar, the job of covering the president includes long stretches of boredom in which the journalists are mainly watching the administration for news rather than doing investigative work. The press conference gives the reporters the opportunity to shine (or embarrass themselves) in front of a national audience. As scholars Steve Clayman and John Heritage noted, press conferences are important to both journalists and politicians because their careers often hinge on their performances in them.³⁷ Although various modern presidents have experimented with changes in the format of the press conference in terms of location, time, and other elements, the event “continues to be an enduring publicity forum for chief executives.”³⁸

Some critics argue that while the presidential press conference appears to be an open forum for reporters, the president maintains control through things like scheduling and deciding who asks questions.³⁹ Because large numbers of journalists are involved, the opportunity for follow-up questions is reduced, and presidents find press conferences easier to control than one-on-one interviews.⁴⁰ As will be shown, Bush joked about his press conferences being scripted, and various Bush haters and conspiracy theorists took that joke as fact. But the press conferences only appear scripted because the president calls on reporters in large part based on tradition and the importance of their news organizations, and the reporters are constrained by traditional news values when asking their questions. So both sides have a good idea in advance of who is likely to be called upon and what the general questions will be. With the resources of the presidency at his disposal, only a fool would enter the press conference unprepared for the likely questions, and anyone who has clawed his way to the presidency is not likely to be that foolish.

Reporters, too, are unlikely to enter the press conference unprepared. And despite accusations that reporters are easy on presidents because they are fearful of being called biased, recent research has shown that reporters at presidential press conferences have become steadily more aggressive over the past 50 years. More specifically, Clayman and Heritage found that reporters had become much more aggressive and less deferential during the intervening 30 years between the Eisenhower and Reagan administrations.⁴¹ Their most recent research, published as this book was being written, focused on reporters’ questions asked at presidential press conferences from 1953 to 2000. The study showed that a president’s popularity in opinion polls did not predict whether journalists would be more aggressive toward the president. Instead, aggressiveness was shown to increase in times of economic downturn. Questions about foreign affairs were significantly less aggressive than questions about domestic affairs.⁴²

Since both the Clinton and Bush pre-war press conferences focused on foreign affairs, we would expect the reporters to treat each president somewhat

deferentially but to be aggressive when asking questions about domestic affairs.

However, instead of looking at the press conference only from the aspect of the reporters' questions, it would be interesting to examine the presidents' performances as well and whether the press conferences were useful for the public.

The following analysis of the two press conferences is based on Carolyn Smith's critical method of analyzing the quality of presidential press conferences. Smith argued that most press conference critics evaluate them from the viewpoint of either the press or the president. They then evaluate the press conference based on one of two standards: whether the president was persuasive or whether the press held the president accountable. She argued that critics should instead evaluate the quality of the press conference from both sides. Every good press conference should reflect the inherent tension; the press should be neither hostile nor fawning.⁴³

Smith wrote that the first step in evaluating a press conference is to determine the agenda of the press conference, which is a combination of the agendas of the president and the press.⁴⁴ The heart of Smith's approach is the second step; analyzing the quality of the reporters' questions and the president's responses to them.⁴⁵ Lastly, the critic examines news coverage and public reaction to the press conference to try to determine its effects.⁴⁶

The president's agenda, or purpose for a press conference, may be evident from his opening statement or the news cycle leading to the session, or the president may have a hidden agenda, hoping to defuse a potential controversy by addressing it obliquely in the session.⁴⁷ Press conferences can also be "institutional," and have no apparent purpose other than to maintain contact between the president and the press.⁴⁸ Both pre-war press conferences concerned persuading the public of the necessity of going to war, although the news cycle leading up to Clinton's press conference included a greater variety of stories than the cycle before Bush's press conference.

Clinton's opening statement, however, did not address any issues other than military action in the Balkans and showed that his main purpose in holding the press conference was to make the case for war. He said force was needed to prevent more ethnic massacres and to stop the conflict between Serbs and Kosovars from spreading to other parts of Europe. Clinton praised Kosovar Albanians for having "the vision to see that a just peace is better than an unwinnable war. Now only [Yugoslav] President Milosevic stands in the way of peace."⁴⁹

Bush's agenda also was clearly to persuade the public of the necessity of war. Bush's press conference was among a series of speeches and public appearances by various members of the administration, including Bush, to make

the case that the United States must use force if Saddam Hussein did not comply with a United Nations resolution demanding that he disarm. The press conference was held the day before UN Chief Weapons Inspector Hans Blix was to deliver an updated report on Iraq. Bush himself clearly articulated his purpose for the press conference in an opening statement in which he declared there was only one question to ask: "Has the Iraqi regime fully and unconditionally disarmed, as required by Resolution 1441, or has it not?"⁵⁰

The reporters' agenda for a press conference is easy to discover by reading the front pages of major newspapers for a few days before the event.⁵¹ The best reporters will ask questions based on current stories because obscure questions will not make news.⁵² Clinton's press conference was his first formal press conference in almost a year, and reporters anticipated asking him for the first time about his impeachment trial.⁵³ Other major stories widely reported the week of his press conference included the beginning of the 2000 presidential election campaign, Chinese espionage at U.S. nuclear facilities, Social Security and Medicare reform, and Hillary Clinton's possible candidacy for the U.S. Senate. On the other hand, Iraq overshadowed all other news preceding Bush's press conference. Major U.S. newspapers often carried multiple stories on the crisis in the week preceding Bush's press conference.⁵⁴

In addition to scanning front pages, the scholar can ascertain the journalists' agenda by noting the first few questions of the press conference, which are usually asked by senior reporters and set the tone for the event.⁵⁵ In both press conferences, the first question actually included several questions in one rambling statement, but both essentially asked when the United States would go to war. Out of 25 questions for Clinton, eight concerned the Balkans, but no other topic received more than four questions. Out of 23 questions for Bush, 21 concerned war with Iraq.⁵⁶ The more intense focus on war for Bush was probably because most experts considered Iraq to be a tougher foe than Serbia, and it was unclear if the United States would do more than air strikes in the Balkans. The news cycle in March 1999 also simply included more dramatic stories than it did in March 2003. Nevertheless, war also dominated Clinton's news conference.

The heart of press conference analysis is an examination of questions and answers. A good press conference will have compelling questions and persuasive answers. "The best press exchanges are those which reveal that the president is exercising legitimate leadership and the press is exercising its legitimate watchdog role," Smith wrote.⁵⁷

The first reporter to query Clinton immediately took that role by pointing out that Yugoslav forces were massing despite NATO threats. "After so many threats in the past, why should President Milosevic take this one seriously?"

The reporter also asked Clinton whether he had a deadline and whether he would bomb until Milosevic complied with “your peace terms.” The president answered the first part deftly, stating that his threat was serious because NATO had already bombed Bosnia. However, he avoided answering how long the campaign would last by seizing on the reporter’s phrase “your peace terms.” Clinton emphasized “it is not my peace agreement” but was one of all the parties negotiated. He concluded weakly, “I’ll do what I can” to see the agreement enforced. After a follow-up question on the deadline, Clinton flatly declined to discuss it. The first exchange was a good one because it was a direct challenge to Clinton’s determination and intent. Clinton showed his resolve and leadership, although he seemed evasive on the details.

A logical second question would have been to press Clinton on whether the war concerned the national security of the United States and what he would do if bombing did not force Milosevic to back down. These questions had been the topic of many stories leading up to the press conference.⁵⁸ The second reporter instead asked Clinton about the Chinese theft of nuclear secrets—certainly a legitimate question, but one that could have waited until Clinton had resolved the war issues. Clinton was sidetracked by two Chinese espionage questions before a reporter returned to Kosovo with a question similar to the debate over Bush’s war with Iraq: Should the United States only act if the Serbs took military action first? The reporter mentioned congressional debate over what would justify military action. Clinton answered the question well by acknowledging the debate but asserting that the Serbs had already taken “provocative actions.” When the reporter tried to pin Clinton on the record that he would act first, Clinton insisted that was inaccurate. “I think they have acted first,” Clinton said. “They have massed their troops. They have continued to take aggressive action. They have already leveled one village in the recent past and killed a lot of innocent people. I do not believe that we ought to have thousands more people slaughtered and buried in open soccer fields before we do something.” Clinton said. The exchange was another effective one. The reporter challenged Clinton on a matter of deep concern, and the president answered forcefully and clearly.

But the next several reporters failed to press Clinton on his war plans, including whether he had an exit strategy once the war started. They instead asked Clinton a variety of questions, at least two of which were worded so easily as to be considered softballs about his wife’s possible Senate race and his feelings about his impeachment. The next reporter to tackle the war wasted the question by asking a variation of the previous war question—“What level of atrocities, sir, is a sufficient trigger [for war]?” The reporter mentioned that Serb soldiers had “massacred 44 civilians” in January, but they ignored Clinton’s demand to withdraw. Clinton smoothly turned the question to his advan-

tage by saying: “Well, you’ve just made my case. I think the threshold has been crossed.” The next reporter tried to press Clinton further by asking whether a move of Serbian troops into Kosovo would trigger air strikes. Clinton repeated that the threshold had been crossed and cut off further questioning along this line by saying he would not comment on specific plans. This round of questions on Kosovo was wasted because it was obvious Clinton had already been as specific as he would be on a war deadline. Had Clinton wanted to set a deadline, he would have done so in his opening statement or in response to the first question of the press conference. Furthermore, Clinton legitimately could decline to be more specific for military reasons. The exchange made the press look foolish but Clinton presidential.

The following six questions covered a variety of newsworthy topics, although none was as crucial as war. The next reporter to address Kosovo challenged Clinton on whether he had an exit strategy, pointing out that the president had made similar statements several years ago about committing U.S. forces to Bosnia to prevent the war from spreading. “How can you assure the American people that we’re not getting into a quagmire in Bosnia?” Clinton responded that 70 percent of American troops had been sent home, so, “It has not been a quagmire.” He said the Pentagon had been wrong in estimating the amount of time it would take to “stabilize” Bosnia. “And this business in Kosovo is not helping any. Keep in mind, there could be some ramifications in Bosnia, as well as Macedonia, where we have troops. So I can just tell you that I think we have tried to limit our involvement; we have tried to limit our mission, and we will conclude it as quickly as we can.” The reporter’s question was excellent because it concerned one of the most important issues when a president contemplates using military force—how long the war will last. Unlike his previous responses, Clinton stumbled over this question. By referring to war as “this business,” Clinton did not sound presidential, and the vague assurance that he would try to limit U.S. involvement while simultaneously threatening more action was not reassuring. Furthermore, shifting the blame for continued involvement on anonymous Pentagon officials was not evidence of strong leadership.

No reporter followed up after this weak exchange. What would Clinton do if Milosevic did not back down following the bombing campaign? Were American lives worth such a risk? The reporters instead queried Clinton on topics ranging from impeachment to Chinese espionage.

The Chinese espionage case at the Los Alamos nuclear laboratory was a crucial national security issue, and the reporters devoted four questions to it. As was noted earlier, the second question of the press conference addressed the scandal, and the reporter used an attack question to get right to the point: “Mr. President, how long have you known that the Chinese were stealing our

nuclear secrets?" The reporter also asked Clinton to respond to Republican charges that he withheld information about it because of the election and his trade goals. How would the scandal affect Chinese-American relations? Clinton explicitly denied the accusation that he had withheld information. He said it was unclear whether there was a "breach of security" or "espionage," but he said that the CIA, the FBI, and the Energy Department had all been cooperating in investigating the case since he was notified in 1997. He avoided a direct answer on the effect of the scandal on U.S.-China relations by saying "We cannot afford to be under any illusions about our relationship with China, or any other country, for that matter."

The next reporter followed up aggressively, trying to put Clinton on the record as to whether espionage had occurred. The reporter pointed out the inconsistency of Clinton's assertion that various federal departments were cooperating, noting the fact that the Energy Department for 17 months had not implemented FBI recommendations on tightening security. The reporter concluded with the attack: "Can you assure the American people that under your watch, no valuable nuclear secrets were lost?" Clinton simply ignored the question about the value of the lost secrets and deflected the other questions to a report to be done by the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board. Clinton concluded: "I can tell you that no one has reported to me that they suspect such a thing has occurred." The espionage questions were direct, and although confrontational, legitimate given the seriousness of the topic. Clinton's responses were weak when one considers his debate over the definition of the word "is" during his testimony in the Monica Lewinsky scandal. In this context, a phrase such as "no one has reported to me" sounds suspicious. Clinton needed to answer more forcefully.

The Lewinsky scandal and impeachment were fair topics for the news conference, but the first question touching on Clinton's scandals was so biased in favor of the president as to be ridiculous: "Sir, will you tell us why you think people have been so mean to you? Is it a conspiracy? Is it a plan? They treat you worse than they treated Abe Lincoln." Clinton responded with a folksy joke about a man who was a victim of circumstance and then said: "I have been very blessed in my life. Most of us leave this life further ahead than we would be if all we got was justice. Most of us get a fair share of mercy, too. And I wouldn't trade anything for having had the opportunity to be President and do the work I've done." It was a great answer that showed humor, a lack of bitterness, and a focus on his job. But the exchange was cheapened because of the reporter's obvious sympathy for the president and the questionable comparison to Lincoln.

Another reporter gave Clinton a ludicrously easy question by asking him whether he thought Hillary Clinton would be a good senator and how their re-

lationship was faring. The president could hardly have answered other than that she would be a tremendous senator, especially if he were, as the reporter mentioned helpfully, working on his marriage. Clinton affirmed that he and the first lady “love each other very much” and that “she would be a magnificent senator.”

However, these too-friendly exchanges were balanced by two that challenged Clinton directly on charges of rape and lying. One reporter mentioned that Clinton’s attorney, David Kendall, had denied the rape accusation made against the president by Juanita Broaddrick, a nursing home operator who had alleged in a recent national television interview that Clinton had assaulted her when he was attorney general of Arkansas. The reporter posed a confrontational question: “But shouldn’t you speak directly on this matter and reassure the public? And if they are not true, can you tell us what your relationship with Ms. Broaddrick was, if any?” Clinton implied the charges were political by saying that following the impeachment acquittal he swore he would devote all of his time to his job but would let others “decide whether they would follow that lead.” He referred to his attorney’s statement for his answer and repeated that referral when the reporter insisted: “Can you not simply deny it, sir?” Clinton answered this distasteful but legitimate question about as well as he could, although his refusal to deny the allegation, particularly given his lies in the Lewinsky scandal, was not convincing.

Another reporter asked Clinton to compare himself to the story about George Washington saying “I cannot tell a lie.” The reporter asked, “How important do you think it is to tell the truth, especially under oath?” Clinton answered the challenge eloquently, saying that he hoped young people learned that telling the truth is important and there are consequences for lying. “But I also think that there will be a box score, and there will be that one negative, and then there will be the hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of times when the record will show that I did not abuse my authority as President, that I was truthful with the American people.”

Overall, the most challenging questions to Clinton concerned his personal behavior. As previous research on press conferences would predict, the reporters were collectively more deferential when asking Clinton about foreign affairs, even though committing the United States to war had more direct impact on the country than his sexual affairs did.

Of course, Bush had no sexual scandal to investigate on the eve of the Iraq war. But reporters were not as deferential to him as they were toward Clinton when grilling him about his foreign policy. For example, one reporter, citing opinion polls, suggested that many people did not believe the president’s contention that Saddam Hussein was a threat: “A lot of people . . . who agree that he should be disarmed, who listen to you say that you have the evidence, but

who feel they haven't seen it . . . still wonder why blood has to be shed if he hasn't attacked us." Did the reporter want Bush to respond to poll results? Or did he want the president to explain why the United States should attack if Hussein hasn't attacked first? Did the reporter personally believe the evidence for war was nonexistent and was using public opinion to hide behind? The bias and confrontational nature of the question made Bush look sympathetic, and the confusing question structure allowed Bush to answer any way he chose. He handled it well by referring to the reporter's statement that if people believe Hussein should be disarmed but that he is not going to disarm—then there is only one way to get him to disarm—force. The exchange was fairly typical of the Bush press conference. Reporters asked legitimate questions but too often framed them in such a way as to show their own opinion or else simply rambled so much that anyone—including Bush—would have a difficult time discerning the point.

Nevertheless, the reporters did cover all of the major issues of the crisis. The first question for Bush, like the first question for Clinton, concerned when the war would start. It was a rambling statement that took up five lines of type in the press conference transcript. The question strongly hinted the reporter's own position through the phrasing "And what harm would it do to give Saddam a final ultimatum?" Bush stated vaguely that the administration was in the "final stages of diplomacy" and repeated the argument he had made in his opening statement. Although several critics of the press conference decried the lack of follow-up questions,⁵⁹ the next reporter re-stated the question, "Are we days away?" but Bush, like Clinton, refused to give a specific date for war, saying, "We are days away from resolving this issue at the [UN] Security Council." And as in the case of Clinton's press conference, the repeated questions about a deadline were wasted. Had Bush wanted to issue an ultimatum, he would have done so in his opening statement.

Another reporter challenged Bush on why some U.S. allies did not think the Iraqi threat was imminent when they were privy to the same intelligence data that the United States had. The question was important and legitimate and set up a controversy Bush could settle. But like many others, it was too long—an incredible 10 lines in the transcript—and indicated the reporter favored the Canadian proposal to give Hussein more time. Phrases like "that would give you a little bit of a chance to build more support" implied the reporter thought it would be a good idea. The rambling nature of the question allowed Bush to answer the easier part first and demonstrate his resolve by saying: "We, of course, are consulting with our allies at the United Nations. But I meant what I said, this is the last phase of diplomacy." Bush brushed aside the intelligence issue by repeating that there were a number of allies involved in the coalition.

A follow-up question on the intelligence issue would have been justified, and the next question followed it after a fashion, but in a roundabout way and with another suggestion of bias by the reporter. The reporter first asked Bush what he was “waiting to hear or see” before deciding on war. The reporter referred to peace protestors and seemed to attack Bush by quoting their idea “that the U.S. was a threat to peace,” asking, “I wonder why you think so many people around the world take a different view of the threat that Saddam Hussein poses than you and your allies.” The question was legitimate and challenged Bush. The president’s response was measured. He acknowledged the view of the protestors and said he did not want a war. But Bush reasserted forcefully that he believed disarming Hussein was necessary. “The risk of doing nothing, the risk of hoping that Saddam Hussein changes his mind and becomes a gentle soul . . . is a risk I’m not willing to take for the American people,” Bush replied.

The next exchange became the most controversial part of the press conference. Bush called on the next reporter by saying, “We’ll be there in a minute. King, John King. This is scripted—(laughter).” Bush was joking about the process of calling reporters from a list—something Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and Clinton had done as well⁶⁰—and the correspondents acknowledged he was joking by laughing at his aside. But critics claimed the exchange showed the entire press conference was scripted.⁶¹ Neither the press nor Bush profited from the exchange. Although humor is usually a good thing, the sensitivity of the reporters about their role and the ferocious, tinfoil-hat conspiracy mindset of a number of Bush critics made this a poor joke for the president. It only gave his critics a weapon. Reporters, on the other hand, looked petulant by complaining about a standard practice. Presidents prepare for news conferences and know who they will call on. Spontaneity occurs because reporters are free to ask whatever they want, and indeed they did during the pre-war event. King’s question following Bush’s joke was certainly not one Bush would have scripted: “How would you answer your critics who say that they think this is somehow personal? As Senator Kennedy put it tonight, he said your fixation with Saddam Hussein is making the world a more dangerous place.” The topic was legitimate and phrased in a way to challenge Bush, but King made the mistake of going on too long after his initial question by asking Bush to provide details on worst-case scenarios in terms of casualties and financial costs—something the president was unlikely to share. Bush answered the question by dramatically raising his hand as if taking the oath of office and saying: “People can ascribe all kinds of intentions. I swore to protect and defend the Constitution; that’s what I swore to do. I put my hand on the Bible and took that oath, and that’s exactly what I am going to do.” The question seemed to anger Bush, and after reiterating

why he believed Hussein was a threat, he said, “The rest of your six-point question?” Ordinarily, presidents look bad when they show displeasure in a press conference because it can make them seem imperious. But King looked worse in the exchange by asking a question that implied the president would go to war to avenge his father. The phrasing seemed to be a personal attack on the president, something Americans instinctively dislike.⁶²

The next question was another lengthy, strongly worded attack question, following up on previous questions about the rift between the United States and some of its allies. The questioner was Terry Moran, the journalist who was widely quoted later for calling himself and his colleagues “zombies.”⁶³ Moran, at least, seemed to have a zombie-like craving for a piece of presidential hide when he asked sharply, “What went wrong that so many governments and people around the world now not only disagree with you very strongly, but see the U.S. under your leadership as an arrogant power?” The question indicated Moran’s view that Bush’s leadership was ineffective. Bush backed off from his sarcastic tone with King, answering evenly that “a lot” of nations would be with the coalition, although he understood that France and Germany disagreed with the United States on the use of force.

The next question was one of the shortest of the evening—one sign of a good question—and effective in that it tried to hold Bush accountable for past rhetoric, in this case his famous statement that he wanted Osama bin Laden “dead or alive.” The reporter asked if the war would be a success if the United States did not capture Hussein, “dead or alive.” Bush tried to evade the question by responding that regime change would improve Iraq. The reporter repeated the question in an even more economical way, and Bush repeated that the “regime” would change. The question was legitimate and phrased well, but Bush could have answered it better by stating forcefully that American goals did not depend upon the capture of one man. His answer seemed evasive.

The next question was also brief and effective, asking Bush what would happen if the United States attacked without UN approval. The reporter’s biased phrasing, asking Bush if he would be “worried” if the United States was seen as “defiant” of the UN, worked well by provoking Bush to a revealing response about his thinking. “No, I’m not worried about that,” Bush said and added that, “When it comes to our security, we really don’t need anybody’s permission.”

After several tough questions in a row trying to get Bush to explain aspects of the possible war, a reporter asked Bush a rambling question about his faith that critics later cited as an example of a “softball” because it let Bush expound on his Christianity.⁶⁴ But the confusing question was really about the critics of Bush’s policy: “Mr. President, as the nation is at odds over war, with many organizations like the Congressional Black Caucus pushing for contin-

ued diplomacy through the U.N., how is your faith guiding you?" The question suggested the reporter's attitude that there was a discrepancy between faith and support for the war. Bush answered skillfully and emotionally that, "My faith sustains me because I pray daily." Bush skillfully connected himself with the millions of his fellow citizens who are religious: "One thing that's really great about our country, April, is there are thousands of people who pray for me that I'll never see and be able to thank. But it's a humbling experience to think that people I will never have met have lifted me and family up in prayer. And for that I'm grateful. That's—it's been a comforting feeling to know that is true. I pray for peace, April. I pray for peace." The exchange definitely favored the president, but not because the reporter was trying to be his foil. The question was a legitimate attempt to make Bush comment on the role of his faith in his decisions, an important topic given his emphasis upon it in his campaigns.

The next question was factually inaccurate because it stated the United States entered the Vietnam War with the goal of "regime change." Nevertheless, the question challenged Bush "to assure them [the American people] that you will not lead this country down a similar path in Iraq." Bush either didn't notice or chose to ignore the inaccurate comparison but instead called it a "great question" and seized on it to distinguish the difference between the Vietnam War and the upcoming operation, using the word "clear" three times in five lines of the transcript to describe the war's mission to disarm Iraq: "Our mission is precisely what I just stated. We have got a plan that will achieve that mission, should we need to send forces in." The question was legitimate and forced Bush to go on the record that he would not let Iraq turn into a quagmire. Bush's response showed determination and his understanding of the potential problem.

Bush's determined responses did not change the minds of his critics, and Clinton had the same fate in 1999. But the goal of presidential communication, especially in the hyperpolarized political world that the two baby boomer presidents inhabited, is not so much to persuade the opposition as to excite the party faithful and inspire the undecided citizens who so often rally around a strong, confident president. In that sense, both presidents succeeded. Clinton and Bush both got the media to lead coverage of the press conference with their arguments for war. Opinion polls indicated that support of both presidents increased after their news conferences.

Stories about the Clinton news conference emphasized his point that NATO was justified in bombing Serb forces. Both the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* led with a paraphrase of Clinton's quote that the Serbs had "crossed the threshold," and the *Dallas Morning News* included the quote in the fourth paragraph of its story.⁶⁵ All three papers carried sidebars reporting Clinton's

comments on his scandals, but the president's justification for war dominated the news. Clinton failed to persuade skeptics of the war, however. Even liberal columnist Anthony Lewis wrote: "Mr. Clinton will have to say more than he did at his press conference Friday to convince Congress and the American public of the cost of doing nothing in Kosovo. He will have to convince us, too, that he has, and will carry through, a serious, long-term policy directed at the source of evil over many years: Slobodan Milosevic."⁶⁶ At least one poll showed that public support of Clinton's policy improved after the press conference. ABC News/*Washington Post* polls on March 11–14 showed that 27 percent believed America's vital interests were at stake in Kosovo; the number increased to 41 percent on March 23.⁶⁷

Most news stories about Bush's press conference emphasized his statements that the United States did not need the UN's permission to invade. The *New York Times* led with the "permission" quote, saying that Bush "vowed that he would press for a vote on a new resolution at the United Nations in the next few days."⁶⁸ The *Washington Post* had a very similar lead about the UN negotiations, writing that Bush "left no doubt that he would act to oust Iraqi President Saddam Hussein even without the blessing of the world body."⁶⁹

Bush, like Clinton, was unable to persuade critics that war was necessary. The *New York Times* argued on its editorial page that the United States should not attack without broad international support,⁷⁰ and the *Washington Post* likewise editorialized that diplomacy should be given another chance.⁷¹

Opinion polls, however, suggested that the public was swayed. A *New York Times*/CBS news poll taken two days after the press conference showed that 55 percent of Americans said they would support an invasion without UN approval. The *Times* concluded that the results suggested Bush had made progress in rallying the country to war.⁷²

Did the press achieve its goal of holding the presidents accountable? Although many questions could have been worded better, and the reporters should have pressed both presidents more forcefully about post-war plans, the reporters did ask both Clinton and Bush the most important questions about their respective war plans. Both were asked to justify a pre-emptive strike, and both were asked the dreaded "quagmire" question that was on most Americans' minds after Vietnam. The reporters did grill Bush more thoroughly on the war, asking about the costs of war (both financial and human), the participation of Turkey, the resolution before the UN Security Council, the effect on the rest of the Middle East, and even whether Bush would attack Iraq because he was "fixated" on the country.

In fact, a comparison of the two press conferences suggests that the charge of liberal bias affecting the way reporters treat the presidents has some merit. Clinton received two blatantly fawning queries about Hillary Clinton and his impeachment. The obsequiousness was reminiscent of a mini-scandal that

briefly erupted in the Bush press briefings in 2005. One “reporter” who constantly tossed softballs at Bush spokesmen turned out to have appeared on a gay escort service website, and had gained admission to the White House briefings while writing under a pseudonym for an obscure conservative news website. Bush spokesmen denied planting a propagandist in the press corps, and the incident was quickly forgotten. In Clinton’s press conference, it looked like the “plant” was a member of the working press. At any rate, no reporter asked Bush in the pre-war press conference why people were so mean to him, even though he was frequently mocked for his “Bushisms” and was the subject of a vitriolic work that sums up that attitude: *The Bush-Hater’s Handbook*.⁷³ No scribe compared him to Lincoln or tossed him a softball about Laura Bush’s work with Afghan women. And the reporters grilled Bush much more intensely about his war plans. Reporters did not press Clinton to explain how his military action would benefit the national security or quote at length various critics of the war (although one reporter did refer to a Republican legislator).

On the other hand, just because Clinton got a few easy questions does not mean that the press as a whole was easy on him. The questions about the Broadrick rape allegation by themselves show that the White House reporters collectively would not let Clinton turn the press conference into a commercial for his policies. If the bias virus had metastasized throughout the press corps, Clinton would have escaped unseemly questions about his sex scandals and gotten nothing but slow pitches about his foreign policy.

The truth is that the White House press corps is so large and diverse, and its members in general so competitive and imbued with professional standards, that there will always be someone to ask the tough question and get the president—any president—on the record. When you include all the other people writing or broadcasting in some fashion about the presidency, whether it is on talk radio, a website like *The Drudge Report*, or a local newspaper, no president of either party will escape “taking it on the chin,” as Helen Thomas put it.

Hillary Clinton, if she ever becomes president, can expect the same treatment. If the press corps reverts to its deferential handling of foreign affairs, she may get a break on Iraq—assuming the troops are still there—and she may get fawning stories from some blatantly biased reporters. But some reporter who “wants to move his bones,” as Bill accused FOX News’ Chris Wallace of doing, will be there to keep an eye on her, and if her administration has a scandal, her White House would be Clinton II in more ways than one.

But if Hillary ever starts feeling sorry for herself, if she happens to see the Hillary Clinton Voodoo Kit in her local Barnes & Noble bookstore and thinks she’s a special victim, she should look closely at the display. She’ll likely see next to it a similar box with a different label—the George W. Bush Voodoo Kit.

In American politics, everybody gets stuck at some point.

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55. Smith, *Presidential Press Conferences*, 90.

56. The Clinton transcript lists 29 “Q” paragraphs, and the Bush transcript lists 24, but in each transcript some of these paragraphs are reporters making statements, clarifying their questions, or answering a president’s question. If one counted the multiple questions and re-phrasings of questions asked by various reporters during their turns at the microphone, one would get a much larger number of questions. The author counted as a separate question each “Q” that was a distinct turn of talk in the form of a question to the president.

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How Could You Prepare for Washington?

When a reporter covers a governor, particularly in a small state like Arkansas, the politician and the journalist can get to know each other with a depth that just isn't possible given the size of the White House press corps and security bubble surrounding the president. In the case of Bill Clinton, who was governor for more than 10 years, there were countless opportunities for reporters to interview him one-on-one or even just bump into him in the hallway. It's the kind of access that reporters long for, and, perhaps, the kind of familiarity that presidents miss once they are caged in the security procedures of the White House, a place the gregarious Clinton once jokingly described as a prison.¹

The Associated Press's Ron Fournier covered Governor Clinton and was a self-described "cub" reporter. Fournier said he enjoyed covering Clinton in Little Rock.

"I learned an amazing amount covering him just because when you watch the best for ten years, then, you know, if you can learn to cover Bill Clinton, you can learn to cover anybody," said Fournier, who followed Clinton to Washington to cover the White House. "And then when he went to Washington, there were a few times where he would look out into the pool of reporters and there'd be one familiar face. It would be mine. And so for the first six months or a year, I would be the one familiar face he would see. And it's not like I got any stories or anything out of it, but you could tell how much he kind of missed, in a way, the old ways of doing things."²

On Clinton's first trip to Northern Ireland, Fournier found himself as the only journalist with the president besides a White House photographer. The motorcade had stopped at a small grocery that had suffered some bomb damage perhaps 18 months earlier.

“We’re inside and Hillary’s kind of back in the corner just outside of my view, you know, doing some shopping, and Clinton, his back’s to me just maybe five feet away picking at some fruit, and I’m—because it was such a small market, they only had room for one reporter and being the wire guy, I was in basically representing the rest of the press corps with the responsibility to present a pool report to everyone else,” Fournier recalled. “So I’m standing back there, you know, just kind of fading into the woodwork as you do in situations like that, just a little courtesy stop. There was a White House camera person in there but no other press. And like I said, his back’s to me and then he turns around and sees me standing there, and there’s a moment [that he’s] kind of surprised to see me, a reporter there, and then an acknowledgement of who I was and he just kind of takes a deep breath and a sigh and says—and it was a pretty overwhelming day, if you remember what was going on there—he was just, ‘Boy, we’re a long way from Little Rock, huh? Boy, we’re a long way from Arkansas, aren’t we?’”³

Clinton’s wistful remark could be interpreted many ways. Certainly the relationship he had with reporters like Fournier was far different in Washington from what he had known in Little Rock. Clinton told journalist Marvin Kalb that the size of the respective press corps made a big difference in the relationship he had with reporters. When reporters don’t get to know a source personally, they have a more difficult time understanding the decisions he makes, Clinton said. “That was less of a problem for the Arkansas press corps—they dealt directly with me and, as a result, relied far less on anonymous sources and leaks,” he said. “They were tough. I’d rate the Little Rock press corps among the toughest any governor faces, especially so when there was genuine newspaper competition in the capital. But there was less of the constant search for ways to belittle those in public service.”⁴

For much of Clinton’s governorship, Little Rock was served by two major daily newspapers with differing political leanings—a rarity in the United States in the 1980s and almost nonexistent in 2008. Still, Little Rock was a small media market with different standards compared to major metropolitan areas like Washington, Los Angeles, and New York.

CBS White House correspondent Bill Plante said politicians who arrive in D.C. from places other than those major markets will have experienced a much more familiar relationship with the press than they encounter as president. “I don’t think the press will hold many surprises for [former New York mayor] Rudy Giuliani, for example,” Plante said. “I mean, anything he’s going to see from a national press, he’s already seen in New York. I do think that in a smaller pond, the fish are more familiar with one another and that probably makes it a little bit easier, because after a while, you reach the limits of what you can do and still be civil. You know, there are usually, we hope, in

every media milieu, a couple of iconoclasts . . . who don't physically cover it and observe from afar and write whatever they think. You'll always hope there are a few people like that—like Molly Ivins—but for the everyday working press that has to see and be with the politician, I think civility does impose certain limits except in a place like New York where, you know, there are so many people and anything goes, or Washington.”⁵

According to Fournier, the familiarity at the statehouse level can result in better coverage because the reporter is more accountable to the people he covers. “The D.C. press is tougher because it's bigger and less personal, and in Washington, what happens—and this happened to me after not too long—you start covering an institution and a title,” Fournier explained. “You're covering the president and the White House, and you stop covering people, so it's very easy to take that cheap shot, take that extra dig of the knife when you're covering a title or an institution than it is if you're digging a person.”⁶

The digs can be subtle, like using the phrase “so-and-so claimed,” which implies doubt, instead of “so-and-so-said,” which is a neutral form of attribution. “Just changing a little word like that makes all the difference in a lead,” Fournier said. “It's a lot easier to take that dig when you're part of a big national press corps. We were tough on them in Arkansas, and nothing that came out of his presidency was news or a surprise to us, and nothing came out that hadn't been vetted in Arkansas. But we were more—since there was only five or six of us—and I knew at the end of the day I was going to be looking him in his eyes, I was a lot more careful to make sure I was fair to him. And then I had both sides of the story and then I would be thinking, you know, ‘Can I justify this paragraph when he comes in and asks me about it?’ And actually, I think that's a healthy thing. I think, you know, when I do that as a national political reporter for a candidate who I may never see, that's when I'm at my best. It's when I know I'm accountable not only to my reader but to the people I'm covering.”⁷

But being accountable didn't mean the Arkansas press wasn't aggressive. The competition for stories in Little Rock in the mid-1980s was particularly intense because the two major dailies, the *Arkansas Democrat* and the *Arkansas Gazette*, were engaged in a death struggle. (Gannett, which owned the liberal *Gazette*, closed its paper in 1991 and sold its assets to the *Democrat*, which then became the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*.) Fournier said he takes offense whenever someone says the Arkansas press wasn't tough on Clinton.

“I'm telling you, that was a more competitive environment for me as a reporter than anything I've seen in Washington,” Fournier said. “We would have killed for a story that brought down the governor. We would have killed for a story that would have, you know, brought down a couple of state legislators.”

Fournier said the Clintons “took some knocks” while Clinton was governor. “But when they got to Washington, [Clinton] was no longer just governor of our state and [covered] by the six- or seven-person press corps, but [he] was president of the United States, where all the stakes are higher, and where the press is a lot less accountable to the people they cover and a lot more into the game . . . more into the process in Washington than they are in states. They feel themselves to be part of the process. Yeah, how could you prepare for the difference between Arkansas and Washington? I wasn’t prepared for it as a reporter. I’m telling you there were two years where I had no idea what was news and what wasn’t—where there was something I thought was really important wasn’t important to anybody else, and something I thought was BS was all of a sudden a federal investigation.”⁸

Travelgate, in which Hillary was accused of unjustly ordering that the White House travel staff be fired, was an example of something that at first blush might not seem to be such a big story to someone from outside the Beltway. The travel staff arranged trips for the White House press corps, and reporters generally liked the staff and appreciated its services. The record-keeping, however, was sloppy. But the firing, whether warranted or not, was even sloppier. The employees were not allowed a chance to defend themselves, and the FBI was brought in to investigate the office—a step most observers, especially reporters who worked with the staff, thought was at the least overkill.

“I’ll never forget sitting in the booth at the White House when [Clinton press secretary] Dee Dee Myers called me to tell me that the travel office employees were being investigated by the FBI,” Fournier said. “My boss was in the other room. I sat on it until he came in. . . . They were accused of stealing money, so why wouldn’t the FBI be looking into it? It made sense to me. Policemen, that’s what they do, right? I didn’t realize, you know, it was Clinton’s FBI, and maybe they were going after these travel office people. I didn’t know how the travel office people had relationships with the press corps and a lot of them had taken care of the press for years. You know, when my boss came in, I told him, he says, well, why the hell isn’t that on the wire? You know, that was a huge story that the FBI was investigating it. I had no clue.”⁹

Fournier said he also was puzzled why the Clintons’ partnership in the Whitewater development project in Arkansas became such a big deal. The Clintons had put Whitewater information in the ethics report that they filed every year in the Arkansas secretary of state’s office. It was a report that Fournier had checked every year when he was covering Clinton in Little Rock.¹⁰

“I knew the land wasn’t making any money,” Fournier said. “You know, of all the things the Clintons could be accused of, there wasn’t a whiff in that town that they were stealing money. So the Whitewater deal was always a big mystery to me why it was such a big deal.”¹¹

At first glance, it also seems a mystery why the Clintons—or at least Bill, who worked with reporters daily—were not better prepared for the Washington press. Hillary, as was pointed out in earlier chapters, did not have as much day-to-day contact with the media as Bill did but instead did standard first lady interviews or came out as a secret weapon to slash people like Tom McRae. But Bill, on the other hand, seemed to have a knack for dealing with the press. He displayed that knack even when he was in his 20s during his ill-fated congressional campaign in 1974.

Bob Steel, then a young reporter for a Little Rock television station, recalled that Clinton drove all the way from his home in Fayetteville to Little Rock, a distance of about 200 miles. The station had invited the various candidates to come to the studio for interviews on election night, but it was a rainy night, and they didn't expect many people to show up. Clinton was one of the few who did.¹²

"He was very well spoken in the interview, and he was very gracious," Steel recalled. "He was very, very good on the air, and I asked him why on earth did you drive all the way down here when he had lost, and he said, 'Name recognition. I intend to run for office again someday, and I want people to know who I am.'" ¹³

Clinton impressed Steel because he knew at such a young age which television station was the most important one in the state, and he also understood the importance of getting airtime, even though he had lost the election. "I thought this guy's really savvy," Steel said.¹⁴

But it may have been this very savviness with the local press that was Clinton's undoing later with the national press. He developed a good professional relationship with Arkansas reporters and understood how the media in his state worked. He had dealt with the national press at times on his frequent trips out of state—trips that became so frequent that he once announced a special session of the Arkansas legislature while he was in Boston.

Rex Nelson, who covered Washington for the *Arkansas Democrat* while Clinton was governor, said Clinton traveled to D.C. so much that the Arkansas reporters facetiously referred to him as the seventh member of the state's congressional delegation. Nelson recalled Clinton vigorously networking with everyone from journalists like Joe Klein to movers and shakers like Benjamin Hooks, head of the NAACP.¹⁵

"He was always somebody—when he was basically running for president years before he was formally running for president—that was not wasting a single second, that was making contacts, media and otherwise, almost every waking second," Nelson said.¹⁶

But such brief exposure to the national press was not enough solid preparation for dealing with the national press full time.

"I think that there was probably a bit of a miscalculation on his part when he went to Washington in '93 in thinking he could really handle the White

House press corps as he had the state capital press corps,” Nelson said. “The fact was he was at really an entirely different level, and the techniques that he had used on the state capital press corps very effectively for so many years wouldn’t necessarily work with the White House press corps. There’s a pack mentality everywhere in journalism, of course, but there’s much more of a pack mentality in the White House. It is the worst place I have ever seen for a pack mentality, in that you’ve got the tiny—which they’re remodeling now, but then tiny White House briefing room—and everybody’s sitting in these little cubicles right on top of each other, and the fact is there are a lot of days when there’s very little real news coming out of the White House, and yet every media outlet in the country with somebody over there is demanding a story out of there that day—whether it’s NBC, CBS, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*—and that leads to much more of a pack mentality, so I think he probably wasn’t quite prepared for that change.”¹⁷

Kenneth T. Walsh, a longtime *U.S. News & World Report* White House correspondent, found Little Rock’s political environment to be like that of a small town when he did interviews there immediately after Clinton’s election in 1992. Everyone involved in politics seemed to know each other, and the citizens all seemed proud of the Clintons. “I could see that for the Clintons, leaving Little Rock would be like leaving the womb,” he wrote. “It seemed to me that they would find the adjustment to Washington, a harsh and unforgiving place where they could no longer dominate their political environment, very difficult indeed.”¹⁸

Walsh, like most reporters, found Bill to be charming, intelligent, and enthusiastic. But he also found him to be overconfident in all the things he could achieve. “It was as if he considered Washington a high school political-science laboratory where he could test his theories, and he was both the smartest kid in class and teacher’s pet (which in fact he had been long ago in Hot Springs),” Walsh wrote. “Yet in Washington many of his rivals would be just as smart as he was, and the political culture would be much more resistant to change than he had ever dreamed.”¹⁹

That political culture, of course, includes the press, the members of which are also set in their ways. Carol Griffiee, who covered Clinton in Arkansas but had also worked in Washington, said the values of the reporters in the nation’s capital are different from those who work outside the Beltway.

“I used to be part of the national press corps, and it’s why I left the District of Columbia,” Griffiee said. “They’re the most arrogant, animalistic people I’ve ever met in my life. Their values are not my values, by the way, and that’s why I left Washington . . . the national press corps doesn’t ever listen to anybody but the cronies within the national press corps, because they have such contempt for the local press.”²⁰

Griffie explained that people in Washington tend to be self-absorbed, whether they work for the news industry or government or some other profession.

“I left Washington because that city is a magnet for self-centered, power-happy people, and when I realized that—I was born there by the way, so I didn’t have any excuse for not knowing it except I finally grew up. When I realized that, and I thought, you know, this is not what I’m about—I’m about trying to inform the public, but not for my own aggrandizement,” Griffie said. “That’s when I said, ‘I want out of here,’ and decided to come back to Arkansas. But I find the people who stay in Washington who become part of that culture—and a lot of other people who are attracted to it—not everybody, understand, but a lot of the people are really, really very self-centered, very power-hungry people, and I’m just not into that.”²¹

Clinton, in fact, may have been spoiled by his smaller Arkansas pack, not because the reporters weren’t professional, but because of the nature of the state and the context of the times. Clinton, as a small state governor from the South, had the mentality that he could get away with anything, according to Darrell Glascock, who worked with Clinton in promoting tourism. Glascock noted that being governor in a small Southern state is such a big deal that, “It carries with it the groupie mania, and Clinton is great with the media.”²²

The Arkansas press in general didn’t write about Clinton and his groupies because before the Gary Hart episode, the mainstream press usually stayed away from covering politicians’ sex lives. The coverage of Hart’s affair that doomed his presidential aspirations in the 1988 campaign made Clinton’s sexual history fair game at about the time he entered presidential politics.

“I think in retrospect we were easy on him,” said Dennis Byrd, who covered Clinton for the Associated Press. Byrd noted how coverage became more intense in all areas, even sports, as Clinton entered the national stage. “It’s not to say we didn’t delve into some things, but not the kind of scrutiny that was put on him during the presidential campaign in ’92. We changed our focus some at the AP, based on some things that occurred along the way like the Gennifer Flowers incident. I remember having the unpleasant task at AP of calling some of the women that Clinton allegedly had had some type of affair with. They included a former Miss Arkansas, and of course you know the list by now, so I sat in the newsroom of AP and called all those women, and of course they all denied that they’d had any kind of relationship with him.”²³

Most local reporters had heard about Clinton’s affairs but did not look into them. Television investigative reporter Mel Hanks, for example, knew a woman that was dating Clinton, but didn’t do a story because it didn’t impact Clinton’s job.²⁴

“You know, we were tough on him on issues related to child abuse and . . . his appointment of the medical examiner—whether the medical examiner covered up for his mother—that’s a whole different issue, too,” said Hanks, referring to two social service issues in which Clinton’s Arkansas administration was accused of incompetence. “But I thought that I, at least personally, was pretty tough on him. Later on, they said, well, gosh, didn’t you know he was this womanizer?”

Hanks said that not only did the press know about the governor’s womanizing, but that Clinton didn’t try to hide it, openly picking up a woman for dates at Hanks’s TV station.

“But the question always was, well, does it affect the way he is governor?” Hanks said. “Does he force his subordinates to hire these girlfriends and does he put them on the payroll of state government? And there was some issue of that with Gennifer Flowers later on, but in the ’80s, there was never any indication, ever, he was that way. He would come on to our own female reporters, and we never did a story because we didn’t feel it was germane to what was going on. It didn’t affect the public issues or public policy or public money. So we knew about it but we didn’t think it was newsworthy then, and actually, now, I still don’t think it’s newsworthy, unless we could prove he was using public money to forward the career of his girlfriends.”²⁵

John Brummett, a reporter who is generally considered to know Clinton extremely well, also noted in his book *HighWire* that the governor’s affairs were “commonly accepted truths.” Brummett wrote that the Arkansas press had not investigated the affairs because—unlike when Clinton became a presidential contender—there were no tabloids willing to print the story first, no right-wing publications pushing the story, and no state troopers ready to sell their versions of the story. “I thought that an article about Clinton’s marital infidelity might have been relevant for public consumption only as a psychoanalytical illustration of what I already knew, which was that Clinton had a tendency toward personal indiscretion and recklessness, a problem being loyal and an insatiable need for ego gratification and approval.”²⁶

Cragg Hines, a Washington columnist for the *Houston Chronicle*, said there is a strong argument for writing about the affairs. “I hate to use these sort of psychobabble words, but I think in some ways, the media in Little Rock was sort of an enabler for Clinton,” Hines said. Some reporters convinced themselves that the more outlandish claims about Clinton’s private life were not true, or that they weren’t worth covering because they didn’t affect public business, he said.²⁷

“I know some of the people and their view is, well, it had nothing to do with the way he performed his public duties and all of that, and I understand that, but I’m not—and maybe it didn’t have anything to do with it, but it cer-

tainly did when he got to Washington,” Hines said. “I think it became incumbent at some point to make sure that this did not have some effect on his public performance, because let’s face it, from what we now know, it was fairly time-consuming.”²⁸

Clinton himself worried that his time-consuming activities might derail his career. Most Clinton observers believe he pulled out of the 1988 campaign at the last minute because longtime aide Betsey Wright convinced him his “bimbo problem” was too much to overcome when Gary Hart had been flogged and chased out of the arena for the same thing. By 1992 he had obviously come to the decision that the personal scandals would not keep him from the presidency. One of the most-repeated stories of Clinton’s path to the White House was his appearance before the Sperling breakfast, a sort of forum for Washington reporters to quiz presidential candidates early in the process. At the breakfast, Clinton admitted that he had problems in his marriage, hoping his statement would inoculate him against the infidelity issue. His relations with the Arkansas press and the lack of coverage of his private life must have also given a bit of a false sense of security.

“He thought himself to be very clever in dealing with the press,” Hanks said, adding that Clinton would be more cautious depending upon who the journalist was he was dealing with. “I’m sure it was a shock to him dealing with the national press because very few reporters in Arkansas really gave him a hard time. We’d ask him tough questions sometimes, but a lot of times he would cultivate the press, some of them would give him softball questions and almost give him a free pass, so once he became president of course that ended, so I think it was somewhat of a shock to him.”²⁹

Clinton assumed he could use that same tactic on the national press. “Clinton, it seemed to me, was really brilliant at the sort of interpersonal stuff and very calculating too,” said the *Los Angeles Times*’s Tom Hamburger, who also covered Clinton for the *Arkansas Gazette*. “Reporters, as you know, or maybe all humans, I think reporters specifically—flattery gets you a long ways,” Hamburger said. “And so Clinton had reporters that [in] the Arkansas press corps he could manage, in a way. And nationally, the personal charm offensive didn’t quite go as well, and you also had a very aggressive Washington press corps, very aggressive *Wall Street Journal* editorial page.”³⁰

Anger didn’t play as well with the national reporters, either. Clinton would blow up at reporters at the drop of hat in Arkansas, then make up. In a perverse way, it was almost the flip side of charm—the reporters and the politicians at the state level are such an intimate group that people on both sides can show their feelings in an uninhibited way. However, Clinton soon discovered in Washington that his temper tantrums did not seem presidential, and that they were reported because every move he made was news.

Washington Post reporter John F. Harris wrote that Clinton's presidential honeymoon ended quickly, and the end was symbolized only a couple of days after the 1992 election when the president-elect yelled at a golf club manager for letting photographers shoot him while he was teeing up. Evidently Clinton didn't realize he had to adapt to being the nation's leader and always being in the public eye.³¹ His first press conferences, Harris wrote, were "an exercise in mutual incomprehension, setting the tone for the contentious relationship between president and press that was to follow." Clinton saw the big picture and pursued big goals while the reporters were focused on details; they saw him as someone whose every word had to be vetted.³²

Arkansas newspaperman Max Brantley recalled watching one of Clinton's temper tantrums captured on television. "There was a famous thing early in his term when he went out for a photo op in Washington or it may have been Baltimore or somewhere; it was a low-income neighborhood," Brantley said. "I can just remember the film. And it was supposed to be a photo op. Some aide had not set up something right. He just turned and just blistered the hell out of this aide, and it was of those cases: 'Whoa, Bill, there's a camera running every second up here.' When you're president, there's a camera on you every minute, a very, very unflattering portrait of him, but it was also an accurate portrait of him."³³

One of the most-repeated stories about his early anger at the Washington press corps was his overreaction to a question at the formal announcement of Ruth Bader Ginsburg's nomination to the Supreme Court, which he had made only after considering a couple of other high-profile figures like New York governor Mario Cuomo. Ginsburg gave a moving speech about her background, and Clinton was dismayed when the first press question afterward was about the "zigzag quality" of his decision-making process. He angrily scolded the press and stomped out of the event. Such temper tantrums were "a failure of presidential optics" to use John F. Harris's tight phrasing—they didn't look right.³⁴

In fact, they seemed not so much intimidating as ridiculous. Clinton once yelled at CBS's Bill Plante and another reporter for asking him about Travelgate.

"It was a Rose Garden event—I forget what it was—it was a summer day, and a group of us were standing up, waiting for him to appear, [saying to each other] 'Well, what shall we ask him today?' And I decided to ask him about . . . whether he was going to pay the legal costs of the people who they had fired from the White House Travel Office that were probably going to face a long legal proceeding, and he got livid," Plante said. "You know, 'Who's going to pay the cost of all of my people who have been called to testify?' And then the reporter from the *Washington Times* jumped in and said, 'Well, you said you were going to pay

legal costs. Are you?’ And he got even meaner. And about 30 minutes later, [George] Stephanopoulos . . . called me and said, ‘Could you meet me and the president?’ Took me out of the colonnade where I got an apology. Said, ‘I shouldn’t have gone off like that.’ I said, ‘Well, it’s all right. You’re the president, you can do whatever you want.’ But he didn’t apologize to the *Washington Times* guy, interestingly enough, who did the follow-up question.”³⁵

Plante, who has covered every president since Ronald Reagan, said the episode neither bothered nor surprised him. “I was more amused than anything else,” Plante said. “But I’ve been doing this a long time, and once he had had his temper tantrum, I knew the minute I picked up the phone and heard Stephanopoulos’s voice what it was going to be, but of course, I played along.”³⁶

The self-indulgent temper tantrums were one thing, but trying to stonewall the national press over Whitewater and other scandals was perhaps an even more serious mistake. The Clintons habitually delayed or declined to release some of their tax returns and other personal documents that might have given the press enough information for some stories that would have been embarrassing but then been forgotten. Instead, the press and the public became ever more suspicious that the Clintons had something to hide in a land deal that didn’t make any money for them. Carl Bernstein wrote in his Hillary biography that for a time it became a Washington parlor game to speculate what would have happened had the Clintons only made public the related documents.³⁷

Arkansas broadcast journalist Steve Barnes believed the Clintons’ stonewalling was a major mistake in handling the Washington press.

“How in the world they thought they could withhold all that stuff and shut down that inquiry is just bewildering to this day, how people supposedly as sophisticated as the Clintons made a miscalculation,” Barnes said.

He reflected and added, “I guess I came to believe that maybe we [had] not been as thorough with them as we could have or should have been, because I don’t ever remember them stonewalling [us] the way they did on those . . . Whitewater papers . . . and in circling the wagons the way they did against the advice of people that really knew the lay of the land up there.”³⁸

Carl Leubsdorf, *Dallas Morning News* Washington bureau chief, said the Clintons erroneously thought their controversies had been vetted in the press coverage of their various Arkansas campaigns.

“I don’t think they were ready for it in the ’92 campaign, because when certain subjects came up, they said, ‘Oh, it’s all been written about in Arkansas,’ and I think they had that attitude in the White House, too—you know, all this Whitewater stuff, they went, ‘It’s all been investigated,’ and to

some degree that was true,” Leubsdorf said, although he added that all candidates who have not run nationally are not prepared in general for the scrutiny of a presidential race. The national press, for example, will investigate stories about Barack Obama that the Illinois senator will consider old news, Leubsdorf said.³⁹

“It’s sort of part of the drill, but I think the Clintons were not prepared for it, which was interesting because Clinton was a reasonably sophisticated candidate the first time out,” Leubsdorf said. “Clinton knew a lot because he’d been studying it for years, and he’d been in and out of the national scene, and he’d had this in mind long enough so . . . they thought they were ready but . . . I think they were very surprised.”⁴⁰

Mike McCurry, an experienced Washington professional who knew the lay of the land, was hired in 1995 as press secretary after the administration had gone through a number of communication failures in its first years. When interviewed for this book, McCurry declined to speculate on whether the Clintons were ready for the D.C. press in 1992 because he was not part of the administration at that time, so he wasn’t sure what the nature of the relationship was between Clinton and the Arkansas press. But Clinton told McCurry the atmosphere in Arkansas was much more relaxed than that in Washington.⁴¹

“His point was it was a lot harder for even his hardest critics to write things about him that were unfair or untrue because people knew him personally,” McCurry said. “So a lot of the personal criticism, or what they refer to as ‘the politics of personal destruction’ didn’t work because it was a much more down-home environment. And then you get to Washington and the rules are somehow different because it’s just such a large, unwieldy place to do business. But truthfully, I don’t honestly know if that’s the way they arrived. I think they tried some things. I mean, if you ask them, they would say, look, we tried to reach out and establish relationships with the kingpins of the local, the national media in Washington, and we felt like that was not, our efforts at establishing some rapport were spurned. And I think there were two sides to that story.”⁴²

The press side is that the Clintons, rather than trying to establish rapport, came to Washington with a hostile attitude. According to investigative reporter and author Ronald Kessler, Clinton aide Bruce Lindsey told reporters after the 1992 election that, “You all have been asses ever since we started.” Lindsey said the reporters didn’t give Clinton enough privacy, and that the president-elect was contemplating ways to limit press access.⁴³ Interestingly, a journalist and longtime Clinton observer Joe Klein used a similar anatomical pejorative to describe how the Clintons themselves felt about the press. Klein told Bernstein that their basic assumption of all reporters is that they are “assholes”; the only difference is that Bill thinks he can “charm” them.⁴⁴

The attitude of the boss, or bosses in the case of the Clintons, runs downhill in any organization, including the White House. Aides pick up on the attitude and act accordingly. In case there was any doubt, Bill made his feelings plain in the first days of the Clinton administration. Jeffrey Birnbaum, who covered the White House at that time for the *Wall Street Journal*, wrote in his book on the administration that Clinton told his staff—ironically in a speech to them in the room where presidential press conferences were held—that the press was his least favorite group of all the ones in Washington that they had to deal with. Clinton warned everyone not to leak to the press, and from that moment, everyone on the staff knew they did not have to treat the press with respect. Birnbaum concluded that the speech made Myers's job more difficult.⁴⁵

Magazine reporter Walsh acknowledged that Myers was hamstrung by her lack of access to many important meetings and information but wrote that she was too inexperienced to be the White House press secretary. She had a flip-pant attitude and appeared to many reporters to be unhelpful. Myers, also, like most of the Clinton staff, carried a grudge against the press for the campaign coverage on Clinton's personal issues.⁴⁶

The choice of the relatively inexperienced Myers as press secretary and her assignment to a smaller office than was usual for press secretaries was an obvious sign of the administration's view of the importance of media relations. And as was detailed in an earlier chapter, the administration cut off reporters' access to the press secretary's office, which was interpreted as an act of war by many journalists, especially Helen Thomas, the dean of the White House press corps.

In essence, the Clintons just weren't ready for the D.C. press. Walsh pointed out that Bill didn't even understand how the White House press corps worked—basic things like how his cavalier attitude toward his schedule affected the reporters. Many journalists were upset that Clinton would jog, play golf, or eat out at any time without letting anyone know in advance. The White House reporters would leave work for the day only to be called back to cover some previously unmentioned event, and some began to think Clinton was doing it just to make their lives uncomfortable.⁴⁷ Two veteran Washington journalists, Mark Halperin of ABC and John F. Harris of the *Washington Post*, wrote that Clinton was like a naïve, rich tourist, just waiting to be mugged by the aggressive pack of newshounds in D.C.⁴⁸ Brummett, in his book about the first year of the Clinton presidency, described Clinton as a man who was indecisive, always trying to please everyone, and often reaching the right decision through a very messy process. Clinton, Brummett wrote, had once told him that much of the governor's job was something you learned by doing. Brummett concluded the presidency was the same way, at least in Clinton's case.⁴⁹ One of the things Clinton learned was that "he couldn't always perform

the presidency as a kind of governor in chief.”⁵⁰ Brummett was referring to Clinton’s negotiations with senators over tax policy, but it could be applied equally to negotiating press policy with journalists.

The negotiations would have been difficult for anyone, no matter how experienced with the press, because journalism was changing in terms of both content and technology just as Clinton was entering the national stage. Public officials could no longer expect the kind of “zone of privacy” that Hillary so famously declared she wanted; no detail of the candidate’s life was off limits. And if old-school mainstream journalists still respected some ethical boundaries, the new Internet virtual town criers, like Matt Drudge, did not. Old media reporters, because of the competitive pressures of new media writers like Drudge, increasingly abandoned their old standards, both in determining what made a story and in sourcing it.

Clinton also had the misfortune to run for national office at a time that reporters were becoming more aggressive and the country was becoming more politically polarized, said the *Los Angeles Times*’s Hamburger.

“The Washington press corps has always been pretty aggressive, but post-Watergate . . . there was a really aggressive effort at sort of investigative, even ‘gotcha’ reporting that I think caught Clinton in a way that they just weren’t prepared for,” Hamburger said. “You know, I keep thinking, and I’m haunted by that wonderful guy, Vince Foster, who I’d known. He was one of the *Gazette*’s lawyers in Little Rock and he was friends with people that I met, and I remember just thinking of him as such a sweet and smart guy. . . . And I think the people weren’t ready for the sort of vitriol that would be laid out on an editorial page and challenging motives.”⁵¹

The *Wall Street Journal* had criticized Foster, Clinton’s deputy counsel, and a number of other Clinton administration officials in a series of hard-hitting editorials in 1993. One piece even criticized Foster for not providing in a timely fashion a White House photograph for the paper to use and was illustrated instead with a large question mark where his picture would have been. Foster committed suicide about a month later; a note found in his briefcase stated that in Washington people were destroyed for sport.

Scandal stories like the Clintons’ Whitewater investment captivated journalists even though it wasn’t clear it should be such a huge story because the Clintons didn’t make any money on the investment, Hamburger said. “There was a generation of sort of Watergate babies who were coming into their own as reporters; every bureau, *New York Times*, *LA Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, were aggressive in their coverage of the White House, and really aggressive,” he said. “Maybe they were caught in some of that, and Clinton presented a target . . . that worked in this environment, too, because he was screwing around; he had his salacious side [so] there were things that may have surprised him.”⁵²

Hillary, too, was surprised by the coverage, although as first lady she had the luxury of pulling back from the spotlight, as she did after her failed effort to revise the country's health care system. "I hadn't had enough exposure to the national press corps to fully appreciate the extent to which the news media was a conduit for everything that happened on a campaign," Hillary wrote in her memoir when describing the 1992 campaign. She added that she since realized candidates and reporters need each other. "It's a tricky, delicate and important relationship, and I didn't fully understand it."⁵³

Brummett, in comparing Bill and Hillary, said she had the mind of a lawyer while he had the mind of a politician, and they didn't use the same skills in dealing with the press. Bill could see the political hazards in a situation while she could not. Brummett wrote that once he needed transportation to get to an event, and the Clintons wanted him to be there so it would get some publicity. Hillary suggested a state trooper drive the scribe; Bill nixed the idea because he realized it would be an inappropriate use of state funds. Brummett took a cab.⁵⁴

But Hillary was influential in Bill's attitudes toward the press, and not always in a way that was conducive to good media relations. Bill once sent Brummett a note saying that Hillary understood journalists like him much better than Bill himself did. Hillary, the note said, thought Brummett admired and looked up to Bill so much that he held him to a higher standard than that of others. Brummett believed Hillary's opinion demonstrated "a basic lack of understanding of the press." At the time, Brummett had to write six political columns a week, and since Clinton was the governor, he would be subject to a lot of them, and they couldn't all be positive.⁵⁵

Hillary, ever the warrior, took awhile to grasp the futility of fighting directly with ink slingers. Bernstein described how Hillary, against the advice of her press aides, ordered an attack plan on the *Washington Post* when she felt it was unfairly covering the Whitewater investigation by special prosecutor Kenneth Starr. Hillary wanted to document all the mistakes the *Post* had made and then get a journalism review to do an article about them. After about 10 days of research, her aides were able to convince her it wouldn't work, and that most of the things she was angry about were tone, headlines, and similar things rather than fact errors.⁵⁶

Helen Thomas said such hostility toward the press was formed by the Clintons watching the attacks on each other. "Well, I think that when you're a married couple, you're always very defensive, obviously," Thomas said. "I mean, pick up the newspaper and read something about your husband or your wife, you obviously get irritated. I mean, Ronald Reagan did, and he was outraged about anything that was written about Nancy Reagan and so forth, so I think it's very human, and I think that they were both on the same page in

terms of the press when they came into power in the White House, because they felt that they had been given a raw deal by the press. So they really had big chips on their shoulders when they came into the White House against the press.”⁵⁷

They didn’t like the national press, but they thought they could handle it, particularly since they ultimately survived everything that had been thrown at them in the 1992 campaign. But as Fournier said: “The difference between Lansing and D.C. or the difference between covering a state capital and covering D.C., it really is night and day. So every president runs into a bit of culture shock.”⁵⁸

And the press is a significant, permanent part of the D.C. culture. While the presidents are limited by law to eight years, the journalists are not, and many of them have seen the presidents come and go like football coaches in New York.

“It’s very institutional,” Fournier said. “You’re the fourth or fifth president Helen Thomas has seen. She’s the press. . . . That’s Helen’s briefing more than any other [person’s]. You’re just bowing into four years. You know, some presidents don’t understand that, although more probably, the staffs don’t get it. Actually Clinton understood the national press corps better than staff. He was ill-served by staff in my opinion. The Clintons, especially Bill Clinton, had a better sense, a better intent on how to deal with reporters than their staff did. You know, you had a bunch of 25-year-old kids or 30-year-old kids who thought . . . they had gotten Clinton elected and they were going to take over the White House, but they did so by shutting off access to people like Helen Thomas. Well, you know, that was declaring war. That wasn’t Clinton’s decision. He had nothing to do with that.”⁵⁹

Still, Clinton was the man in charge and should bear some responsibility for the mistakes of the people under his command. Max Brantley said everyone—press and politicians—learned something from the Clintons’ experience.

“As smart as they are, I don’t think they fully anticipated how bright the light shined in the Washington circle, and that there is a video camera running every second, and that there is somebody out there to torpedo every single thing you say,” Brantley said. “And I think Bill still went up there with some of the belief that he could kind of sweet talk his way out of just about anything. And pretty quickly, I mean there are entrenched forces there that—that’s just not going to happen.”

Clinton’s one statewide defeat for office had been a fluke brought on by inexperience and hubris, Brantley said. (Clinton’s other campaign loss had been a moral victory because he had almost upset an incumbent in a safe Republican congressional district.) Arkansas was basically a one-party state during

Clinton's career, so he didn't have the experience of electoral combat against the kind of strong opposition he would face as president.

"So they had a lesson to learn," Brantley said. "I mean we all did. It's probably trite to say, but all of us learned lessons—the press here who thought we were good, learned we were pretty inadequate, the people here who thought the national press were at another level, also learned that they were as mortal as the rest of us and made mistakes as bad as we made and were as easily manipulated as we were—that there's no limit beyond which a reporter won't go to pry into somebody's personal life. I mean people in Little Rock got exposed, not just to the Washington press corps—that would have been easy—but I mean the British tabloid press; it was an eye-opener, and people passing out big money for stories, it was—until you're in it, you just can't imagine. I was stunned as just sort of an innocent bystander."⁶⁰

At one time the Clintons may have been stunned political innocents in the ways of the national media, but that time is gone. They have a wealth of experience to apply to the 2008 campaign or any other future political endeavor.

NOTES

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3. Fournier, interview, 26 January 2007.

4. Marvin Kalb, "The Press and Presidential Campaigning: President Bill Clinton," *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 1.1 (Winter 1996): 3–6.

5. Bill Plante, telephone interview by author, tape recording, 20 February 2007.

6. Fournier, interview, 26 January 2007.

7. Fournier, interview, 26 January 2007.

8. Fournier, interview, 26 January 2007.

9. Fournier, interview, 26 January 2007.

10. Fournier, interview, 26 January 2007. "Whitewater" has become a catchall word for the Clintons' various scandals. Fournier here is referring to the Clintons' partnership with Jim McDougal in a project that was supposed to make money by developing a piece of land on the White River into retirement and vacation homes. Ultimately, the Clintons lost money on the project.

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12. Bob Steel, interview by author, Little Rock, Arkansas, tape recording, 4 January 2007.

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15. Rex Nelson, telephone interview by author, tape recording, 22 January 2007.

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23. Dennis Byrd, interview by author, Little Rock, Arkansas, tape recording, 5 January 2007.
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32. Harris, *The Survivor*, 8.
33. Max Brantley, interview by author, Little Rock, Arkansas, tape recording, 4 January 2007.
34. Harris, *The Survivor*, 62.
35. Plante, interview, 20 February 2007. The *Washington Times* is an unabashedly conservative newspaper and a harsh Clinton critic.
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39. Carl Leubsdorf, telephone interview by author, tape recording, 15 February 2007.
40. Leubsdorf, interview, 15 February 2007.
41. Mike McCurry, interview by author, tape recording, 27 February 2007.
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45. Jeffrey H. Birnbaum, *Madhouse: The Private Turmoil of Working for the President* (New York: Times Books, 1996), 159.
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52. Hamburger, interview, 30 January 2007.
53. Hillary Clinton, *Living History*.
54. Brummett, *Highwire*, 51–52.
55. Brummett, *Highwire*, 23.
56. Bernstein, *A Woman in Charge*, 458.
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Get Used to It

Hillary Clinton appeared to be so uncomfortable around the press when she was first lady that one Washington reporter thought she would never run for office.

Kathy Kiely, who covered the Clintons in both Arkansas and Washington, said Hillary seemed particularly uncomfortable compared to her husband. “Bill Clinton is much more of what you’d call a natural,” Kiely said. “I mean, he always struck me as somebody who was kind of a pro when it came to the press. He . . . would talk to reporters no matter what they wrote about him, and he never visibly held a grudge.” Hillary, on the other hand, seemed to “harbor resentment about things that had been written in the paper.”¹

In 1998, Kiely was covering, or trying to cover, Hillary while she was touring historical sites as part of her first lady project to preserve them in the millennium.

“She traveled all through places in New York, and then she also dipped into western Massachusetts; she went to Edith Wharton’s home [and] the reception was phenomenal . . . everywhere. There was a lot of, ‘You go, girl’ feeling in the crowd, and so anyway, it was a very warm kind of a trip,” said Kiely, who at that time was working for the New York *Daily News*. “It was a very non-threatening subject—she was getting wonderful crowds. The press corps traveling with her were mostly women of . . . roughly her age, and so if ever there were a time when you would think somebody would feel relaxed about talking to the media, it would be then. Well, the thing went on for maybe three or four days and every, twice a day, I swear, her press secretary was promising us, ‘Now, she’s going to sit down with you now,’ you know, ‘She’ll—yeah, it’s going to be this afternoon. I’ve carved out some time.’ And every time, something would happen and she wouldn’t sit down with us. In

other words, not that anything really happened, she just, I could tell the press secretary was having a hell of a time getting her to sit down with the press.”

Finally, at a lunch on the last day of the trip, Hillary agreed to meet with the half dozen or so reporters. They made a space for her at their table. They cleared the use of tape recorders with Hillary’s press aides.

“So Mrs. Clinton finally comes, she sits down with us, and the first person pulls out a tape recorder, she jumps up as though a bee had stung her and said, ‘Oh, I have to go see someone on the other side of the room, I’ll be right back.’ She never showed up. And the only thing that happened—our closest encounter with her—was we all lined up and had our picture made with her, but we never got to ask her any questions, and it was just hilarious, you know,” Kiely said. “And so of course, after an experience like that, when she was starting to think about running for the Senate, and I thought, oh, she’ll never do it, you know, because this woman, she can’t bring herself to have any of the normal kind of relations with the press that you would have to have as a politician.”²

But after that tour of upstate New York, Hillary not only entered the race, she won it decisively over Congressman Rick Lazio with 55 percent of the vote, and in 2006 won a landslide 67 percent in her reelection bid against former Yonkers mayor John Spencer. In her trademark fashion, Hillary studied the problem—how to deal with the press—and improved dramatically. She’s no Bill Clinton, but she’s no longer the stone-faced lawyer she was before she ran for the Senate. With his help and her own hard work, she turned herself into a formidable candidate for the presidency.

Dallas Morning News Washington bureau chief Carl Leubsdorf noted the contrast between Hillary as first lady and Hillary as presidential candidate in one of her early campaign swings through Iowa in 2007. “You always had the impression early on that Hillary was sort of anti-press and didn’t like to schmooze and didn’t like to—didn’t happen to understand that certain things had to be put out,” Leubsdorf said. “Now she seems in some ways very different as a candidate, you know, since she’s become a public official, and let’s face it, she was not an elected official in those (White House) days. She certainly seems to talk to the press a lot. I was struck by the fact that on her first trip to Iowa, in addition to a couple of open forums and one meeting with . . . top Democrats, she made time for a session with Dave Yepsen, the political columnist of the *Des Moines Register* and the most influential journalist in the state, so they don’t miss a bet. The coverage in states interestingly, in Iowa and New Hampshire, I thought, was more favorable and more friendly than the coverage of national organizations.”³

Hillary has even, to some extent, tried to make friends with members of the “vast right-wing conspiracy.” Rupert Murdoch, who owns the *New York*

Post—a paper that fought especially hard against her during her 2000 Senate campaign—as well as FOX News, stunned many observers by hosting a fundraiser for her 2006 Senate campaign, although he did not endorse her presidential candidacy.

“If Murdoch is sort of hosting a fundraiser for her Senate campaign . . . that’s a huge sort of recognition on both their parts, well, there’s something you can do for me and something I can do for you,” said *Houston Chronicle* columnist Cragg Hines. “And it sort of mirrors to some extent—not that it will carry over into the presidential race—but it mirrors to some extent what Murdoch did with Labor and [former British prime minister Tony] Blair, new Labor and Blair in the UK, because of course, [Murdoch’s] son was, of course, the harshest critic sometimes of old Labor. But even the *Times* [of London] came around the last couple of campaigns.”⁴

Longtime White House correspondent Helen Thomas said she thought Hillary would do a good job handling the press on the presidential campaign. Hillary has learned to be diplomatic and “dodge the bullets” that come rapidly at the candidates, Thomas said.⁵

“She had to amend her hostilities when she ran for Senate, and I mean, I admire her very much, I think she’s brilliant and a terrific speaker and so forth, but there is no question that the handlers told her to smile,” Thomas said. “I mean, politicians have to act like they like people, and eventually they will, because the response is always great. When you like people, people like you. So I think that she learned a big lesson about personality exchanges and so forth. Very different person as senator, and to win the Senate, she went all out and she was able to transform herself, in my opinion.”⁶

The transformation has not made her a “schmooser”—the kind of senator who will talk at the drop of the hat. Kiely said some senators, like Lindsey Graham, Richard Shelby, and Mark Pryor, are always willing to chat. But others, like former New Jersey senator and presidential candidate Bill Bradley, are less talkative. Hillary falls into the Bill Bradley category, Kiely said, but that does not mean she is unapproachable.

“She’s not like every other senator, she’s not the kind of person who’s going to talk, stop and schmooze, and she does have kind of a built-in—what’s the word I want?—bubble, because she has security as a former first lady,” Kiely said. “But you know, it’s never obtrusive, and you can still walk up to her. It’s not quite as easygoing as it would be with another less celebrated member of the Senate, but it’s easy to talk to her, and she’s gotten, I would say, a lot more comfortable, and I think a lot more of a pro. I think part of being a good politician is having a thick skin and not taking things too personally, and being willing to turn the other cheek a lot of times if you’re not happy with your press coverage, you know. . . . I don’t know what [Bill] was

like early in his career as a politician because that was before my time—but certainly throughout the entire time I’ve covered him, he’s shown an ability to be a real pro. But my gut tells me that that just comes a lot more naturally to him than it does to her, because of the differences in their personalities. But you know, I would say she’s come a long way.”⁷

Kiely, like many other reporters, said that Hillary’s personality is more attractive over the long haul and in one-on-one situations than Bill’s is. Hillary’s staff is extraordinarily loyal with low turnover, which Kiely takes as a sign of how good she is in personal relations.

“She’s better in an intimate setting than she is in a very public setting, and that’s always going to be a challenge, you know,” Kiely said. “There are politicians like that. You know, people said that about Al Gore, ‘Gee, he’s a great guy, you know, if you get to know him.’ And so the challenge for her is to make whatever it is, whatever magic it is that keeps those people working for her—she’s going to have to figure out a way to express that in a wider arena, and if she can’t, I think she’s not going to succeed.”⁸

Former Clinton White House press secretary Mike McCurry also said it’s difficult to convey that sense of personality through the press. “Everyone says about her, which is true, is that she has such an easygoing manner in private that that would be something [if] she could effectively find a way to get some of that captured and out in front of the American public, it would be a very good thing,” McCurry said. “I think most people who know her and interact with her in that kind of setting agree that the more that the American public could see of her kind of informal and kind of self-deprecating style, that that would be quite effective. And the problem is it’s hard to convey that through mass media.”⁹

But in what at least one conservative website suggested was a sign of the apocalypse, the dour-looking Hillary started to convey a sense of humor in the summer of 2007. In an article headlined “Hillary Made Me Laugh, End Times Surely Nigh,” Mary Katherine Ham wrote that the “woman who comes across as warm as flounder skin” actually made her laugh with her self-deprecating humor in a couple of her YouTube videos.¹⁰ The videos, which featured Hillary’s promotion to let Web surfers choose her campaign song, poked fun at herself by including a promise not to sing the song herself—a reference to a much-played ambush video that caught a pathetically out-of-tune Hillary howling the national anthem at a rally earlier in the year.

Hillary followed up those videos with a spoof of the last scene of the series finale of *The Sopranos* television show, one of the most talked about entertainment events of that summer. The last scene of the finale showed crime family boss Tony Soprano meeting his family in a restaurant. Tony sat down at a table and watched his various family members and a succession of men-

acing characters enter the restaurant, the tension mounting as *Sopranos* fans waited to see whether Tony would be “whacked.” Instead, the show ended with a startling blank screen, leaving the viewers—many after checking their cable connection in disbelief—to try to figure out what it meant.

In a role reversal that neatly encapsulated the changing relationship of the Clintons, Hillary played the head of the family in the spoof while Bill passively sat by like Tony’s wife. Comparing the Clintons to a fictional crime family might at first glance seem to be an unfortunate choice of image for a presidential contender, but many viewers, including Ham, took it for the joke it was intended to be. Ham noted that, once again—unfortunately for conservatives like her—it showed a “hip” side of Hillary and suggested the Clintons are as much a part of American culture as the extraordinarily popular TV show.¹¹

Her website got more than 500,000 hits the day the *Sopranos* spoof aired. By comparison, an Obama YouTube video drew about 510,000 hits in a week, and a six-year-old girl singing on the popular *American Idol* show drew about 640,000 hits in a week.¹²

Midway through the primary campaign in 2008, Hillary again turned to humor to help her stop Obama’s momentum. Before the crucial Texas and Ohio primaries, she appeared in a “Saturday Night Live” skit and was interviewed on Jon Stewart’s satirical news program, “The Daily Show,” on the Comedy Central channel. Her self-deprecating humor made her seem genuine and sympathetic, and the venues appealed to youthful voters, something she needed because in Obama she faced an opponent more than a dozen years her junior. *Time*’s Joe Klein suggested that the appearances “might have changed the zeitgeist.”¹³

Hillary has also been in tune with the zeitgeist through her use of the Internet, which garnered praise from political observers. Hillary announced her candidacy on the Web, and did so at a time that distracted from the excitement over the beginning of Barack Obama’s campaign. Hillary’s announcement made her campaign look modern compared to the old style of candidates announcing in front of a crowd at their home, or, as Bill Clinton did, in front of the historic Old Statehouse in Little Rock.

“I think a lot of these announcements, the old-fashioned announcements, in retrospect, almost look like they’re in daguerreotypes,” said *Dallas Morning News* senior political writer Wayne Slater.¹⁴

Hillary even took a webpage from the playbook of Matt Drudge, whose *Drudge Report* website broke a number of major scandal stories during Bill’s presidency and is generally considered part of the “right-wing conspiracy.” But Drudge’s report sets the gold standard for Web influence, and Hillary’s campaign set up its own version with *HillaryHub.com*, a news aggregator site

similar to Drudge's. *HillaryHub.com*, of course, carries news with a positive spin about Hillary. Columnist Ben Smith noted that the website is part of a trend started by corporate America to control news and go around the mainstream media.¹⁵

Politicians still can't completely disregard the mainstream media, and they therefore must rely on some standard tactics in dealing with reporters. One of these tactics is to appear to answer journalists' questions without taking positions that are too controversial, or else be able to appear to offer a little something to everyone. Bill Clinton was so notorious for his slippery ability to avoid answering questions that he earned the nickname "Slick Willie." After watching Hillary's performance at a candidate forum held before a government employees' union, Associated Press reporter Ron Fournier wrote that she might earn the title of "Slick Hillary." Hillary easily swatted down questions from moderator Chris Matthews at an American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees union event. For example, in response to a question about whether President Bush should pardon convicted perjurer Scooter Libby, a former White House aide, she said there was enough talk about it without her adding to the discussion. "[Bill] had a knack for convincing people on both sides of an issue that he agreed with them," Fournier wrote. "His wife may not be as smooth, but Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton is doing a passable impression of the ever-parsing president."¹⁶

It really shouldn't be surprising that Hillary has mastered these techniques. She has been watching Bill for more than 30 years and has been an elected politician herself for approaching 10 years. She's not a natural politician, but she's a natural student. "She's learned a lot over the years, and she's learned from the master," said Leubsdorf.¹⁷

From watching Bill, Hillary has learned the importance of schmoozing and answering questions like a politician. She's also learned how badly the press can hurt you. That lesson may have led her to structure her press relations more like George W. Bush's than her husband's. Her ability to maintain message discipline, control her own staff, and restrict access to the mainstream national press are all similar to the tactics of the man who replaced her husband in the Oval Office. Hillary also has Bush's ability to charm one-on-one, but, like Bush and unlike Bill, she doesn't have the compulsion to sweet talk reporters into liking her, nor does she have the belief that sweet talking necessarily results in better coverage.

Slater, who has covered Bush since he was governor of Texas, said Hillary's message discipline is very similar to that of the 43rd president. "The Hillary Clinton operation reminds me very much of the early George Bush operation in the sense that they were somewhat wary, they were skilled, they were professional, but they were somewhat wary of the media, and clearly es-

established a message discipline that you didn't vary from," Slater said. "Bill Clinton is just open. You get a sense half the time he's sort of operating, sometimes he's operating on the fly almost, and instinctively. I never get a sense that Hillary Clinton's public—anything she's doing, is instinctive. I always get the sense that it's carefully calculating."¹⁸

The Hillary campaign's message will be tightly managed in the way that Bush's closest press adviser, Karen Hughes, ran his early political campaigns, including the 2000 presidential race, Slater said.

"You're going to see the Hillary Clinton operation very much like George Bush and Karl Rove, who do not deviate from whatever the message of the day or the theme of the week [is]," Slater said. "You're not going to see anybody—well, anybody who goes out there and freelances with some comments that aren't cleared internally is gone. That's what happened in the Bush administration. That's what's going to happen in this administration."¹⁹

Hines also noted the similarity between Hillary and Bush on message discipline. "She's Karen Hughes's twin sister," he said. Hines thought Hillary would continue the pattern of control that she demonstrated when she tried to influence the coverage of Bill as governor and later as president by telling people what to say to reporters, or to not say anything at all.

"And you don't teach an old dog new tricks," Hines said. "It has absolutely continued. And I think she has people around her now, Howard Wolfson, for instance, who [are] very good at sort of message control, and they will adapt it as necessary." All politicians try to control coverage about them to some extent, he said. "Some are better at it, more practiced at it, and some actually believe in the fundamental principle of controlling the message and the media," he said. "And I believe she's one of them."²⁰

McCurry agreed that in terms of message discipline, Hillary's operation would be more like Bush's. "I think that her political operation now as senator and even when she was first lady was much more disciplined and much better at kind of keeping the sausage-making from spilling over into print," McCurry said. "And I think she, I mean, she prizes people who kind of like stay focused on the things that need to be articulated and don't rush off to brief the press on how smart they were to have recommended this policy or that policy. We had a little more of a chaotic, turbulent environment in the Clinton White House just because there were so many people who were adept at dealing with the press. I think we got better at that as time went on, but a little less of the freewheeling style, I think, helps concentrate your ability to deliver a message when you're being scattered across an audience that's being pulled in so many multiple directions because of the different sources of information that are now available. I think the struggle is to be coherent at a time in which there's really no easy way to reach mass audiences. You know,

we're not gathering around Walter Cronkite's campfire every night to hear 'That's the way it is,' and we don't have just a few very large and influential institutions within the media that set the standard for everybody else the way we did 20 years ago. And I think that requires a little more discipline, and that it also requires a little more creativity in how you get your message out."²¹

One of the ways to control the message is to control who it goes to—what medium that the White House chooses to contact when officials want to release certain stories.

"One of the things that I suspect Mrs. Clinton will do that this current White House has done effectively is to target select audiences and find channels of communication that are appropriate for those audiences," McCurry said. "I think George Bush has done a lot more select interviews and targeted communications than is commonly realized. We woke up to that fact, by the way, pretty late in the game during the John Kerry campaign in 2004. They were doing underneath the standard campaign, you know, most campaigns deal day in and day out with the national press corps covering the campaign, but they were simultaneously doing an awful lot of stuff with regional media, specialty publications, you know, hobby newsletters and things like that that were designed to match what some of their political imperatives were."²²

In addition to controlling what comes from her press staff, Hillary has enormous self-discipline that reminds observers more of the laconic Bush than the loquacious Bill, who is known for giving overly long answers, almost as if he is playing games with the questioner. Bush, on the other, will simply not answer the question, "bridging" to the message of the day—briefly acknowledging the question but then talking about the subject he wants to discuss. In that sense, Fournier's example of Hillary speaking to the government association was more like a Bush speech than a Bill speech.

The self-discipline as reflected in caution during interviews and speeches is as much a function of personality as anything else. It's interesting to note that both Bush and Hillary are early-to-bed types, who are disciplined in their personal habits, at least compared to Bill, who is legendary for all-nighters and impulsive behavior.

"Everybody's personality has strong points and weak points," Kiely said. "I mean, I think Clinton at his worst could just kind of ramble on, because he's very exuberant. He's a very exuberant speaker, and so he could get caught up on some riff and then get lost in it and gas on forever. And we can all think of examples of that, but Hillary is not—that will never happen to Hillary, but at the same time, she lacks his exuberance. You know, it's like when he's good, he's awesome, and she's never going to reach those heights, but she'll never be as awful a bloviator as he can be at his worst."²³

Oddly enough, the extreme care Hillary exercises in her speeches and interviews may make her susceptible to Hillisms in the same way Bush has become notorious for Bushisms. Speakers who overanalyze what they are going to say before they say it tend to get nervous and garble their sentences. Speakers who stick rigidly to a written script, instead of speaking spontaneously, run the risk of misreading it or sounding like a robot. Bush was not particularly known for misspeaking when he was a public figure in Texas as a baseball team owner or governor. When he moved to the national scene and used more prepared texts, and every word was analyzed and recorded by the media, he gained a reputation for misspeaking.²⁴ What was a minor quirk on the regional level became magnified to become a source of endless material for comedians, calendars, and quote books.

Hillary is likely to suffer a similar fate in kind if not in degree. She doesn't tend to make outrageous word slips like Bush's "Is our children learning?" But she has a tendency to make inappropriate (and unfunny) jokes, like saying Mahatma Gandhi used to run a gas station in St. Louis, or overly mean campaign rhetoric, like saying someone can't be a Republican and a Christian. At least two humor books of Hillary quotes were published before she even announced she was running for president.²⁵ She already had a swipe of the media's broad brush stroke when she tried to crack a joke when someone at a campaign event in Iowa asked what in her background would allow her to handle evil men like Osama bin Laden. Hillary repeated the question so the audience could hear, but her raised eyebrows, nod, and sarcastic tone when she said, "What in my background equips me to deal with evil and bad men?" brought down the house. Reporters interviewed audience members, and some thought she was referring to Bill, while others thought it was Bush, former Republican house speaker Newt Gingrich, or Whitewater prosecutor Kenneth Starr. Reporters jumped on the issue at a press conference later in the day. Hillary said she was thinking of "bad actors" and "our leadership the last six years." She emphatically denied she was thinking of Bill.

But in the case of Bushisms or Hillisms, the media can make them to be whatever they want. The conservative *New York Post* suggested the joke was on Bill; the liberal *Newsday* left it as a mystery that the reader would have to decide.²⁶

Slater thought it was a "gotcha" by the press. "To be honest with you, I felt sorry for her," Slater said. "Here she was—now I know I'm probably reading this different than other reporters, but what I felt was, she was trying to loosen up a little bit and say something, and although she said later, that wasn't what she was saying—you know, there wasn't that kind of resonance about her husband—that was exactly the point that she was making in a funny way.

Then she goes right out and the press starts, we start quizzing her about it, you know, and she goes, ‘Well, wait a minute, you know, you want me to lighten up.’ I think what that tells me, though, is she’s not very good at this, that . . . there are some people who don’t do light very well, and I think that’s her. But I feel sorry for her because it’s the kind of thing that in a sense we’re asking these candidates to do, ‘Come on, lighten up sometimes, just kid about,’ but in the moment they do, then we jump on them.”²⁷

The press will be all over Hillary because she is not only a candidate for the presidency but arguably the most unusual (a key definition of news) candidate we’ve ever had. For such a candidate, a joke is no longer just a joke. For example, the press examined the *Sopranos* spoof with the intensity of *Sopranos* zealots analyzing the last episode of the *Sopranos*. One story even used a body language expert to opine that Hillary must have filmed the bit under duress because of the way she carried herself in the video.²⁸

Gregg Birnbaum, a *New York Post* journalist who covered Hillary, started a website called *JustHillary.com*. The “About the Site” page on *JustHillary.com* describes the site as a private venture independent of the *Post* that provides “the most comprehensive and up-to-date” information on Hillary and her 2008 campaign. Incredibly, *JustHillary.com* links to about 35 other Hillary sites of varying quality, and from both ends of the political spectrum. Truly, there is no place for Hillary to hide and nothing about her that won’t be scrutinized.

But if any candidate could survive that scrutiny, it would be Hillary, who lived through the most embarrassing presidential scandal of the information saturation age, and has demonstrated the toughness and adaptability to handle the current media system.

In fact, Hillary may be the most media-experienced presidential candidate the American public has seen since Franklin Roosevelt. She was an active campaigner, she was an active adviser (if many times behind the scenes), she was a warrior when she had to be, and she was always, always in the media’s eye. Unless the two-term limit rule for presidents is repealed (or another activist presidential spouse runs for office), no presidential candidate will ever have the type of intense media coverage that Hillary experienced—eight years in the White House fish bowl. She was attacked, vilified, and humiliated throughout Bill’s campaigns and administration, which might not have felt good but was certainly priceless training for a campaign of her own.

Given her additional experience working on Bill’s Arkansas political career, it’s hard to imagine a situation she will face that she hasn’t already seen. Ron Fournier, who covered the Clintons in both Arkansas and Washington, said an episode at one of Hillary’s debates in her 2000 Senate campaign reminded him of the 1990 gubernatorial campaign in Little Rock. Her Repub-

lican opponent in 2000, Congressman Rick Lazio, walked aggressively toward her during one of the debates, insisting she sign right there on the stage an agreement pledging to reject unregulated or “soft money” campaign contributions. “It was the same kind of move she made on McRae,” Fournier said, recalling the Tom McRae press conference that Hillary seized to chastise Bill’s most dangerous opponent for the Democratic nomination for governor in 1990.²⁹ Hillary had flustered McRae, making him appear weak and thwarting his campaign’s momentum. In 2000, the roles were reversed, but Hillary calmly stood her ground during the in-your-face attack. She ended up looking strong while Lazio looked like a bully.

In her life in politics, Hillary has been the bully, and, more often, has faced the bullying coverage of a media-saturated society. That bullying/bullied experience appears to now be a job requirement for president. Every winning presidential candidate since 1996—the first election held since the Internet became widely used by the general public—has been more media savvy than his opponent. In 1996, Clinton, who had already been the media’s piñata in 1992, easily defeated Bob Dole, a career senator from the World War II generation used to its friendlier, almost clubby relationship with the Washington press. Granted, Dole had run for vice president in 1976, and was a serious contender in the 1988 primaries, but those elections were like the Pleistocene era in media terms when compared to 1996. The 2000 race featured two candidates equally knowledgeable about the media and the White House. Bush had been a surrogate campaigner for his father’s various races since he was a kid and was a trusted adviser when the elder Bush was president. He had watched with dismay as his father’s 1992 campaign fell apart by “running into a ninety-mile-an-hour media headwind.”³⁰ Al Gore had been through the Clinton scandal wars as vice president. Gore had even been a reporter himself for a while, but he wasn’t able to cultivate the campaign reporters, many of whom didn’t like him. Bush, on the other hand, knew how important it was to schmooze reporters and acted accordingly. In a close race like the 2000 battle, press relations proved a decisive factor. In 2004 the experienced Bush bested John Kerry, another longtime senator, who demonstrated a Dole-like obtuseness in his dealings with the press.

When commenting on the 2008 campaign, many pundits have noted that if Hillary wins the nomination, a Bush or a Clinton would have been on at least one of the major party tickets as president or vice president in every election for almost 30 years. People who cite that fact often argue that because Americans rejected royalty when they rebelled against Great Britain in 1776, they will likewise rebel against a Hillary candidacy that would confirm a twenty-first-century monarchy. That argument ignores the fact that Americans not so long ago elected one man to four terms—dying in office was the only thing

that prevented FDR from serving as long as Bill Clinton and George W. Bush combined. And FDR's elections weren't even close races. Given FDR's ambitions and his efforts to stack the U.S. Supreme Court to accrue even more power for himself, who knows how long he would have held onto the presidency if his health permitted, or what efforts he might have made for his familial electoral succession of a son or wife?

The royalty issue is largely a parlor game of interest to the pundits and political scientists. The American electorate in 2008 will make its choice, as it almost always does, based on the future, not the past. If anything, being part of an American political dynasty is a help, not a hindrance. In the twenty-first century, presidential candidates need the type of name recognition that can come with being part of political royalty in order to cut through the information saturation to shake voters' attention away from the bread and circuses of celebrity gossip. The days are gone when a relatively obscure governor like a Jimmy Carter, or even a Bill Clinton, could gain the White House without first undergoing the national media hazing that comes with living in the White House or going through a presidential campaign. Tom Vilsack, the popular governor of Iowa, dropped out of the race almost before it started, and Bill Richardson, governor of New Mexico and secretary of energy under Bill Clinton, languished toward the bottom of the Democratic contenders in the summer of 2007. The people who got 24/7 news coverage in 2007 were not Vilsack or Richardson but celebrities like Anna Nicole Smith, the centerfold who had married an elderly billionaire, was widowed, then died herself of a drug overdose, leaving a number of suitors to fight over the paternity and fortune of her infant daughter, and Paris Hilton, a hotel heiress who was briefly sent to jail for violating her probation on a traffic offense. Political parties in this media environment are increasingly turning to actors and athletes for instant candidates. Such celebrities can jumpstart campaigns with immediate name recognition among a jaded population. In 2007, Fred Thompson, more famous for being an actor on a television crime drama than his brief U.S. Senate career, moved to the top tier of Republican contenders simply by saying he was considering running for president. Thompson's campaign imploded rather quickly, but his failure was due to lackluster effort on his part to build on the early momentum generated by his celebrity.

Hillary's association with Bill and the tabloid turmoils of their marriage—similar to the high jinks of the real royalty in Great Britain—make them the ideal candidate couple for the information saturation age. Bill and Hillary are often described as “rock stars” for their ability to generate attention and enthusiasm, at least among the Democratic base. Whether she is a rock star or royalty, Hillary's fame, linked to Bill's, is one of her main media assets.

The other main asset is her experience in dealing with the saturation coverage that accompanies such fame. Since the dawn of the Internet age, presidential contenders must be able to generate enough attention to cut through the noise yet still have the toughness born of experience to survive the intense beatdown the media administers to all who would be president.

The Clintons' experience with the media has certainly taught them how to handle journalists, but it doesn't mean they like reporters or the institution they represent. The left traditionally prides itself as a champion of free speech rights. The Clintons, as part of the Vietnam War protest movement, were indisputably aligned with the philosophy of using free speech to fight against government and societal policies with which they disagreed. Bill Clinton, as was mentioned earlier, told one journalist that he and his fellow Democrats thought the press was on their side because of its coverage of the progressive causes of the 1960s.

But human nature being what it is, that philosophy changes in a hurry when a person becomes the subject of newspaper stories rather than an enthusiastic reader of them. A look at Clinton's presidential library in Little Rock in early 2007 gives a solid indication of the couple's current attitudes toward the press. The small display about Bill's impeachment essentially blames the media for causing it. According to the library display, the rise of 24-hour television news networks and a blurring of tabloid and mainstream news media created a climate ripe for character assassination, and the Internet allowed "rumors" to spread quickly. The impression left by a visit to the library is that the media was a creator of scandal rather than a seeker of truth.

In an upstairs display of artifacts related to the first lady and the White House, a DVD entitled *A Time to Laugh: The Clintons' Humor* played constantly. The DVD, which was for sale in the Clinton museum gift shop, illustrates, according to the DVD case, how the Clintons "brought good humor to nearly every challenging day" in the White House. One of the challenges, of course, was the press. In one skit that was done for the Gridiron Club dinner in 1995, Hillary spoofed Forrest Gump, the slow-witted character of the popular movie released the previous year. In satirizing the scene in which Gump sits on a bench and compares life to a box of chocolates, Hillary compares the reporters to a box of chocolates, saying "too many of 'em will kill you, but the sweet ones are awful nice."³¹ Of course, the skit was a joke. But humor can be revealing, and in the case of the DVD illustrates the more serious animosity referenced in the displays downstairs in the library. There are too many reporters covering the White House in the information saturation age, and although there are some good ones, the coverage can kill you if you aren't careful.

Hillary's puckish acting ability in skits, whether for the various White House journalists' dinners or campaign videos, is surprisingly good for a woman who has had to fight an often too-serious public image. But the self-effacing humor displayed on the *Sopranos* spoof, and the more accommodating attitude toward reporters she has displayed as senator, might not indicate a true change of core beliefs.

Has Hillary gotten better at handling the press?

"Well, I think that's an interesting question in that has she gotten easier around the media in sort of a bedrock way, or has she learned how to appear to be able to be easier in terms of media relations?" Hines said. "I think those are two different questions. You know, it's a question of appearance over a question of sort of basic instincts. . . . We don't know, do we?"³²

We do know something about the Clintons' past, however. The Clintons both had good relations one-on-one with journalists in Arkansas, although Hillary had much less contact with the press than Bill. Those relations soured beginning with the intense coverage of the first presidential campaign, turned into a bunker mentality for much of the presidency, and culminated in the acid, though brief, description of the press in the presidential library. The White House record is clear that the administration, often at the direction of Hillary, was reluctant to release information to the press.

The record in Arkansas is also poor on Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) issues. Meredith Oakley wrote that Clinton as governor "had earned a well-deserved reputation for paying lip service to open government." Several important public boards and commissions ignored open meetings and records laws under the advice of Clinton's chief counsel. During the 1987 legislative session, journalists like Oakley were incensed that Clinton had gone back on a promise that he would not support a proposed state law to seal Arkansas tax records.³³

Clinton friend and Arkansas newspaper journalist Max Brantley said Bill "certainly wasn't any paragon of press freedom." Brantley cited as an example Bill's "very expansive" definition of a governor's working papers, which are exempt from media access under the state FOIA.³⁴

"I really credit Bill Clinton for establishing the road map on that, and it's really been a bad thing," Brantley said. "It's shielded, for example, deliberations on clemency matters, which is one thing they do where internal communications would provide a lot of insight in why one [prisoner] got it and one didn't, and I don't just mean Clinton, I mean all succeeding governors as well."³⁵

Brantley said Clinton also backed a change in the FOIA law that made it harder to examine the personnel records of state employees, something he said could be useful in investigating, for example, an abusive police officer.

Clinton and succeeding Arkansas governors have used this rule, Brantley said. The policy is similar to the Bush administration trying to limit access to federal executive agency records. Brantley recalled fighting against the change in the law. “We have rued the day, because it is just one more huge swath of records that now are off limits to us except under pretty extraordinary circumstances,” Brantley said. “So that was one of his great achievements in FOI, was making it harder for us to review personnel records of public employees—black mark as far as I’m concerned.”³⁶

Another black mark against the Clintons, according to some journalists, is that they use their power to intimidate or harass reporters. Richard Poe, a conservative journalist, detailed such accusations in *Hillary’s Secret War*, which reported the claims of several conservative journalists that they experienced various forms of harassment or even assault while they were investigating stories about the Clintons. Poe wrote in his introduction that although some would dismiss his book “as a collection of wild-eyed conspiracy theories,” he had “strong evidence” for every allegation.³⁷

Most journalists who cover the Clintons complain instead about Bill’s temper or Hillary’s coldness. But one journalist interviewed for this book, Little Rock television reporter Mel Hanks, did experience an odd episode while covering the grand jury that was examining drug trafficking, among other things. An employee of Dan Lasater, a Clinton donor, was indicted by the grand jury. Chapter 6 described how coverage of Lasater and the grand jury prompted Hillary to interrupt a press conference and confront reporters about their fairness.

Hanks said that while he covered the case, a strange man on a motorcycle started following him everywhere. “It was an effort to find out who was talking to me, who was the leak inside this investigation,” Hanks recalled. “And, the only time I was ever suspicious was when [Clinton aide] Betsey Wright told my news director at the time, ‘We understand you’re trying to connect this to the governor’s office. We sure want to have a chance to respond to that.’ And nobody had ever said anything about the governor’s office at the time.”³⁸ (Wright declined to be interviewed for this book.)

The station caught the motorcycle man on tape, and it made for quite a story, Hanks said. “But no one ever accused the governor of this publicly, of being involved in it. . . . There was never anything proven on that,” he said.³⁹

A motorcycle stalker sounds intimidating, but the media policies of the Clinton gubernatorial and presidential administrations, and the public comments on the media by Hillary, should be more cause for concern among journalists.

In her book on children, *It Takes a Village*, Hillary decries violence on television, including newscasts and the “tabloid approach” to news. She urges parents

to control what their kids watch but also writes, “As creators and consumers of the media, and as citizens of the village, we must be willing to join with one another to press for improvements in what our children see and hear.”⁴⁰ She doesn’t say how the village should press for improvements, but her book does praise two authors for taking broadcasters “to task for evading the consequences of their decisions by hiding behind the First Amendment.”⁴¹

A Hillary quote that sounds even less friendly to the First Amendment guarantees of press freedom was her musing at a February 11, 1998, White House event that was demonstrating a live cyberscast, a technically innovative feat at that time. After the demonstration, a reporter asked Hillary to comment on whether the new medium was a good thing in light of the fact that anyone could transmit anything instantly. Hillary replied that the Internet raised some serious issues, namely, that “Without any kind of editing function or gate-keeping function, what does it mean to have the right to defend your reputation, or to respond to what someone says?” Hillary said that competing interests must be kept in balance and that when “an invention leaps so far out ahead of that balance and throws a system, whatever it might be—political, economic, technological—out of balance, you’ve got a problem. . . . So we’re going to have to deal with that.”⁴²

Bill’s administration had already tried to deal with the Internet in 1996 through its support of the Communications Decency Act (CDA), which banned the transmission of indecent material to children over the Internet. The law was struck down in 1997 by the Supreme Court, which ruled that it was too vague and chilled free speech.⁴³

It is not hard to imagine a Hillary Clinton administration supporting other types of restriction on the Internet or other media. At the time of this writing, left-wing activists and some members of Congress were suggesting a reintroduction of the Fairness Doctrine or other similar legislation that would be aimed at controlling talk radio, a medium favored by the right and one that had bedeviled the Clintons for years. In 2007, Republican senator James Inhofe reported overhearing Hillary discussing with fellow Democratic senator Barbara Boxer the need to do something legislatively about conservative talk radio. Spokesmen for Hillary and Boxer denied the conversation took place, but Inhofe stood by his version, although he admitted it had happened several years ago, not recently as he had first implied.⁴⁴

Of course, legislation restricting talk radio might not be passed by a Republican or closely divided Democratic Congress even if a President Hillary Clinton pushed it. Such legislation, like the CDA, might also be struck down by the Supreme Court. But Hillary’s belief in government regulation to solve problems—as in health care—and her belief that the media has serious problems, should give pause to journalists.

At any rate, relations between the press and the presidency are unlikely to improve under a new Clinton administration. The *Dallas Morning News's* Slater said the press is going to want something different from the secretive, controlling tactics of the Bush administration, but is unlikely to get it from a Hillary administration. The tactics worked well for Bush when things were going well, but backfired in his second term when he faced a bungled Hurricane Katrina relief effort, a seemingly intractable war in Iraq, and a scandal-bedeveled Republican Congress.

"In fact, reporters, when things started turning south, I don't think they're giving him any benefit of the doubt," Slater said. Reporters felt slighted, and although they were reporting the news "fairly straight" the stories were worse than they might have been because there was not a good working relationship between the White House and the press corps, he said. "When things began to turn south, there wasn't really much of anything that the White House could do to try to quickly mend fences or build bridges with reporters who might be a little more favorably disposed in writing about them. So in the end, we reporters, if the White House isn't talking to us, we get the information from somebody else. In the end, if the administration has decided to essentially freeze out the press, then it is more often than not the administration, when things go badly, that suffers."⁴⁵

But Bush, as a conservative, no doubt believed he had few friends in the national press corps and thought the best strategy was to go around them through local and alternative media. Bush had the upper hand through the first year of his second term and likely would have kept it had not outside events overtaken him. Even if he'd had sterling press relations, journalists still would have been reporting bad news because the news was bad. His father had actively courted the press with parties at the family compound in Kennebunkport, Maine, and numerous press conferences and was still bounced from the White House after one term. There's still an argument to be made that it's better to try to control the press rather than pamper it. The early indications are that Hillary feels that way.

Slater, for one, doesn't think Hillary has learned the lessons she should have from watching the George W. Bush administration.

"It's early," Slater said. "We don't know what's going to happen, but my conversations with her people and what I've seen so far is that she may very well be at the beginning of making this colossal mistake. . . . She may be about to make a colossal mistake of duplicating, of repeating the Bush administration's kind of message discipline, over-managed effort, and possibly even secrecy within the White House that in the end could be very damaging, not so much to the media but to her administration. But I see no evidence that she's changed. But . . . who knows? I mean, a year from now, maybe they'll

be more open, but part of this, I have to tell you . . . the structures, the apparatus of a campaign or of a White House administration reflects the person at the top. Bill Clinton's sort of more open, engaging way of dealing with the media was a product of the way Bill Clinton is, the way he thinks and the kind of person he is, the approach. George Bush's much more disciplined sort of MBA style of management and where he had a few loyalists around him and nobody deviated from the message was really a product of George Bush."⁴⁶

"Gotcha" moments like the joke about handling evil men will cause Hillary to go back in her shell despite some efforts to lighten up, Slater said. "We're going to see, as they say, a very managed campaign, and the press better get used to it," Slater said.⁴⁷

Presidential press relations have always been contentious. When John Tebbel and Sarah Miles Watts published their history of the relationship in 1985, they concluded that it was heading for an "imperial" presidency that could manipulate the press so handily as to nullify the First Amendment.⁴⁸ When Louis W. Liebovich published his history of the press and the modern presidency at the beginning of George W. Bush's first term, he noted that the relationship was at its lowest point because of the emphasis on the president's private life. But Liebovich added hopefully that one president skilled in press relations might be able to restore the situation.⁴⁹ In the last year of the Bush administration, the White House still complains of unfair coverage and the press still complains of lack of access and message control. The public complains of gridlock, partisanship, and a biased press.

That last complaint is also a common and long-standing one, but it has gotten markedly worse during the Internet age as every mainstream press story is scrutinized and torn apart by an army of bloggers of all levels of skill and political affiliation. Bias was usually a battle cry of the right, but the left has recently gotten into the act as well with watchdog groups accusing reporters, many of whom are sympathetic personally to the left, of being tools of or fools for the Bush administration. It's not a happy time in general to be a reporter in 2008. Never members of a high-paying profession, journalists at least had the satisfaction of doing important, respected work. Their work is still crucial to the functioning of democracy, but they are no longer respected. Recent surveys show the press as a whole is one of the least trusted institutions in America.⁵⁰

The Clintons, in an amazing twist of fate, have added yet another layer of bricks to the towering wall of mistrust between the public and the press. In the 2008 campaign, conservatives still complained about bias in the media, and had a great example when the *New York Times* in February ran a questionable, thinly sourced story about an inappropriate relationship John McCain might have had with a lobbyist eight years earlier.⁵¹ Liberals, especially

the Clintons, still complained about the right-wing attack machine. In fact, Hillary often said that her experience facing the so-called right-wing conspiracy during Bill's administration was a reason that she would be a more tested and thus more effective candidate for the Democratic party than Obama would be. What's new is that the Clintons and their supporters are now arguing that the media is biased in favor of Obama—a fellow Democrat.

While campaigning in New Hampshire in January, Bill suggested that the media was not covering Obama and Hillary equally, and that would force her campaign to go negative on Obama to even things out.⁵² Hillary's closest advisers believe press critics have a sexist double standard; for example, castigating Bill for vigorously defending Hillary but making "barely a peep when Michelle Obama plays the role of hard-hitting surrogate for her husband."⁵³ But Hillary supporters were just as upset, if not more so, as the political professionals about the perceived media bias. ABC's Karen Snow told *Newsweek* that Hillary fans often curse her when they see her TV mike because they believe the media is ruining her campaign.⁵⁴

Whether the bias was perceived or real is certainly worthy of study but is beyond the scope of this book. Nevertheless, preliminary studies and anecdotal evidence indicate that the Clintons are probably right that the press collectively was easier on Obama, at least early in the campaign. One study done by the Center for Media and Public Affairs showed that from mid-December 2007 to mid-February 2008 the evening news shows on ABC, CBS, and NBC gave 83 percent "positive evaluations" of Obama but only 53 percent positive of Hillary. Bill received only 24 percent positive press, according to the study. The study noted Obama's good press had dropped to 67 percent during the period after Super Tuesday but Hillary's positive coverage remained about 50 percent.⁵⁵

Anecdotally, a casual reading of the 2008 campaign coverage midway through the primary season indicates that Obama was not scrutinized as closely as the Clintons. Ironically, just as Bill Clinton was able to hide his temper for the most part during his initial 1992 campaign, Obama has rarely appeared as anything but cool and calm in 2008. But at least one reporter who covered Obama when he was an obscure Illinois state legislator recalled a more confrontational side to Obama, although the reporter noted that he admired Obama at the time and still does. In an article for the *Dallas Observer*, Todd Spivak wrote that Obama once called him an "asshole" at a political event and later screamed at him about a story during an early morning phone call. "It's the first time I've ever heard him yell, and I'm trembling as I set down the phone," wrote Spivak, who at the time worked for a string of community newspapers in Chicago. "I sit frozen at my desk for several minutes, stunned."⁵⁶ Spivak's article appeared in an alternative weekly. Such warts-and-all portraits of Obama,

particularly of his background in Chicago, were comparatively hard to find in the mainstream press during the early primary season. Most stories instead focused on Obama's charisma and the passion of his worshipful followers.

Critical stories on Bill and Hillary were easier to find, especially as a number of pundits, many of them liberals, expressed shock over what they believed was negative campaigning by the former first couple. Jonathan Chait, a liberal columnist for the *Los Angeles Times*, went so far as to question whether the conservative enemies of the Clintons had been right about them all along.⁵⁷ Conservative Rich Lowry, on the other hand, argued that many Democrats and the media conveyed "a palpable impatience with Clinton's continued presence in the race," hoping she would withdraw so they could "consummate" their love affair with Obama.⁵⁸

At the time this book was being written, the Democratic Party had not yet decided whether to marry its fortunes to Obama or Hillary. If Hillary does not get the nomination, it is a mistake to assume that voters will have, as a number of conservative commentators hopefully described, driven a stake through the heart of the Clintons' political ambitions. Hillary will have a lot of political options remaining.

One of the least likeliest is that she would be Obama's running mate. Common sense would dictate that he choose someone who could better appeal to Republicans and moderates than the controversial Hillary. But if Obama does choose to run on what many Democrats were calling the "dream ticket," Hillary, as the vice presidential nominee, would be the frontrunner in 2012 if Obama loses or in 2016 if he wins two terms.

If Obama doesn't choose her as his running mate, she could run in 2012 or 2016 if the circumstances were right. She could even run in 2012 against an incumbent Obama if he suffers a Jimmy Carter-like implosion in his first term. Many observers have said that because of Hillary's age, she would be finished as a presidential candidate if she loses the 2008 nomination. But in 2016 she would be about three years younger than McCain was in 2008, and he secured the Republican nomination after his second try.

If the presidency doesn't work out, she could probably hold her New York Senate seat for as long as she wants, becoming a female Strom Thurmond if she so chose. Democratic Senate leader certainly is a reasonable goal. A Supreme Court seat is not out of the question, either.

All of those roles will require dealing with the press to some degree. If the past is any guide, she will be handling the press effectively as part of her life-long partnership with Bill. The Clintons are the most experienced political couple the American press has ever seen. But whatever she and Bill do in politics, they will be twice as effective because they are part of a team. They have survived the most brutal and aggressive coverage any politician could imagine.

They have learned how to control their message and alternately sweet talk or bully the press as the need arises.

Win or lose in 2008, the Clintons are going to be around for a long, long time. The press better get used to that.

NOTES

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About the Author

James E. Mueller is an associate professor of journalism at the University of North Texas. He worked for about ten years as a newspaper journalist before entering academia. He earned a bachelor's and a master's degree in journalism at the University of Missouri and a Ph.D. in journalism at the University of Texas at Austin. His book about the press relations of George W. Bush, *Towel Snapping the Press*, was published by Rowman & Littlefield in 2006.

