FEEDING FRENZY

How Attack Journalism Has Transformed American Politics

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MICHAEL DUKAKIS

While the judgmental evaluation of Hart’s frenzy is necessarily equivocal, no such ambiguity is possible about Michael Dukakis’s 1988 “mental health” controversy, one of the most despicable episodes in recent American politics. The corrosive rumor that the Democratic presidential nominee had undergone psychiatric treatment for severe depression began to be spread in earnest at the July 1988 national party convention. The agents of the rumormongering were “LaRouchies,” adherents of the extremist cult headed by Lyndon LaRouche, who claims, among other loony absurdities, that Queen Elizabeth II is part of the international drug cartel. The LaRouchies passed around leaflets headlined “Is Dukakis the new Senator Eagleton?” and after the convention they contacted numerous reporters and media organizations to follow up, stoking the competitive fires by telling each that rivals were already hot on the story’s trail. (ABC’s Sam Donaldson said he was personally approached by a LaRouchie who possessed press credentials, but all the others were telephoned.)

Shortly after the Democratic convention, the Bush campaign—with its candidate trailing substantially in most polls—began a covert operation to build on the foundation laid by the LaRouchies. As first reported by columnists Evans and Novak, Bush manager Lee Atwater’s lieutenants asked outside Republican operatives and political consultants to call their reporter contacts about ‘the matter. These experienced strategists knew exactly the right approach so as not to leave fingerprints, explains Steve Roberts of U.S. News & World Report:

They asked us, “Gee, have you heard anything about Dukakis’s treatment? Is it true?” They’re spreading the rumor, but it sounds innocent enough: they’re just suggesting you look into it, and maybe giving you a valuable tip as well.

At about the same time the Detroit News sent a questionnaire to Bush and Dukakis mildly reminiscent of the earlier New York Times grand inquisition, asking in part whether the candidates had ever been hospitalized or treated for depression or other mental illness. The Bush camp was delighted and began to alert key Republicans around the nation to the forthcoming Detroit story, which they hoped would include revelations about Dukakis’s past. This fed the already developing frenzy and brought to a boil the speculation in political circles—all of it reaching the ears of reporters. Incredibly, the fever pitch of gossip even broached the subject of Dukakis’s possible resignation from the ticket and the identities of his potential replacements.

The Bush strategists actually received little satisfaction from the Detroit News’s August 2 story, which contained no discussion of Dukakis’s mental history because Dukakis had refused to provide his medical records. But in anticipation of the story, the behind-the-scenes gossip had become so intense that a reporter from the Boston Herald asked Dukakis about the subject at a July 29 press conference. Dukakis merely shrugged and brushed the question aside, yet the Boston Globe (but not the Herald) printed an account of the encounter in the two bottom paragraphs of a page 6 article on July 30. Included was a brief explanation of the rumor and a notation that no evidence supporting it had been uncovered. Dukakis’s press secretary, Dayton Duncan, also issued a blanket denial that the candidate had ever been treated for any form of mental illness.

At this juncture the conservative Washington Times swung into action. On August 2 (the same day as the Detroit News’s nonstory), the Times published a front-page article entitled “Dukakis Psychiatric Rumor Denied.” The story was officially pegged to Duncan’s statement and the Globe’s report, but the paper also revealed that a Dukakis press aide had piqued its interest with a telephone call on July 28. As the Times editorially explained later, the aide wanted “to deny rumors that hadn’t been placed in print—and which we had no intention of printing. . . . Such denials traditionally produce news reports, especially when they’re unaccompanied by documentary proof.” With this highly questionable rationale for publishing a rumor without evidence, the Times’s August 2 story suggestively drew a strained parallel between Dukakis’s situation and Thomas Eagleton’s 1972 resignation from the Democratic ticket. This was child’s play compared to the thoroughly deceptive, front-page banner headline the Times ran two days later: DUKAKIS KIN HINTS AT SESSIONS.

The lead paragraph began, “The sister-in-law of Massachusetts Gov. Michael Dukakis said yesterday ‘it is possible’ the Democratic presidential candidate consulted ‘on a friendly basis’ with psychiatrist Donald Lipsitt.” (Lipsitt was a Dukakis family acquaintance who lived in their neighborhood.) Four paragraphs later the lead paragraph became clearer: “It’s possible, but I doubt it. . . . I don’t know.” This manipulation of the facts was so egregious that both of the bylined reporters quit the Times in protest. Incidentally, the psychiatrist in question, Dr. Lipsitt, was not even interviewed by the Times; when the Baltimore Sun contacted him, he emphatically denied treating Dukakis,
discussing any personal problems with him, or referring him to any other doctor.\(^6\)

Many newspapers, including the Sun and the Washington Post, had at first refused to run any mention at all of the Dukakis rumor since it could not be substantiated.\(^5\) But on August 3, an incident occurred that made it impossible, in their view, not to cover the rumor. During a White House press conference, a correspondent for Executive Intelligence Review, a LaRouche organization magazine, asked Reagan if he thought Dukakis should make his medical records public. A jovial Reagan replied, "Look, I'm not going to pick on an invalid." Reagan half apologized a few hours later ("I was just trying to be funny and it didn't work"), but his weak attempt at humor propelled into the headlines a rumor that had been only simmering on the edge of public consciousness. Opinions differ as to whether the "gaffe" was intentional. The Sun's Jack Germond says no, "Reagan was always making mischievous cracks without thinking." Steve Roberts strongly disagrees: "I was sitting twenty feet from Reagan when he said it, and I'm convinced it was a shrewd and calculated way of planting that story. Reagan and his staff knew much of the press was trying to ignore the rumor, but when a president says something like that you can't ignore it."

Whether spontaneous or planned, there is little doubt that "Reagan and the Bush people weren't a bit sorry once it happened," as CNN's Frank Sesno asserts. The Bush camp immediately tried to capitalize on and prolong the controversy by releasing a report from the White House doctor describing the Republican nominee's health in glowing terms.\(^5\) But this was a sideshow compared with the rumor itself. The mental health controversy yanked the Dukakis effort off the White House press conference, attracting still more public attention. False though it was, the charge nonetheless disturbed many Americans, raising serious doubts about a candidate who was still relatively unknown to many of them. "It burst our bubble at a critical time and cost us half our fourteen-point [poll] lead," claims the Dukakis staff's senior adviser, Kirk O'Donnell. "It was one of the election's turning points; the whole affair seemed to affect Dukakis profoundly, and he never again had the same buoyant, enthusiastic approach to the campaign." Dukakis lost the 1988 election for many reasons,\(^5\) and it would be foolhardy to contend that his residence would now be 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. However, the rumor added unfairly to his burdens, and Dukakis was treated shabbily.

As is usually the case, though, the candidate unnecessarily complicated his own situation. Until events forced his hand, Dukakis adamantly and stubbornly refused to release his medical records or an adequate summary of them, despite advance warning that the mental health issue might be raised. Gossip had circulated for years in Massachusetts about Dukakis's "deep" depressions after the death of his brother Stelian in a 1973 automobile accident and again in 1978 when he was defeated for reelection as governor.\(^4\) Dukakis's wife Kitty had called his reaction to the 1978 loss "like a public death," although it would be a strange individual who would not be considerably affected by such a voter rejection or by the death of a close relative. More to the point in 1988, a senior civil servant with direct access to Reagan and Bush White House aides delivered a very specific warning right after the convention to Dukakis adviser O'Donnell. The Bush side intended to undermine the Democrat's reputation by stoking the mental health rumor, the source said with assurance. Yet, even apprised of this fact, Dukakis still held firm for nondisclosure. Some of Dukakis's top staffers are convinced that the nominee mainly wanted to protect Kitty, fearing that a policy of complete openness on health records would eventually lead to requests for fuller information about his wife's past medical treatment and counseling for drug dependency. This protective was had been on public display before: In 1982 Dukakis lied about the purpose of Kitty's hospitalization, passing off her amphetamine dependency as hepatitis.\(^5\)

Finally, when Dukakis was confronted with the first queries about mental health in 1988, he reacted badly, giving curt replies and refusing all elaboration. Noted Ellen Hume, then of the Wall Street Journal, "Dukakis handled the matter so poorly that the press started to suspect he was covering something up. He fed our worst instincts, and he wasn't prepared to understand just how cynical and skeptical the corps has become."

Dukakis's failing in Hume's accounting was also the press's. Most of the aggressive reporting in this frenzy was directed at the victim of the rumormongering. Andrew Rosenthal of the New York Times recalls the "really awful" press conference with Dukakis's doctor:

First we questioned him extensively about whether Dukakis had ever gone to a psychiatrist, which would have supposedly proved [Dukakis] to be crazy in some way. Then once we established Dukakis had never gone to a shrink, we asked whether it was abnormal not to seek professional help when under as much stress as he apparently had been. The doctor was just dumbfounded; he said, "First you ask me if Dukakis is crazy because he went to a psychiatrist, now you ask me if he's crazy because he didn't go."
While focusing on the relatively innocent casualty, most journalists gave light treatment to the perpetrators. In retrospect, several newspapers people said they regretted not giving more attention to the LaRouche role in spreading the rumor, given what Hume called the "dirty tricksters." President Reagan also received no more than a light rap on the wrist in most newspapers and broadcasts for his successful move to highlight the rumor. "The incident was an outrage right from the get-go, but all the more so because of the president's misuse of his national platform," commented CBS's Dan Rather. And the press was far too reluctant to expose and alienate a source or two in order to piece together the clever rumor-marketing effort conducted by Republican party operatives. Kirk O'Donnell asked a question that begs attention from the press: "If they're pushing false rumors, why should they be protected?" Overall, one of the most important lessons of the Dukakis mental health frenzy is an enduring one, with applicability to many of the rumors discussed in this chapter. "The media are really liable for criticism when we get stampeded by competitive instincts into publishing or airing stories that shouldn't be on the record," says Nina Totenburg. "We were stampeded on the Dukakis story, and we should never have let it happen."

**DAN QUAYLE**

The megafrenzy of post-Watergate campaigns, the perils of Dan Quayle, became perhaps the most riveting and certainly the most excessive feature of 1988's general election. For nearly three weeks, coverage of the presidential campaign became mainly coverage of Quayle. Most major newspapers assigned an extraordinary number of reporters to the story (up to two dozen), and the national networks devoted from two-thirds to more than four-fifths of their total evening-news campaign minutes to Quayle. Combined with the sexy material being investigated, this bumper crop of journalists and stories produced, in the words of a top Bush-Quayle campaign official, "the most blatant example of political vivisection that I've ever seen on any individual at any time; it really surpassed a feeding frenzy and became almost a religious experience for many reporters." Balance in coverage, always in short supply during a frenzy, was almost absent. First one controversy and then another about Quayle's early life mesmerized the press, while examination of the most relevant parts of his record, such as his congressional career, got short shrift.

"You saw lots of reporters camped out at the registrar's office at DePauw University [Quayle's alma mater] and at the National Guard headquarters in Indiana, but you didn't see many talking to people on the Hill about what sort of reputation he had," said David Beckwith, then of Time magazine and now Quayle's press secretary. It is not surprising to find Quayle's staff criticizing the press. What may startle observers who view the media as thin-skinned and defensive is their widely shared retrospective agreement with the charge that the Quayle frenzy was chock-full of excesses (see table 5.1). Even the minor but revealing digs at Quayle are well remembered by concerned journalists. U.S. News & World Report's Michael Barone recalled that CBS's estimate of Quayle's financial worth, broadcast at the GOP convention, was an astounding six hundred million dollars: "It was part of the press's irresponsible attempt to paint Quayle as a mindless rich kid, to put him into a slot that he didn't quite fit." (While Quayle will eventually inherit a large family trust fund, his total assets in 1988 totaled approximately one million dollars.) Another previously mentioned aspect of the press's "slotting" of Quayle at the convention was an insistence by some broadcasters on calling him "J. Danforth Quayle III" rather than "Dan," by which he was usually known. This denial of a courtesy commonly extended to all politicians was decried by Roger Mudd: "The one thing you don't do is make fun of a person's name. With [the surname of] Muldoon I've been through it myself, and it's probably the cheapest shot you can take at anybody."

Of course, it was the big-ticket items about Quayle—his National Guard Service, the alleged affair with Paula Parkinson, and his academic record—that attracted the most attention. As discussed in an earlier chapter, the question of whether Quayle used special influence to gain admission to the National Guard and avoid the Vietnam War draft when he graduated from college in 1969 served as the original lightning rod for criticism of the young senator. At the convention, wild rumors flew, such as the false one that Quayle's family had traveled to Indiana on August 19 at the conclusion of the Republican's national conclave. At Huntington, Indiana, a hometown crowd of twelve thousand had gathered to root for Quayle, and in a classic setup that will be examined further in chapter 8, Quayle answered questions from a swarm of reporters as Hoosiers alternately cheered the candidate and booed the journalists. This threatening atmosphere may explain what NBC's John Chancellor called
The News-Gazette's hearsay had passed for records and memories to be complete. But the December 31, 1987, p. 10. Neither the university president nor the college professor cleared Jackson completely; too much time sources certainly did not present an airtight case meriting publication of damaging information about a presidential candidate.

36. Hart refused to answer Taylor's questions, as well as this one from Tom Olliphant of the Boston Globe: "Except for the times you and your wife were separated, has your marriage been monogamous?"
39. William Dickey, "In Bed with the Press," Washington Journalism Review 9 (September 1987): 17. In 1990 the Arkansas Gazette followed the New York Times' precedent by asking each candidate for governor whether he had ever used illegal drugs or engaged in extramarital sex (in addition to requests for tax returns, medical records, and financial data). The sex question was dropped before all candidates were polled. See Hotline 3 (March 15, 1990): 5-6.
41. See Michael Wine, "In Bed with the Press," Washington Journalism Review 9 (September 1987): 17. In 1990 the Arkansas Gazette followed the New York Times' precedent by asking each candidate for governor whether he had ever used illegal drugs or engaged in extramarital sex (in addition to requests for tax returns, medical records, and financial data). The sex question was dropped before all candidates were polled. See Hotline 3 (March 15, 1990): 5-6.
42. Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, "Behind Those Dukakis Rumors," Washington Post, August 8, 1988, A13. Reporters from six major news organizations (all three networks, the Washington Post, U.S. News & World Report, and the Los Angeles Times) said they had been contacted by Bush operatives about the rumor—and in addition, they knew of colleagues at other outlets who had also been called. See also Thomas B. Rosenstiel and Paul Houston, "Rumor Mill: The Media Try to Cope," Los Angeles Times, August 5, 1988, 1, 18.
43. Several reporters mentioned this nife speculation during interviews. Evans and Novak, "Behind Those Dukakis Rumors," also included a reference to it in their column.
44. By Ralph Z. Hallow and Amy Bayar, A1, 6.
45. "Invalid?!," Washington Times editorial, August 5, 1988, F2. This editorial was more explicit; the August 2 story made a brief reference to the aide's unsolicited call, however.
46. By Amy Bayar and Gene Grabowski, August 4, 1988, A1, 8.
52. Another Massachusetts-based incident also fed the Dukakis rumor. A past president of the state psychiatric society, who had owned an upscale mental health clinic, purchased land that was chosen by the Dukakis administration as the site for a new prison building—guaranteeing the landowner a handsome profit. The FBI had been investigating whether special favors were involved, and this apparently encouraged groundless speculation that the owner was being paid off for covering up
Dukakis's medical history. (The FBI dropped the investigation, incidentally.) See

54. Conservative Ed King ousted the one-term governor in a Democratic primary;
Dukakis had his revenge four years later when he staged a successful comeback
and defeated King to regain the statehouse.

55. Andrew Rosenthal, "Dukakis Releases Medical Details to Stop Rumors on

56. Dennis King, in Lyndon B. Johnson, p. 122, commented upon "the usual [media]
reluctance to cover anything relating to LaRouche."

57. The network Quayle coverage on evening news shows, August 18–27, 1988,
compiled by my research assistant Leslie Greenwald from Vanderbilt University's
Television News Index and Abstracts (Nashville, Tenn.: Vanderbilt Television News
Archive, August 1988), was as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Network</th>
<th>Total Number of Quayle Stories</th>
<th>Total Quayle Minutes</th>
<th>Total Lead* Minutes for Quayle</th>
<th>Percentage of Total Campaign Coverage Devoted to Quayle</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABC</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>49:50</td>
<td>35:00</td>
<td>85.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>CBS</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>42:50</td>
<td>32:40</td>
<td>67.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>NBC</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>38:20</td>
<td>30:20</td>
<td>68.2</td>
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* "Lead" means the first item on the evening news.


59. Quayle's official 1988 financial statements showed his assets amounted to
between $859,700 and $1.2 million.

60. Retired Major General Wendell C. Phillipi, a former senior official of the
Indiana National Guard, admitted that he was contacted by Quayle in 1969 and
called Alfred F. Ahner, a ranking officer in the guard. Phillipi was then managing
editor of the Indianapolis News, a paper owned by Quayle's grandfather. Ahner
did give Quayle any preferential treatment, and guard vacancies apparently exis
ted at the time of Quayle's application. Ahner and many others noted that calls
from former guard officials such as Phillipi seeking help for guard applicants were
quite common in the Vietnam era. Undoubtedly Quayle received extra attention be
because of Phillipi's rank, and his swearing-in may have been expedited as well. But,
can't the family connections Quayle used were probably different than those employed by other relatively well-connected, upper-middle class families at the time. See Michael Isikoff and Joe Pichirillo, "The Quayle Furor: Questions Linger," Washington Post, August 26, 1988, A1, 6.

61. Beth Barrett and Mark Bamhill, "Former Lobbyist's Lawyers Say She Told

62. Lois Romano, "Parkinson Silent on Quayle Trip," Washington Post, August 18, 1988, C2; Michael Isikoff and Joe Pichirillo, "Allegations Called 'Lies' by


64. Engberg makes a valid point when he notes, "In investigative reporting
we're rarely involved with witnesses who are the kind of people you'd want to invite
to your sister's wedding. Individuals with checkered pasts are frequently the only
ones in the room." But caution is in order when dealing with such people; they are
sometimes schemers and manipulators well trained in the media arts.

65. See David Rogers, "Bush Campaign Manager Atwater, Often Viewed as

66. The attorney is not included in this number; he had never heard of "Dawn"
until one of Jenrette's closest aides called him and mentioned the name in the middle
of this flap.

67. The best recollection of Indiana political observers and Bayh campaign
veterans is that the rumor never surfaced on the air or in print in 1980. Indeed, the Bayh
campaign appears to have had no hard evidence that the plagiarism had occurred.

68. The interview was conducted on Wednesday evening, August 17, 1989.


70. See Aaron Friewald, "Prisons Director Defends Quayle Accuser's Isolation,"
Legal Times, December 19, 1988, 1. See also Norman Solomon, "Quayle Bait," San

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