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Media and Democracy: Prospects and Problems

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Media and Democracy: Prospects and Problems

Cover Page Footnote

Eleanor Clift is a contributing editor for Newsweek and a panelist on The McLaughlin Group. Tom Brazaitis is the Washington senior editor for the Cleveland Plain Dealer. This is a lightly-edited transcription of their talk at a Sacred Heart University Public Forum on July 24, 2003, as Visiting Woodrow Wilson Fellows.

ELEANOR CLIFT AND TOM BRAZAITIS

*Media and Democracy:
Prospects and Problems*

Tom: We've spent the week fielding questions, and we had pretty much thought you had run out, but since you are here, apparently not. I do want to start by thanking the people here. We've had a wonderful month here this week. *(laughter)* We've been going from 8 in the morning until 8 at night, and nobody seems to mind if we stumble over our words and repeat ourselves and carry on incoherently because sometimes we forget what we're saying. Everybody has been warm and hospitable to us. We arrived here last Sunday, and had dinner with some of the coordinators for the program we'd be working with, and with our host, Bud Stone, on his estate, which is not far from here. I never knew college professors lived like this. He offered us one of his cars. That was a refreshing start. Then we ran into Mary Lou DeRosa at our apartment. She came in staggering under a fruit basket she could hardly lift. I don't know what she had in mind as far as what we might be eating: it was bananas and peaches and plums and cherries and strawberries. It took us a half-hour to load it into the refrigerator. You are all welcome to come over after this if you want some fruit, because we never got a chance to eat everything. We were constantly being fed: we had meal after meal after meal. This is a good life, we've decided, and at the very least, these are very good hosts.

Eleanor Clift is a contributing editor for Newsweek and a panelist on The McLaughlin Group. Tom Brazaitis is the Washington senior editor for the Cleveland Plain Dealer. This is a lightly-edited transcription of their talk at a Sacred Heart University Public Forum on July 24, 2003, as Visiting Woodrow Wilson Fellows.

We were very delighted to be addressing for the most part Master's students. The undergraduates are off having fun or something for the summer, and so the Master's students, mainly teachers, were on campus. This is the first time we had done that. In most of our Woodrow Wilson appearances, we had appeared before undergraduates and we've had some pretty stony silences when we were expecting questions, because undergraduates are always afraid to ask a question, for fear that they'll embarrass themselves in front of their friends. Believe me, these teachers are not afraid to ask. It was hard for us to get a word in edgewise some of the time, to tell you the truth. I myself have a teacher's certificate, but it's weeks like this that remind me that teaching is really hard work, and I'm glad I chose to be in journalism. Some of these classes ran for two and a half hours, and to keep them at a provocative level, I came up with a topic that I thought was perfect for Sacred Heart University, and that was: Will an atheist ever be President? Now, that's because I was educated by Jesuits: that's where you get these kind of questions, you see.

One other thing I forgot to tell you about our hospitality is that we have a suite over in Jefferson Hill, with a kitchen and a living room and cable TV, which we never got to watch, by the way. Then we were shown our beds, and, well, they were bunk beds. We didn't have one on top of the other. Eleanor had a low bed on one end of the room and I had a high bed on the other. Before she showed us this, Mary Lou said, "You know, you're a Washington power couple. We're really glad to have you here." So after she was gone and we were in bed and the lights were turned out, I was just about falling asleep and I heard Eleanor from across the room: "Tom, do you think Andrea Mitchell and Alan Greenspan would do this?" (*laughter*)

Anyway, we've been going pretty strong for quite some time, when this afternoon we were coming over to do our last class and Eleanor ran into Jim, who runs these Master's degree cohorts, along with Harry and Bud. Jim said, "You know, you look kind of tired. Maybe you'd like the afternoon off," and Eleanor hugged him. She actually hugged him. But now we are refreshed, and we are ready for your questions. I will say that we'll leave Sacred Heart University several pounds heavier, but we truly feel enlightened. And now my co-host for the evening, the voice of reason on *The McLaughlin Group*, and my wife, Eleanor Clift.

Eleanor: Well, first of all, I second everything Tom said about the welcome that we've got here. We really have enjoyed being with you all. It's a treat for me to be somewhere where I can actually finish a sentence without being interrupted. Normally on *The McLaughlin Group*, as soon as I begin to speak, I can see the guys levitate from their chairs, ready to pounce and interrupt me, and the show feels less like a televised public affairs show and more like a food fight. I've learned how to interrupt. If you didn't interrupt, the whole show would go by without you. But I still have trouble holding the floor, and I think on my tombstone it will probably say, ``Let me finish." (*laughter*) It was once said that ``*The McLaughlin Group* without Eleanor Clift is like a fox hunt without the fox," and as the years go by, I appreciate that analogy more and more. As soon as I start speaking, they chase after me like I've said something totally outrageous. I know that's not true. The show is the creation of John McLaughlin, formerly Father John McLaughlin, and I feel like I'm in the heart of McLaughlin country here, because he taught at Fairfield Prep and Fairfield University, and I think even at Notre Dame High School, and this is where he perfected his *shtick*. This morning we had breakfast with a Jesuit father, Al Hicks, and he recalled the days when he knew John McLaughlin, and knew him by the nickname of J.J., and I can't wait to go back to Washington tomorrow and say, ``Hi, J.J."

The show is set up a lot like a classroom in a Jesuit school. The beadle is the first person who speaks on the show, and Pat Buchanan is the original beadle. That's b - e - a - d - l - e. It's a church term. It's the person who follows behind the bishop with the incense. Pat Buchanan is a good Catholic boy, and he and John have had a friendship that goes back to the Nixon administration. John likes to say of Pat that he keeps under his chair an Uzi and a set of rosary beads, which signify both his religiosity and his pugilistic nature. I also notice that the world headquarters for GE are here. GE has been the dominant advertiser for *The McLaughlin Group* for the last twenty-one years. Actually, since Jack Welsh has retired, they are diversifying, and I think that they feel that the people who watch *The McLaughlin Group* are getting too old to go out and buy a new refrigerator, so they don't advertise as faithfully. But Jack Germand, one of the original panelists on the *Group*, who always had a very wry sense of humor, and I did a show

for advertisers at one of the political conventions some years ago, and Jack got up and thanked GE for providing the means for John McLaughlin to dumb down not only America but the entire world. It was not a politic remark, and you'll notice that Jack Germand is no longer on *The McLaughlin Group*.

In the spirit of tonight, which is supposed to be a dialogue about media and democracy, I have to report that *The McLaughlin Group* is a total dictatorship. John runs everything. We have typically no say in what the issues are, and sometimes he will survey the group if we have too many issues, and ask which one we think should be dropped. If we reach a consensus, he will generally overrule it and go with something else. He loves to shout out "Wrong" in private life just as he does on television. He has told me, however, that he did get his training for television as a teacher, and that the best and the most memorable teachers are those who project themselves as characters. I have met some of his former students from Fairfield Prep, and they describe him coming into the classroom in his long, flowing robe with a velvet rope tied around the middle, white gloves, and a homburg, and he would hand the homburg to the beadle – the hall monitor, I guess; the teacher's pet – and pluck off the gloves a finger at a time and with a great flourish drop them into the hat. He, in effect, treats the show the same way he does his classroom, and so being in the company of a Catholic institution, I feel like it's an extension of *The McLaughlin Group*, but a much more civilized *McLaughlin Group*.

And there isn't as much demand here to come up with predictions, that's the other thing. The signature of the show is that you always have to come up with a prediction every week, and sometimes they get pretty ridiculous. My favorite in the ridiculous category is when Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev some years ago was quite ill, Mort Kondracke, one of the panelists, predicted that Brezhnev would die someday. (*laughter*) Now that's an all-purpose one that I'm saving! John does come from the conservative side of the spectrum. He was a columnist for the *National Review*. But he has not been particularly enamored of President Bush, and the line that he uses is "Bush doesn't have the nuance of Ronald Reagan." He's also been quite skeptical of the war, and I actually heard him say the other day, "I used to be on the far right, now I'm on the far left." Well, hardly. But it does make for some interesting discussion, so I'm hoping that you will

MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY

5

pepper me with questions tonight to get me in good working order for the show, which I will tape when I arrive back in Washington tomorrow. And again, thank you for a very fun and fulfilling week.

Question: A question for Eleanor. I'm fascinated by your description of the rules of the game that it sounds like you more or less have to fit yourself into. If you could change those rules, or if this were your program, and you had the kind of sponsorship that would allow you to shape the political discourse in a different way, would you do anything differently? If so, how would you reshape that kind of discussion?

Eleanor: I would probably run a deadly show that would run on PBS and wouldn't attract many viewers. I've got to give John McLaughlin his due. He has a performer's sense, and that quick confrontational conversation is appealing. He's lasted for twenty-one years, and last year he was put into the Broadcast Museum of Radio and Television Hall of Fame. He frames issues in such a way that there is very little time to talk, but where the two sides are sharply defined, so he is always going to get a fight. In commercial television today you've got to have heat. You can't simply have light, or it would be a different show. It would air on PBS. And I know some years ago, Judy Woodruff, who's now with CNN, explored doing a talk show with all women, and she was never able to get any funding for it. There actually is one show that is all women, called *To the Contrary*, but it's not a top-rated show. I think combat works in today's society, and if you want something else, you need to read patiently on the Internet or you need to turn on Jim Lehrer, which I do almost every night.

Question: I'm sure everyone is more interested in your opinion than mine, but what underlies my question is the real worry that when you talk about entertainment values you are talking about something quite a bit different than news values and information values. Not that there can't be an overlap, but it seems to me that we've swung very far to the entertainment side and the ratings side and the commercial viability side, and that worries me. And that's why I framed the question: If you had your druthers, would you see a role for a show that operates a bit differently?

Eleanor: Well, *Washington Week in Review* has lasted a good number of years. I think we live in a wonderful media marketplace, so there is room for a lot of things. But your general point is well taken, that the entertainment needs have overtaken particularly a lot of cable networks, where everything has to be breaking news, the top story, and they do go for the tabloid stories over other things.

Tom: My comments are from someone who is not on the show but who is a journalist and a consumer of this and other shows – and I assume you're still talking about talk shows: we haven't got into the rest of the media yet and its entertainment value, just about talk shows. If you compare the *Washington Week in Review* with *The McLaughlin Group*, the temptation is to say that *The McLaughlin Group* is all fizz and no substance, it's all entertainment and no depth, whereas the very mannerly *Washington Week in Review* appears to be much more substantive. I would argue, however, from a reporter's standpoint, that the people who are debating, and they are debating, on *The McLaughlin Group* are every bit as informed about what's going on in Washington as those on *Washington Week*, and that the format compels them to get their ideas out quickly and to tell the truth about what they think about issues, because you don't have time to dilly-dally around with "On the one hand . . . On the other hand . . ." An awful lot of useful information comes out, and I think it has a second value, and that is that these opinions are delivered with passion. McLaughlin has said that that's what he looks for most in a panelist: being able to bring passion to your interpretation of news events. In a country where passion is sadly lacking in our political life, I think it's a good thing. If it were the only show on television, I don't think that would be enough. But because it isn't, it's valuable, and I also think that while *McLaughlin* was once thought of as way over the top in terms of clash journalism, it has been superseded in that regard by many, many other shows and looks somewhat tame by comparison these days.

Eleanor: Actually, McLaughlin likes to say that he wants to create an atmosphere where panelists will blurt out what they actually think. Some years ago I left *Newsweek*, where I've spent virtually my entire adult life, and I went to the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Los Angeles Times* was really uptight about any of their reporters expressing

anything that resembled an opinion in public. So they said, ``You can do *The McLaughlin Group*, but you must say `My sources tell me . . . I've been told . . . Analysts say . . .' " And I went on *The McLaughlin Group* and I got all those phrases out, and about halfway through the show, John looked over at me and called me ``Cop-out Clift." It is a fast-paced show, but I think Tom is right: people do bring a knowledge base to what they are saying, and I must say I have never failed to get outraged – and I apparently do that to my fellow panelists, because this is not manufactured emotion. You have so little time to speak, and you are so anxious to get your point in that it's total concentration. The show is not live, except under unusual circumstances, but it's live to tape. We never stop and do anything over. I think once in twenty-one years they excised something John said that was totally inappropriate. If one of us say something that we regret, he keeps it in. Even better! You could utter a career-ender in this sort of hothouse atmosphere, and I've had to utter some apologies over the years, and I've had to explain to my editors at *Newsweek* what I really meant to say. But for the most part I have survived, and so has the show, and I think that really is a tribute to McLaughlin.

Now John says that sometimes I am a victim of Stockholm syndrome, because I've grown to love my captors. But I've been with John now for a number of years, and while I've certainly gotten frustrated many times with him, I appreciate the intellectual rigor he brings and the zest for life. He's now a man in his mid-seventies, and when many people would be lying on a beach somewhere, he goes off to the Middle East to see for himself what's going on. I admire his eagerness to always learn something new and to question it.

Question: I appreciate your presence on *The McLaughlin Group*. I've watched it for years, and you redeem the show. Two questions. One, would you comment on the recent FCC hearings? I heard on the radio this morning that President Bush is going to veto the thing that's moving through Congress if it gets to him. I'm very concerned about that. And secondly, I heard just tonight that part of the 9/11 report that came out included a poll in Reuters that said one out of three Germans believe that the U.S. had something to do with the attack on the Twin Towers, that there was foreknowledge, and that the head of Pakistan's CIA was in D.C. around that time and had wired a good deal of money to Mohammed Atta. I wonder if you could comment

on any of that.

Tom: Starting with the FCC, it's a topic that we talked about in our classes. The FCC ruling, as handed down some weeks ago, would expand the right of the media conglomerates to increase their hold on the markets. Now the limit on television reach is at 35%. I don't know if that's of all markets, but they would expand that to 45% under these new rules, and in effect close out an awful lot of smaller stations and continue to homogenize the delivery of news and information with fewer and fewer sources of delivery. This is happening throughout the media, which we'll probably get into before this is over, but it's most apparent in television and radio. The FCC did this despite a torrent of objections from the public. I don't remember the number anymore, but it was in the millions. Tons of e-mails, letters, testimony from the public saying, "We don't want this to happen." But of course the networks in particular, which now are owned by Viacom or Disney, or part of AOL-Time Warner, or Rupert Murdoch's purview, were pushing very hard for greater access to bigger markets, and that is the way the FCC went by a narrow 3 to 2 vote. Nevertheless, that was enough to put the rules in place.

Well, it came to Congress just this week for a vote, and there's been a lot of buildup to it. John McCain has been one of the leaders in objecting to this rule-making. But it was stunning to us that the House of Representatives yesterday voted 400 to 27 to overturn the FCC's ruling. Now the House of Representatives is a Republican house, as is the Senate, and they knew that the Republican president, George Bush, had said he would veto any action by Congress to overturn these regulations. Nevertheless, they overwhelmingly voted to overturn them because they are answering to the people. It was a wonderful demonstration that people still have some clout out there, that if they exert themselves in enough numbers with enough passion, Congress will listen. The same result or a similar result is expected in the Senate. They may even try to restrict even further the ability of television stations to own these properties, actually forcing some sell-offs of existing property to try to keep competition alive in the marketplace.

Bush's threat to veto still stands, but there was some analysis in the news today that suggests that because they are all on the same political team, and this would be Bush's first veto, they don't want to have him

MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY

9

be embarrassed by it being dramatically overridden, which seems likely to me, based on this House vote and the expected Senate vote. They may find a way to do this without Bush having to invoke the veto, but I think the FCC rules are finished, and I think Chairman Powell, the chairman of the FCC, who happens to be the son of Colin Powell, would be finished himself if he were not the son of Colin Powell, because his job security depends on President Bush, and President Bush certainly wouldn't let him go and risk Colin Powell going with him. So that's where things stand. It's a great victory for people power.

Eleanor: It crosses party lines, too. This is one area where Democrats and Republicans can come together, and actually, as Tom had first pointed out to me, William Safire, former speechwriter in the Nixon White House and *New York Times* columnist, referred to the four big media conglomerates as the Four Horsemen, and he pointed out that the Republican administration may have a vested interest in limiting media power to these four large institutions, all of which are increasingly sympathetic to the Republican Party.

To pick up on your other question about the 9/11 report that came out today, this was a 900 page report and is the result of the investigation by the House and Senate Intelligence Committees. It's actually been finished for months, and the White House did not want it released to the public, and there have been all these backstage maneuverings over whether they could classify the report in its entirety or classify sections of the report. It's my understanding that, to use the proverbial phrase, there's no smoking gun in the report, but the administration did not want the embarrassment of having to relive the events leading up to 9/11 and the lapses in intelligence and the failure to connect the dots and all of that that we have all heard before. So they stalled it for months. The final result is that the report is being released except for twenty-eight pages that document the connection between the Saudi royal kingdom and terror cells, specifically Al Qaeda, which is a bargain with the devil that both the Saudis and the U.S. have made that goes back a couple of administrations. In exchange for Saudi Arabia being responsible about oil and feeding the U.S. oil addiction, we have looked the other way when they made contributions to so-called charitable groups that support terrorist activity. Their deal is that if they give money to Osama bin Laden and

his causes, then Osama won't attack within the Saudi kingdom. Now that's been violated two times, most recently in May, but it's like classic Mafia protection money, basically.

It's an awkward little arrangement, because you have the Saudi family quite cozy with American policymakers. This is bipartisan, Democrat and Republican, but the Bush family is particularly close to the royal family. Prince Bandar, who's been the ambassador here in Washington for a number of years and has been representing the government going back to the Nixon administration, has Thanksgiving dinner in Kennebunkport, and the Bushes call him Bandar Bush. There are financial ties, because the first President Bush and the Bush family are heroes to Saudi Arabia because of the intervention in the first Gulf War, when Saudi Arabia was threatened. The controversy in Washington that I am aware of is over the pages that have been blackened out, and it seems to me a rather foolish step on the part of the administration, because Congressional aides are making sure that that information gets out, and the administration then has to battle not only the validity of the information but charges that they are covering up, especially at a time when the President's credibility is already under attack.

On the notion that there was foreknowledge of 9/11, the conspiracy theories will never die. It doesn't surprise me if the report goes into the attitudes around the world, and we should, as Americans, be aware of that. There was a best-selling book by a French author which essentially said that 9/11 was planned and executed by the U.S., probably the CIA, and a lot of people believe that, including a lot of people in this country. Just go on the Internet and you can find all sorts of conspiracy theories. If there was a foreknowledge, it was only of the sketchiest sort, and I don't think anybody put it together. I am not diabolical enough to imagine that our administration would perpetrate that upon us.

Tom: I saw that story about one in three Germans believing that the United States was actually behind the 9/11 attack, but the story was small and played well inside the paper, more as an oddity than as a real news story. If it were believed to be hard news, it would have been much more prominent. In this country, two out of three Americans polled believe that Saddam Hussein had something to do with 9/11,

and there's no evidence for that.

Question: I wanted to ask a question about media concentration and your views on that, because what I've heard on that sounds a bit schizophrenic. On the one hand, you've made a reference to a multiplicity of media, references to the Internet, for example, and a variety of sources that weren't around. We know, for example, that the networks have far less influence now than they did twenty or twenty-five years ago. Their market share has actually decreased tremendously. You have the addition of the Fox Network, MSNBC, CNN, where before three networks used to dominate television news. So I'm wondering if the media concentration concerns aren't just really partly an academic concern, rather than one in reality, given the number of bloggers and alternative media sources out there now.

Eleanor: That is the argument that Michael Powell makes and that supporters of the increased concentration make. I don't get the connection. Just because you can go on the Internet and find an alternative source, does that mean that Rupert Murdoch should be able to buy up all the TV stations or that Clear Channel can dominate the radio market? I think there's too much of a singularity of view and too much of a homogenized news culture that comes out of the concentrated ownership, and that's not even getting into the more insidious ways of controlling the news.

Toni: We happen to know, because we met him at dinner, that the question comes from a newspaper publisher. It's a valid question, but from those of us who are mere grape-pickers in the vineyards of truth, we look at what's happening in newspapers as not a healthy phenomenon. We look at the Knight-Ridder chain, for instance, where a great number of editors have left and a great number of reporters have been axed. The news hole has either been reduced or the number of people to fill it has been reduced, because this company, being beholden to its stockholders, is worried about the bottom line perhaps more than it is worried about the product. This is a little far removed from the FCC decision, but this is a large entity delivering news. If more and more of these entities become these sort of corporate entities, depending more on profits . . . I mean, there are

profits to be made in newspapers, but it was told to me – this may be apocryphal – that Knight-Ridder was making a profit of 22% but the board wanted it to be 24%. My newspaper is operated by a family-owned chain, the Newhouse family, and has so far been free from that kind of influence, the influence of stockholders, but the larger corporations become and the more diffuse, the more the product looks homogenized. To save money, it gets delivered or produced in similar ways in various neighborhoods. It loses its identity, I think, or its uniqueness, because of the effort to save money.

At lunch the other day, I spoke with Jim Trifone. This was after the Jason Blair matter, and we were talking about whether or not this could happen in television, whether you could make things up and so forth. He revealed something on a different point that makes some sense with regard to this FCC matter. He talked about the fact that the networks don't really have cameras out there in the world anymore, that there is only one camera – well, not one literally, but there is one pool of cameras that provides the pictures for all the networks. So it's not as if they have options. Increasingly they have fewer options on what they can show viewers. The enterprise aspect of it has grown less and less because the expense is so high, and to the extent that we can hold off on that, to the extent that we can still have independent entities that are challenging the bigger news producers, I think it's healthy.

Eleanor: Whether you agree with the FCC ruling or not, the people have spoken. I think that's what's most fascinating about this. I believe over a million people went to the FCC website and complained, and this is a new method of putting pressure on members of Congress. They are not voting, many of them, what many of them wish would happen or think should happen. They are responding to constituent pressure. What it reminds me of is when in 1989 the Congress passed a catastrophic health-care plan for seniors, and seniors discovered how much it was going to cost them and in their minds how little they were going to get, and seniors revolted, to the point where there was a picture of a group of senior citizens banging on the car of Congressman Dan Rostenkowski from Chicago, who was the chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, and Congress repealed that legislation. Now I happen to think that was probably a

good deal, especially as we've seen how health care has evolved since then, but the public didn't want it, and the public has spoken out on this issue in a way that I can't think of anything comparable. And it also is an example of the use of the Internet to apply pressure. There have been fax attacks on Capitol Hill, and they've gotten mail, but logging onto a website that everybody could see has really produced action here, and it may be a model for the country to speak out. It may in effect be the equivalent of a national referendum on a particular issue. It's quite fascinating from a civic education point of view. Whether you like what the FCC has done or not, we've heard from enough people that Congress reacted quite quickly.

Question: That feeds right into my question. Before I get to my question, I want to congratulate you and thank you, on behalf of the teachers here, for raising the ante of the awareness of what's going on in the world, just by your mere presence and the way you address it and the colloquial way which you address us. It's very, very refreshing. And that leads me to my question, which has a very sad point, as most people here were buffeted and stunned and knocked over yesterday by the news yesterday at City Hall, where there was a killing, two killings. The question that I have is that it seemed this week, now I don't know if it was just because you guys were here and my consciousness was raised so much, but it seemed like an incredible week: between Iraq and the sons of Saddam Hussein, who were killed by U.S. forces, which was an awful thing and a wonderful thing at the same time, and then of course the City Hall shooting, Liberia, and Korea. It was like an unbelievable week of news. You, as professionals, and as the purveyors of the news that we get — and of course what we get is what we believe, by and large: not necessarily, but by and large you see the stuff on TV, you read the stuff in the newspaper, and it forms your opinion. How do you, as professionals, deal with a week like this? My first question is: Am I wrong that this was an unbelievable week, with an incredible number of top-rated stories, so much so that even Liberia had to be put in the background a little bit, because the stories were so volatile? And number two, from a professional standpoint, how do you deal with that? How do you organize it? What do you choose? Where will you go with it?

Eleanor: I'm generally an optimistic person. I don't walk around with a cloud over my head, but if you travel with me, generally the plane is delayed or the luggage gets lost. And if you pick a week to go away from Washington, generally all hell breaks loose back in Washington, and it feels to me like that's what's happened this week. As was mentioned in the introduction, I'm a political analyst for the Fox News network, which is a fairly right-leaning network, and so they don't call me all that often. I got three calls from Fox this week, wanting me to be on for this or that, and it wasn't even to go up against a Republican strategist, to butt heads about something, it was actually to analyze some of the news. So if you are a news junkie, this was a week to be tethered to the news cycle.

Now how do we keep up with it? As you in the classes all know, I was very interested in your reactions to the No Child Left Behind legislation. I asked you to write me paragraphs, and I will come back to that. But somehow when I wrote my weekly column for the *Newsweek* website – it's called "Capitol Letter," and I'm supposed to write about Capitol Hill – I couldn't ignore the deaths of Saddam's sons, the release of the 9/11 report, and to try to get some sense of what was going on in Capitol Hill. So I reverted to what I basically am, and that's a reporter, and I made a couple of phone calls. As anybody knows who writes, it's wonderful if you get somebody who gives you an insight or a phrase. I talked to one Republican who said that the deaths of the two Saddam sons proved that God was looking out for George W. Bush, and he called it Bush's "Magoo moment." Do you remember Mr. Magoo? This is a president who walks sort of unknowingly through all of these mishaps, and yet he's emerging unscathed.

But then to get the other side of the equation, I talked to somebody on the Democratic side in the Senate, and he pointed out that it's probably time to move beyond the sixteen words in the State of the Union speech. But it's never really been about the sixteen words, it's about what's happening on the ground in Iraq, and it's about a sense that the President may have gotten us into something for which we don't have a clear exit plan. He said it's the first crack that may mean the teflon's going to peel off.

So around those couple of phrases I was able to craft a column, examining the week's events. The one insight that I found new was the questioning on the Hill as to why the administration didn't try harder to

get the Saddam sons alive. They are two key intelligence assets, as it was put to me, who could really lead us to the weapons of mass destruction. The supposition is that: One, the administration really didn't want the headache of putting these fellows on trial. Two, their primary concern is restoring security in Iraq, and as long as they were alive that that would make it more difficult. And three, that there is sort of a growing acceptance within the administration that weapons of mass destruction may never be found, and so gambling that these two diabolical fellows will actually lead you to them was not a gamble that the administration was willing to take. But there are so many threads still to be pulled on the whole issue of the war in Iraq, that it's those magic words for any journalist: the story isn't going away. And as we enter into August, slow August, those are the words that every journalist wants to hear.

Tom: One commentary on the news of the week, and also a commentary on the suspicion of anything governmental by the media: Last night on CNN, David Gergen was being interviewed — David Gergen, who served in both Republican and Democratic White Houses, and knows how these things operate — and the questioner actually said, “Is it possible that the Bush White House set up this raid on Saddam Hussein's son to deflect attention from the fact that Stephen Hadley, head of the National Security Council, was going to admit that he had some blame, as far as those sixteen words are concerned?” Gergen could hardly keep a straight face. I mean, they are not quite that Machiavellian, we don't think. But in fact, the news about the sixteen words, and the news about Hadley and the NSC admitting a role in this matter, would have been much bigger news had it not been overtaken by these other stories. You know, part of what an administration does is to try to put bad news out at a time when the press isn't prepared to deal with it, and Friday afternoons and early evenings are frequent times for that because the Saturday newspapers and the Saturday television shows are the least read and least watched of all, and reporters are, like everybody else, heading out for the weekend fairly easily, so the people left behind get these stories and whenever somebody wants to break bad news, that's when it's usually announced. But the NSC role, Gergen also pointed out, may open the door to questioning of Condie Rice, who after all is the boss of the

National Security Council, and that in turn could lead to further questioning of the role of Vice President Cheney and ultimately President Bush.

Eleanor: The other tidbit I discovered in phoning back to Washington is that Democrats aren't all that happy that President Clinton called in to the *Larry King Show* to say that, ``You know, presidents aren't perfect, they make mistakes, let's forget about the sixteen words." (*laughter*) I talked to one Democrat, who said, ``Clinton didn't read the talking points from the Democratic National Committee." Now, in fact, that may be good advice from President Clinton, because there are some events that Democrats can't control, and are getting too overheated about. I think that story has about run it's course, and there are other ways to go. President Clinton is an excellent strategist, so he either knows what he's doing or he's trying to clear the Democratic field to help Bush's re-election and make it safe for Hillary in 2008, if you really want to be diabolical.

Question: Who would you put up against President Bush now?

Tom: We were shown the results of a national poll that was taken just yesterday, or just this week, and it showed that the Democrat with the best chance of doing well against Bush was, in fact, Hillary Clinton. But of course she's not running.

Question: Who else?

Tom: Well, so far, we've been most impressed by Howard Dean. (*applause*) Go ahead, let it rip. I'm not cheering for Howard Dean, I'm just analyzing the candidates who are out there, and what Howard Dean has brought to the equation is energy and excited people. He reminds me a little of John McCain. He has the same sort of straight-talk approach, the kind of no-holds barred, not paying that close attention to advisors approach. That's gotten him into some trouble, but it's also been refreshing for large numbers of people in the public. He's made spectacular use of the Internet to raise money. You know, Vermont's not a state that anybody takes seriously politically. Because it's so darn small it doesn't have much political impact in

normal times. So he had to find a way to go outside that, and he did, through the Internet. And he's excited a lot of people about politics, and doing that in this day and age is a big step ahead, to begin with.

He's come across as a liberal. The Bushes have said that they want to run against him, and in fact in this very poll, when put up against Bush, Dean does worse than the other candidates in the race, but not much worse, just a little bit. And I know the Democrats, to use the converse example, when Ronald Reagan was a potential candidate, said ``Bring on Reagan. We'd love to run against the Hollywood ``B" actor. But don't give us Howard Baker. Howard Baker's a real threat." This is how the thinking goes inside the Washington Beltway, with the Washington Establishment: they always prefer Establishment figures, or think they're much stronger. So I'm not held back by the fact that the Washington Establishment is afraid of Howard Dean, that they think he'll be another George McGovern. I don't think so. I think he would present a real challenge to Bush, should he get the nomination. We met him two years ago and he was already running for president. Eleanor wrote one of the first pieces about him, and we are happy to see that others have picked up on it.

Eleanor: In that piece, I noted that Vermont is known for having more cows than people, and I got tons of e-mail, with precise figures that there are actually more people than cows. I'm still not convinced about that, however. *(laughter)* Dean is the only one who's attracted any sort of visceral emotion from the Democratic primary voters, and they're the ones who are going to select the nominee. But I think John Kerry of Massachusetts makes a lot of sense for the Democrats as well, because he does have a strong national security background. He actually fought in Vietnam, was highly decorated, was on the Intelligence Committee for some seventeen years, and he's written a book about terrorism. So he brings those credentials, and I think Dean and Kerry are going to have a face-off in New Hampshire, and it's hard to see how both of them could survive. I think it's one or the other.

And then I'm interested in the potential candidacy of General Wesley Clark, former NATO commander under Clinton. He is toying with entering the race. He was at one of these White House correspondents' dinners in April, and in cocktail chatter we asked him whether he was going to run for president, and he held out his wrist

and said, "Look at my watch." He had on a watch he said his brother had got him over E-Bay which said "Wesley Clark for President."

So he's interested, and I think what he's trying to decide is if it's too late to get into the race at this date. It's kind of weird that this is late, because Clinton after all in the 1992 election announced in October of 1991, and that was plenty of time. But everything is so accelerated. If he gets in at this late date, does he enhance his stature by participating or would he do better as a potential vice-presidential nominee if he sits it out? But I'd keep an eye on him. Those are the ones that interest me the most in the current field.

Question: You could argue that for a long time in this country there's been a certain value placed on impartial reporting. Though there's no such thing as "objective" reporting, there's been a value placed on that. And I'm wondering, if you look in the past let's say decade or so, maybe even shorter, if that has sort of shifted, if now there's more value placed on having an opinion? Being part of the media is in fact about having an opinion. It's about not only having an opinion in one place but in multiple places, even like yourself: you work for *Newsweek* and Fox News, and that somehow means that you are established as being someone who knows something. Would you comment on if you agree with that and how that affects the way you do your jobs?

Moderator: That seems to be the "objectivity" question. We actually have some cards that people wrote some questions on, and that came up a lot: the question of objectivity, the place of it. Obviously you are moving between book writing, which seems quite journalistic and descriptive, in some ways, and your op-ed writing. They are different genres, and you wear many hats, but overall where is the place of objectivity and impartiality? How conscious are you of this in your profession? And maybe Tom could speak to this more historically, as you've seen over the decades: the state of objectivity or impartiality in the professional ideology of the discipline.

Eleanor: Well, I can speak from my own sort of anecdotal experience. First of all, in the *Newsweek* bureau, I spent a lot of years as an anonymous print reporter before I went into television, and I started doing *The McLaughlin Group* while I was covering the Reagan White

House. Jim Baker was a very good source for reporters, and he was quite amused that the so-called liberal position during those years was defending Jim Baker against the charge that he wasn't letting Reagan be Reagan. It was the conflict between the pragmatists and the true believers. I appeared on the show fairly regularly, and there never seemed to be any conflict until the Clintons came to town. The Clinton presidency was a terrifically polarizing presidency. John started calling me Eleanor Rodham Clift. For those of you who've read some of the history of the effort to bring down the Clintons, I would recommend a book, *Blinded by the Right*, by David Brock, whose articles actually kicked off the Paula Jones controversy and who has moved to the other side of the political agenda and has essentially issued a public apology to the Clintons. It was a very nasty time in Washington, and so that's when I really had to decide whether I was a beat reporter covering the White House or whether I was an opinion person. Opinion people are still in the minority in the overall political reporting culture. But at *Newsweek*, we did go through a phase where opinion and edge and attitude seemed to count more than just reporting, and I think that phase extended through 9/11. I think 9/11 has changed that, and *Newsweek* has moved back to a much greater emphasis on reporting: investigative reporting on intelligence links, on Middle Eastern connections. I think the pendulum has gone back to place more of an emphasis on reporting, and I think that's a healthy thing.

Tom: The question as it was framed originally gave the premise, which I was glad to hear, that there is no such thing as objectivity. I've long said that, and I think if we had a discussion about it you'd see why. Beauty isn't the only thing that's in the eye of the beholder. We bring our ability to report events of any kind, big or small, who we are and what we know and where we've been. A lot goes into it. A simple way of looking at it is if you choose to interview someone, it is the reporter who decides which questions to ask, it's the reporter who decides what value to give to the answers, and what order to put them in when writing a story, what to put in and what to leave out. All of these are subjective judgments.

What you can strive for is fairness, and what we do strive for, I think, is fairness. A long time ago, when I had visions of attending the

Columbia School of Journalism, the manual for that school talked about a concept called "ruthlessly fair," which I really loved: really go after the information as hard as you can, but in the end, be fair. When we talk about opinion in the media, newspapers by and large separate opinion from factual reporting. Newspapers are far more likely to be as close to objective as is physically possible these days than they were in the *Front Page* era. You've seen that play, *The Front Page*, where they were glad to make things up in order to get a more salacious headline for the paper. I think newspapers are better today than they have ever been. I think the public is better served by today's newspapers than it's ever been. Although there is the danger of media conglomerates, I think overall the newspaper industry is delivering something that is almost miraculous. If computers hadn't been invented and somebody told you that every morning you could wake up and have at your doorstep for a quarter or fifty cents a day a paper that would give you the news of the world all organized in ways that you could find whatever section you wanted, whatever you were interested in, in a moment's glance, with good pictures and color and all that, you'd be amazed. For a quarter I can get that? It's just fantastic.

However, in the news magazine, in Eleanor's news magazine, there's sort of the perception of opinion, because the stories are edgy. They're slanted, they're not biased, but they're intended to leave you with an impression when it's over. And frankly, as a consumer of news, I hunger for that kind of presentation. I don't want you to tell me "On the one hand . . . on the other hand . . . On the one hand . . . on the other hand" and come down with both hands sore and no real information. I want to know from the perspective of people who have reported this story thoroughly where they come down on this. Lead me in some direction. I can disagree with you, but take me someplace with this information. I can't figure it all out by myself. Why else would there be reporters? If we could get things straight, if you could sit and listen to C-Span all day, maybe you'd have some understanding of Congress, but it really would be superficial, even if you watch from dawn to dusk, because what goes on in Congress really goes on behind the scenes and in closed door meetings. A reporter's job is to get at some of that information, and to put it out there for public consumption.

As far as newspaper reporters going too far on their own with

opinionated material, never before in my newspaper life has there been, as there is now, layers of editing to make sure that doesn't happen, people who are questioning whether you've given fairness to the story: if you're overly heavy on one side, have you asked the other side? There's a lot more questioning that goes on in our major papers. Jason Blair aside – and believe me, that was a colossal exception to the rule – read the *New York Times* and look for slant in the news columns, and I think you'll have a hard time finding it. Or the *Wall Street Journal*. Go to the editorial page, you'll have a totally different matter. The television talk shows, because they've become so dominant now in the cable market that pits Left against Right constantly, certainly carries the whole opinionated idea of news a lot further, but I think we're so conscious of this that we work hard not to convey anything but the information as we can dig it up.

Moderator: Just a quick follow up on that. Is that true also in the context of war? How do the stakes seem to change, for quite obvious reasons? And maybe this would be a chance for you to talk about what you think about the war coverage more generally.

Tonn: Well, what's the first casualty of war? Truth. And who controls the information? Increasingly as our wars have gone along, especially since Vietnam, the dominant military, in this case our military, controls it. The first Gulf War was a disaster as far as information was concerned. Reporters who went all the way over there might as well have stayed at their desks in the United States and done it by phone, because they had very, very little access to the actual combat arena. They were given briefings that we all saw at home. Again, you could have covered it from home. And they believed in weapons that appeared to be sensationally accurate, which turned out to be on target about 50% or less of the time in many cases. It made for good pictures, it made for lousy information, as far as the public was concerned. The Patriot missiles failed so many times. It wasn't really a bullet hitting another bullet out of the sky. It didn't happen that way. But we didn't learn that, all of that, until much later, because of lack of access to hard information.

This time, with the embedded reporters: the embedded reporters was a very good idea and a step in the right direction, but there's a

down side to it too, because when you become embedded, you become part of the team, in a sense. You travel with the guys, you see what they see, you live like they live, and you report from a very sympathetic vantage point. And because of our highly mechanized, highly modern weapons, you rarely get to see what we're hitting on the other side or what's happening on the other side. Al Jazeera was probably the most effective, and a lot of cable networks, to their credit, ran Al Jazeera footage to give an idea of what it looked like from the receiving end of some of these heavy munitions. However, it was a dangerous experiment on the part of the military, and the reporters who have stayed behind, I think, are doing a fairly terrific job of letting us know what is going on in Iraq. I think the postwar coverage has been particularly good, and I hope it continues to be that way.

Eleanor: The idea of embedding reporters in the field was the brainchild of Tory Clark, a very dynamic young woman who was the first female spokesman at the Pentagon, and it was a brilliant public relations maneuver on the part of the government. I think it was also positive for reporters and for the country, because it did give you a sense of what was going on over there. It was an incomplete sense, but it was certainly more than you would have had otherwise. While the television embeds tended to be a little cheerleading, the written embeds, some of them, cut pretty close to the bone. I remember reading a description of one killing where the young soldier who had killed an Iraqi woman said, "The chick got in the way." There was some unvarnished stuff out there, so I really think that was positive.

What I wish we would continue to see is that wonderful media center that they spent \$250,000 creating in Doha, with split screens and the latest equipment. Where is Brigadier General Vincent Brooks, now that we need him? Once there was no more good news to report and the war was technically over or the major combat operations were over, they sure pulled up stakes from that media center pretty quickly.

The overall reaction of the media in this country was the mirror opposite of the way the media reacted to the Watergate scandal, which made the media ever more skeptical. The line was, "If your mother tells you it's so, you'd better get a second source." All institutions were questioned, not just the Pentagon and government, but all major institutions. After 9/11, the reaction in the media was very different.

There was a sense that we were all in this together, and many reporters wore American flags. Certainly there's nothing wrong with that, but if you're on an international broadcast, other countries are going to see you wearing an American flag and assume that you are working for the government. CNN at one point asked its reporters not to do that, whereas Fox encouraged its reporters to do it, so there was kind of a split in the media as to how you would handle the patriotism issue. But after 9/11, for much of the last year and a half, government's assertions have been accepted pretty much face value, and I think that the press is now again coming out of that sort of lapdog phase and reverting to the watchdog, which is what we're supposed to be. We are an adversarial institution, and we are there to question everything government does. That's healthy, although a lot of people – again 9/11 had a profound effect on the country – are offended when reporters ask questions about the war and about the president in the wake of 9/11, and that has intimidated the media. I think that phase is coming to an end here, and I think that's good for the democracy.

Tom: And no commentary on the war coverage would be complete without a word about the media falling hook, line, and sinker for the Private Lynch story. The Pentagon created her and the media was more than happy to go along with this creation of a sort of Rambo-like 95-pound specialist who emptied her gun and suffered at the hands of torture and was rescued gallantly, all of which turned out to be huge exaggerations. She was injured in a crash, the Iraqis tried to return her, and they were unable to. The rescue was easy, because they were glad to have her go. And she's still a hero. Hundreds of people lined up and waited for hours for her to come home. I guess in every war there's a need to believe in heroism, and she represented so much of that, the perfect figure. I don't know whether it was gullibility or greed that caused the media to not ask too many questions. That's the old reporter's mantra: don't ask too many questions once you are onto a good story. There weren't enough questions asked in this case.