

THE IDIOT CULTURE

By Carl Bernstein

It is now nearly a generation since the drama that began with the Watergate break-in and ended with the resignation of Richard Nixon, a full twenty years in which the American press has been engaged in a strange frenzy of self-congratulation and defensiveness about its performance in that affair and afterward. The self-congratulation is not justified; the defensiveness, alas, is. For increasingly the America rendered today in the American media is illusory and delusory—disfigured, unreal, disconnected from the true context of our lives. In covering actually existing American life, the media—weekly, daily, hourly—break new ground in getting it wrong. The coverage is distorted by celebrity and the worship of celebrity; by the reduction of news to gossip, which is the lowest form of news; by sensationalism, which is always a turning away from a society's real condition; and by a political and social discourse that we—the press, the media, the politicians, and the people—are turning into a sewer.

Let's go back to Watergate. There is a lesson there, particularly about the press. Twenty years ago, on June 17, 1972, Bob Woodward and I began covering the Watergate story for *The Washington Post*. At the time of the break-in, there were about 2,000 full-time reporters working in Washington, D.C., according to a study by the Columbia University School of Journalism. In the first six months afterward, America's news organizations assigned only fourteen of those 2,000 men and women to cover the Watergate story on a full-time basis. And of those fourteen, only six were assigned to the story on what might be called an "investigative" basis, that is, to go beyond recording the obvious daily statements and court proceedings, and try to find out exactly what had happened.

Despite some of the mythology that has come to surround "investigative" journalism, it is important to remember what we did and did not do in Watergate. For what we did was not, in truth, very exotic. Our actual work in uncovering the Watergate story was rooted in the most basic kind of empirical police reporting. We relied more on shoe leather and common sense and respect for the truth than anything else—on the principles that had been drummed into me at the wonderful

old *Washington Star*. Woodward and I were a couple of guys on the Metro desk assigned to cover what at bottom was still a burglary, so we applied the only reportorial techniques we knew. We knocked on a lot of doors, we asked a lot of questions, we spent a lot of time listening: the same thing good reporters from Ben Hecht to Mike Berger to Joe Liebling to the young Tom Wolfe had been doing for years. As local reporters, we had no covey of highly placed sources, no sky's-the-limit expense accounts with which to court the powerful at fancy French restaurants. We did our work far from the enchanting world of the rich and the famous and the powerful. We were grunts.

So we worked our way up, interviewing clerks, secretaries, administrative assistants. We met with them outside their offices and at their homes, at night and on weekends. The prosecutors and the FBI interviewed the same people we did, but always in their offices, always in the presence of administration attorneys, never at home, never at night, never away from jobs and intimidation and pressures. Not surprisingly, the FBI and the Justice Department came up with conclusions that were the opposite of our own, choosing not to triangulate key pieces of information, because they had made what the acting FBI director of the day, L. Patrick Gray III, called "a presumption of regularity" about the men around the president of the United States.

Even our colleagues in the press didn't take our reporting seriously, until our ordinary methodology turned up some extraordinary (and incontrovertible) information: a tale of systematic and illegal political espionage and sabotage directed from the White House, secret funds, wiretapping, a team of "plumbers"—burglars—working for the president of the United States. And then of the cover-up, an obstruction of justice that extended to the president himself.

It is important to remember also the Nixon administration's response. It was to make the conduct of the press the issue in Watergate, instead of the conduct of the president and his men. Day after day the Nixon White House issued what we came to call the "non-denial": asked to comment on what we'd reported, Press Secretary Ron Ziegler, House Minority Leader Jerry Ford, or Senate Republican leader Bob Dole would attack us as purveyors of hearsay, character assassination, and innu-

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endo without ever addressing the specifics of our stories. "The sources of *The Washington Post* are a fountain of misinformation," the White House responded when we reported that the president's closest aides controlled the secret funds that had paid for the break-in and a pervasive cover-up (not to mention John Mitchell's inspired words to me: "If you print that, Katie Graham's gonna get her tit caught in a big fat wringer...").

Rather than disappearing after Watergate, the Nixonian technique of making the press the issue reached new heights of cleverness and cynicism during the Reagan administration, and it flourishes today. Hence Reagan's

revealing statement about the sad and sorry events that ravaged his presidency in the Iran-contra affair: "What is driving me up the wall is that this wasn't a failure until the press got a tip from that rag in Beirut and began to play it up. This whole thing boils down to a great irresponsibility on the part of the press."

And now in George Bush we have still another president obsessed with leaks and secrecy, a president who could not understand why the press considered it news when his men set up a faked drug bust in Lafayette Square across from the White House. "Whose side are you on?" he asked. It was a truly Nixonian question. This contempt for the press, passed on to hundreds of officials who hold public office today—including Bush, may be the most important and lasting legacy of the Nixon administration.

In retrospect, the Nixon administration's extraordinary campaign to undermine the credibility of the press succeeded to a remarkable extent, despite all the post-Watergate posturing in our profession. It succeeded in large part because of our own obvious shortcomings. The hard and simple fact is that our reporting has not been good enough. It was not good enough in the Nixon years, it got worse in the Reagan years, and it is no better now. We are arrogant. We have failed to open up our own institutions in the media to the same kind of scrutiny that we demand of other powerful institutions in the society. We are no more forthcoming or gracious

in acknowledging error or misjudgment than the congressional miscreants and bureaucratic felons we spend so much time scrutinizing.

The greatest felony in the news business today (as Woodward recently observed) is to be behind, or to miss, a major story; or more precisely, to seem behind, or to seem in danger of missing, a major story. So speed and quantity substitute for thoroughness and quality, for accuracy and context. The pressure to compete, the fear that somebody else will make the splash first, creates a frenzied environment in which a blizzard of information is presented and serious questions may not be raised;

and even in those fortunate instances in which such questions are raised (as happened after some of the egregious stories about the Clinton family), no one has done the weeks and months of work to sort it all out and to answer them properly.

Reporting is not stenography. It is the best obtainable version of the truth. The really significant trends in journalism have not been toward a commitment to the best and the most complex obtainable version of the truth, not toward building a new journalism based on serious, thoughtful reporting. Those are certainly not the priorities that jump out at the reader or the viewer from Page One or "Page Six" of most of our newspapers; and not what a viewer



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gets when he turns on the 11 o'clock local news or, too often, even network news productions.

"All right, was it really the best sex you ever had?" Those were the words of Diane Sawyer, in an interview of Marla Maples on "Prime Time Live," a broadcast of ABC News (where "more Americans get their news from... than any other source"). Those words marked a new low (out of which Sawyer herself has been busily climbing). For more than fifteen years we have been moving away from real journalism toward the creation of a sleazoid info-tainment culture in which the lines between Oprah and Phil and Geraldo and Diane and even Ted, between the *New York Post* and *Newsday*, are too often indistinguishable. In this new culture of journalistic titillation, we

teach our readers and our viewers that the trivial is significant, that the lurid and the loopy are more important than real news. We do not serve our readers and viewers, we pander to them. And we condescend to them, giving them what we think they want and what we calculate will sell and boost ratings and readership. Many of them, sadly, seem to justify our condescension, and to kindle at the trash. Still, it is the role of journalists to challenge people, not merely to amuse them.

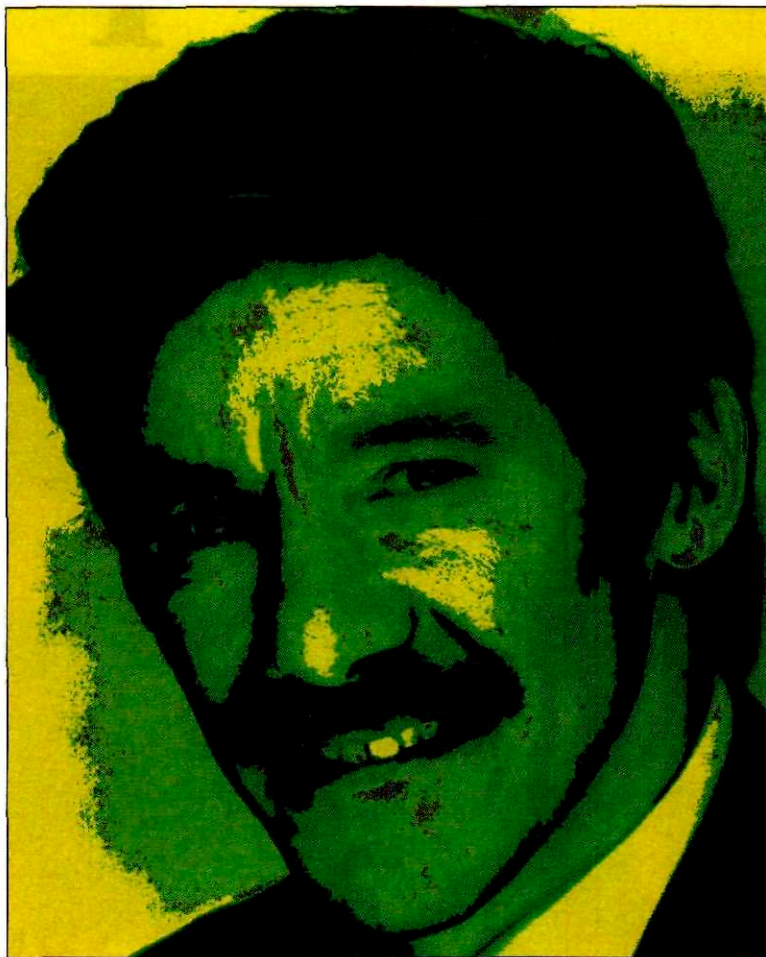
We are in the process of creating, in sum, what deserves to be called the idiot culture. Not an idiot *sub*-culture, which every society has bubbling beneath the surface and which can provide harmless fun; but the culture itself. For the first time in our history the weird and the stupid and the coarse are becoming our cultural norm, even our cultural ideal. Last month in New York we witnessed a primary election in which "Donahue," "Imus in the Morning," and the disgraceful coverage of the *New York Daily News* and the *New York Post* eclipsed *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, the network news divisions, and the serious and experienced political reporters on the beat. Even *The New York Times* has been reduced to naming the rape victim in the Willie Smith case; to putting Kitty Kelley on the front page as a news story; to parlaying polls as if they were policies.

I do not mean to attack popular culture. Good journalism *is* popular culture, but popular culture that stretches and informs its consumers rather than that which appeals to the ever descending lowest common denominator. If, by popular culture, we mean expressions of thought or feeling that require no work of those who consume them, then decent popular journalism is finished. What is happening today, unfortunately, is that the lowest form of popular culture—lack of information, misinformation, disinformation, and a contempt for the truth or the reality of most people's lives—has overrun real journalism.

Today ordinary Americans are being stuffed with garbage: by Donahue-Geraldo-Oprah freak shows (cross-

dressing in the marketplace; skinheads at your corner luncheonette; pop psychologists rhapsodizing over the airways about the minds of serial killers and sex offenders); by the Maury Povich news; by "Hard Copy"; by Howard Stern; by local newscasts that do special segments devoted to hyping hype. Last month, in supposedly sophisticated New York, the country's biggest media market, there ran a craven five-part series on the 11 o'clock news called "Where Do They Get Those People . . . ?," a special report on where Geraldo and Oprah and Donahue get their freaks (the promo for the series featured Donahue interviewing a diapered man with a pacifier in his mouth).

The point is not only that this is trash journalism. That much is obvious. It is also essential to note that this was on an NBC-owned and -operated station. And who distributes Geraldo? The Tribune Company of Chicago. Who owns the stations on which these cross-dressers and transsexuals and skinheads and lawyers for serial killers get to strut their stuff? The networks, the Washington Post Company, dozens of major newspapers that also own television stations, Times-Mirror and the New York Times Company, among others. And last month Ivana Trump, perhaps the single greatest creation of the idiot culture, a tabloid artifact if ever there was one, appeared on the cover of *Vanity Fair*. On the



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cover, that is, of Condé Nast's flagship magazine, the same Condé Nast/Newhouse/Random House whose executives will yield to nobody in their solemnity about their profession, who will tell you long into the night how seriously in touch with American culture they are, how serious they are about the truth.

Look, too, at what is on *The New York Times* best-seller list these days. *Double Cross: The Explosive Inside Story of the Mobster Who Controlled America* by Sam and Chuck Giancana, Warner Books, \$22.95. (Don't forget that \$22.95.) This book is a fantasy pretty much from cover to cover. It is riddled with inventions and lies, with conspiracies that never happened, with misinformation and disinforma-

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tion, all designed to line somebody's pockets and satisfy the twisted egos of some fame-hungry relatives of a mobster. But this book has been published by Warner Books, part of Time Warner, a conglomerate I've been associated with for a long time. (*All the President's Men* is a Warner Bros. movie, the paperback of *All the President's Men* was also published by Warner Books, and I've just finished two years as a correspondent and contributor at *Time*.) Surely the publisher of *Time* has no business publishing a book that its executives and its editors know is a historical hoax, with no redeeming value except financial.

By now the defenders of the institutions that I am attacking will have cried the First Amendment. But this is not about the First Amendment, or about free expression. In a free country, we are free for trash, too. But the fact that trash will always find an outlet does not mean that we should always furnish it with an outlet. And the great information conglomerates of this country are now in the trash business. We all know pornography when we see it, and of course it has a right to exist. But we do not all have to be porn publishers; and there is hardly a major media company in America that has not dipped its toe into the social and political equivalent of the porn business in the last fifteen years.

Many, indeed, are now waist-deep in the big muddy. Take Donahue. Eighteen years ago Woodward and I went to Ohio on our book tour because we were told that there was a guy doing a syndicated talk show there who was the most substantive interview in the business. And he was. Donahue had read our book. He had charts, he knew the evidence, he conducted a serious discussion about the implications of Watergate for the country and for the media. Last month, however, Donahue put Bill Clinton on his show—and for half an hour engaged in a mud wrestling contest that was even too much for the studio audience. Donahue was among those interviewed for that WNBC special report about “Where Do They Get Those People . . . ?,” and on that report he uttered a damning extenuation to the effect that as Oprah and the others get farther out there, he too has to do it.

Yes, we have always had a sensational, popular, yellow tabloid press; and we have always had gossip columns, even powerful ones like Hedda Hopper's and Walter Winchell's. But never before have we had anything like today's situation in which supposedly serious people—I mean the so-called intellectual and social elites of this country—live and die by (and actually believe!) these columns and these shows and millions more rely upon them for their primary source of information. Liz Smith, *Newsday's* gossip columnist and the best of a bad lot, has admitted blithely on more than a few occasions that she doesn't try very hard to check the accuracy of many of her items, or even give the subjects of her column the opportunity to comment on what is being said about them.

For the eight years of the Reagan presidency, the press failed to comprehend that Reagan was a real leader—however asleep at the switch he might have seemed, however shallow his intellect. No leader since FDR so changed the American landscape or saw his vision of the country and the world so thoroughly

implanted. But in the Reagan years we in the press rarely went outside Washington to look at the relationship between policy and legislation and judicial appointments to see how the administration's policies were affecting the people—the children and the adults and the institutions of America: in education, in the workplace, in the courts, in the black community, in the family paycheck. In our ridicule of Reagan's rhetoric about the “evil empire,” we failed to make the connection between Reagan's policies and the willingness of Gorbachev to loosen the vise of communism. Now the record is slowly becoming known. We have, in fact, missed most of the great stories of our generation, from Iran-contra to the savings and loan debacle.

The failures of the press have contributed immensely to the emergence of a talk-show nation, in which public discourse is reduced to ranting and raving and posturing. We now have a mainstream press whose news agenda is increasingly influenced by this netherworld. On the day that Nelson Mandela returned to Soweto and the allies of World War II agreed to the unification of Germany, the front pages of many “responsible” newspapers were devoted to the divorce of Donald and Ivana Trump.

Now the apotheosis of this talk-show culture is before us. I refer to Ross Perot, a candidate created and sustained by television, launched on “Larry King Live,” whose willingness to bluster and to pose is far less in tune with the workings of liberal democracy than with the sumo-pundits of “The McLaughlin Group,” a candidate whose only substantive proposal is to replace representative democracy with a live TV talk show for the entire nation. And this candidate, who has dismissively deflected all media scrutiny with shameless assertions of his own ignorance, now leads both parties' candidates in the polls in several major states.

Today the most compelling news story in the world is the condition of America. Our political system is in a deep crisis; we are witnessing a breakdown of the comity and the community that has in the past allowed American democracy to build and to progress. Surely the advent of the talk-show nation is a part of this breakdown. Some good journalism is still being done today, to be sure, but it is the exception and not the rule. Good journalism requires a degree of courage in today's climate, a quality now in scarce supply in our mass media. Many current assumptions in America—about race, about economics, about the fate of our cities—need to be challenged, and we might start with the media. For, next to race, the story of the contemporary American media is the great uncovered story in America today. We need to start asking the same fundamental questions about the press that we do of the other powerful institutions in this society—about who is served, about standards, about self-interest and its eclipse of the public interest and the interest of truth. For the reality is that the media are probably the most powerful of all our institutions today; and they are squandering their power and ignoring their obligation. They—or more precisely, we—have abdicated our responsibility, and the consequence of our abdication is the spectacle, and the triumph, of the idiot culture. •

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