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The Press as Storyteller

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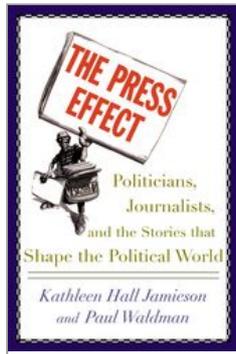
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The Press as Storyteller

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The Press Effect: Politicians, Journalists, and the Stories that Shape the Political World

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Abstract and Keywords

The reports that journalists offer are not called “stories” by accident. This chapter analyzes a series of cases, in wars, electoral campaigns, and policy debates, in which dramatic stories framed coverage and overwhelmed the facts. As a result, inaccuracies passed into news and the public was left misinformed.

Keywords: campaign news, framing, journalism, news stories, policy debates, public opinion, war news

The reports that journalists offer their readers, listeners, and viewers are not called “stories” by accident. By arranging information into structures with antagonists, central conflicts, and narrative progression, journalists deliver the world to citizens in a comprehensible form. But the stories that journalists tell and the lenses that color their interpretation of events can sometimes dull their fact-finding and investigative instincts.

In the illustrations that follow, we describe instances in which reporters failed to investigate and locate the facts that would have undercut the coherence of a story being told because the lens they adopted made fact-finding seem unnecessary or irrelevant. In the first set of cases, while replaying coherent, compelling stories, reporters missed facts that would have disrupted the story line even though the story line itself was being disputed. In the second set, involving events in times of crisis or war, government-blessed versions of fact were uncritically embraced and deceptions tacitly forgiven.

Of course politicians cast the world in stories, too. Political actors argue through the use of narrative for a number of reasons. First, they understand that narrative has persuasive power; when arguments are arranged into stories, they are more readily recalled and more easily believed. Second, they understand the reporter's preference for good stories around which news can be built. If a story is compelling enough, it can increase the chances that coherent but inaccurate information will pass through to the public, as is the case in our first example from the 1988 presidential campaign.

(p.2) The Horton Menace

The 1988 presidential election produced a telling case in which the press failed to challenge facts that sounded plausible because they completed a dramatic narrative. Seeing the story through the lens of strategy and tactics, reporters neglected their role as custodian of fact. What were the facts? William Horton, who had been convicted as an accessory to a felony murder for his part in a robbery in which a young man was murdered, was released from a Massachusetts prison on a furlough. He jumped furlough and traveled to Maryland, where he held a couple hostage, stabbed the man and raped his fiancée. The Bush campaign used the story to paint the Democratic nominee, Massachusetts governor Michael Dukakis, as soft on crime.

Whether or not the Horton story accurately symbolized Dukakis's record on crime, George H. W. Bush's embellishment of it and the press's failure to challenge the untruths the vice president told as he repeated the story provide an excellent example of the power of narrative to overwhelm concern about fact. On the stump, for example, Bush alleged that "Willie Horton was in jail, found guilty by a jury of his peers for murdering a seventeen-year-old kid after torturing him."¹ There is no direct evidence that Horton killed Joseph Fournier, and nothing on which to base a charge of torture. The untrue claim that Horton had cut off Fournier's genitals and stuffed them in the victim's mouth was whispered to reporters by Bush campaign operatives. There is some evidence that Horton may have been in the getaway car shooting heroin while his associates robbed and killed Fournier. A court official indicated that one of Horton's accomplices confessed to killing Fournier but the confession was disallowed because it had been secured without the reading of Miranda rights. Horton was convicted as an *accomplice* to a felony murder. In other words, there is no evidence that he killed Fournier and reason to believe that he did not.

Bush next alleged that Horton had murdered again when he jumped furlough. As he described it in an Ohio speech in September, “You remember the case of Willie Horton in the *Reader's Digest*, the guy was furloughed, murderer, hadn't even served enough time for parole, goes down to Maryland, and murders again, and Maryland wouldn't even let him out to go back to Massachusetts, because they didn't want him to kill again. I don't believe in that kind of approach to criminals.”² Bush's claim that Horton had committed murder while on parole was untrue. The Republican candidate's story, then, had three flaws: It increased **(p.3)** Horton's role in the crime for which he was originally in jail, it embellished the details of the crime, and it magnified the horror of Horton's post-furlough activities. There is symmetry in the notion that a killer has killed again; thus Bush's exaggerated version of the story cohered thematically with the undisputed facts, and that coherence increased its plausibility. When Dukakis failed to challenge the Bush claims on the assumption that they were unbelievable, the press, taking its cue in part from the Democrat, gave Bush a pass. While reporters discussing the story usually correctly stated its facts, they did not charge Bush with deception for making the story more awful than it actually was.

The Bush campaign also falsely asserted that the furlough program was Dukakis's invention (he had inherited it from his Republican predecessor), that Horton was a first-degree murderer not eligible for parole at the time of his furlough (he was in a category that made him eligible for parole), that there were hundreds of others who escaped from Massachusetts furloughs and committed violent crimes (none committed murder, and Horton was the only one who committed rape), and that Horton's name was not William but “Willie.” In fact, until June of 1988 Horton was referred to as William in all court documents and newspaper stories, including those of the *Lawrence Eagle-Tribune*, the Massachusetts newspaper that won a Pulitzer Prize for its exposé of the furlough program. The advertisement featuring Horton, which was paid for by the National Security PAC,³ referred to him as “Willie,” and Bush, who mentioned him in speeches in the summer of 1988 as well as in his debate with Dukakis on September 25, referred to him as “Willie.” An examination of newspaper stories reveals that once the Bush campaign began referring to him as Willie, most newspapers began calling him that as well. Only the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* continued to call him William—although they shifted back and forth between the two names. Given the controversy, one would assume that reporters would have gone back to look at the documents surrounding the Horton case, including the *Eagle-Tribune* series. Had they done so, they would have noticed that Horton hadn't been called Willie until Bush began talking about the case. One explanation for the lack of correction is that the name Willie sounded more lower class, more criminal, and indeed more “black” to reporters, and thus cohered with the narrative concerning Horton's crimes.

The question of Horton's name demonstrates that the stories on which political arguments are built have embedded within them a variety of facts both large and small, any of which may be subject to distortion. The fact **(p.4)** that reporters failed to call Bush on his claim that Horton had killed again while on furlough suggests the extent to which reporters, like the rest of us, often fail to check facts that seem compatible with compelling narratives. This is particularly true when the lens through which reporters are seeing is a strategic one, evaluating candidates' words and actions for their tactical intentions and electoral effects.

The Supreme Court and Election 2000

In the case of William Horton, the press permitted a compelling story—and the absence of clear rebuttal from Dukakis—to overwhelm the facts, allowing inaccuracy to pass uncorrected to the public. The denouement to the 2000 election showed how an existing narrative can drive interpretation in cases where the press is called to make sense of a finite set of facts. When the tightly fought 2000 race came down to a disputed state decided by a margin of less than one one-hundredth of one percent, the dominant narrative portrayed partisan division and a country equally divided between the “red states” supporting one candidate and the “blue states” supporting the other, as they were portrayed on the networks' electoral maps. Reporters had forecast two possible story lines about the basis for the Supreme Court decision. In the first, the conservative majority's disposition to minimize federal authority and reserve power to the states forecast a decision that would return the case to the Florida Supreme Court. A second story line suggested that the “conservatives” would find a way to hand the election to the individual most likely to strengthen their hold on the Court. Either of these was compatible with a 5-4 vote on the Court; neither was compatible with a 7-2 ruling. The ruling contained both a 7-2 decision and a 5-4 decision. Which would reporters feature?

Democrats and Republicans were divided over whether the court had decided 7-2 or 5-4. In fact, it had done both. “Seven justices of the court [Justices Stevens and Ginsburg disagreed] agree that there are constitutional problems with the recount ordered by the Florida Supreme court that demand a remedy,” said the Court. “The only disagreement [among the seven] is as to the remedy.” On the issue of whether there was a remedy available before a hard-and-fast deadline, two of the seven (Justices Souter and Breyer) held open the option to give it a try. In short, four of nine believed that there might be a remedy that would permit continuation of the count; five concluded that the election was over and for practical purposes a president elected.

(p.5) Republicans would argue that the recount requested by Gore had been unconstitutional. But that is not actually what the Court said. “Because it is evident that *any recount seeking to meet the December 12 date* will be unconstitutional for the reasons we have discussed,” the justices wrote, “we reverse the judgment of the Supreme Court of Florida ordering a recount to proceed” (emphasis added). One can parse the opinion into three questions: Was the recount to that point acceptable? Seven said no. Were the recount problems remediable? Seven said yes. (“It is obvious that the recount cannot be conducted in compliance with the requirements of equal protection and due process without substantial additional work.”) Were they remediable in the time remaining? Five said no.

If *Bush v. Gore* was a 7-2 ruling then the court acted decisively; if the ruling was 5-4, the court was instead closely divided. Republicans favored the first construction; Democrats the second. Just before midnight December 12, the Gore campaign issued a statement saying that Gore and Lieberman were “reviewing the 5-4 decision issued tonight by the Supreme Court of the United States” The next evening he seemed to lay fights over the size of the majority behind the ruling to rest with the words “The U.S. Supreme Court has spoken. Let there be no doubt. While I strongly disagree with the court's decision, I accept it. I accept the finality of this outcome.” The Bush camp, on the other hand, characterized the ruling differently. James Baker, appearing before Gore's concession, said that the Texas governor was “very pleased and gratified that seven justices of the United States Supreme Court agreed that there were constitutional problems with the recount ordered by the Florida Supreme Court.”⁴

More than six months after the Supreme Court ruling, the person who led the Bush team in the thirty-six days was still working to cast the decision as a 7-2 vote. In a letter to the editor of the *New York Times*, James Baker protested the fact that “you have once again described *Bush v. Gore* as a 5-to-4 decision . . . a point that is accurate but also incomplete The court's holding that the lack of uniform standards for the recount violated the 14th Amendment guarantee of equal protection was decided on a 7-to-2 vote, with one of two Democrats joining six of seven Republicans.”⁵ The statement by Baker says more than he may have intended. Presumably in their role as justices of the Supreme Court, individuals do not consider themselves members of a party, although one could appropriately characterize them as nominated by presidents who were either Republicans or Democrats. In his eagerness to establish that the important decision was rendered 7-2, Baker reopened a far more damaging charge—that the justices acted politically.

(p.6) Overwhelmingly, press accounts focused on the 5–4 ruling. The *New York Times* headline read: “Bush Prevails; By Single Vote, Justices End Recount.” “The Supreme Court effectively handed the presidential election to George W. Bush tonight,” wrote Linda Greenhouse, “overturning the Florida Supreme Court and ruling by a vote of 5 to 4 that there could be no further counting of Florida’s disputed presidential votes.” “Supreme Court Rules for Bush,” read the headline in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, “5–4 Decision Clears Path to the Presidency.” “A deeply divided U.S. Supreme Court on Tuesday night effectively handed the presidential election to Texas Governor George W. Bush,” said the first sentence. “A sharply divided U.S. Supreme Court last night handed Texas governor George W. Bush what may be a presidential victory,” wrote the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. In the *San Diego Union-Tribune* the headline announced “5–4 Ruling Puts Bush on Threshold of Victory.” The Court was “sharply split,” said the accompanying article.

Although reporters might have spent more time discussing the elements of the Supreme Court’s ruling with which seven members agreed, the 5–4 split—conservatives on one side, liberals on the other—fit so well with the larger story line of a divided country and a neck-and-neck election that it almost inevitably became the central point in describing the Court’s decision. This is not to say there was anything inaccurate about that characterization; on many of the key issues of substance, the Court was indeed divided 5–4. But this provides another example of the way frames highlight some facts and interpretations instead of others.

The decision by the Gore team to concede the day after the Supreme Court ruling was, in part, a reflection of its reaction to the way the media had played the story. The staff writers for the *Washington Post* note:

Could they fight on? Sure, Boies said. Should they? “It is not just making a decision of whether this is viable or sensible,” he said later. “It is whether the viability of it or the sensibility of it [is] great enough to consider it. It is not just a legal question.” It was a question about a divided country, and about the future of Al Gore.

All this was hashed and rehashed in early morning conference calls. At about 8:30, Daley and Gore spoke again. “The spin on the morning news was ‘It’s over,’ ” Daley noted. Even if they wanted to keep fighting, there was scant running room and vanishing support.⁶

A process that had begun when the vice president believed the media reports and called to concede ended when the vice president heard from an aide that the news interpretation precluded any further legal **(p.7)** challenge. The frame through which the Supreme Court decision was discussed provided a coda to the contested 2000 election. The reliance on the 5–4 frame opened a story line suggesting that a single Supreme Court justice had in fact selected the president of the United States. As we will argue later, when the so-called media recounts were complete, the press itself dismissed that story line.

Who Had Political Relations With That Company?

When an assumption is widely shared within the press, an allegation consistent with the assumption is more likely than it otherwise would be to travel uncorrected into news. The campaign finance scandals of the Clinton administration were telegraphed in one often repeated claim: those who gave money were invited to spend the night in the Lincoln Bedroom.

The Lincoln Bedroom first emerged as a symbol of selling access when it was revealed that the Clinton administration had rewarded large contributors by allowing them to spend a night in the White House, some in the Lincoln Bedroom. The story became a powerful symbol because it told of wealthy contributors in effect being able to purchase the right to temporarily occupy what is in the American civil religion a kind of sacred space by virtue of its association with a revered president. The proximity of the Lincoln Bedroom to both the Oval Office and the President's bedroom translates readily into a symbol of intimate access and proximity to power.

As the Enron scandal developed at the beginning of 2002, one of the key points of contention was, first, whether it was a business scandal or a political one, and, second, if it was a political scandal, who was implicated in it. Democrats argued that Enron in general and its chairman, Kenneth Lay, in particular were much closer to the GOP than to them. Observing that three quarters of Enron's contributions went to Republicans, Democratic consultant James Carville said to Tim Russert on *Meet the Press* on February 17, 2002, “This ludicrous idea, ‘Oh, they both got it,’ no, it was 73 to 27. If you lose the game 73 to 27, that is not a tie.” Republicans attempted to tell the story as one in which Enron spread its wealth to both parties. Supporting that view was a claim repeated in numerous media outlets: Ken Lay had spent a night in the Lincoln Bedroom during the Clinton administration. The Lincoln Bedroom story turned out to be false; although Lay had played golf with President **(p.8)** Clinton, he had spent the night in the White House only at the invitation of George H. W. Bush.

Because it was known that Clinton had rewarded contributors with nights in the Lincoln Bedroom, and it was also known that Ken Lay had given large amounts of money to many politicians, it was plausible that Ken Lay had rested in Lincoln's bed at Clinton's invitation. The claim originated on the *Drudge Report*, and was then picked up by the *Chicago Tribune* and *USA Today*. Subsequently, it appeared in, among other places, a news story in the *Washington Times*; editorials in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, *Portland Oregonian*, and *Augusta Chronicle*; and in a Newhouse News Service column by James Lileks distributed to multiple newspapers. It reached overseas, appearing in the *Times* of London, the *Sunday Age* of Melbourne, and the *Korea Herald*. Fred Barnes wrote it in the *Weekly Standard* and made the claim on Fox News's *Special Report with Brit Hume*. On the same network, Republican activist David Bossie said the same thing on Greta Van Susteren's *On the Record*. Republican media consultant Alex Castellanos made the claim on CNN's *Crossfire* on February 14, then again on ABC's *This Week* on February 17. That appearance was the only time anyone directly challenged the assertion. The exchange on *This Week* offers a good example of the way in which such claims survive untethered to fact.

Castellanos: Paul forgot—Paul forgot to mention that Ken Lay slept in the Lincoln Bedroom in the Clinton administration, not Bush.

Begala: No, that's not true, actually.

Castellanos: But anyway—yes, it is.

Begala: That's false. It's false.

Castellanos: But anyway . . .

Begala: Maybe Bush One, but no, not Clinton.

Castellanos: Anyway, what the Democrats are doing here . . .

Moderator George Stephanopoulos probably did not attempt to settle the factual dispute because he did not know whether the story was true or not. Instead, after Castellanos and Begala went back and forth, Stephanopoulos said, “Alex, let me talk a little bit more about the Republican strategy . . . ” Had Stephanopoulos stepped in to side with Begala, he would have been accurate, but might have risked the perception that his past work as a Clinton aide was compromising his role as a moderator. Would audiences have believed a former Clinton aide turned journalist in this kind of factual dispute? Ultimately the Lay-in-the-Lincoln-Bedroom story was debunked by Gene Lyons of the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* and **(p.9)** Brendan Nyhan in the on-line magazine *Salon*, but the correction did not diffuse into the national media. Mistaken information given plausibility by the past actions of Clinton and Lay and by its coherence with an existing narrative was thus able to help Republicans widen the sphere of responsibility for Enron to include Democrats. With each subsequent retelling, the story became less and less likely to be checked for accuracy. When a contested piece of information such as this arises, reporters have a responsibility to discover the truth, then sanction anyone who repeats a falsehood.

Tobacco, Taxes, and Canadian Mounties

When two sides are projecting competing outcomes from a piece of legislation, reports are likely to simply set their claims against each other and probe for tactical advantage. If the facts are checked, reporters are more likely to scrutinize the claims of those who have demonstrated a capacity to deceive the public in the past. If the contest is between the tobacco companies on one hand and groups such as the American Cancer Society and the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids on the other, the fact that internal documents had confirmed that the tobacco industry had lied about marketing to kids meant that the media were more likely to explore the accuracy of its arguments than those of the other side.

There was not a week in a three-and-a-half-month period in 1998 in which tobacco industry ads addressing an antitobacco bill sponsored by John McCain were not being aired. The McCain bill would have settled the states' suits against the tobacco industry by providing protection for the industry from class-action lawsuits in return for an increased tobacco tax and assurances that the industry would no longer advertise to the young through billboards near schools and the like. The industry's ad campaign was significant in part because it was the first time a large-scale, long-running nationwide broadcast ad campaign on a piece of pending legislation had run with negligible response from those on the other side. The only television ad by proponents of a “tough bill” against “Big Tobacco” was aired by the American Cancer Society for a single week in May in five states and nationally on CNN. By contrast, the tobacco industry's ads aired widely (in from thirty to fifty markets) on both cable and local spot broadcast. Much of the industry budget was spent on CNN, which did not air a single news piece evaluating the accuracy of the ads' claims.

(p.10) One of the industry ads featured Ron Martelle, identified as a former Canadian Mountie, who said, “The criminals that showed up in Cornwall threatened my life and the lives of my family. All because a tax that was supposed to protect our teenagers from smoking ended up hurting all of us, and as a result, teens purchased black market cigarettes.”

Illustrating the role the press should play in providing context for facts offered by those engaged in political debate, *New York Times* reporter Anthony DePalma noted that “many of the 47,000 people who live in Cornwall say Mr. Martelle is exaggerating, just as, in their view, he had tended to blow things out of proportion during the more than five years he was mayor.” The same article reported the attack of his opponents: “They point out that although he calls himself a former Mountie, he was in the force for only eight months . . . They also delight in pointing out that the company Mr. Martelle now works for, Forensic Investigative Associates of Toronto, represents the National Coalition Against Crime and Tobacco Contraband, a lobbying group for tobacco wholesalers, retailers and the major cigarette producers in the United States.”⁷

What else should reporters have told viewers? The tobacco industry ads implied a legitimacy that their claims lacked by providing on-screen citations to supposed forms of documentation. A number of the ads argued that the McCain bill would “create 17 new government bureaucracies . . . Washington wants to raise the price of cigarettes so high, there would be a black market in cigarettes with unregulated access to kids.”

By any reasonable definition of “bureaucracy,” this claim was false. The ads for the five tobacco companies source the “seventeen new government bureaucracies” assertion to an April 9, 1998 research note by David Adelman of Morgan Stanley. However, Adelman's “Industry Overview” was not an independent finding that there would be seventeen new government bureaucracies. Instead Adelman was quoting tobacco company CEO Steve Goldstone's April 8 speech at the National Press Club. And Goldstone did not use the word bureaucracies but “17 separate tobacco committees and boards.” Adelman's document also contained the following information: “Within the last three years, Morgan Stanley and Co. Inc., Dean Witter Reynolds Inc. and/or their affiliates managed or comanaged a public offering of the securities of RJR Nabisco.”

The statement “Lots of money for new government bureaucracy” is sourced to an article in the *Washington Post*. However, there is no backup for the assertion in the cited article. Instead it said, “President Clinton's new budget calls for spending nearly \$10 billion from the proposed national tobacco settlement on a wide variety of new initiatives . . . ”⁸ The **(p.11)** cited article referred not to the McCain bill but to a request in President Clinton's budget. On-screen citations for information, which have become commonplace in both candidate and advocacy ads in recent years, are a welcome development. As this case illustrates, the fact that someone offers citations does not mean that they are necessarily telling the truth.

And what of Martelle's claim that teens simply got their cigarettes on the black market created by the tax increase? In a May 19 adwatch on ABC, Aaron Brown evaluated both the industry ad claim that the McCain bill would produce a black market and the implication that kids would buy cigarettes there:

Narrator in ad: There will be a black market in cigarettes with unregulated access to kids.

Brown: The industry cites Canada as proof. In the early '80s when Canada increased cigarette prices, a black market did emerge. But something else happened in Canada the tobacco industry doesn't mention.

David Sweanor: Non-Smokers Rights Canada: The price went up in Canada, consumption among teenagers plummeted.

Brown: The number of kids who smoked every day dropped by 60% in little more than a decade. The tobacco companies know this. The evidence of their knowledge is contained in their own files. This Philip Morris strategic planning document from the early '90s states it simply.

Voice-over reading from Philip Morris document: “There is no question that increasing taxes will cause a decrease in smoking. This point is best illustrated by the present situation in Canada.” Five years earlier, a Philip Morris analysis of price increases concluded, “Price increases prevented 600,000 teenagers from starting to smoke. We don't need to have that happen again.”

As in the case of Brown's report, the press is more likely to deconstruct and critique the narrative provided by those it perceives to be powerful and manipulative. But one other element was missing from the context reporters should have offered: when Canada increased its taxes on cigarettes, the source for a black market—that is, a place where black marketeers could purchase cigarettes Canadians wanted to buy—was just over the border in the United States. With cigarettes in Canada subject to high taxes, would similar taxes in the United States give rise to a huge black market for Mexican cigarettes? From where would the black market come?

Why should we be concerned about the small amount of fact-checking of these ads? Survey data show that the deceptive claims of the ads were believed in markets with high airing, little adwatching, and little **(p.12)** rebuttal.⁹ So the deception succeeded. Anthony DePalma's *New York Times* piece and Aaron Brown's adwatch are examples of journalists upholding their responsibility as custodians of fact, evaluating claims, and investigating to determine accuracy. Unfortunately, many more people saw the tobacco industry's inaccurate advertising than saw these isolated corrections.

When one side in a policy debate makes a prediction about the effects of legislation, reporters have a responsibility to make judgments about the likelihood that those consequences will actually occur. This is particularly true of those opposed to a legislative change, who usually predict a dire outcome should a proposed bill become law. These campaigns conduct survey and focus group research to determine the arguments against the legislation that resonate most strongly with the citizenry; sometimes these arguments are reasonable and sometimes they are not. For instance, when automobile manufacturers and business groups argue against proposals to increase fuel efficiency standards for cars, they contend that higher fuel efficiency would result in lower safety, because when a small car collides with a large sport utility vehicle, the people in the small care are more likely to be killed; more small cars would equal more people being crushed by SUVs. Indeed some ads have shown an SUV at the point of impact with a small car. But if higher fuel efficiency meant smaller cars, the same logic would dictate higher safety, since fewer SUVs would be on the road to crush those in small cars. The questionable logic of the argument presented in the advertisements is seldom pointed out by journalists.

Although predicting the effects of legislation can require a measure of speculation, reporters can evaluate the factual and logical basis of forecasts without making categorical predictions about the future. Often, reporters avoid such evaluations because of the risk of seeming biased should they determine that one side is being less than accurate. But when the press fails to critically examine these predictions, it makes it difficult for the public to assess the case for and against proposed change.

The Press as Patriot: Four War Stories

On August 3, 1964, President Lyndon Johnson ordered the Navy to take retaliatory action in the Gulf of Tonkin after, he stated, the U.S. destroyer *Maddox* had been attacked by communist PT boats. The next day, in a nationally televised speech, Johnson defined the enemy action in the **(p.13)** Tonkin Gulf as “open aggression on the high seas against the United States of America.” He asked Congress to pass “a resolution making it clear that our government is united in its determination to take all necessary measures in support of freedom and in defense of peace in south-east Asia.”¹⁰ On August 10, Congress passed the Tonkin Gulf Resolution.

The narrative that initiated the United States's formal entry into the war in Vietnam was simple in its construction. The United States had been attacked. The attack constituted aggression on the high seas. The United States responded at once on the order Johnson gave “after the initial act of aggression.” The response of the military was heroic “in the highest tradition of the U.S. Navy.” The U.S. response was “limited and fitting.” The cause was just; the goal, peace. “Firmness in the right is indispensable today for peace,” said Johnson.

There was only one problem with the narrative. The U.S. destroyer *Maddox* had, in all likelihood, not been attacked. In 1995, Johnson's defense secretary, Robert McNamara, said that he was convinced the attack that prompted the U.S. retaliation had never actually occurred. As was later revealed in his secretly recorded audiotapes, President Johnson himself doubted whether the attack took place.¹¹ McNamara also said that had it not been for the Tonkin Gulf incident, the war resolution (which had been drafted months before) would have been sent to Congress later and would have been subject to a more extensive debate.¹²

The Tonkin Gulf case illustrates a number of important features of political discourse. First, what we believe is in part a function of what we are told by those entrusted with information we lack. Congress believed Johnson at a time when skepticism would have better served the country's interests. In turn, the country believed Johnson, for it had little reason to expect that a president would lie about such a consequential matter. Second, this example shows that facts matter. Policies are built on arguments describing the past, present, and future; if those arguments contain untruth, the consequences can be enormous. Third, it demonstrates that the impulse to bend the truth in order to maintain support for one's goals is a powerful one.

This is not to say that politicians persuade mostly by lying. Instead, they tell the public stories, selecting facts and arguments that support their interpretation of reality. In the context of events occurring in war zones overseas, the press is constrained by its often limited ability to confirm the factual assertions made by the government. As the next example shows, in times of crisis the press often refrains from punishing the government for deception, even when it learns the truth.

(p.14) Deception Excused: Air Force One

After word of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon reached President George W. Bush's staff at a school in Florida where Bush was making an appearance, Air Force One flew the president from Miami to a military base in Louisiana and from there to the Strategic Air Command headquarters in Nebraska before returning to Washington. Members of the press wondered why he had done this. Hoping to blunt a narrative in which Bush appeared to be the object of forces beyond his control rather than a decisive leader guiding the country through the crisis, Bush aides told reporters that there had been a "credible threat" against Air Force One. If that was true, then the moves across the country were the reasonable response of a vigilant Secret Service and a national security process to protect the commander in chief. If it was not true, then the Bush aides were deceiving reporters to create a false image of a President's behavior. "Credible evidence" that Air Force One was at risk was quickly disseminated. Bush adviser Karl Rove told journalists that the Secret Service had received a telephoned threat that "contained language that was evidence that the terrorists had knowledge of his procedures and whereabouts. In light of the specific and credible threat, it was decided to get airborne with a fighter escort."¹³

Reporters later learned that Rove and administration spokesperson Ari Fleischer had misled them. Administration officials had no record of any such call, and were unable to explain why Air Force One was less vulnerable in one location than another even if there had been such a message.¹⁴ Had such an act occurred in a political campaign, headlines would have reported the deception. Instead, the facts were largely buried. The country needed to believe in a decisive, commanding president in the anxious days after September 11, and the press was not disposed to feature evidence incompatible with that narrative.

People generally assume that the press plays an adversarial role to those in power and is quick to unmask, debunk, and challenge. In fact, reporters play this role selectively. If they assume that the country supports the person telling the story (in this case the president) and opposing narratives are not being offered by competing players, the tendency to challenge is dramatically curtailed. At the time of the Tonkin Gulf speech, Johnson was on his way to a landslide victory against Barry Goldwater. After assuming the presidency at the death of John Kennedy, LBJ had driven much of the Kennedy legislative agenda through Congress. His was a formidable presence. At the same time, the Tonkin Gulf **(p. 15)** Resolution was passed overwhelmingly by Democrats as well as Republicans. Only two dissenters opposed the Resolution. Faced with the allegation of an attack on the country and two parties united behind the president, reporters are disinclined to buck the tide.

Reporters sometimes say that their job is to tell the public “what it needs to know.” The perceived need can shift depending on how the public feels. In a time of crisis, do citizens “need” to know if the president's representatives have misled them? As these cases indicate, in times of national crisis, when reporters learn that they have been deceived they downplay the implications. Implying that Bush was not up to the job that first day seemed unpatriotic.

While campaigns and policy debates are characterized by competing narratives, in wartime the country is often presented with a single, uncontested story line. In both cases, the successful construction and use of narrative often determines the outcome of events. We illustrate this claim with a particularly gruesome tale from the Gulf War.

Did Saddam's Soldiers Throw Babies from Their Incubators in Kuwait?
With hundreds of thousands of soldiers massing in the Persian Gulf in the fall of 1990, America was on the brink of an undeclared war against Iraq over its invasion of Kuwait. The Bush administration needed not only to provide a principled justification for action, but to demonize Saddam Hussein and those who served him. To that end, Bush focused attention on a compelling narrative—albeit one built on a fabrication.

On October 10, 1990, a fifteen-year-old using the assumed name “Nayirah” appeared before the Congressional Human Rights Caucus. “I just came out of Kuwait,” she said. “While I was there, I saw the Iraqi soldiers come into the hospital with guns. They took the babies out of the incubators, took the incubators and left the children to die on the cold floor. It was horrifying. I could not help but think of my nephew, who was born premature and might have died that day as well.” At the end of her testimony, Congressman John Porter said, “We've passed eight years in the existence of the Congressional Human Rights Caucus. We've had scores of hearings about human rights abuses throughout the world . . . we have never heard, in all this time, in all circumstances, a record of inhumanity and brutality and sadism as the ones that the witnesses have given us today. I don't know how the people of the civilized countries of **(p.16)** this world can fail to do everything within their power to remove this scourge from the face of our earth . . . [A]ll the countries of the world . . . must join together and take whatever action may be necessary to free the people of Kuwait.” The audience for the account included the president, who told Porter that “he had seen it on CNN and that he was shocked at some of the things that he had heard.”¹⁵

It is unclear why President Bush should have been shocked, since the day before Nayirah's testimony, identifying the Emir of Kuwait as the source, he had alluded to babies taken from incubators. In that first telling, however, he added that the stories may not have been authenticated. Specifically, at a press conference October 9, he said “babies in incubators [were] heaved out of the incubators and the incubators themselves sent to Baghdad. Now I don't know how many of these tales can be authenticated but I do know that when the Emir was here he was speaking from the heart.” “Speaking from the heart” uses perceived sincerity as a test of reliability. This is one unusual instance in which the elder Bush used a technique similar to one employed often by his son, using good intentions—the contents of the Emir's heart—as a counter-weight to potential criticism or factual refutation.

There was at the time another source that confirmed the incubator story. After the young woman testified, her observations were corroborated by Amnesty International, which concluded that 312 infants had died after Iraqi soldiers removed them from their incubators.

After the first reference, in which Bush qualified the story by expressing uncertainty about its authenticity, the incident moved from an undocumented tale to a statement of presumed fact. Rallying troops en route to Iraq on October 28, Bush said that twenty-two babies had died and “the hospital employees were shot and the plundered machines were shipped off to Baghdad.”

The story then became a staple of the Bush drive to mobilize public support for the impending war. In a speech in Mashpee, Massachusetts on November 1, Bush said of Saddam Hussein and his forces, “They’ve tried to silence Kuwaiti dissent and courage with firing squads, much as Hitler did when he invaded Poland. They have committed outrageous acts of barbarism. In one hospital, they pulled twenty-two premature babies from their incubators, sent the machines back to Baghdad, and all those little ones died.” Speaking to the allied forces near Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, Bush said on November 22, “It turns your stomach when you listen to the tales of those that have escaped the brutality of Saddam, the invader. Mass hangings. Babies pulled from their incubators and scattered like firewood across the floor.”

(p.17) The story served two purposes: legitimizing the analogy between Hitler and Hussein, and rebutting the charge that the conflict was actually about retaining U.S. access to Middle East oil. The analogy to Hitler set justification for the war not on the pragmatic claim that the United States needed access to the region's oil but on the moral claim that Saddam's acts were an affront to humanity. So, for example, on October 28 at a rally in Manchester, New Hampshire, Bush said, “I read the other night about how Hitler, unchallenged—the U.S. locked in its isolation in those days, the late thirties—marched into Poland. Behind him . . . came the Death's Head regiments of the SS. Their role was to go in and disassemble the country. Just as it happened in the past, the other day in Kuwait, two young kids were passing out leaflets in opposition. They were taken, their families made to watch, and they were shot to death—a fifteen- and sixteen-year-old. Other people on dialysis machines taken off the machines and the machines shipped to Baghdad. Kids in incubators thrown out so that the machinery, the incubators themselves, could be shipped to Baghdad.” On October 15, Bush closed his litany of atrocities by saying “Hitler revisited.” It was only when Bush attempted to argue that Hussein was not simply the German dictator's equal but *worse* than Hitler that the analogy was criticized.¹⁶

The use of the story of the babies to dismiss the pragmatic claim and justify the moral one—making the war about human rights, not oil—was clear on October 23 when Bush told a fund-raiser in Burlington, Vermont, “They had kids in incubators, and they were thrown out of the incubators so that Kuwait could be systematically dismantled. So, it isn't oil that we're concerned about. It is aggression. And this aggression is not going to stand.” Speaking to the troops at Pearl Harbor on October 28, Bush said, “What we are looking at is good and evil, right and wrong. And day after day, shocking new horrors reveal the true nature of terror in Kuwait.” In his list of horrors was the story of the incubators.

On *Larry King Live* on October 16, Kuwait's ambassador to the United States, Sheik Saud Nasir al-Sabah, cited the young woman's testimony and the Amnesty International report as proof of atrocities in Kuwait. Eyewitnesses, he said, "came out and described all the brutalities of the Iraqis against my people . . . and they are also being corroborated by Amnesty International." Unnoted during any of this was the fact uncovered by *Harper's* publisher John R. MacArthur long after the war was over: "Nayirah" was the Kuwaiti ambassador's daughter and a member of the royal family of Kuwait.¹⁷ After its own investigations concluded that no babies had been removed from incubators, Amnesty International retracted its report.

(p.18) On March 15, 1991, not long after the fighting had ended, ABC reporter John Martin revealed that the incubator story was a fiction when he interviewed employees at the hospital where the incident allegedly took place. In a *60 Minutes* exposé in January 1992, Morley Safer talked with Andrew Whitley, executive director of Middle East Watch, who reported that a colleague went to the Adon Hospital after the liberation of Kuwait "and interviewed the doctors, and he was able to speak to people who said they had been on duty at that time, and that this incident didn't happen." Asked by Safer to explain, a representative of Hill & Knowlton, the powerhouse Washington lobbying and public relations firm that choreographed the campaign, said, "I'm sure there will always be two sides to a story. I believe Nayirah. I have no reason not to believe her. The veracity of her story was indelibly marked on my mind when I saw her and when I talked to her."¹⁸ In this telling, truth is relative and the perceived authenticity of the speaker is the test of veracity. But there either were or were not Iraqi soldiers in the hospital in Kuwait. If there were, they either did or did not remove babies from incubators and put them on the floor; they either did or did not kill hospital personnel; they either did or did not then ship the empty incubators to Baghdad; the babies either did or did not die. President Bush either did or did not have a warranted reason for outrage.

While the Gulf War may have been justified on any number of grounds, the incubator story was offered repeatedly by the war's proponents as primary evidence of the moral righteousness of the cause. In the Senate, where a resolution supporting the use of force was passed by five votes, the incubator story was cited six times during debate on the resolution. The incident was mentioned in floor debates about the war a total of twenty-two times.

In the President's rhetoric the synoptic statement justifying the war—"This aggression is not going to stand"—was built in part on a deception about babies and incubators. More important for our purposes here, the narrative was used to rebut the charge that the purpose of going to war was securing access to oil, as opponents of the war alleged ("No blood for oil" was the chant heard at protests of the war). Bush used the dramatic, heartrending story to reframe the conflict as a moral one in which no compromise was possible and the United States's actions, in the past or present, would not be subject to debate given the evil of the enemy.

The Nayirah tale is instructive for other reasons that speak to our need for public wariness and press vigilance when public discourse veers into emotional anecdote. MacArthur's book and Safer's exposé both **(p.19)** appeared in 1992, nearly a year after the war was over; the ABC News story was the first attempt to disprove the incubator story, but it appeared after the war ended as well. The incubator story raises a number of important questions: First, was the president deceived? What efforts were made to verify the facts used to justify consequential action? Did the president believe the account because he heard it from the Emir, saw Nayirah's testimony on CNN, and read Amnesty International's seeming corroboration? Was the analogy comparing Saddam Hussein to Adolf Hitler—which was made from the day Iraq invaded Kuwait—given more legitimacy by the incubator story? These questions are important because 200,000 troops were already on the ground when the incubator story emerged.

Why did it take so long for reporters to check the facts? Of course, journalists would have had trouble getting into Kuwait to talk with the medical personnel in the hospital. Nonetheless, why was there no skepticism about a story from a young woman speaking under an assumed name? Why no tests of her credibility? Didn't any reporter in Washington know enough about the family of the ambassador to recognize his daughter? Why didn't any reporter ask for a copy of her passport to verify that she was in Kuwait at the reported time? John MacArthur reported that Congressman Tom Lantos, the cochair of the Human Rights Caucus, knew before the hearing that "Nayirah" was in fact the ambassador's daughter. Although Congressman Porter denies knowing, the Kuwaiti ambassador himself claimed that both congressmen were aware of her identity. Why did no reporters ask Lantos or Porter if they had any information that would substantiate her claims?

Why didn't someone test the claim of Amnesty International by asking U.S. doctors who had visited Kuwait how many incubators a single hospital would be expected to have in use at a given time? Does Kuwait have an unusually large number of premature births? Why didn't reporters spot the contradictions in Bush's accounts? For example, in a speech in Des Moines on October 16, Bush said, "In a hospital Iraqi soldiers unplugged the oxygen to incubators supporting twenty-two premature babies. They all died. And then they shot the hospital employees." Did the soldiers unplug the oxygen or throw the babies to the ground? The story changed in various tellings. As C. Wright Mills observed in *The Sociological Imagination*, "The problem of empirical verification is 'how to get down to the facts' . . . The problem is first *what* to verify and second *how* to verify it."¹⁹

The reporter who uncovered Nayirah's identity did so while writing a book about propaganda and the Gulf War. John R. MacArthur told (p.20) *60 Minutes*, "I set out to find out, like any reporter does. And I started asking questions. And I finally heard a rumor that Nayirah was the daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador, so I used an old reporter's trick. I called up the embassy, and I said, 'Nayirah did a terrific job at the Human Rights Caucus, and I think her father must be very proud of her. And doesn't she deserve her place in history?' And the ambassador's secretary said to me, 'You're not supposed to know that. No one's supposed to know she's the ambassador's daughter.' "

The conditions of war made the press both more willing to accept the incubator story and less able to determine whether it was true. But in other cases, assertions that would have been quite simple to investigate have been accepted at face value because they cohered to form a powerful, coherent narrative.

Did the Patriots Intercept and Destroy the Scuds?

As Congress and the president once again debate the feasibility of deploying a missile defense shield, the ability of what Dwight Eisenhower called the "military industrial complex" to produce technology that shoots down incoming weapons should be open to question. We all remember watching the Patriot missiles blasting Scuds out of the sky, rendering Saddam Hussein's malevolence impotent in the face of our technological prowess. During the Gulf War, we were told that the Patriots worked nearly perfectly.

The rhetoric at the time reduced the Scuds vs. the Patriots to a tale of U.S. superiority, a rebuke to those who had doubted the Patriot. On February 15, 1991, President Bush visited the Raytheon plant that constructed the Patriot missiles. “The critics said that this system was plagued with problems, that results from the test range wouldn’t stand up under battlefield conditions,” he told the workers. “You knew they were wrong, those critics, all along. And now the world knows it too. Beginning with the first Scud launched in Saudi Arabia, right into Saudi Arabia and the Patriot that struck it down and with the arrival of Patriot battalions in Israel, all told, Patriot is 41 for 42: 42 Scuds engaged, 41 intercepted . . . Not every intercept results in total destruction. But Patriot is proof positive that missile defense works. I’ve said many times that missile defense threatens no one, that there is no purer defensive weapon than one that targets and destroys missiles launched against us. Thank God for the **(p.21)** Patriot missile.” Note that the President is actually claiming interception, not destruction. Hence the qualification “not every intercept results in total destruction.” But what the audience is supposed to hear is clear in the sentences that follow: The Patriot worked. Did it?

Later evidence indicated that the answer was no. Testifying before a congressional hearing in 1992, Secretary of Defense William J. Perry said that “I believe that the Patriot cannot deal with countermeasures,”²⁰ meaning that it could be easily fooled into missing its targets. The General Accounting Office indicated in 1994 that “the Patriot’s success rate may have been no better than 9 percent: four Scuds downed or disabled out of 44 targeted.”²¹ When a 1992 congressional hearing produced a report critical of the Patriot’s performance in the Gulf War, Raytheon lobbied successfully to prevent the report from being approved. The unapproved draft included the statement that “the public and the Congress were misled by definitive statements of success issued by administration and Raytheon representatives during and after the war.”²²

The Pentagon’s impulse to overstate the success of missile defense systems emerged again in 2001. On July 14, the system successfully intercepted a missile in a test conducted over the Pacific. “Bush’s Hopes for Missile System Get Boost With Successful Test,” said the *Wall Street Journal*. “Interceptor Scores a Direct Hit on Missile; Successful Test a Boost to Bush’s Shield Plan,” said the *Washington Post*. But ten days later, an article in the magazine *Defense Week* revealed that the test had been rigged—the missile was outfitted with a homing beacon that guided the interceptor toward it (and away from the “decoy” the system was supposed to avoid).²³ The revelation that the test had been rigged was the subject of few stories in major newspapers, all of which were buried on inside pages. Once again, the story of technological success was trumpeted prominently, while the subsequent correction, revealing that the performance was not quite as advertised, would have been noticed by far fewer people.

In sum, the stories we tell and that are told matter as do the stories that are never spun. Skillfully deployed stories are important because they persuade. A young woman tells a harrowing tale of murdered babies, and the story becomes an exhibit in rallying a nation to war. Past fact can bear directly on present-day decisions, as well. If, as generals and the President told us, the Patriot missiles reliably destroyed Scuds, then that fact might bolster our confidence that their manufacturer might produce a workable missile defense shield. But if the missiles were easily confused by countermeasures, just as the missiles in the missile defense (p.22) shield appear now to be, we might be more skeptical about claims that a workable technology is in the offing.

What these examples and the others we have cited have in common is that those who utilized them were able to present a dramatic narrative that played an outsized role in the debate of the moment, driving out relevant facts. As psychologists have known for many years, people don't evaluate situations and make decisions by conducting an inventory of all the information to which they have been exposed about a subject. Instead, both the press and the public use heuristics, often referred to as "information shortcuts," to make evaluation easier. One of the most commonly employed is the availability heuristic; we rely on what is most easily available in our memories. Because evocative images are more available in memory, they carry a greater importance in evaluations.²⁴ Dramatic, repeated, visually evocative materials can be tools of terror or vehicles that reassure. By repeatedly showing the hijacked planes hitting the World Trade Center towers, news increased our sense that such attacks were likely to occur. By repeatedly showing the towers collapsing, news magnified our fear that we would be trapped in a tall building as it collapsed. By repeatedly airing stories about anthrax, news increased the likelihood that we would be fearful as we opened our mail.

The dramatic narrative can thus drive out relevant facts. Ordinary Americans, the vast majority of whom would not be targets of an attack, feared opening their mail because of the stories of the few letters that contained anthrax, despite the billions of letters delivered spore-free. In 1991, Americans remembered the incubator and the success of the Patriot missile, understanding the war as a battle against evil in which victory was obtained in large part through the triumph of American technology. When voters in 1988 evaluated Michael Dukakis's crime record, the fact that the furlough program was begun by his Republican predecessor and that serious crime was down in Massachusetts were forgotten by most (although he mentioned them often), while the dramatic story of "Willie" Horton was remembered. In a contest between data and dramatic narrative, the narrative is likely to be stored and recalled.

The political narratives on which we have focused underscore the insight underlying Aristotle's observation that pity and fear are powerful drivers of stories, and Kenneth Burke's realization that identification is at the core of the powerful rhetoric. We respond by identifying with Nayirah and with the babies who have died because Saddam's soldiers have thrown them from their incubators; we fear criminals who, if released by well-intentioned but naive liberals, might prey on us. We fear **(p.23)** those who might harm the young while thinking that they are helping them. The story that unmasks the well-intentioned but harmful act is powerful because it serves to warn—Dukakis's furloughs, the black markets produced by taxation of tobacco in Canada.

As custodians of fact, journalists need to help viewers and readers make sense of statements about fact while not losing sight of those facts political actors are reluctant to acknowledge. We make no claim that this is a simple task, but it is at the core of the journalist's responsibility to the public. The task becomes particularly difficult when the relevant facts are embedded in a compelling narrative.

Notes:

- (1.) The documentation for our account of Bush's 1988 use of the Horton narrative is in Jamieson's *Dirty Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- (2.) Excerpted on the *McNeil-Lehrer News-hour*, September 16, 1988.
- (3.) This conservative political action committee, not the Bush campaign, paid for what is generally remembered as the "Willie Horton ad," featuring Horton's mug shot. Although Bush ran a well-known ad criticizing Dukakis's furlough program (known as "Revolving Door," it featured supposed menacing convicts traveling in and then out of a turn-stile), the Bush campaign itself did not air any ads containing Horton's photo.
- (4.) Tom Raum, "Bush Waiting for Gore Concession," Associated Press, December 13, 2000.
- (5.) "Bush v Gore: The Fateful Ruling" *New York Times*, July 7, 2001, p. A12.
- (6.) The Political Staff of the *Washington Post*, *Deadlock: The Inside Story of America's Closest Election*. New York: Public Affairs, 2001, pp. 234–235.
- (7.) Anthony DePalma, "Cornwall Journal: In Tax Debate, A Hero or a Tobacco Hireling?" *New York Times*, June 27, 1998, p. A4.
- (8.) Sandra Torrey, "Tobacco Funds Allocation Adds Settlement Pressure," *Washington Post*, February 3, 1998, p. A8.

- (9.) Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Everything You Think You Know About Politics and Why You're Wrong*. New York: Basic Books, 2000.
- (10.) Papers of the President, August 4, 1964, p. 627.
- (11.) Michael Beschloss, *Reaching for Glory: Lyndon Johnson's Secret White House Tapes, 1964-1965*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001, p. 39.
- (12.) Keith Richburg, "Mission to Hanoi: McNamara Asks Ex-Foes to Join in Search for War's Lessons," *Washington Post*, November 11, 1995, p. A21.
- (13.) William Safire, "Inside the Bunker," *New York Times*, September 13, 2001, p. A27.
- (14.) Mike Allen, "White House Drops Claim of Threat to Bush," *Washington Post*, September 27, 2001, p. A8.
- (15.) *60 Minutes*, January 19, 1992.
- (16.) David Lauter and John Broder, "Bush Rhetoric Grows but Aides Are Cautious," *Los Angeles Times*, November 6, 1990, p. A4.
- (17.) John R MacArthur, *Second Front: Censorship and Propaganda in the Gulf War*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1992, pp. 57-60.
- (18.) Morley Safer, "Iraqi Stealing Incubators From Babies May Have Been a Fraud," *60 Minutes*, January 19, 1992.
- (19.) C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1959, p. 125.
- (20.) David Chandler, "The Patriot: No Letup in War of Words," *Boston Globe*, April 4, 1994, p. 25.
- (21.) Ibid.
- (22.) Ibid.
- (23.) John Donnelly, "In Anti-Missile Test, Target Signaled Its Location," *Defense Week*, July 30, 2001.
- (24.) Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, "Availability: A Heuristic for Judging Frequency and Probability," *Cognitive Psychology* 5:207-232 (1973).