

PRESS & TELEVISION

ries that such practices leave "too much room for misunderstanding."

Contrary to popular myth, the most open of the Golden Triangle's three institutions is the Defense Department, regularly covered by 34 reporters. The Pentagon's large staff of press officers strains to be helpful. Conflict is kept to a minimum because, in military matters, it is far easier for journalists and officials to agree on what is an official secret, and what is merely embarrassing. Perhaps more important is the sheer size of the bureaucracy. As Richard Halloran of the *New York Times* put it, "If someone is promoting the M-1 tank, there are plenty of people around who will tell you what's wrong with the M-1."

Hess adds that while Golden Triangle reporters tend to be liberals, their shoptalk rarely reflects ideology; their chief preoccupation is how various officials help or hinder them as fact-seekers. "An administration never gets the press that it thinks it deserves," Hess observes, "it almost always gets the press that it brings upon itself."

Soft on Reagan?

"With Friends Like These. . ." by Michael Robinson, Maura Clancey, and Lisa Grand, in *Public Opinion* (June-July 1983), American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1150 17th St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

Ronald Reagan's personal charm has disarmed the news media—at least, that is the self-criticism circulating among many Washington print and broadcast journalists. Robinson, Clancey, and Grand, George Washington University political scientists, say that reporters are being too hard on themselves; they have been plenty tough on the President.

The authors sifted through some 100 "soft news" clips—commentary and feature stories—that appeared on the three major TV networks' evening broadcasts during the first two months of 1983, when midterm assessments were in full swing. Of the 29 segments that were unambiguously "positive" or "negative," 27 were the latter, yielding a bad-news/good-news ratio of 13.5 to one.

TV commentators criticized "just about everything but Reagan's personality"—his nomination of Kenneth Adelman as head of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, the Environmental Protection Agency's sluggishness, and, repeatedly, his economic policies.

While the negative stories were often hard-hitting, the two positive ones were at best backhanded, the authors report. For example, NBC's John Chancellor opened his favorable commentary on Japanese Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone's January 17 reception in Washington with a slap: "The administration has handled the visit . . . with the kind of skill and dexterity it does not always show in foreign affairs."

Examination of the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post*, and the three news magazines show that the print media have been even more critical of the President than have broadcast journalists. The *Times*, for example, flatly editorialized on January 9: "The stench of failure hangs over the Reagan White House."

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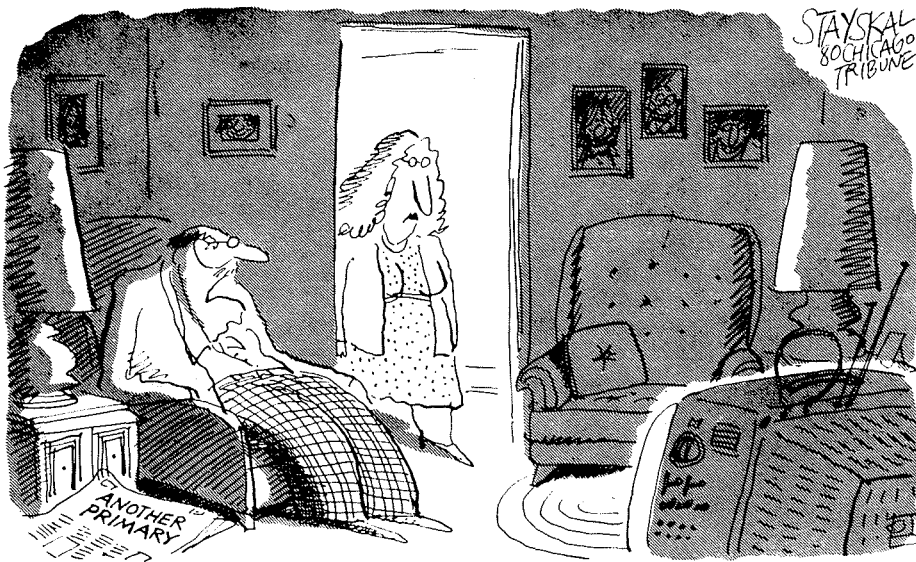
Why, then, the *mea culpas*? A hint of hubris, the authors speculate. The largely liberal Washington news corps believes that it is an important shaper of public opinion. If a conservative President remains popular in the polls, the newsmen assume, the media must not be getting the "truth" out to the public. They suspect they are too chummy with the President. And perhaps, the authors add, "the press is doing to the press what it does to all institutions—accentuating the negative."

*Building Fires
From Straw Polls*

"Is a Straw Poll Worth Reporting?" by Martin Linsky, in *The Hastings Center Report* (June 1983), 360 Broadway, Hastings-on-Hudson, N.Y. 10706.

The TV network news shows and top newspapers and magazines heavily influence the nation's political agenda, but newsmen are reluctant to acknowledge their power or to question how they use it.

Too often, says Linsky, a former *Boston Globe* editorial writer now at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, they decide what is newsworthy "on the basis of crasser values such as time, convenience, and



Early in the 1980 presidential primary season, a cartoonist targeted the news media's zeal: "With two percent of the vote in, the CBS computer just projected the winners for tonight, next November, and 1984!"