

ANNALS OF COMMUNICATIONS

## Fortress Bush

How the White House keeps the press under control.

By Ken Auletta

Last August, in Crawford, Texas, George W. Bush gave a barbecue for the press corps. Bush has let it be known that he's not much of a television-news watcher or a newspaper reader, apart from the sports section; and during a conversation with reporters he explained, perhaps without intending to, why his White House often seems indifferent to the press. "How do you then know what the public thinks?" a reporter asked, according to Bush aides and reporters who heard the exchange. And Bush replied, "You're making a huge assumption—that you represent what the public thinks."

At the White House, I recently heard much the same thing—it sounded like a declaration of press irrelevance—from Andrew Card, Bush's chief of staff, who said of the press, "They don't represent the public any more than other people do. In our democracy, the people who represent the public stood for election. . . . I don't believe you have a check-and-balance function."

Bush's relations with the press are, at once, distant, friendly, and prickly. Many reporters like Bush personally; he gives some of them nicknames (he calls David Gregory, of NBC, "Stretch," and Bill Sammon, of the *Washington Times*, "Super Stretch"); and, especially during the 2000 campaign, reporters felt comfortable around the jocular candidate. Yet Bush, like many conservatives, also believes that the press is dominated by left-leaning men and women, and that their biases affect their reporting. And, more than any President in recent memory, Bush is uneasy in the spotlight—especially in front of television cameras. When he lacks a prepared script, that discomfort creates a kind of tension that has nothing to do with ideology or personal rapport.

But what the White House insists is most troublesome about the press is its perceived hunger for headlines, which leads, in turn, to carelessness. Mark McKinnon, the director of advertising for Bush's 2000 Presidential campaign and now for his reelection, says, "I've never subscribed to the bias argument about the press. I think the press is tough on everybody. The nature of the news business is that conflict is news."

I heard similar interpretations throughout the White House. Karl Rove, the President's closest political adviser, says of Bush, "He has a cagey respect for them"—the press. "He understands their job is to do a job. And that's not necessarily to report the news. It's to get a headline or get a story that will make people pay attention to their magazine, newspaper, or television more."

According to Rove, who works out of a modest second-floor office at an antique wood desk piled high with papers, Bush sees the press as "elitist" and thinks that the social and economic backgrounds of most reporters have nothing in common with those of most Americans. Bush refers to the major newsweeklies—*Newsweek*, *Time*, and *U.S. News & World Report*—as "the slicks." Reporters, for their part, see the White House as a fortress. In December of 2002, Bob Deans, who was then the president of the White House Correspondents Association, sent a two-page letter to Andrew Card. He summed up the recent news—Bush had announced a plan to protect the public from smallpox; the Senate Majority Leader, Trent Lott, was embroiled in a racial controversy—yet noted that Bush had "not taken a single question" from the White House press in two weeks and had held "substantially fewer press conferences, interviews," and other media events than either Bill Clinton or George H. W. Bush in their first two years. Deans never received a reply.

Bush's view of the press is also personal, and was no doubt shaped by the experience of his father, who sometimes invited reporters to chat or to toss horseshoes, often over the objections of his wife. A former close aide remembers that Barbara Bush, who is similar in temperament to her son, would never speak off the record to reporters, because she believed they would betray her confidence. "She didn't trust these people," the former aide recalls.

When the senior Bush prepared to announce his candidacy, in 1987, he gave unusually close access to Margaret Warner, at the time a correspondent for *Newsweek*. Warner prepared a generally sympathetic profile, but the piece also took into account what she described as Bush's "potentially crippling handicap"—a perception that he wasn't tough enough for the job. This notion was captured on the cover by these words: "Fighting the 'Wimp Factor.'"

Warner, who is today an anchor on PBS's "NewsHour with Jim Lehrer," defends the profile, but she believes that *Newsweek* editors tarted it up by inserting the word "wimp" throughout. "I thought to put that word on the cover—and have it hit the stands the day he announced for President—was a cruel, gratuitous thing to do," she says, sounding like any defensive reporter who blames an editor. Warner remembers that the Bush family was "hurt and irate"—and that they let her know it.

George W. Bush, like his mother, is known for holding grudges. "Being there and experiencing how something like that plays out and happens can only make you more guarded," Dan Bartlett, the White House communications director, says.

Bartlett, a Texan and former chapter president of the Future Farmers of America, took the job when his predecessor, Karen Hughes, returned to Texas to spend more time with her family. Bartlett had worked for Karl Rove's political-consulting firm and then for Rove's principal client, George W. Bush; he worked with Bush during his two terms as governor of Texas, and then with Hughes. (Bartlett is also a golf partner of the President, and a fellow sports enthusiast.) Today, Bartlett, who is thirty-two, oversees five divisions: press, media affairs (for the out-of-town press), global communications (for the international press), speechwriting, and communications. He runs a staff of fifty-two-thirteen more than worked for President Clinton. Bartlett told me that, more than once, he's heard Bush say of the press, "'Their business is sometimes to be provocative,' or 'What's the lead going to be?' As opposed to, 'Let's have a conversation.'" Bartlett went on, "So he does like formats and reporters who can get out of the moment and look at the big picture."

Bush has not totally dodged the press. He gave a one-hour interview, in September, to Brit Hume, of Fox News, and cooperated with NBC's Tom Brokaw, CBS's Scott Pelley, and ABC's Diane Sawyer for lengthy interviews. He has talked to the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal* but has not given an in-depth interview to the *New York Times* since becoming President. Nor has he done so with the television anchors Peter Jennings, of ABC, or Dan Rather, of CBS. "I recently did a story on a senior figure in the Bush White House and was told in advance, 'It better be good,'" Jennings recalls. "Which I thought was rather naked. It wasn't a threat, but it didn't sound like a joke. There is a feeling among some members of the press corps that you are either favored by the Administration or not, and that will have something to do with your access." Jennings added that he has interviewed every President since Richard Nixon.

Every modern President has complained about "unfair" and "cynical" reporters and has tried to circumvent the press "filter," just as White House correspondents routinely complain that their access is restricted, that the Administration is hostile or deceptive. Even President Kennedy, who liked journalists and was masterly in his manipulation of them, complained to the *Times* about David Halberstam's early reporting of the Vietnam conflict, and, angry over coverage of his Administration, cancelled the White House subscription to the *Herald Tribune*.

What seems new with the Bush White House is the unusual skill that it has shown

in keeping much of the press at a distance while controlling the news agenda. And for perhaps the first time the White House has come to see reporters as special pleaders—pleaders for more access and better headlines—as if the press were simply another interest group, and, moreover, an interest group that’s not nearly as powerful as it once was.

“What other Administrations have is people who go into business for themselves,” the Brookings Institution scholar Stephen Hess, a former Eisenhower speechwriter, observes. “This Administration has tremendous loyalty.” There has been very little senior staff turnover. If there are turf wars at the White House, they are hidden within a semi-familial culture dominated by Rove and Bartlett, as well as by people like Card and Vice-President Dick Cheney, both of whom worked for the first President Bush (Card as a deputy chief of staff and Cheney as Secretary of Defense). At work, they achieve what Dan Bartlett calls “mind-meld.”

Much has been written about George Bush’s fondness for discipline and routine, and relations between the White House and the press bear this stamp, too. Bush gets to the office at around six-forty-five each morning, follows an exercise regimen, and keeps meetings short and structured; he cannot disguise his annoyance at reporters who ask follow-up questions or who are not, in his estimation, sufficiently polite; and he grumbles if he’s not in bed by 10 p.m. Bush insists that the White House speak with one voice. Michael Deaver, who as deputy chief of staff in the Reagan Administration was known for his insistence on staying on message, says of Bush, as others have, “This is the most disciplined White House in history.”

Disciplined—the White House is almost like a private corporation—and relatively silent, too. “The vast majority of people in this building—the press doesn’t believe this—don’t want to talk to the press,” Dan Bartlett told me. “They want to do their job.”

“There’s a natural tendency in political communicators to want to be liked by the press,” Mark McKinnon says. “By doing that, somehow you improve the nature of your coverage. . . . I think this Administration rejects that notion. I don’t think they think it works.”

McKinnon, who is forty-eight, lives in Austin but will work out of the Bush-Cheney campaign headquarters, in Arlington, Virginia, for the duration of the reelection effort. He sees himself as a Washington outsider; he wears jeans to work, and usually eats lunch within walking distance of his office. “Reporters who cover the Administration are a very competitive lot,” he says. “They are highly skilled at what they do. There’s enormous pressure on them to get unique information. So an extraordinary effort is made to establish and cultivate sources. For people like me who get involved, there is an instinct to say, ‘Oh, they think I’m interesting’—when all they want is a source. So it’s easy to be manipulated by the press. This White House has done a good job of understanding how it all works.”

Dana Milbank, one of three reporters whom the *Post* assigns to the White House, says that the Administration speaks with one voice partly because officials have “talking points that they e-mail to friends and everyone says exactly the same thing. You go through the effort of getting Karl Rove on the phone and he’ll say exactly the same thing as Scott McClellan”—the White House press secretary. NBC’s David Gregory says, “My biggest frustration is that this White House has chosen an approach with the White House press corps, generally speaking, to engage us as little as possible.”

In other Administrations, the chief of staff and key deputies—people like Deaver and James A. Baker III, during the Reagan-Bush years, and John Podesta and Leon Panetta, under Clinton—have usually been open with reporters; they’ve even courted the press. In the current White House, Card and Rove usually don’t return calls, and staffers boast of not answering reporters’ questions. That task is left to McClellan and his staff, and to Dan Bartlett. “Too often they treat us with contempt,” Elisabeth Bumiller, one of three

*Times* White House correspondents, says. “In comparison, the Reagan Administration coddled us. This crowd has a wall up. They never get off their talking points.”

What Bumiller calls a “wall,” Mark McKinnon calls “a funnel for information.” When I talked with Andrew Card, I asked what was new about relations between this President and the press. Card, who is fifty-six, has the bonhomie and accent of a Boston politician. (He once ran unsuccessfully for the Republican nomination for governor of Massachusetts.) On the day we spoke, he was relaxing on a red sofa beside a fireplace in his large, sunny office down the hall from Bush’s. He talked for thirty minutes about the advent of cable news and the birth of the Internet—prompting me eventually to interrupt and also to wonder whether such monologues were his way to avoid more pointed questions. When I asked about press standards, Card became more animated; he gesticulated as he said, “It used to be an expectation—that I had, anyway—that before a ‘fact’ showed up in an article there were two sources to that ‘fact’ or the ‘fact’ was there; it was put on the table. I see an awful lot of things now that look like, at best, there is one source. And the media outlet runs with that source. And it is wrong.”

Card blamed the pressure of competition for this. I asked how the press could get more sources when the Bush Administration wouldn’t return their calls.

“It’s not our job to be sources,” he replied, flushing. “The taxpayers don’t pay us to leak! . . . I feel strongly that people who get paid taxpayer dollars should be doing their job. If their job is like Ashley’s”—Ashley Snee, a member of the press staff, who sat in on the interview—“if their job is to talk to the press, they should talk to the press. If their job is to help develop policy, it’s to talk to the people who are involved in that policymaking process; they don’t get paid to talk to the press. . . . Our job is not to make your job easy.”

Scott McClellan’s mind is never far from his script. Twice daily, he appears before an audience, knowing that, just as a poor performance can derail a play, a stray word from the President’s press secretary can create unwanted headlines.

On most days, including the mid-November day I spent with him, McClellan arrives at his ground-floor office in the West Wing at about 6:45 a.m. Unless there is a crisis that he knows will overwhelm his day, the first thing he does is read the newspapers on his horseshoe-shaped desk—the *Times*, the *Post*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, the *Financial Times*, the *Washington Times*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. McClellan, who is thirty-five, was the deputy of the previous press secretary, Ari Fleischer, and before that a travelling press secretary in Bush’s Presidential campaign; before that, he was deputy communications director for Governor Bush. Generally, reporters find him more congenial but less knowledgeable about Washington than Fleischer, who worked on Capitol Hill for almost two decades. McClellan’s morning task, he says, is to anticipate the questions from reporters.

Card arrives at the White House between five-thirty and five-forty-five, ready to brief Bush on the headlines. When Bush arrives, an hour later, he goes over his daily C.I.A. and F.B.I. intelligence reports. Card said of Bush, “He may skim the front page of the papers. Laura reads the papers and she alerts him. . . . He does not come into the Oval Office ignorant of what people are reading in the newspapers.”

At seven-thirty, the senior staff of about twenty, including Rove, Card, Bartlett, and McClellan, gets together in the windowless Roosevelt Room, where, among other subjects, they review Bush’s schedule, discuss possible questions from reporters, and come up with answers that they believe best reflect the Administration’s message. The meeting is over at eight o’clock. The rest of the day, Card says, feels like “drinking from the fire hydrant.”

McClellan returns to his office, where he continues to review news reports and consult with his staff. At eight-thirty, he heads upstairs to Bartlett’s second-floor office for the daily communications meeting, attended by about twenty staffers from the five

divisions reporting to Bartlett, along with a representative from Cheney's office and one from the National Security Council. Late arrivals sit on the floor. The walls of the corner office, once occupied by Karen Hughes, are covered with pictures of Bush. "Our goal is to get everyone on the same song sheet," Bartlett says. For McClellan, this meeting is an opportunity to share "what I'm thinking about saying" at the press briefing.

On November 14th, after McClellan talked about some of the stories of the day, Bartlett interrupted to announce that a bigger story loomed: Ambassador L. Paul Bremer III, America's administrator in Iraq, was at that moment meeting with the Iraqi Governing Council to try to speed the transfer of power to a new Iraqi government. This, Bartlett warned, "could move somewhat faster" than originally thought; it also put the communications staff into what Bartlett had earlier described to me as a "gray area," which posed several conundrums. If McClellan or the press staff made it look as if the White House were dictating, it would provoke "blazing headlines" about an "arrogant" American government, and would make Bremer's task "more difficult." If they said they were merely consulting, it would help Bremer but might make the Administration appear untruthful. And if they admitted that the White House had been wrong initially, that its position on transferring power had shifted, it would provoke still another set of headlines—all negative.

McClellan also used the meeting to collect more positive news: a Cheney aide mentioned that ABC's "Nightline" had been vying to get Cheney to sit for an interview, as he has several times for Tim Russert, of NBC's "Meet the Press," and that the previous night's broadcast featured a profile of Cheney that "was essentially a windup to beg for an interview." No decision was made on whether to cooperate; Ted Koppel, like Peter Jennings, is seen as being critical of Bush's Iraq policies. The Bush White House seems to punish perceived adversaries—that's why George Stephanopoulos, a former Clinton aide, gets fewer top Administration figures on his Sunday-morning talk show than his competitors do.

After the meeting, McClellan prepared announcements about Bush and his day, and got ready for anticipated questions at his morning press briefing. "We're the twenty-four-hour office," he says. "We don't have a lot of time to think ahead."

By nine, Bartlett had joined Bush, Cheney, Card, Rove, and Condoleezza Rice, the national-security adviser, for what he called a daily "pulse check" briefing to find out if they were staying "on message." (In addition to this daily meeting, Bartlett and Rove co-chair a twice-weekly "message meeting," at noon in the Roosevelt Room, with various division heads, in order to review Bush's schedule and what they hope to convey about the Administration in the month ahead.) At the nine-o'clock session, Bartlett says, Bush often presses them, saying, "I want to know that you're talking about what we want to talk about, not what the press wants to talk about."

The morning press briefing, which is held between nine-thirty and ten, is called "the gaggle"; it's less formal, and TV cameras are banned. Before September 11, 2001, the gaggle was held in the press secretary's office, with a dozen or so reporters crowded around his desk. These days, the forty-eight press seats in the James S. Brady Press Briefing Room are often filled, and, when McClellan arrives, the podium is already crowded with tape recorders.

The press and the press secretary have come to use the gaggle as a dry run for the televised briefing, at about twelve-thirty. McClellan says, "I get a sense of what they're thinking." Ari Fleischer, whose briefings were often more vituperative than McClellan's, recalls that each morning he felt both the rush of "stimulation" from the pending contest and like "a pinata" as he was pummelled by reporters. Since Herbert Hoover appointed the first press secretary, in 1929, the role has changed—often depending upon the relationship between the press secretary and the President, as well as on the condition of the Presidency. Pierre Salinger, who worked for J.F.K., was in many ways superfluous; Kennedy was essentially his own press secretary. Jody Powell, who served Jimmy Carter,

was popular because the working press trusted him and knew that he was close to the President. Ronald Ziegler, who worked for Richard Nixon during the Watergate scandal, fell regularly into the pinata category; Clinton's press secretary Michael McCurry and his successor, Joe Lockhart, rarely did—even during the Lewinsky affair.

Marlin Fitzwater, who worked for both Reagan and George H. W. Bush, says that a good press secretary “has to be a broker between the President and the press.” The press secretary must be sure that the information given out is accurate, because he’s “the last stop before that information goes out the door.” But serving as a broker is not the model for the Bush White House. “The President wants the press secretary to be an automaton,” a Bush loyalist says. Unlike Fitzwater or McCurry, who believed that a press secretary had to represent two masters, McClellan says, “I work for the President of the United States. I serve as an advocate for his thinking and his agenda.” Instead of specifically saying that he represents the press as well, he says, “I’m here serving the American people, too.” He does acknowledge “a responsibility to work closely with the press corps and to be an advocate for them internally when I think it’s appropriate. But unless they’re with the President twenty-four hours a day they’re not going to be happy.”

**A**t the November 14th gaggle, reporters seized on an interview that Bush had granted the *Financial Times* on the eve of his trip to England, in which he suggested that American troops would remain in Iraq until Saddam Hussein was captured or killed. “He has said that we will stay until the mission is complete,” McClellan responded, adding that “the bigger mission” there was to achieve a “free, peaceful, and democratic Iraq.”

The gaggle ran for about fifteen minutes, as it usually does, but much of it was consumed by nineteen versions of the same question, each pushing McClellan to define precisely the United States mission in Iraq. Later, McClellan told me that he saw this encounter as an example of pack journalism, with one reporter asking a question and setting off a mild frenzy. “In some respects, they’re trying to put an artificial time line on things we don’t know the answer to,” he said, adding that he knew why: “There’s a tendency to focus more on process stories. They’re trying to say, ‘Oh, the President is changing what he said.’” He made a note to alert Bush that reporters would “probably” ask about this at the next press-pool event, which consists of a rotating group of thirteen reporters and photographers. (A couple of times a week, after a Presidential meeting, the press secretary leads the pool, which always includes three wire-service reporters, into the Oval Office, where they are allowed to ask a few questions before McClellan leads them out.)

By eleven-thirty, McClellan was back at his desk, preparing for the twelve-thirty briefing. He talked with Bartlett. He conducted a conference call to review foreign-policy and national-security questions with press representatives from the State Department, the Department of Defense, and the N.S.C. He met with his staff to rehearse. Just before twelve-thirty, he dabbed makeup on his forehead to soften the shine, and put on his jacket. McClellan dreads two things: questions that may betray ignorance on his part, and the television cameras. Because there were cameras both in the back and in the front of the room, he said, “Reporters play to the camera—the President calls it ‘peacocking.’”

Ari Fleischer, who served in the job for two and a half years, says he doesn’t believe that a press secretary will ever again serve six years, as Marlin Fitzwater did. The presence of cameras throughout the lunchtime briefing, which Fitzwater would not allow, only increases the torture—and the risk of a mistake. The press secretary, Fleischer says, must be conversant with “every issue from around the world,” must receive phone calls at home seven days a week from journalists who are often “relentlessly critical” and cynical, and must partake in two daily briefings, which “half the time is a game of trying to trip the press secretary.”

The “peacocking,” McClellan says, explains Bush’s preference for “more informal

encounters with the press.” Dan Bartlett is blunter: “At press conferences, you can’t control your message.” By January 1st, Bush had held just eleven solo press conferences. According to Martha Joynt Kumar, a professor of political science at Towson University, in Maryland, who is writing a book on White House communications policies, other Presidents had many more in a comparable period in their first terms: Dwight D. Eisenhower held seventy-four, John F. Kennedy sixty-five, Lyndon B. Johnson eighty, Richard Nixon twenty-three, Gerald Ford thirty-nine, Jimmy Carter fifty-three, Ronald Reagan twenty-one, George H. W. Bush seventy-one, and Bill Clinton thirty-eight.

Bush’s advisers believe that solo press conferences do not show Bush at his best, and Bartlett prefers to place Bush in less formal settings—for instance, appearances with leaders like Prime Minister Tony Blair, which account for most of Bush’s press conferences. Reporters dislike the constrictions of these joint sessions, where Bush receives about a quarter of the questions he gets when he’s alone, just as they dislike the abbreviated replies that the press pools usually produce. Yet, even in the most limited exchanges, Bush’s wariness is obvious. For example, in November, in England, when Bush conducted a joint press conference with Blair, the following exchange took place:

REPORTER: With thousands marching on the streets today here in London, a free nation, what is your conclusion as to why apparently so many free citizens fear you and even hate you?

BUSH: I’d say freedom is beautiful. It’s a fantastic thing to come to a country where people are able to express their views.

Prime Minister Blair answered this way:

There is something truly bizarre about a situation where we have driven the Taliban out of government in Afghanistan who used to stop women going about the street as they wished, who used to prevent girls going to school, who brutalized and terrorized their population; there’s something bizarre about having got rid of Saddam in Iraq—from the government of Iraq—when we’ve already discovered just so far the remains of four hundred thousand people in mass graves; there is something bizarre about these situations happening, and people saying that they disagree, when the effect of us not doing this would be that the Taliban was still in Afghanistan and Saddam was still in charge of Iraq.

Bartlett, when he was shown the transcript, attributed Bush’s response to the briefing that Bush had received, at which he was warned that certain British reporters would “try to rattle him” with hostile queries. “He wasn’t going to give the reporter the satisfaction,” Bartlett said. “He would answer the question, but he believed less is more.”

Rising network stars like Terry Moran, of ABC, John Roberts, of CBS, and Norah O’Donnell, of NBC, are familiar to millions of viewers. Their off-camera lives are spent jammed into closet-sized, windowless offices at the White House, where they eat out of plastic containers and answer their own telephones. Political correspondents who work for a cable channel, like John King, of CNN, race outside fifteen times a day, to an area on the White House lawn, alongside the driveway, known as Pebble Beach, where a dozen or more cameras are set up. Here they offer constant news updates. “This job leaves you less time for reporting,” King says.

Reporters occupy a tight space on two West Wing floors (one above- and one belowground), off the driveway leading to the Residence and the East Wing. Stepping down from the driveway, one enters a hundred-foot-long, twenty-foot-wide theatre or pressroom. To the right, a podium faces eight rows of six worn blue cloth-covered seats,

each containing the nameplate of the press organization for whom it is reserved. To the left, a corridor leads either downstairs, to the cramped offices of Fox, CNN, Cox newspapers, and others, or straight back to the space occupied by the wire services, newspapers, and broadcast networks.

Outside, reporters enjoy a front-porch view of who comes and goes. Seeing who arrives at the White House allows reporters to ask questions, to add color or pieces to a puzzle; it rarely provides more. “You have to report the Bush White House from the outside in,” says the *Times* correspondent David E. Sanger, who describes this as “radar reporting. You’re reporting the *ping*, the sound that comes back.” Dana Milbank says, “There’s little time to do entrepreneurial work. It’s more a stenographic kind of a job.” Milbank often works from his office at the *Post*, several blocks away. “When I’m not covering the news,” he says, “my job is truth-squadding.”

Mark Halperin, the ABC News political director, who also edits and co-writes the network’s daily political Web briefing, *The Note*, says that the 2000 Presidential campaign and the subsequent Bush years have provided a lesson about the press: “It is that a President surrounded by advisers who understand that the public perceives the media as a special interest rather than as guardians of the public interest can manipulate us forever and set the press schedule, access, and agenda that he wants.”

Dan Bartlett rejects that notion. Bush “understands the role of the press and respects it,” Bartlett says. “He has good relationships with many members of the press corps. . . . He enjoys the press. I think people sometimes draw the wrong conclusions.” Bartlett mentioned Bush’s September interview with Brit Hume, in which the President said, “The best way to get the news is from objective sources. And the most objective sources I have are people on my staff who tell me what’s happening in the world.” To emphasize his point, Bartlett said that Bush “knows people form their opinions in lots of ways”—not just from the media.

I asked Bartlett whether the exchange at the barbecue in Crawford, where Bush told journalists that they did not represent what the public thought, suggested Bush’s disdain for the press. “He resents the press’s ‘exclusive’ pipeline to the public,” Bartlett replied.

Relations between Bush and the press have been marked by distinct periods, the first of which—the traditional honeymoon period—ran approximately from the January inauguration to September 10, 2001. The press briefings from that time are striking in their contentiousness and in Ari Fleischer’s skill at evading questions, sometimes with humor, more often by reciting the same answer: “The President thinks that the best politics comes from the best substance and the best government”; “The President is not concerned about his image, the President is concerned about results.” Fleischer rarely let his guard down, but he did so on the evening of September 10, 2001, during a Presidential trip to Florida. “It’s hard getting the country’s attention,” he told David Sanger.

After September 11th, the briefings became less contentious, the press coverage of Bush and his leadership more adulatory. Another phase began around the fall of 2002, and was marked by somewhat more aggressive coverage of the Administration’s march to war with Iraq. The White House was enraged by an article by Dana Milbank, which appeared on October 22, 2002, under the headline “FOR BUSH, FACTS ARE MALLEABLE.” It began:

President Bush, speaking to the nation this month about the need to challenge Saddam Hussein, warned that Iraq has a growing fleet of unmanned aircraft that could be used “for missions targeting the United States.”

Last month, asked if there were new and conclusive evidence of Hussein’s nuclear weapons capabilities, Bush cited a report by the International

Atomic Energy Agency saying the Iraqis were “six months away from developing a weapon.” And last week, the president said objections by a labor union to having customs officials wear radiation detectors has the potential to delay the policy “for a long period of time.”

All three assertions were powerful arguments for the actions Bush sought. And all three statements were dubious, if not wrong.

Milbank, who is thirty-five and short, balding, and low-key, is not popular at the Bush White House. According to Maralee Schwartz, the *Post's* national political editor, Fleischer, Hughes, and Rove each complained to her about him, and suggested that he might be the wrong person for the job. The White House now says that it does not “believe that anybody has ever asked for his removal.”

The White House, Milbank says, tried to freeze him out, and for a time stopped returning his calls. Some of Milbank's colleagues thought he was “too snarky,” and Schwartz concedes that when he started on the White House beat “there was a lot of attitude in his copy” but that this “got detoxed in the editing process and Dana has come to understand his role better.” Even those White House reporters who sometimes think him snarky admire his independence. And Leonard Downie, the *Post's* executive editor, says, “I think very highly of Dana's coverage. He breaks news; he explains to readers how and why Bush and the White House do things the way they do; he provides the political context for policy decisions and actions.”

In the fall and winter of 2002–03, there was a considerable amount of reporting about the Administration's diplomatic stumbles at the United Nations and elsewhere; about Vice-President Cheney's suggestions of a link between Iraq and Osama bin Laden; and about the Administration's case that Iraq was hiding weapons of mass destruction. In an October, 2002, speech in Cincinnati on the eve of a congressional resolution authorizing war with Iraq, Bush declared that “we know that Iraq possesses and produces chemical and biological weapons. It is seeking nuclear weapons.”

In his January, 2003, State of the Union address before Congress, Bush uttered sixteen words that his Administration retracted after the war: “The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa.” In a speech at the U.N. in February, Colin Powell, the Secretary of State, laid out what he said was proof of Hussein's hidden weapons program by displaying satellite photographs and transcripts of intercepted telephone conversations. In March, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz assured Congress that the rebuilding of Iraq after the war would be financed by its own oil revenues, “and relatively soon.” Bush officials predicted that American troops would be thrown flowers of welcome on the streets of Iraq. At a March 6th press conference, held in prime time, Bush said of Saddam Hussein, “He has trained and financed Al Qaeda-type organizations before, Al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations.” There were no requests that Bush elaborate on the Al Qaeda connection. By the eve of war, there were increasing complaints that the press was not being rigorous in its examination of such claims.

As the fighting in Iraq began, on March 19th, six hundred members of the press were “embedded” with the military. From the Administration's standpoint, it was a brilliant strategy; not only was the war brought home but it was brought home with a soldier's-eye view of hostilities. Dan Bartlett explains the decision this way: “It showed that we were willing to give access to the media. . . . It gave the American people a conduit to become emotionally attached to what was going on.” He went on to describe the “detached” reactions to the 1991 Gulf War as a “video arcade game,” adding that “in this case people got emotionally invested . . . and that was important, for the public to be invested in this emotionally and personally.”

Afterward, there were renewed complaints about an uncritical press. On September 10th, in an interview with Tina Brown, on *CNBC*, *CNN's* Christiane Amanpour declared,

“I think the press was muzzled and I think the press self-muzzled. I’m sorry to say but certainly television, and perhaps to a certain extent my station, was intimidated by the Administration and its foot soldiers at Fox News.”

Ari Fleischer finds laughable the idea that the press was too soft on Bush. “The White House press corps sees its role as taking the opposite side of whomever they cover,” he says. During his time at the White House, Fleischer deflected reporters’ questions about what would constitute victory in Iraq. At an April 11, 2003, press briefing, he said, “I am not going to be able to shed any more light on when the President will say the mission is accomplished.” Three weeks later, Bush appeared on the deck of the U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln in front of a “Mission Accomplished” banner.

This early declaration of victory—and Bush’s arrival in a fighter jet, wearing a flight suit—was a spectacular photo opportunity. But it was also an occasion for the press to challenge the Administration’s heroic view of itself, and in that way marked another, more skeptical phase in the coverage of the Bush White House. By the fall, it was noted that more American soldiers had been killed in seven months of occupation of Iraq than had died in the initial invasion. Bush’s approval rating, as measured by polls, fell from seventy-one per cent to fifty per cent. Word leaked to the *Times* that Bush had decided to shift ultimate responsibility for rebuilding Iraq from the Defense Department and State Department and turn it over to the National Security Council—a leak that infuriated Bush and, not incidentally, Donald Rumsfeld, the Secretary of Defense.

Bush publicly complained, “We’re making good progress in Iraq. Sometimes it’s hard to tell it when you listen to the filter.” More reporters came to feel that the filter worked the other way—that they had been misled about Iraq, and about the reasons for going to war. At best, they asked, did the Administration’s desire to believe the worst cloud the judgment of White House officials? Or did they lie? Last August, in a front-page story in the *Post*, Barton Gellman and Walter Pincus wrote about “a pattern in which President Bush, Vice President Cheney and their subordinates—in public and behind the scenes—made allegations depicting Iraq’s nuclear weapons program as more active, more certain and more imminent in threat than data they had would support.”

The Bush Administration denies that it was a victim of faulty intelligence, or that officials lied. In an interview with David Frost for the BBC, in November, Bush said, “I’m very confident we got good intelligence.” Bush went on to say that David Kay, the Administration’s chief weapons inspector in Iraq, had concluded that Saddam Hussein was in violation of U.N. resolutions. But since Kay did not find hard evidence of the substantial chemical, biological, or nuclear materials that Bush had warned of, Frost asked if the President had exaggerated the imminent threat. “I believe he was a dangerous man,” Bush simply said. On December 16th, Diane Sawyer interviewed Bush, and recounted some of the claims made by the Administration to justify war in Iraq. Bush repeated much of what he had said about Kay to Frost and then invoked the attacks of September 11, 2001:

And, look, there is no doubt that Saddam Hussein was a dangerous person. And there’s no doubt we had a body of evidence proving that. And there is no doubt that the President must act, after 9/11, to make America a more secure country.

Much of the White House press corps believed that Bush was sometimes isolated not only from the press but from reality. This suspicion was strengthened in October, when Bush rushed through a six-day visit to Asia and Australia. After an hour-long meeting between Bush and moderate Islamic leaders in Bali, David Sanger reported that the President emerged and, shaking his head, asked aides, “Do they really believe that we think all Muslims are terrorists?” In a *Times* news analysis, Sanger wrote, “It was a revealing moment precisely because the president was so surprised. . . . Even some of

Mr. Bush's aides concede that Mr. Bush has only begun to discover the gap between the picture of a benign superpower that he sees, and the far more calculating, self-interested, anti-Muslim America the world perceives as he speeds by behind dark windows."

At the tenth solo press conference of the Bush Presidency, on October 28th, Bush was asked twenty-three questions, all but two of them on international issues. His staff was unhappy with the nature and tone of many of the questions, and thought they displayed the distance between what concerns the press and what concerns the public. "It was very telling," Dan Bartlett told me. "What's the No. 1 issue facing the public? It's the economy. Yet he did not get one question on the economy." Bartlett also saw this as proof of the media's "negativity." Catherine Martin, a public-affairs assistant to Cheney, saw what she referred to as an "unconscious" liberal bias. "It's interesting how, before they ask their question, reporters stand up and give a little spiel that taints what the question is," she said. "It's their view of what is going on. . . . And it's not the same thing as objective reporting." (Such perceptions may be subjective. Martin and I witnessed the same press conference. We each heard the same long-winded questions. But only one question seemed to me opinionated.)

Afterward, the press saw in Bush's performance confirmation that he was either out of touch or dissembling. At one point in the press conference, he was asked whether the "Mission Accomplished" banner was premature, and Bush declared that the banner "was put up by the members of the U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln, saying that their mission was accomplished." It was not an idea from his staff, he said. But, as the Administration later admitted, the banner was approved, constructed, paid for, and delivered by the White House.

In his 2000 book "Eyewitness to Power," David Gergen, who has worked for three Republican Presidents and one Democratic President, and is now the director of the Center for Public Leadership at the Kennedy School, at Harvard, summed up his experience with truth-telling: "In my experience over the past thirty years, every White House—save one—the Gerald Ford White House—"has on occasion willfully misled or lied to the press."

Not all journalists have felt excluded by the Bush White House. Bob Woodward had more access than any other journalist to Bush and his first team for the book "Bush at War," which presented, sometimes with fly-on-the-wall detail, the Administration's reaction to the September 11th attacks (a second volume will be published before the Presidential election). Woodward has had a luxury that few White House newspaper reporters enjoy—time and space—and says that he has found this White House "more responsive" than any he's covered. But, he adds, talking to reporters takes time, and this Administration has "not devoted the energy and the time to fully explain some of their decisions. . . . These people are tired. And, after a long day, responding to the press goes at the bottom of the list." Woodward, no doubt, is at the top of the White House list for several reasons—among them a calculation that it would be wiser to try to coopt Woodward, a tenacious reporter, than to shut him out. The White House also trusted Woodward, who, after the first Gulf War, wrote "The Commanders," a generally flattering account of that conflict's strategy and execution.

The Administration's top officials—among them, Rice, Powell, and Rumsfeld—rarely speak at length to the press, and a close reader of newspapers can easily deconstruct the lengthy interviews and profiles that do appear. If a journalist wants continued access, as most Washington-based reporters do, it is likely that the President will be portrayed as tough-minded, decisive, and fair—though perhaps faulted for impatience with squabbling underlings. And the underling in the spotlight will be credited with wisdom and restraint in the service of a greater good—though perhaps faulted for being a bit too pushy in their policy agendas.

By the beginning of the New Year, Dan Bartlett and Bush's strategists realized that

there was some merit to the assertion that the Administration could do a better job of cultivating the press. In the day that I spent at the White House, I watched an Oval Office interview of Bush by a reporter for the *Sun*, of England. Bush wore a blue pin-striped suit and black cowboy boots (as well as pink wool socks), and he seemed more conversant with the nuances of policy than he does at press conferences. One also saw his backslapping charm, and his bluster. When the interview was over, I talked with Bush about New York, and about one of his friends there, Tom Bernstein, a former co-owner, with Bush, of the Texas Rangers. Bernstein, a strong proponent of human rights, regularly faces abuse from liberal friends for supporting Bush. “Bernie is great,” Bush said. He then looked at me intently and declared, “No President has ever done more for human rights than I have.”

Later, Bartlett said, “Some of the best moments the President has had have been unscripted”—such as when he stood at the site of the World Trade Center with a bull-horn and declared, “I hear you!,” or on the few occasions on Air Force One when he invited pool reporters to join him in his conference room and, reporters say, impressed them with his grasp of policies affecting the Middle East, North Korea, and even Iraq. Bartlett continued, “The less formal the better, across the board.” At formal press conferences, he went on, quoting the President, “Everybody has to get pur-died up.”

Bartlett did not mention a potentially ugly problem facing the Administration: Joseph C. Wilson IV, a former Ambassador to Gabon, who in early 2002 had been sent to Africa by the Administration to track down the uranium story that Bush would later cite in his State of the Union address, reported that the intelligence information was bogus. Early in the summer of 2003, he publicly announced this in a column for the *Times* Op-Ed page, which enraged the Bush White House. In mid-July, the syndicated columnist Robert Novak reported that Wilson’s wife, Valerie Plame, was a C.I.A. “operative on weapons of mass destruction,” and that “two senior administration officials” had told him that she had suggested her husband’s mission.

Although it is against the law for government officials to knowingly disclose the names of undercover agents, the press did not initially take much notice. Joseph Wilson, however, did, and in the late summer he alleged that Karl Rove had engineered the leak. When I asked Rove if he was the source, he replied that he could not answer, because the allegation was under investigation. But he asked an assistant to print out a copy of his sole public comment, a quick exchange with an ABC reporter who had waited outside his home to ask if he had knowledge of the C.I.A. name or had leaked it. “No,” Rove had replied. (Last week, after Attorney General John Ashcroft recused himself from investigating the leak, the Justice Department appointed a special prosecutor.)

Scott McClellan keeps a list on his desk of ideas of ways to provide more access to Bush, many suggested by reporters—a radio roundtable interview, more one-on-one interviews, more conversations with pool correspondents. The White House staff knows that Americans are divided, with a little over half approving of Bush’s performance. (His approval rating went up in December, after Saddam Hussein was captured.) But, even if there is a mixed verdict on his policies, a larger number appear to believe that Bush is a person of conviction, character, and compassion. “Integrity is the backbone of this Presidency,” Mark McKinnon says. “And I think it has sustained him through some difficult periods and events.” The challenge for the campaign, he concludes, is this: “How do we create forums where people see not just his policy but his soul?”

That, however, may require Bush to find a forum that makes him comfortable. “Bush compares himself to a C.E.O., but C.E.O.s communicate regularly with their constituents—shareholders,” Donald A. Baer, the communications director in the Clinton Administration, says, adding that Bush has yet to find “his own version of fireside chats.” Michael Deaver believes that Bush makes a mistake when he tells his people not to share with the press how decisions are made. “If we knew more about how he made

decisions, it might humanize him,” Deaver says.

Sometimes Bush’s anger with the press cuts off communication. For example, on November 13th Bush was furious about a *USA Today* story claiming that he was unhappy with the performance of Paul Bremer; it asserted that Bush had summoned Bremer to a White House meeting and told him to speed up the transition to Iraqi rule. “How can anybody report this who was not in the meetings?” Bush said to an aide. Bartlett waited three days for Bush to “cool down,” an aide says, before suggesting that Bush consent to a *People* magazine interview. Bartlett was angry about two cover stories in *Newsweek*—“How Dick Cheney Sold the War” and “Bush’s \$87 Billion Mess”—and knew that the President would have been so as well had he seen them. In the end, Bartlett persuaded Bush to grant December interviews to *People* and to Diane Sawyer. “My goal is that I want them to know the person and not the institution,” Bartlett explained.

Despite such gestures, the Bush Administration appears to believe that the power of the White House press corps is slowly ebbing. “I think when viewed through a historical lens the role and importance of the White House press corps today have diminished—perhaps significantly,” Mark McKinnon says. “Drudge”—Matt Drudge’s popular Internet blog—“and non-stop cable news have created a virtual real-time news environment. . . . White House press briefings today are televised”—instantly posted on the Internet. McKinnon discerns a potent mixture of frustration and ennui among White House reporters: “They are all alpha dogs. The cream of the journalistic crop. They have arrived. They have made it to the top. And they discover, to their dismay, they are not as important as they thought they would be. Or should be. And, in fact, many are flat bored. It’s always been the hottest beat for the best reporters. And now they sit in real-time limbo, lost in the dust of the Internet and cable.”