

## SOCIETY

Weicher believes that reviewing U.S. progress during the 1970s, in terms of adjusted poverty rates, could have a great impact on future policy decisions. For example, use of the adjusted CPI could have saved the federal government \$100 billion in Social Security spending during the past decade, and reduced the national debt by four percent.

If the old poverty figures were recast, says Weicher, "We would feel a little better about our progress, our economy, and our society."

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## PRESS & TELEVISION

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### *Campaign Spending*

"Campaign Money and the Press: Three Soundings" by Frank J. Sorauf, in *Political Science Quarterly* (Spring 1987), 2852 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10025-7885.

Is something amiss in media coverage of political campaign financing?

Sorauf, a political scientist at the University of Minnesota, argues that stories about campaign funding reveal a "progressive" slant, owing to "structural biases" of the U.S. media and the liberal "political assumptions" of reporters, editors, and writers. Generally anti-Big Business, anti-political machine, many U.S. journalists act as if they were "the grandchildren of the Progressive muckrakers," finding irksome a campaign finance system that permits political action committees (PACs) to influence elections through dollars.

As examples, Sorauf cites three campaign-finance "events" covered by the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Washington Post*.

Reporting on the Supreme Court's decision in March 1985 to uphold the unconstitutionality of limits on presidential campaign spending, the newspapers gave the story front-page play. "But why?" asks Sorauf. Because the decision signaled "an opportunity lost to curb campaign spending? Or because it vibrated with popular fears about money in politics?" The media played up PAC spending, de-emphasized non-PAC spending, and magnified the decision's scope and "its permissive consequences."

In March 1985, the lobby Common Cause reported the 1984 congressional campaign spending totals. The coverage focused mostly on big dollar figures. But, as Sorauf notes, the media largely ignored the fact that the rates of growth in campaign spending had leveled off; total spending for House seats fell from \$205.4 million in 1982 to \$205.1 million in 1984. Considering the high rates of spending increases between 1976 and 1982—194 percent by congressional candidates—Sorauf finds the downturn very significant. Yet no news organization treated it as such.

A third episode: Between 1974 and 1984, the number of PACs registered with the Federal Election Commission (FEC) grew steadily, from 608 to 4,009. Yet the FEC's announcements, in 1985 and early 1986, that the number of PACs had declined for the first time (to 3,992) attracted little attention. The *New York Times* dismissed the drop as a "seasonal blip." The rapid growth of PACs had been "big news," Sorauf observes.

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"Curiously, the end of that growth was not."

"Information brokers"—e.g., Common Cause, the FEC—help shape the political news agenda, says Sorauf, as do various "expert" commentators. Thus newsmen tend to think money stories dull, "unless one finds knaves, buccaneering PACs, or lavish campaign spending in them."

Moreover, says Sorauf, "stories about declining numbers of PACs or stabilizing spending levels . . . conflict with the fundamental understandings of the Progressive vision [and] with the long-term reality of the corrupting capacity of money in the hands of special interests."

*Sherman's Other War*

"The New Sherman Letters" by Joseph H. Ewing, in *American Heritage* (July-Aug. 1987), 60 Fifth Ave., New York, N.Y. 10011.

The American military's relations with the news media have often been strained. But recent confrontations between brass and press pale beside the battles that Civil War General William Tecumseh Sherman (1820-91) fought against journalists. Nowadays, senior commanders may chastise reporters. Sherman actually courtmartialed them.

War correspondents, Sherman complained, were "dirty newspaper scribblers who have the impudence of Satan." "A cat in hell without claws," wrote a rueful New York *Tribune* correspondent, "is nothing to a reporter in General Sherman's army."



*"If my name must go to History," Sherman wrote in 1864, the year his Union troops burned Atlanta and made their devastating march to the sea, "I prefer it should not [be] as the enemy to the South . . . but against mobs, vigilance committees, and all the other phases of sedition and anarchy which have threatened and still endanger the country which our children must inhabit."*