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CENTER FOR MEDIA AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS

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file: Press Relations

June 17, 1993

David Gergen
Counselor to the President
The White House
Ground Floor
West Wing

Dear Dave,

In your new capacity, I thought you might continue to be interested in our ongoing tracking of the administration's TV news coverage.

Enclosed is our latest update, along with a story referencing it in today's New York Times. We have collected considerably more information than these summary tables display, including coverage of federal agencies and Congress, breakdowns by network, etc.

Please let me know if you find this material useful and would like to keep receiving it.

Best wishes.



S. Robert Lichter
Co-Director

The New York Times

THE NEW YORK TIMES NATIONAL THURSDAY, JUNE 17, 1993

The Capitol Press Vs. the President: Fair Coverage or Unreined Adversity?

By WILLIAM GLABERSON

Though mutual distrust is routine in Washington, President Clinton's conflicts with reporters have raised, somewhat earlier than usual, the question that arises in every Administration: whether the nation's news organizations are being fair to the President.

For months now, the press has had little good to say about President Clinton, and he has sometimes been unable to contain his obvious frustration with the press.

That rocky relationship reached a low on Monday in Mr. Clinton's acid Rose Garden response to ABC News's White House correspondent, Brit Hume. Mr. Hume asked Mr. Clinton about "a certain zigzag quality" in the President's decision making. Mr. Clinton's response ended the news conference by chastising reporters.

The debate over the fairness of the coverage is about such subtleties as tone and emphasis rather than literal accuracy. And the battle between the President and the press has raised anew the unanswerable question of whether it is the events or the way they are recorded that set the tone of an administration.

"This is the normal process, but accelerated," said Larry J. Sabato, a professor of government at the University of Virginia who wrote "Feeding Frenzy" (Free Press, 1991) about politics and the news. "Rarely, if ever, have press relations deteriorated so quickly as they have in this Administration."

Criticism of the coverage has also focused attention on the growing trend of the news media to supplement traditional news accounts with heavy doses of interpretation, which some readers see as virtual editorials.

Not surprisingly, some people argue that the messenger is being blamed for the message. Stephen Hess, who studies the Presidency and the press at the Brookings Institution in Washington, said: "Bill Clinton is getting bad press largely because he's been all thumbs. The press didn't hire Zoë Baird. The press didn't fire Lani Guinier."

Presidential Punching Bag

But reporters have overheard the President telling guests that he felt like a punching bag, and he has publicly blamed the press for focusing on the wrong things. "Controversy gets news," he said during a town meeting in late May, "and when we're out here working on things that aren't controversial, it's often not reported."

Some who sympathize with the President say Mr. Clinton is rightly impatient with what they see as the press's destructive tendency to oversimplify and overdramatize and to declare quick winners and losers.

This week the sparks flew over news accounts of Mr. Clinton's first Supreme Court nomination, when he selected

Judge Ruth Bader Ginsburg after stops and starts. Some said the news of Judge Ginsburg's nomination was unfairly overwhelmed with negative interpretation about whether the President had mishandled the selection process.

Kathleen Hall Jamieson, dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, said President Clinton was right to be distressed that the press had focused so much on "tactics and the game" of Washington politics as opposed to the substance of public issues.

Government as a Game

Ms. Jamieson acknowledged that reporters need to help readers and viewers understand the relationship of each decision to Mr. Clinton's overall performance. "But, when everything the President does is covered as 'how is he

A relationship built on growing mutual distrust.

doing?" rather than 'what does it mean?' you lose your ability to evaluate governance," she said.

This week, the White House worked anew to play down differences with the press corps. "I don't think it's necessarily a question of fairness," George Stephanopoulos, the President's former communications director and now his senior adviser, said yesterday. "They're doing their job. Our job is to make sure that our side of the story gets out."

But there is general agreement that Mr. Clinton entirely missed a media honeymoon. "This is a strange city," said Adam Nagourney, a Washington political correspondent for USA Today. "Everyone makes these instant judgments; the conventional wisdom moves way too fast. It's more of a press problem than it is Clinton's problem."

Even before Mr. Clinton moved into the White House, some commentators asserted that news organizations, including The New York Times, appeared to be "a chorus of journalistic doubt and concern," as The New Yorker magazine put it just two weeks after the election.

Clinton as 'Antihero'

From there, the coverage only grew harder. The three major networks' evening news broadcasts have pounded away with negative coverage. The President, as The Boston Globe said, has been "the nightly news' leading antihero."

According to a new study by the Center for Media and Public Affairs,

which receives some of its financing from conservative groups, 64 percent of all references to Mr. Clinton by network news reporters or by people they interviewed were negative during the first four months of the Administration, as against 41 percent negative comments about President Bush during the same period of his Administration in 1989. At the time, President Bush had very high ratings in public opinion polls, while Mr. Clinton's ratings are at a post-World War II low.

In the nation's magazines and newspapers, writing about the White House has taken on an edge. Time magazine reported in a June 7 cover article titled "The Incredible Shrinking President" that Mr. Clinton's public approval ratings had slipped to record lows and described his Presidency as "beset since its inception by miscalculations and self-inflicted wounds."

U.S. News & World Report's June 14 issue, under the headline "A question of competence," described the President as "preoccupied with an astonishing series of mistakes and bungles."

Litany of Negatives

Newspaper news and analysis columns have been filled with barbs. In print, reporters referred to the "Hair Force One" and "Travelgate" affairs and described the "embarrassment du jour." The White House staff, William Neikirk of the The Chicago Tribune wrote on May 30, has been described as a "children's crusade" of inexperienced, liberal ideologues." David Shribman of The Boston Globe wrote in a news analysis that the President, "who seemed to have perfect pitch, now seems tone deaf."

"It doesn't get much worse than this," Thomas B. Rosenstiel wrote in The Los Angeles Times, adding, "The President and his staff have been put into the position of somehow proving they are not incompetent." In The New York Times Week In Review Section, Michael Kelly declared, "What might be called Mr. Clinton's incredibility factor has been building for some time."

But the edge may have grown sharper in the handling of the Supreme Court nomination. The Wall Street Journal's accounts of the nomination were examples of the growing use of interpretation in news articles.

The news article in the Journal on Monday included the kind of right-between-the-eyes analysis that infuriates those who think they spot an ambush of the President by the press. "No matter how it turns out," the article by Jeffrey H. Birnbaum and Paul M. Barrett said, "Mr. Clinton's handling of the situation — widely considered inept even by political allies — has been damaging."

Beyond Just the Facts

Albert R. Hunt, The Journal's Washington bureau chief, acknowledged that in earlier times who, what, when,

COVERAGE OF THE CLINTON ADMINISTRATION

January 20 to May 31, 1993

Amount of Coverage

	Number of Features	Minutes of Airtime
President Clinton	451	830
January	74	165
February	116	229
March	54	63
April	93	165
May	114	208
Entire Administration	1,162	1,937
January	148	266
February	299	539
March	212	285
April	219	363
May	284	484

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EVALUATIONS OF ADMINISTRATION INDIVIDUALS

	PERCENT POSITIVE	PERCENT NEGATIVE	(N)
President Clinton	34%	66%	1,272
David Gergen	80%	20%	5
Hillary Rodham Clinton	75%	25%	61
Janet Reno	75%	25%	63
Les Aspin	43%	57%	14
Al Gore	40%	60%	5
William Sessions	32%	68%	31

Note--Table omits individuals with fewer than five evaluations.

COVERAGE OF THE CLINTON ADMINISTRATION

January 20 to May 31, 1993

Amount of Coverage	Number of Mentions	Number of Features
President Clinton	1,371	451
Hillary Rodham Clinton	155	53
Warren Christopher	140	50
Les Aspin	77	22
Al Gore	67	9
George Stephanopolous	64	4
Janet Reno	62	35
Colin Powell	40	5
Lloyd Bentsen	33	5
William Sessions	27	15
Leon Panetta	24	3
Chelsea Clinton	20	1
Robert Reich	18	4
Ron Brown	17	2
Mike Espy	16	4
Donna Shalala	16	0
Dee Dee Myers	14	1
Bruce Babbitt	12	4
Madelaine Albright	11	2
Mack McLarty	11	1

Top Issues	Number of Mentions
Economy	303
Taxes	270
Defense	254
Health Care	220
Bosnia	202
Budget Process	196
Budget Deficit	173
Unemployment	166
Western Europe	136
Russia	121
United Nations	118
Gay Rights	100

EVALUATIONS OF PRESIDENT CLINTON

January 20 - May 31, 1993

	PERCENT POSITIVE	PERCENT NEGATIVE	(N)
TOTAL	34%	66%	1,272
By Network			
ABC	35%	65%	448
CBS	30%	70%	405
NBC	37%	63%	419
By Source			
Administration	82%	18%	141
Other Democrats	41%	59%	179
Republicans	9%	91%	191
Interest Groups	26%	74%	113
Other U.S.	33%	67%	451
Foreign Sources	38%	62%	45
Reporters	22%	78%	152
By Issue			
Bosnia	41%	59%	78
Economy	44%	56%	181
Unemployment	38%	62%	39
Budget	40%	60%	148
Taxes	21%	79%	103
Health Care	33%	67%	27
Energy Policy	14%	86%	37
Gay Rights	25%	75%	114
Abortion	44%	56%	25
All Foreign Policy	42%	58%	125
All Economic Policy	37%	63%	474
All Social Policy	25%	75%	283
Non-Issue	35%	65%	390
By Month			
January	37%	63%	144
February	46%	54%	341
March	33%	67%	109
April	31%	69%	206
May	27%	73%	472

COMPARING PRESIDENTS BUSH AND CLINTON

January 20, 1989 through May 31, 1989 (Bush)
January 20, 1993 through May 31, 1993 (Clinton)

	BUSH PERCENT POSITIVE	CLINTON PERCENT POSITIVE
TOTAL	59%	34%
By Network		
ABC	78%	35%
CBS	49%	30%
NBC	58%	37%
By Source Type		
Partisan sources	59%	41%
Nonpartisan sources	60%	30%
By Month		
January	78%	37%
February	57%	46%
March	53%	33%
April	56%	31%
May	48%	27%

THE WHITE HOUSE NEWS PROJECT

The Center's White House News Watch employs content analysis¹ to study network news coverage of the federal government. Since 1989, trained researchers have systematically reviewed all news stories on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts. They examine each story, noting any mention of the president, members of his Cabinet, members of Congress, federal government agencies, or any other references to Congress or the Executive Branch. They also note mentions of over 80 different policy issues (such as defense spending, unemployment, congressional ethics or abortion).

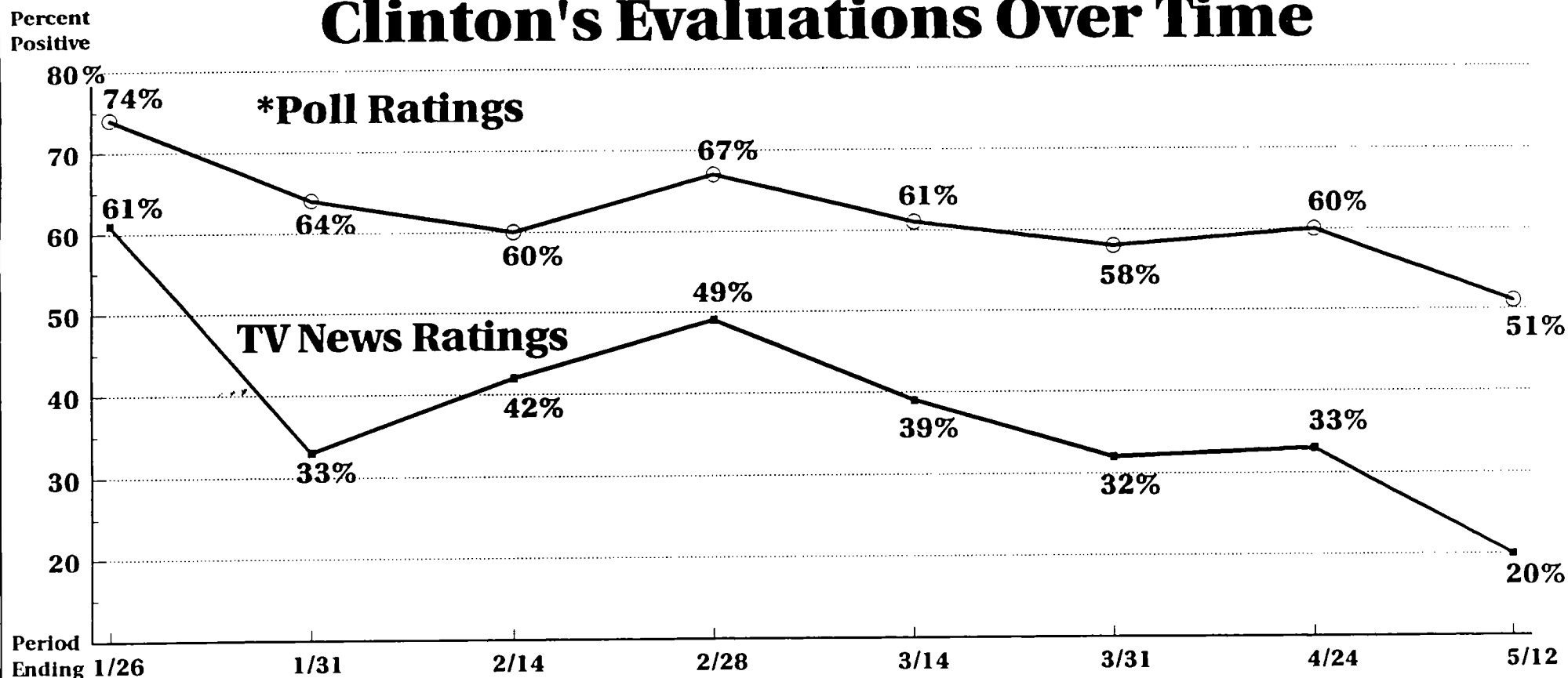
The researchers also review the newscasts on a statement by statement level, noting any overt opinions expressed about governmental actors. Only clearly positive or negative remarks are recorded; no effort is made to find opinions in ambiguous or neutral material. Opinions are recorded in a manner that links them to the individual (either the reporter or an interviewed source) who expressed the opinion in the story.

Coders are not asked to assign overall positive or negative scores to entire stories, since such an approach is inherently subjective and fails to fully account for the nuances within each story. Individual statements are coded and entered into the computer separately. All this material is entered onto a pre-designed codesheet and subsequently transferred into a computer file. Statistical analysis then seeks to discover relationships based on network, time period, or type of news source.

The codebook containing the categories and rules for coding is over 100 pages long and includes more than 40 different analytic variables. Research assistants working on this project are trained for a period of between 150 and 200 hours. During the training process, researchers code sets of previous news stories. Their work is compared to that of previous coders until a minimum reliability level of 80% is obtained for all variables. That means that the new coders must reach the same conclusions as their counterparts at least four out of five times. For most variables, the level of agreement is much higher.

¹Content analysis is a social scientific method for producing an objective and systematic description of communicative material. In order to be scientific, such analysis requires explicit rules and procedures that minimize a researcher's subjective predispositions. Categories and criteria are rigorously defined and applied consistently to all material. The system must be reliable, meaning that additional researchers using the same criteria should reach the same conclusions. Because it is both systematic and reliable, content analysis permits the research to transcend the realm of impressionistic generalizations, which are prone to individual preferences and prejudices.

Clinton's Evaluations Over Time



TV News Ratings based on CMPA content analysis of soundbites on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news programs.

***Poll Ratings** based on Gallup/USA Today/CNN polls. Excludes "don't know" responses; therefore ratings may appear higher than reported elsewhere.

file: Press Relations

June 16, 1993

MEMORANDUM FOR MARK GEARAN

CC: DAVID GERGEN
DEE DEE MYERS
GEORGE STEPHANOPOULOS

FR: KEITH BOYKIN

RE: NETWORK NEWS COVERAGE OF PRESIDENT CLINTON

The Center for Media and Public Affairs in Washington has been monitoring the network news broadcasts since the beginning of the Clinton administration and has tabulated preliminary results on the treatment of the President on the network news. The tabulations attached have not yet been released to the general press (although the St. Petersburg Times has the information). Because the Center has not publicly reported the results, I have analyzed the data below.

As expected, the majority (64%) of the coverage of the President has been negative. CBS was the most negative network, but it had also been the least positive of the three networks in its coverage of Bush in his first five months. Also, although Administration officials were supportive (positive) of the President 82 percent of the time on the news, other Democrats such as members of Congress were only supportive 41 percent of the time. Republicans were critical 91 percent of the time.

The coverage was negative on every major issue surveyed, with taxes and energy policy receiving the most negative coverage of all. The coverage of so-called "non-issues" such as presidential haircuts was also, not surprisingly, negative.

ABC's coverage of Bush (78 percent positive) compared to its coverage of Clinton (only 35 percent positive) provides perhaps the most startling disparity in coverage. Because ABC's numbers were more out of line four years ago than they are today, the discrepancy seems more likely to reflect ABC's overly positive coverage of Bush than it does the network's negative coverage of Clinton.

However, the President was quite right to remind Brit Hume that he had not received a honeymoon. Even in the President's first month in office, only 37 percent of the network coverage was positive. The President received his best coverage in February, the month when he unveiled his economic plan to the nation. But the best month for Clinton (46 percent positive coverage in February) still falls below Bush's worst month (48 percent positive in May).

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