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The Anti-democratic effects of America's media: putting health care reform on its deathbed

Bruce R. Butler

The University of Montana

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THE ANTI-DEMOCRATIC EFFECTS OF AMERICA'S MEDIA:
PUTTING HEALTH CARE REFORM ON ITS DEATHBED

By
Bruce R. Butler
B.A. The University of Montana, 1993
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Approved by:

[Signatures]
Chairperson
Dean, Graduate School

Date
5-21-97

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America's press have a societal purpose to inform the public so that the people can assert meaningful control over the governing process. However, media coverage of the recent health care debate suggests that the press is not fulfilling their democratic responsibility.

The introduction reviews several approaches to media studies, and outlines a method for studying the media's effect on the debate over President Clinton's health care reform proposal. Anti-government themes and anti-reform propaganda exacerbated a media feeding frenzy. Eventually, pack journalism engulfed President Clinton's proposal. The media focused on the surface aspects of the political debate, contributing little to the public's understanding of policy matters.

The case study illustrates the mass media's significant control and influence over the flow of information truncated the debate. The limited scope of media coverage often focused on the negative aspects of the President's proposal or the thrust and parry of politics, not in-depth analysis. Thus, media coverage often lacked context, reinforced conventional wisdom, and ultimately failed to help the public understand and decide on an important policy issue.

Considering that the public has demanded health care reform for the past two decades, the effect of the media's feeding frenzy was anti-democratic because it contributed not only to the defeat of President Clinton's health care proposal, but to any solution. The media treated the public as spectators, not as members of a society engaged in a difficult policy decision.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION:
THE MEDIA, DEMOCRACY, AND HEALTH CARE REFORM

To claim that America's media have an anti-democratic effect on domestic policymaking is to contradict the traditional belief that the press are "cantankerous, obstinate, and ubiquitous in their search for truth and their independence of authority."\(^1\) Today, however, this standard conception is frequently challenged by even mainstream political commentators. For example, Charles E. Lindblom and Edward J. Woodhouse suggest that the media's attempts to be objective are more likely to reinforce "conventional interpretations of current events."\(^2\) By reinforcing conventional wisdom the media narrow the "competition of ideas," and fracture the "foundation of democracy -- the capacity of the citizen to analyze his or her own needs and to find policies for meeting them."\(^3\)

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\(^3\) Ibid., 124.
However, the idea that the press simply narrow the competition of ideas is somewhat inadequate, given the importance of the media to deliberative democratic processes. As Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky contend, America’s media actually have a societal purpose, that is itself valuable. A democratic press can empower people “to assert meaningful control over the political process by providing them with the information needed for the intelligent discharge of political responsibilities.”

From Herman and Chomsky’s viewpoint, the media’s tendency to reinforce conventional wisdom and to focus on the surface aspects of political debate does more than just fracture a citizen’s ability to choose “goods” from Lindblom and Woodhouse’s supermarket of ideas. Instead, the media fosters a climate of conformity which can impede the public’s ability to play an informed role in the policy-making process. Therefore, shallow media coverage actually truncates democratic debate.

Unlike the press’s more manifest functions — such as providing information — curtailing political discourse is a latent function of America’s market-based news media. It is these functions Herman and Chomsky are referring to when they contend that the media support the status quo and hinder the public’s ability to “assert meaningful control over the political process.” The following chapters suggest that even

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4 Herman and Chomsky, Manufacturing Consent, 298.
5 Ibid.
though the media obstruct the practice of democracy, the result is not just a reaffirmation of the status quo. Instead, the media can fortify a democracy without citizens, which Benjamin Barber refers to as democracy's thin veneer:

[yielding] neither the pleasures of participation nor the fellowship of civic association, neither the autonomy and self-governance of continuous political activity nor the enlarging mutuality of shared public goods ... [it] is at best a politics of static interest, never a politics of transformation; a politics of bargaining and exchange, never a politics of invention and creation....

There are many theoretical constructs which attempt to describe how America's media curtail democratic deliberation. Yet, none of these are universally applicable. In order to shed further light on the media's anti-democratic effect, this thesis investigates the press's role in defeating the Clinton administration's health care initiative, and contends that their substantial influence over the flow of raw information, and their interpretations of that information, truncated the health care debate, and had an anti-democratic effect.

In pursuit of these goals, a three part overview is outlined in the remainder of this chapter. The initial section sketches out a conceptual approach specific to the media's effect on the health care debate. The second section establishes how the Clinton Administration formed the Health

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Care Security Act of 1993. The final section describes the in-depth evaluation to be taken up in the following chapters.

Before preceding, however, it is important to make a point of clarification. This analysis draws a distinction between the "mass media" and the "media." The latter refers to the news media, the press or journalists. The term "mass media" is much broader. It refers to not only the media, but also other forms of news, marketing and entertainment delivered to the public via electronic and print mediums — such as information delivered through television, radio, films, newspapers, magazines, journals, and books.7

Part of the problem with media studies is that the barrier between the news media and other elements of the mass media have become increasingly blurred. For instance, is Rush Limbaugh providing people with news or is his radio program entertainment? One could also question whether ABC’s "Prime Time Live" is a news or an entertainment program. Is Sam Donaldson a journalist, an entertainer or a political commentator? The fact that these distinctions increasingly lack distinction is important because news coverage is packaged — by the reporter’s tone and interpretations of events. If information is being framed for entertainment value instead of information value, it can alter the message conveyed.

Conceptualizing the Media’s Influence on Democracy

A common problem when studying news coverage is that empirical proof of the media’s influence on society can be inconclusive. However, one may nonetheless theoretically conceptualize and interpret the media’s effect on participatory democracy. One way to do this is to begin with the premise that internal and external factors influence press coverage, which shapes raw information contributing to media content, i.e., content influence studies. The media’s messages are dependent variables determined by influential factors which are the independent variables.8

There are also process and effect studies. As the terminology suggests, these studies are concerned with how media content affects society. For instance, a common research question is whether news coverage of violence causes children to be more aggressive. In such studies, media content is considered to be the independent variable.9 This analysis investigates the press’s influence on the health care debate; thus it is primarily a content effects study. However, it is necessary to determine and organize what factors influenced media content during the debate prior to contending that it had an anti-democratic effect because some factors were more relevant than others.

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9 Ibid., 3-4.
Two predominant ways to analyze influences on news media content are Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model, and Larry Sabato's feeding frenzy approach. The former is considerably more controversial and focuses on mass media, while the latter is widely accepted and focuses exclusively on the news media.

Herman and Chomsky contend that the media serve the ends of America's elite by systematically disseminating propaganda and manufacturing the public's consent to an elite political agenda. Although their conclusion resembles a conspiracy theory, Chomsky adamantly refutes such charges, "If I give an analysis of, say, the economic system, and I point out that General Motors tries to maximize profit and market share, that's not a conspiracy theory, that's an institutional analysis.... [T]hat's precisely the sense in which we are talking about the media." However, Herman and Chomsky also stress that even though the media may favor elite interest, the media "are not a solid monolith on all issues." Members of the elite often disagree, and political debate within the media reflects a "diversity of tactical judgments [among elites] on how to attain generally shared aims." Disagreement can be fierce

10 Herman and Chomsky, Manufacturing Consent, xii.
12 Herman and Chomsky, Manufacturing Consent, xii.
13 Ibid., xii.
but opinions challenging the dominant ideology are systematically excluded from media content by the press's "selection of topics, distribution of concerns, framing of issues, filtering of information, emphasis and tone, and by keeping debate within the bounds of acceptable principles." The exclusion of dissenting opinions erodes the traditional functions of the press, while favoring one of its more latent functions — manufacturing the consent of the "disenfranchised masses." According to Chomsky, this latent function of the media is necessary to legitimize the status quo. Since the United States is not a dictatorship, it is unable to ensure public obedience by force. Thus, its leaders must control public thought and political debate because "thought can lead to action and ... the threat to order must be exercised at the source." Chomsky contends that it is necessary for the elite to "establish a framework for possible thought that is constrained within the principles of the state religion." The "state religion" is the collective fundamental beliefs of the citizenry. For Americans these include rights to property and free speech. In Chomsky's view, strict adherence to these rights has sanctified the privileges of those who own a majority of the country's capital and has

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14 Ibid., 298.
15 Ibid., 1-2.
17 Ibid.
defined the public's conception of democracy. Thus, "it was in the service of democracy" that the media -- radio, television, and newspapers -- were "kept from the public domain and handed over to a few huge corporations...."¹⁸

Even though private ownership influences media content, it represents only one of five interrelated influences, or filters, through which members of the elite can control the media. The five, outlined in Herman and Chomsky's structural analysis, include:

(1) the size, concentrated ownership, owner wealth, and profit orientation of the dominant mass-media firms; (2) advertising as the primary income source of the mass media; (3) the reliance of the media on information provided by government, business, and "experts" funded and approved by these primary sources and agents of power; (4) "flak" as a means of disciplining the media; and (5) "anticommunism" as a national religion and control mechanism.¹⁹

The result of raw information passing through these filters is an elite interpretation of reality that establishes "the premises of discourse and interpretation," controls the political agenda, and defines "what is newsworthy in the first place."²⁰

Sabato's approach differs significantly from that of Herman and Chomsky's. There is no hint of conspiracy in a media feeding frenzy. Instead, it is "any political event or circumstance where a critical mass of journalists leap to

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¹⁹ Herman and Chomsky, Manufacturing Consent, 2.
²⁰ Ibid.
cover the same embarrassing or scandalous subject and pursue it intensely, often excessively, and sometimes uncontrollably."21

The effects of feeding frenzies vary according to the event, or collection of events, they revolve around. Since the public's view of politics is, for the most part, a byproduct of what they gather from the news media, feeding frenzies can contribute to collective optimism or pessimism. Thus, the ramifications of aggressive media coverage are not all negative. As Sabato explains, since Watergate there has been an increased openness and accountability required of politicians and government which has had some positive effects on public awareness. Unfortunately, another consequence has been press coverage that has contributed to the trivialization of political discourse, because the press often end up treating "venial sins and mortal sins as equals, rushing to make every garden-variety scandal another Watergate."22 In effect much of the news is not news at all, or as Sabato opines, "peccadillos have supplanted policy on the front pages," and this decivilizes politics.23

There are a variety of causes for feeding frenzies. In describing some of the difficulties encountered by the Clinton administration, W. Lance Bennett suggests that a lack

22 Ibid., 200, 208-209.
23 Ibid.
of cooperation and unfavorable press relations between the
Administration and the Washington Press Corps fueled a series
of feeding frenzies. Clinton and his staff were resentful
about their treatment by the press during the 1992 campaign.
Once in the White House, they attempted to "go over the
heads" of the press by holding electronic town hall meetings
and attempting to stage news events. According to Bennett,
many members of the press felt that this "amounted to a
declaration of war on journalism's elite corps."24 From
there, other questionable mishaps — such as the Clintons'
involvement in Whitewater, a questionable land deal in
Arkansas — became prime targets for feeding frenzies.

Bennett's observation suggests that media coverage of
the Clinton Administration, and perhaps the health care
debate itself, could be adequately explained by a feeding
frenzy. However, it is helpful to understand that feeding
frenzies are the result of an "interplay of influences."
This term has been used by Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Karlyn
Kohrs Campbell to conceptualize media processes as societal
processes. Thus the following chapters describe "not only
how the media influence us, but how the media are, in turn,
influenced by others — individuals, groups, government
agencies, politicians, and other mass media."25

25 Kathleen Hall Jamieson, and Karlyn Kohrs Campbell.
The Interplay of Influence: Mass Media & Their Publics in
News, Advertising, Politics. (Belmont, California: Wadsworth
However, it is still necessary to determine which influences are significant, and to organize their interactions. One way to do this is to utilize a structural approach based on the two types of studies mentioned earlier -- content influence studies and process and effects studies. This thesis combines the two, forming a relevant influences and content effects approach. This approach illustrates how a feeding frenzy consumed President Clinton's health care initiative, and leads to the conclusion that the media can have an anti-democratic effect.

Two of Herman and Chomsky's "filters" were predominant influences on media coverage of the health care debate: "anticommunism" as a national ideology and control mechanism; and "flak" as a means of keeping the media in line. This is not to say that the influence of the other filters -- the media's profit orientation, their dependence on advertising as a primary source of income, and their reliance on information provided by government agencies, businesses, and think tanks -- did not play a role in swaying media coverage. However, their effects can be accounted for while focusing on dominant ideology and flak.

Anti-Communistic themes easily translate into pro-American themes, such as liberty, individuality and property rights. Since these concepts have competing definitions they can not only be used freely, and often spuriously, but they can also encompass dominant ideological themes. When

26 Herman and Chomsky, Manufacturing Consent, 29.
Herman was questioned about limiting this conception to "anti-Communism," he conceded that "dominant ideology" would probably be more appropriate in extending the filter beyond the nature of Cold War dichotomies, and to include elements vital to established interests. The reason he and Chomsky chose to focus on anti-communism was because they "wanted to focus on the ideological element that has been the most important as a control and disciplinary mechanism in the U.S. political economy." Thus members of the mass media often become dependent on dominant themes other than anti-communism to communicate messages. Therefore, this analysis utilizes the conception of dominant ideological themes.

These themes are often appealed to by producers of "flak," negative reactions to media commentary or programing distributed through issue-orientated advertising, private publications and expert opinions. Most flak is subsidized by businesses, organizations, interests groups, and think-tanks. Not surprisingly, Herman and Chomsky contend that the dominant producers of flak are the established right wing of American politics. Beth Schulman, associate publisher of In These Times, a left-of-center publication, agrees since they are better funded, "America's conservative philanthropies eagerly fund the enterprise of shaping of

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28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., 26-28.
opinion and defining policy debates ... similar efforts by progressive philanthropies are, by comparison, sporadic."  

From 1990 to 1993, private grants to the leading political magazines of the right wing, such as American Spectator and The New Criterion, were eighty-two percent higher than private grants to comparable magazines of the left wing, such as The Progressive and The Nation. John Tirman, director of the Winston Foundation and a board member of the Foundation for National Progress, agrees that the "right" influences government policy makers on a "conveyor belt from think tanks, academics and activists," enabling them to dominate policy debates.  

As will be discussed later, "flak" during the health care debate was prevalent but it originated from anti-reform activists, which differs significantly from the generic perception of America's right wing. In particular, many of the largest health insurance corporations had supported President Clinton's proposed universal, managed-care system, in which the government would set certain guidelines for coverage to be delivered by private insurance agencies. To many in the health insurance industry, managed competition seemed be preferable to a government takeover of health care.

31 Ibid., 11-12.
The Clinton Plan

By the 1992 Presidential election, the public had joined many health insurers in realizing the need to reform health care. Fifteen percent of the population had no health care insurance, many others feared that they too would lose their coverage, and increasing medical costs were consuming twelve percent of the nation’s GNP and increasing budget deficits. On the eve of Clinton’s inauguration, health care was second only to the economy among the problems Americans wanted addressed most. In fact, the findings of Harris and CBS/New York Times polls suggested that governmental attention to health care reform had been long overdue. The polls found that since 1982 seventy-five percent or more of the population believed America’s health care system needed to be either fundamentally changed or completely rebuilt.

Early in the presidential primaries, candidate Clinton neither embraced the untested idea of managed competition nor


a Canadian-style, "single-payer" health care system like that supported by one of his opponents, Senator Robert Kerry. (The term single-payer is used because all fees for health services are channeled through one entity -- either the federal or state government, or a regional organization. Services are still provided by privately owned facilities.)

Instead, Clinton tacitly supported a "play or pay" approach which would require employers to either offer health insurance to their workers or pay into a governmental fund to expand coverage for uninsured Americans. However, his support for this approach decreased when he entered the general election against President Bush and independent Ross Perot. Clinton wanted to campaign as a "New Democrat," but Bush painted his "play or pay" approach as a tax and spend program more characteristic of the old Democratic Party, and Perot's recalcitrant budget cutting rhetoric seemed to reinforce Bush's charges.

By September, 1992, Clinton endorsed the idea of managed competition. According to Theda Skocpol the change was Clinton's way of finding a middle ground between the promise of universal coverage and the demands of the health insurance industry. Additionally, it seemed achievable.


37 Ibid., 34-39.
because the idea had gained the political endorsement of influential journalists and academic policy experts.38

Beginning in the summer of 1991, economist Dr. Michael Weinstein, a member of the New York Times editorial board, had endorsed managed competition in more than two dozen of the paper’s editorials.39 In addition many of managed competition’s fundamentals had been envisioned by Stanford economist Alain Enthoven, who formed the “Jackson Hole group,” made up representatives from the “Big Five” insurance agencies -- Aetna, Cigna, Metropolitan Life, Prudential, and Travelers.40

The ideas produced by the “Jackson Hole group” directly influenced Clinton’s Health Security Act. They proposed requiring employers to make payroll contributions to health insurance premiums, financing expanded coverage. Second, they called for capping tax deductions for employer-provided health benefit plans at the lowest-priced plan in a given region, thereby forcing employers to invest in less expensive plans or pay the difference. Third, they wanted the government to form guidelines establishing what types of plans could be offered and for creating “health purchasing alliances” among smaller businesses so they could purchase insurance at lower rates.41

38 Ibid., 41-42.
39 Ibid., 42.
40 Ibid., The group was named for sight of their first meeting in Jackson Hole, Wyoming.
41 Ibid., 42-43.
The combination of these reforms would encourage the spread of Health Maintenance Organizations (HMOs), offering basic and preventive care at reduced costs. One addition the Clinton camp made to the Jackson Hole group's outline was the institution of global budget caps, or a cap on overall government spending to ease the transition to the new system.42

A quasi-governmental health care system appealed to Clinton for a number of reasons. Politically, it was important to have a plan that did not propose new taxes, and did not completely relinquish private control of health care to the government. At the same time, Clinton was determined to provide universal coverage, but he knew that this goal could only be met if the plan simultaneously promoted cost containment. He also hoped that the approach would enable his administration to attract the support of powerful health industry interests for a plan that managed private competition within a budget, without the political yoke of increased taxes.43

During the campaign, Clinton was critical of President Bush's proposal: "the Bush plan would put another $100 billion in tax credits through the same system between now and 1997, pouring good money after bad, with no plan for cost control."44 At the same time, he stressed that his own plan

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42 Ibid., 43-44.
43 Ibid., 46.
44 Ibid., 45.
was about "personal choice, private care, private insurance, private management, but a national system to put a lid on costs, to require insurance reforms, to facilitate partnerships between business, government, and health care providers." 45

After Clinton's inauguration, however, "Grand ideals met obdurate fiscal reality...." 46 The intricacies of the plan had not been mapped out, and only the basic outline had survived the test of public opinion. Thus, instead of passing these general demands on to Congress, the President decided to form a Health Care Task Force. The first lady acted as its public spokesperson and, along with longtime friend Ira Magaziner, constructed the bill. The Administration believed that Congress, with its decentralized power structure, would be unable to construct a comprehensive health care package and unable to find that "way through the middle" Clinton perceived was there. 47

From the viewpoint of Representative Pat Williams, chair of the Labor subcommittee, the President's proposal represented a grand compromise, but it had political ramifications:

The President obviously had a number of plans and dozens of combinations to work with. In short he could have presented any plan he wanted, and he was being pulled this way and that by a lot of the groups that had been interested in health care for

45 Ibid.
46 Ibid., 49.
47 Ibid., 49-55.
almost fifty years.... Clinton, then, was the Clinton that we now recognize better. He was the Clinton of the middle.... When it all came crashing down on him he frankly couldn't understand it for a long time because he thought he had moved toward the private health care industry.... He was going to let them run it.... [However] I came to realize very quickly that in order to properly provide access, to all of our people ... you have to have what on the surface appears to be a rather complicated set of rules.... The notion that one can reform health care access in America with very, very simple minor standards is nonsensical.  

Williams' insight begs many questions. Could media soundbites ever describe such a difficult piece of legislation to the American public? Could members of the press overcome their tendency to trivialize policy debate? Essentially, soundbites could have never been adequate, and that in itself truncates the public's understanding of policy matters. However, the press's failure during the health care debate transcended the media's inherent inadequacies. Many in the press were overly concerned with gossip, instead of governance, focusing on titillation rather than inquiry. The result was the trivialization of the health care debate rather than the enlightenment of the public.

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48 Representative Pat Williams, interview by author, 25 April 1997, Missoula, Montana, tape recording.
The Media’s Failure

Part of the reason the plan “came crashing down” was the media’s portrayal of the President’s proposal. As James Fallows contends, “the media failed in a historic way to help America understand and decide on this issue.” How the media failed is explained in the following chapters.

Chapter Two, “Health Care is Un-American: Anti-Government Sentiment and the Liberal Myth,” investigates how media content was plagued with anti-government, anti-Clinton and anti-reform themes, and how this trivialized the educational value of media reporting. The media were more concerned with focusing on the superficial aspects of the debate, and portraying President Clinton’s plan as a liberal, bureaucratic approach to health care reform. There was little interest in probing or questioning the essence of the proposed policy itself. Much of what passed for public information and policy discourse was an unprecedented amount of negative propaganda.

Chapter Three, “Mountain of Misinformation: The Media and Anti-Reform Flak” discusses how the media failed to critically evaluate misleading anti-government themes spread by interest groups, talk radio programs, and academic think tanks. An example was the “Harry and Louise” ads funded by


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the Health Insurance Agency of America (HIAA). Their strategy was simple: play on American's distrust of government. The preponderance of anti-reform propaganda blended with the media's concentration on the superficial aspects of the debate, and culminated into a feeding frenzy.

The fourth chapter, "No Exit: A Chart, A Scandal, And a Bus Tour," analyzes four events during the health care debate and exhibits how media content was fed by numerous frenzies. Members of the press were busy "gauging and guessing who would win" on Capital Hill and "not in exploring what the consequences would be for the country." Haynes Johnson and David Broder suggest that this type of reporting is a product of the journalistic culture, "its professional mind-set and its commercial, competitive pressures."

The final chapter, "The Anti-Democratic Effects of America's Media," elaborates on how the formation of media content contributed to an anti-democratic debate. In addition, it highlights that there may not be an all encompassing approach to media studies, no one element to be pointed to, and no conspiracy to be uncovered. However, if one looks at how the interplay of dominant ideological themes and flak constructed much of media content during the health care debate, one can uncover how a feeding frenzy engulfed President Clinton's proposal.

50 Johnson and Broder, The System, 635.
51 Ibid., 634.
CHAPTER 2

HEALTH CARE IS UN-AMERICAN:
ANTI-GOVERNMENT SENTIMENT AND THE LIBERAL MYTH

In her 1996 work, *Boomerang: Clinton’s Health Security Effort and the Turn against Government in U. S. Politics*, Theda Skocpol makes two observations about media coverage of the health care debate. First, anti-government themes, as well as anti-Clinton themes, dominated media content and demonized the administration’s health care proposal.¹ At the same time, many journalistic accounts wrongly accused the Clintons of “devising a liberal, big-government approach to health care reform.”²

Skocpol is correct, but one must also understand that the media’s attention to anti-Clinton and anti-government themes was symptomatic of both the built up animosity many journalists had for the Clinton administration, and of the media’s focusing, almost exclusively, on “the Clinton Plan.” The combination of these elements produced media content lacking an in-depth and ongoing discussion of vital policy issues. Since the media did little to probe Clinton’s plan, or discuss alternative reforms, they did little to broaden

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² Ibid., 15.
the public's understanding of the debate's substance, or to discredit misinformation about "the Clinton Plan."

The media's interweaving of anti-government themes and liberal accusations portrayed the Clinton health package as "a regulatory rat's nest, a nightmare of overambitious social engineering, and a sweeping solution where modest reforms would do." Essentially, "the Clinton Plan became the left-wing alternative, not the comprehensive, economically astute package that it was. As shown by a March, 1994, Wall Street Journal-NBC News poll, many in the public could not support "the Clinton Plan." The poll found that forty-five percent of those surveyed opposed President Clinton's Health Care Security Act, yet seventy-six percent favored an unlabeled plan which contained all the essential elements of Clinton's proposal. The Wall Street Journal concluded: "Mr. Clinton is losing the battle to define his own health-care bill." However, the failure was not solely President Clinton's. The downfall of health care reform was exacerbated by journalists fanning the flames of discontent. This disdain for the Clinton Administration began well before the bill was introduced in September, 1993.

Antipathy toward government has always been a dominant ideological theme in American political thought, and these emotions can manifest in many ways -- animosity, bitterness,

4 Hilary Stout, "Many Don't Realize It's the Clinton Plan They Like," Wall Street Journal, 10 March 1994, 1(B) and 6(B).
In an August, 1992, memo to candidate Clinton, Senator Jay Rockefeller astutely recognized the importance of the public’s psychology: “Voters fear losing coverage from loopholes, job changes, layoffs or catastrophic illness. Fear, much more than compassion, drives support for universal guarantees of coverage” (emphasis added). However, Rockefeller also warned Clinton that their fear was offset by an equal threat: “Before long they will be asking: How would we pay for all that care for all those people? Won’t it require a huge new government bureaucracy?” So for many the debate became a choice of whom do you fear more, the insurance companies or the government?

Kathleen Hall Jamieson contends that the media increased the public’s fear of “the Clinton Plan.” The press rarely focused on the policy issues of reform, and when they did, they failed to investigate competing solutions. The media opted to concentrate on the attacks and counter-attacks forged by the proponents and adversaries of President Clinton’s proposal. According to Jamieson, this

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7 Ibid., 93.
concentration bred public skepticism, and left many saying to themselves, "Gee, everything is awful. I have nothing I can believe in. Let's just reject the whole bunch of them. Let's just reject the whole process." 8

However, there is evidence to suggest that long before the public's rejection of "the whole process," a pack of journalists had already begun to feed around a turbulent White House. Only five months into his presidency, magazine headlines were denouncing President Clinton and his administration. The cover of the June 7, 1993, issue of Newsweek depicted a perplexed Bill Clinton -- arms crossed, one hand on his chin, gazing downward. Above him read the simple banner, "What's Wrong?" 9 That same week, a miniature of President Clinton was pictured on the bottom of the cover of Time. Arms behind his back, he gazed upward at the bold headline, "THE INCREDIBLE SHRINKING PRESIDENT." 10

Most of the initial turmoil for the Clinton Administration was not directly related to health care reform. Moreover, media coverage is not the result of a single event, but the interplay of events. Initial journalistic accounts of the administration set the tone for the media's coverage of health care reform. Journalists zeroed in on the administration's blunders and fed public

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9 Newsweek, 7 June 1993.

10 Time, 7 June 1993.
cynicism. The media was not wholly to blame because Clinton's agenda was ambitious. As Barbara Sinclair notes, "if several major efforts are going on at once, press coverage is even less predictable and more likely than usual to be harmful.... The press [chooses] the big story of the day and will almost always select the negative over the positive. Consequently, conducting several such campaigns simultaneously is nearly impossible."  

A brief overview of a few of these episodes — gays in the military, the failed nomination of Lani Guinier, and Travelgate — underscores how an interplay of events influences media coverage, and demonstrates how media content contributed to the public's negative reaction to "the Clinton Plan." Eventually, there seemed "to be an almost visceral level of mistrust and dislike for Clinton, a rejection of him not as a leader or politician but as a person."  

As controversies multiplied and the journalistic tone was set, vital questions concerning the administration's character, its honesty and the public's trust were never far from the headlines.

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13 Ibid.
The first controversy to arise came only two weeks after Clinton had taken the oath of office. During the campaign, he had promised to reverse the ban on homosexuals in the United States Armed Forces. Even though it was not a high priority on his agenda, the issue warranted media attention because the Democrats were fiercely split on the President’s position and it was easily explained in a headline or sound bite.

One of the most emphatic antagonists of lifting the ban was Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Sam Nunn. He “took on the newly elected president of his party vocally and publicly; for doing so, he received an enormous amount of media attention.” However, Representative Ron Dellums, Nunn’s counterpart in the House, supported the President but received nowhere near the attention Nunn’s vigorous opposition did. Dellums complained, “If you read the paper, I’m not even there.”

Eventually President Clinton backed down, opting instead to allow homosexuals to serve as long as they concealed their sexual preference (a policy known as “don’t ask don’t tell”). By doing so he impaled himself on a double-edged political sword. Adversaries tabbed Clinton a liberal, gay rights supporter, while gay activists accused him of failing to keep

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Neither of these themes would play well during the battle over health care reform.

More controversy arose from another of Clinton’s campaign pledges: to appoint an administration that “looked like America.” In April, 1993, Clinton nominated Lani Guinier, an African-American female and personal friend of the Clintons, to head the Justice Department’s Civil Rights division. Her nomination “became a lightning rod for political conflict.” At the time she was a University of Pennsylvania Law Professor, but she had also worked for the Carter administration and for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s (NAACP) Legal Defense and Educational Fund. During her career, Guinier had written many scholarly articles advocating minority voting rights, increasing black representation and intensifying minority group participation in legislative bodies.

Much of the nation was introduced to Ms. Guinier in a April 30, 1993 opinion-editorial by Clint Bolick, entitled “Clinton’s Quota Queens.” Bolick contended that Guinier’s appointment represented a Clinton payback to “extreme left-wing elements.” According to Bolick, her scholarly works showed that she had an “in-your-face civil rights agenda”

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17 David M. O’Brien, “Clinton’s Legal Policy and the Courts: Rising from Disarray or Turning Around and Around?,” in The Clinton Presidency, Campbell and Rockmann, 130.
18 Ibid.
that would "further polarize an already divided nation." Newsweek columnist George Will echoed Bolick's concern, accusing Guinier of believing that "the Voting Rights Act is violated by any legislative body where measures favored by certain government-approved minorities are often defeated."\(^\text{19}\)

Unfortunately, Bolick and Will, like much of the mainstream press, were guilty of selectively reading Guinier's work. She had also written that empowering minorities at the polls did not "require legislative set-asides, color-coded ballots, electoral quotas or 'one black, two votes' remedies."\(^\text{20}\) Unfortunately, the damage had been done. The catchy phrase "quota queen" caught on, and the racially loaded term was often used by journalists referring to Ms. Guinier. It combined the "welfare queen" stereotype with "quota," a term President Bush grappled with prior to the passage of the 1991 Civil Rights Act.\(^\text{22}\) All of this did not deter George Will from suggesting that Guinier's nomination was "just another day in the 'reinvention of


\(^{22}\) Rob Richie and Jim Naureckas, "Lani Guinier: Quota Queen or Misquoted Queen?," in Naureckas and Jackson, The Fair Reader, 133.
government' by a 'New Democrat'.... Next this lot will 'fix' the economy and 'reform' the health care system. Hang on."  

Will's warning to "hang on" may have evoked images of a wild ride yet to come, but it was also ironic considering that on May 19, 1993 the seven-person staff of the White House travel-office was fired due to allegations of wrongdoings. The office is in charge of scheduling charter flights for the White House Press Corps who accompany the President on official duties, and for making hotel reservations for Executive aides. Members of the office were under FBI investigation for embezzling some eighteen-thousand dollars. During the investigation it was discovered that Harry Thomason, a friend of the Clintons and Hollywood producer, was trying to gain some of the airline charter business for his friends. At the same time, travel-office employee Catherine Cornelius, a distant cousin of the President, had proposed that the office be reorganized with herself as its head. In the mainstream press, these stories became know as "Travelgate."  

Since the travel-office provided "first-class creature comforts ... to reporters on presidential trips," any change in its personnel was sure to affect the professional lives of

the White House Press Corps. ABC journalist Brit Hume voiced his dissatisfaction a few weeks after the shakeup by asking why the press had been served cold food on a recent White House charter flight, "a mere croissant, yogurt, and fruit." Not long after, there were one-hundred-sixty-nine questions about Travelgate during a White House press briefing, "far more than there were about the prospects for the president's $246 billion tax bill...."

The press's antipathy for the Clinton-way of doing things segued into their antipathy for the health care reform process. In early May, 1993, Ira Magaziner and First Lady Hillary Clinton wanted to finish the health care proposal and send it on to Congress. However, most of the White House staff wanted nothing to distract attention, primarily media attention, from the battle for the President's budget proposal on Capitol Hill. Eventually the First Lady agreed to exclude the press from the health care task force meetings. She recalled how she had been badly criticized by the press during the 1992 campaign and she did not want the same to happen to either the President's budget or health care reform. She justified the press lockout in an April, 1993 speech, "the bane of all people in political life ... is the unfair, unjust, inaccurate reporting that goes on from

26 Clift and Miller, "Don't Mess With the Media," 23.
27 Ibid.
coast to coast." According to journalists Haynes Johnson and David Broder, the secrecy policy was a major mistake that "ultimately deprived the public of essential information on which to form judgments," and created a "cloud of public suspicion."29

Locking out the press lead to a number of damaging, and often misleading, leaks. One of the more serious incidents concerned three charts detailing three reform options. The first outlined the projected inflationary effect each of the three plans would have on national spending, the highest being an initial increase of fifty-billion dollars which would eventually increase to one-hundred-billion. The second chart depicted the potential savings that each option would gain, and the third estimated the net effect of each option on the federal budget. Johnson and Broder claim that only the first chart -- regarding the increasing costs of Clinton's reform ideas -- was leaked to the New York Times. To compound this breach, the chart was modified, making it appear to call for a one-hundred-fifty-billion dollar increase in taxes. A footnote which stated "in unmistakable uppercase letters" that projected cost increases were "before any calculation of savings" had been blacked out.30

29 Johnson and Broder, The System, 140, 142.
30 Ibid., 140-141.
Without access to the footnote, or consulting the other two charts, the May 3 edition of the New York Times ran a critical front page headline: "HEALTH-CARE COSTS MAY BE INCREASED $100 BILLION A YEAR." The article, by Robert Pear, lacked an in-depth analysis of the reasoning behind increasing expenditures or the benefits increased investments might bring about. Pear also maintained that some Clinton administration officials were urging their budgetary experts to reduce the cost estimates because the increases would be politically impossible to achieve.31 This insight suggests that he relied on more than the one chart to write his article. Of course, writing about the embattled administration's balanced approach to health care reform -- which was revealed by the missing charts, and the lost footnote -- would not have landed his story on the front page of one of the nation's leading newspapers.

In fact, the accusation that there was a shroud of secrecy around the task force implies that it was some sort of conspiracy, which it was not. Nor is Johnson and Broder's contention that this somehow deprived the public of essential information and created a cloud of public suspicion completely accurate. The task force actually went out of its way to hear a variety of interests on matters of substance. Only four months into Clinton's term, the task force had already met with 572 organizations. The headline on the May twenty-second issue of the Congressional Quarterly read

"CLINTON TASK FORCE ALL EARS ON THE SUBJECT OF OVERHAUL." In September, when Hillary Clinton testified on behalf of health care reform before five congressional committees, "not a single legislator complained about the 'closed' or 'secretive' deliberations: not Bob Dole, not Robert Packwood, not John Danforth ... Republican Senators who all later came out against the bill." 32

Despite consulting many organizations and a lack of conspiratorial assertions from legislators, journalist Dana Priest, who covered the task force for the Washington Post, continued to suggest that the Clintons "hurt themselves a lot, because the idea formed that they were creating a 'secret plan.'" 33 More pointed accusations came from radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh who professed that "anybody who disagrees with any aspect of [the Clinton] plan is being attacked." 34

Part of the problem is that there are inherent problems with detailed press coverage. With an almost concessionary tone, Johnson and Broder admit that

[I]t was a story that required detailed, persistent, imaginative coverage for people to understand how it affected them ... For the print press, which should have had more time to prepare longer in-depth articles, it was ... a challenging assignment to help the public understand the stakes involved and to sort out fact from propaganda in the political battle for public opinion.... Too often the print press failed to meet the challenge;

33 Johnson and Broder, The System, 142.
34 Great Health Care Debate, videotape.
coverage was desultory, inconsistent, or focused on the political points being scored by opposing sides.... For television, by nature a fragmentary medium for conveying information, with increasing emphasis on entertainment as news and "sound bites" featuring conflict, charge, and countercharge as news highlights, this story was nearly impossible.\(^{35}\)

The closed door policy did make these inherent complications worse because it excluded the one group that mattered the most, the press. Despite their importance, veteran journalist James Fallows contends that even if keeping out the Washington Press Corps was a "stupid" idea it far from justified journalists depicting the task force as being a secret organization, a naive collection of liberal intellectuals or a closed-minded group of elites.\(^{36}\)

Essentially, the decision to keep the press at bay during the early stages of policy formation did not warrant the media misrepresenting reality.

Misleading depictions did not end after the task force had finalized their reform proposal. As mentioned above, journalistic accounts interwove anti-government themes, such as the shroud of secrecy, and the administration's closed-minded approach, with liberal accusations, portraying the Clinton health package as "a regulatory rat's nest," and "overambitious social engineering."\(^{37}\) Thus, to many the 1993 Health Care Security Act became the left-wing reform plan.

\(^{35}\) Johnson and Broder, The System, 143.
\(^{37}\) Ibid., 32.
This was perpetuated by media content that practically excluded advocates of a Canadian-style, single-payer health care system, a more liberal solution than President Clinton's.

As mentioned in chapter one, the Clinton team steered away from a single-payer proposal, even though eighty-nine House Democrats had already signed on the bill sponsored by Representative McDermott. The administration wanted to maintain Clinton's image as a "New Democrat" and they feared that opponents could easily portray a single-payer proposal as an unnecessary federal takeover of health care that would increase the national debt.

The strategy was intended to satisfy two related ends. First, it was supposed to create a compromise position, situated between full-fledged socialized medicine and the present free market system. Second, by starting with a compromise the Clinton administration hoped that the package would avoid being labeled a big government program proposed by a tax-and-spend, liberal Democrat. The administration did not foresee that the nature of the plan, with its intricate and interlocking regulations, would give "right-wing government haters" adequate ammunition to contend that it would only increase taxes, create an unnecessary, intrusive governmental bureaucracy and destroy "the best health care system in the world." For the most part, the media

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38 Johnson and Broder, The System, 43.  
39 Skocpol, Boomerang, 178.
exacerbated this reaction by marginalizing advocates of a single-payer health care reform package.

The quieting of these dissenting opinions perpetuated the liberal myth. Even while media content was failing to represent all sides of the health care debate, members of the media championed America's pluralistic system. On PBS's "MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour," anchor Margaret Warner proclaimed that "interest groups on all sides of the issue have taken to the airwaves." In reality, an advertisement supporting a single-payer system, funded by the interest group Neighbor to Neighbor, was kept off television stations in San Francisco, Boston, and Washington D.C.

The ad depicted a living room setting, with an elderly woman sitting in her easy chair next to a fire. As the camera zoomed in, the woman spoke tenaciously, "Listen, why don't we get rid of the health insurance companies. Let's go to the blackboard." Using her walking cane as a pointer, "Here's what we spend on health care. It's a lot!" She directs the viewers attention to the board:

Single-Payer
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$900 Billion

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41 Ibid.
"But if we get rid of the insurance companies, we can have complete coverage for everyone for the same money." The graphic on the board changes:

**Insurance Companies**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Amount</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$900 Billion</td>
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<td>+ $100 Billion</td>
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<th>Tax Type</th>
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<tr>
<td>Sales Tax</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits Tax</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Payroll Tax</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

"Any plan that keeps these guys in business will cost billions in taxes, taxes, taxes. To me it's a no-brainer."
The ad closed by picturing the words "Health Insurance Companies," encircled and slashed through in red. A deep, forewarning, male voice cautioned, "It's time for them to go. Call Congress today."42

Kathleen Hall Jamieson contends that the reason this single-payer ad never "saw the light of day" was because health insurers brought pressure against those wanting to run them.

Insurance Agencies are major advertisers.... They can put economic pressure on stations not to air ads such as this and because those ads aren't protected legally, [insurance agencies] can threaten lawsuits against stations who air them, saying they are misleading. Now what that means in the debate is that this ad which says let's get rid of insurance companies won't air but ... ads for the insurance industry [will air].... That means we have incentives, that are legal incentives inside the system, for large corporations to be given access to the

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42 *Great Health Care Debate*, videotape.
airwaves and those who oppose them not, and that is a problem if one believes in balanced debate.43

The reasons given by station managers for not airing the single-payer ad confirms Jamieson's contention. They claimed that the ad was "a call to action," "too broad," and "undocumented." One even explained that running the ad would be prohibitive because many of their major advertisers are health insurers, and "we don't want to take any hits from the insurance companies."44 Of course, stations did not routinely turn down ads from the health insurance corporations for the same reasons, because that would have directly cut revenues.

To make matters worse, news programming rarely mentioned a single-payer alternative. For instance, in all of 1993, ABC's "World News Tonight with Peter Jennings" mentioned the proposal only once.45 When a Canadian single-payer health care system was discussed it was likely to be discarded without question. From July, 1993, to November, 1994, the proposal was referred to only twice on ABC's "Nightline." One of these occasions was a featured interview with President Clinton. Anchor Ted Koppel suggested to the President that many Canadians were coming to the United States for health care. According to Koppel, America's northern neighbors were saying, "Whatever you do, don't

43 Ibid.
44 Cohen and Solomon, Through The Media Looking Glass, 86.
45 Ibid., 85.
exchange what you’ve got for what we’ve got.” Actually, a Gallup poll taken a few days earlier had shown that only two percent of Canadians preferred the American health care system to their own. Koppel had also overlooked that Representative McDermott’s single-payer proposal had gained the support of eighty-nine members of the House.

By marginalizing single-payer advocates the media effectively disqualified one solution to the debate. Even though the press might have easily explained how a Canadian-type system would reduce bureaucracy, cut costs, provide universal coverage, and still allow patients to choose their own doctors, they rarely discussed it. Ironically, these ingredients are what much of the American public wanted from health care reform.

However, a single-payer plan went against those voices in the debate with the ability to speak the loudest, namely, the majority of the health insurance industry. Thus, members of the media, who might have considered discussing the plan seriously, could have lost credibility if they had done so. They could have been accused of a liberal media bias and of championing a socialist health care system. Thus, most of the media chose to zero in on the Clinton proposal, which

47 Johnson and Broder, The System, 43.
48 Skocpol, Boomerang, 178.
effectively edited a great deal of the debate because many House Members had already signed on to a single-payer bill. The single-payer advocates were lost in the fray and the American public was left uninformed about one workable solution to health care reform.

For all practical purposes, the exclusion of the single-payer proposal created a contextual void in media content. Since journalists often narrow policy debate to political dichotomies, they needed a "liberal" plan. Considering that many of the established members of the media had a growing animosity for the administration, many of them had little problem characterizing "the Clinton Plan" as the "liberal" alternative. If single-payer advocates would have been given the same media time that antagonists of Clinton's plan were allotted, then the liberal myth would not have gained such distinction.

Thus, a full-blown media myth was born, as basic truths were edited. The Health Security Act of 1993 was not cooked up by Hillary Clinton and her liberal cronies, rather it was adapted from a managed competition blueprint drawn up by the representatives of the "Big Five" insurance companies -- Aetna, Cigna, Metropolitan Life, Prudential and Travelers. One of the representatives noted that the only way to avoid a government takeover of health care, and avoid a Canadian style-system, was to eliminate the present multiple-payer

50 Ibid., 43.
private insurance industry, and replace it with a system of managed competition.\textsuperscript{51}

However, the "Big Five" had already begun forming Health Maintenance Organizations (HMOs), an essential ingredient to the President's proposal, and they were assured a major role in a health care system founded on a business-government partnership. Members of the Health Insurance Association of America (HIAA), which consisted of small to medium-sized health insurers, were not so confident. They feared that "managed competition" would manage them out of business, or that they would at least lose more of their business to the "Big Five."\textsuperscript{52}

HIAA's response was to produce flak -- a multi-million dollar media campaign against Clinton's health care reform. Their most effective weapon was a series of now infamous advertisements known as the "Harry and Louise" ads. The next chapter, "Mountain of Misinformation: The Media and Anti-reform Flak," concentrates on the producers of flak. As Skocpol notes, anti-reform flak spread "from think tanks to popular media and from elites to groups with a geographically dispersed grassroots presence."\textsuperscript{53}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{51} Cohen and Solomon, \textit{Through The Media Looking Glass}, 84-85.
  \item \textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{53} Skocpol, \textit{Boomerang}, 146.
\end{itemize}

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Opponents to health care reform used flak as a way of “playing on, and intensifying, public distrust of government,” and too often their propaganda, accurate or not, went unadulterated.\(^1\) The following assesses the influence of two sources of flak during the health care debate -- political advertisements, and radio talk shows -- and how they influenced media content. However, this flak was not, as Herman and Chomsky would contend, a pure function of elite propaganda which kept the media in line.\(^2\)

Flak during the health care debate occurred in the context of what David Truman termed a “political disturbance,” or an identifiable event that challenges the status quo and compels those adversely affected into action.\(^3\) Health care reform threatened many established business interests and health care providers. They responded by

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producing political advertisements critical of the plan, and their accusations were often reinforced by conservative talk radio. These forms of propaganda were intended not only to sway public opinion but also to sway the opinion of legislators and members of the media. Often, advertisers and talk radio hosts would appeal to public doubts about the ability of government to solve the health care problem. Such appeals contributed to a level of confusion and mistrust surrounding President Clinton and his reform package.

Kathleen Hall Jamieson suggests that advertising and talk radio exemplified the larger problems with the health care debate itself. One could often trace the lines of political propaganda from the Republican National Committee, or a conservative interest group in Washington, to talk show host Rush Limbaugh, or to the editorial page of the Wall Street Journal, or even back through the circuit. Whether or not these lines of rhetoric were intended is debatable. What is important is that their similarities hindered the public's ability to hear multiple sides of the debate. The average citizen had "no way to say yes I favor this over that, or say I've heard all the arguments ... and I don't think any of them solve the overarching problem." 

Although reform opponents may have played on the public's cynicism, they were not highly effective in changing

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5 Ibid.
the type of health care package the public demanded. As the Wall Street Journal-NBC news poll cited in Chapter Two shows, forty-five percent of the public had turned against the President's proposal but seventy-six percent continued to demand its essential elements when they were not connected to "the Clinton Plan."6

However, political advertisements and talk radio did influence key decision makers. In a 1995 survey commissioned by the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, prominent members of both Houses of Congress were questioned about the influential factors leading to the demise of health care reform. Responding to the question, "In your opinion, did each of the following have a great deal, some, not very much, or no influence on the outcome of the congressional debate on health care reform?," fifty-five percent said that advertising by interest groups had a great deal of influence and thirty-six percent said it had some influence.7

When asked, "Of the media sources, which specific one or two do you believe had the most influence in the outcome of the health care debate?," the number one response was radio talk shows, cited by forty-six percent of the respondents, and most of them specifically mentioned Rush Limbaugh. The

6 Hilary Stout, "Many Don't Realize It's the Clinton Plan They Like," Wall Street Journal, 10 March 1994, 1(B) and 6(B).

second closest response was newspapers, with thirty-eight percent (fifteen percent going to the New York Times, eleven percent to the Wall Street Journal, and four percent each to the Washington Post, the Washington Times and the Los Angeles Times).  

Influencing the decision making process was what many special interests set out to do. The HIAA’s executive president, Willis Gradison Jr., had an insider’s view of how his group could be successful. Gradison had served as a member of the House for eighteen years and had become an influential voice for the minority party on the Ways and Means Committee, and its Health Subcommittee. In 1992, after the moderate Republican lost election to a minor leadership post in the House Republican caucus, he decided to leave the House. Soon thereafter he accepted a post as president of the HIAA.  

The HIAA developed a series of advertisements popularly known as the “Harry and Louise” ads. Ben Goddard, the producer of the ads, admits that the HIAA targeted a certain audience, “We bought time on CNN and Headline News, CNBC, Rush Limbaugh, and in New York, Washington, and Los Angeles. We wanted to get on the agenda of the national media ... where editors and reporters who decide the news live.”

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8 Ibid., 145.  
Many other advertisers followed HIAA's strategy. As Jamieson notes, roughly twenty-five percent of the country received concentrated advertising attention, "and those people were in the key districts of the members of the major committees that were going to act on health care legislation."11

HIAA's first ad began with a younger couple sitting at their kitchen table covered with loose papers, a couple of note pads, and a calculator. A pencil in his right hand, the man taps at the calculator with his left. The woman, wipes her brow, and exclaims, "This was covered under our old plan." The man replies, "Oh yeah, that was a good one wasn't it." A foreboding voice chimes in, "Things are changing, and not all for the better. The government may force us to pick from a few health care plans designed by government bureaucrats." The actors respond. Woman: "Having choices we don't like is no choice at all." Man: "They choose." Woman: "We lose." The man brakes his pencil in half, and the woman scratches her head as the camera zooms out. The narrator concludes, "For reforms that protect what we have call toll free. Know the facts. If we let the government reform health care, we lose."12

This first installation of the HIAA's advertisements began running before the President even presented the Health Security Act to a joint session of Congress on September 22,

11The Great Health Care Debate, videotape.
12Ben Goddard, "Changes Alternate #2," (Claussen/First Tuesday productions, 1993), video recording obtained from the Health Insurance Association of America.
1993. Whether or not the HIAA had access to one of the leaked copies of the President's proposal is unknown. However, it is important to recognize that the "Harry and Louise" ads quickly got the attention of other adversaries of "the Clinton Plan." As noted in the *New York Times*, the HIAA's advertising campaign "quickly attracted the ire of competing special interest groups." Through the use of advertising, different adversaries began to accuse "the Clinton Plan" of various deficiencies, while offering no alternative proposals. Piece by piece, they took the plan apart, until there was nothing left. The press's attention to various advertising campaigns increased the potency of the attacks.

In fact, the press added to the HIAA's advertising campaign by actually giving the series its catchy name. The original script identified "Harry" and "Louise" as merely "He" and "She." Only after members of the press had obtained a copy of the script, which listed the two actors by name, Harry Johnson and Louise Caire, did reporters write about the "Harry and Louise" ads, which is easier to report on than reporting about that young couple sitting at their kitchen table discussing the nation's health care problems. Without media coverage of the ads, Americans may never have discussed "Harry and Louise."14

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The second "Harry and Louise" ad appeared in November. It also began with the couple sitting at their breakfast table. Harry, casually turning pages of his newspaper, says, "Well, I'm glad the President is doing something about health care reform." Louise, flipping through a copy of the President's Health Security Act, replies, "He's right, we need it." Harry: "But some of these details." Louise, yellow highlighter in hand: "Like a national limit on health care?" She begins to highlight lines of the President's plan and explains, "The government caps how much spending on health care and says, 'that's it.' ... There's got to be a better way." A phone number appears on the screen, under the bold banner, "A Better Way to Reform." The narrator concludes, "There is a better way to reform. Call this toll free number for the facts...."15

The HIAA's simple, cost-effective strategy -- to target certain members of the media and to target certain legislative districts -- had a rippling effect. According to Gloria Borger, of U. S. News and World Report, the ads played a big part in the psychological crossfire of the health care debate. In general, members of Congress are familiar with the power of television because most of them have used it in elections. They are also aware that special interest groups can easily use advertising against them. However, their attention to advertising can lead them astray because some

15 Ben Goddard, "Yes But II," (Claussen/First Tuesday productions, 1993), video recording obtained from the Health Insurance Association of America.
campaigns may actually be ineffective, and "members can get conned if they believe the public is listening."

Borger believes that is exactly what happened during the health care debate. The "Harry and Louise" ads show how health care reform became a debate between elites, and not a conversation between the voters and their leaders. The advertisers stirred up Washington and the press stirred up the public. As Borger suggests, "Harry and Louise would just have been two more whiny yuppies had the media not taken up their lament." 17

The "Harry and Louise" ads were so feared by legislators, that former House Ways and Means Chairman Dan Rostenkowski negotiated with the HIAA to keep the ads out of the districts of two prominent committee members. 18 Since Gradison, HIAA's president, was a former member of the committee it is likely that there was a substantial amount of communication between he and Rostenkowski. Chuck Lewis of the Center for Public Integrity, suggests that not only is this metaphorical for the cozy relationship between the health industry and the federal government, but it also exhibits how effective advertising can be. Gradison was able to "bludgeon public policy in the direction of his industry,

17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
and he did so, in part, because he had been on the Ways and Means Committee and he knew Dan Rostenkowski very well.  "19

Jamieson agrees with Lewis' and Borger's basic premise. The "Harry and Louise" ads were not necessarily effective as mass advertising, per se. If they were then "Harry and Louise" would have changed public opinion. Evidence suggests that they did not. Instead, Jamieson contends that they were effective as a public relations phenomenon -- in altering the decision making process -- primarily because the media imputed political pull to "Harry and Louise."

On the major networks, the ads received more than five-and-a-half minutes of free air time, and most of this covered HIAA's strategy or the ads' political potency, not the accuracy of the ads or how they contributed to solving the health care problem. In the print media, "Harry and Louise" were mentioned over seven-hundred times in newspaper articles, and the couple "got more headline space in the nation's major news papers than the Senate Majority leader or the Senate Minority leader." 20

Jamieson also recognizes that the press responded to how the administration retorted "Harry and Louise." Since press coverage is driven by conflict, attack and counterattack, the "real press attention" came when

Bill and Hillary Clinton started to attack [Harry and Louise]. The press gravitated toward the attack, [and] featured Harry and Louise as an

19 Great Health Care Debate, videotape.
20 Ibid.
important enemy of the Clinton plan ... they assumed because the Clintons were treating [the couple] as if they were a serious player, they must be and they must be highly effective. Key legislators accepted this press interpretation and acted on it.21

In November, 1993, Hillary Clinton rebutted the HIAA campaign and the insurance industry in a well publicized speech. She began, "I know you’ve all seen the ads.... 'There must be a better way' -- you’ve seen that right? What you don’t get told in the ad is that it is paid for by insurance companies...."22 Newsweek journalist Jonathan Alter reported that the First Lady’s “attack” was substantively accurate and he stressed the divisions between the First Lady and the HIAA. Quoting her, he wrote that the health industry has “brought us to the brink of bankruptcy,” and they enjoy “being able to exclude people from coverage, because the more they can exclude, the more money they can make.”23

As the First Lady positioned herself against the health insurance industry, a number of media reports fortified the perception that this was a battle between the White House and big business. For instance, one report by “NBC Nightly News With Tom Brokaw,” began with Brokaw’s introduction, “Hillary Rodham Clinton today launched a scathing attack on the health

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21 Ibid.
insurance industry." During the story Washington correspondent Andrea Mitchell suggested that anonymous sources were telling her that the White House went after the HIAA because they "wanted a scapegoat." CNN journalists also played the HIAA and the White House against one another. One reporter stated that the administration is "involved in something close to an all-out war with the health insurance industry," and that "the White House would rather talk about insurance industry profits than the rosy assumptions on which its own plan is based."

These examples exhibit a couple of interesting points about the media's coverage of the debate. The first is that media content depicting health care reform to be a battle between the Clintons and the health insurance industry is misleading. As noted, the plan was adapted from a managed competition blueprint drawn up by the "Big Five" health insurance companies -- Aetna, Cigna, Metropolitan Life, Prudential and Travelers. The Clintons were not battling these members of the health insurance industry. In fact, this group had formed the Alliance for Managed Competition, and continued to back President Clinton's proposal. However, most journalists used terms such "the health insurance industry" freely without recognizing the divisions within the industry itself. Thus, the real debate emerged as a battle

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24 As cited by Husseini, "Hillary & Bill," 732.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
between big health insurers and small health insurers, but many members of the media concentrated on the attack and counter attack's forged by the Clinton administration and the equivocal "health insurance industry." 27

The second point is that media coverage concentrated on the attack and counterattack of the competing sides, even when journalists recognized the split between the larger and smaller health insurers. For example, Newsweek's Jonathan Alter suggests that the political strategy behind Clinton's approach was to divide and conquer the insurers, "The half-dozen big boys would back the plan because they stand to win one of the sweetest shared monopolies ever." 28 However, the members of HIAA, who "wreak havoc on the system with mounds of paperwork and cherry picking (insuring only healthy people without 'preexisting conditions') would be driven out." 29

Alter also acknowledges that the HIAA was mistaken to suggest that "the Clinton plan" would limit a patient's right to choose a doctor, but he also contends that the "Harry and Louise" ads were no more "misleading than the average election-year spot. In fact, the industry's opening salvos were rather mild...." 30 However, according to Alter, the First Lady was "smart to rip their heads off" because if

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28 Alter, "Go Ahead," 34.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
health reform is to live, then the members of the HIAA "must die."  

The terminology used in these examples is frustrating if one is concerned about having a frank and open discussion about the problems of health care in the United States and possible ways to solve those problems. Phrases such as — "a scathing attack," "wanting a scapegoat," "an all out war," "ripping their heads off," and "must die" — lack context because they are used so freely. Unfortunately, they have also become characteristic of pack journalism, directed by free market pressures. Thus news outlets are not only providing news, they are also providing entertainment. As these pressures increase, the line between news and entertainment becomes increasingly blurred and, ironically, when sources of entertainment comment on matters of public policy they contribute to a mediated perception of reality for both the public and their decision makers.

Anti-reform themes were picked-up by two of CBS's prime time television programs. A scene on "Picket Fences" depicted the show's primary characters, a married couple, in the kitchen discussing the effects of health care reform on their family. The wife explained, "We have two sons who are very fragile right now -- emotionally, psychologically. This is a bad time for their father to get fired, and the Clinton

31 Ibid.
health plan is going to cut my salary by thirty-percent. If we lose your income too...." 32

Another scene on "Northern Exposure" echoed the anti-Clinton sentiment but was set against the backdrop of an Alaskan saloon rather than a family's kitchen. A man sitting at the bar, reading a newspaper, bemoans, "Ah, national health insurance, here we go down the sinkhole of socialized medicine." The bartender responds, "Like in England." Man: "Yeah, and look what wonders its done for them. How to flush an empire down the toilet." Jamieson suggests that it is not only difficult to rebut dialogue that is insinuated into prime time television but that this type of political commentary hindered the policy making process because it contributed to the public's negative perception of Clinton's proposal without offering preferable alternatives.33

Another form of flak that was difficult for the White House to rebut, and which perpetuated confusion about the Health Security Act, came from talk radio.34 This relatively new medium's most popular personality is Rush Limbaugh. The "bombastic" talk show host has become so popular and influential that when the Republicans gained control of Congress in 1995 they made Limbaugh an honorary member of the Republican freshman class. Limbaugh offered them some advice with editorial space given to him by the Wall Street Journal,

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32 Great Health Care Debate, videotape.
33 Ibid.
34 Johnson and Broder, The System, 570.
"Never moderate your tone.... Never attempt to be liked by those you defeated."\textsuperscript{35}

Limbaugh is considered by some to be one of the most influential commentators in America.\textsuperscript{36} His daily broadcasts are on over six-hundred-fifty radio stations and two-hundred television stations received by an estimated twenty-million people each week. He has also appeared as a guest political commentator on ABC's "Nightline" and "This Week With David Brinkley;" NBC's "Today Show" and "Meet The Press;" and PBS's "MacNeil/Lehrer Newshour." The \textit{New York Times}, \textit{Los Angeles Times}, \textit{Newsweek}, and the \textit{Wall Street Journal} have all published his columns.\textsuperscript{37}

Despite Limbaugh's bombastic style, these guest spots have not been token appearances. In fact, many leading journalists and politicians have lauded his contributions. Tim Russert, Washington bureau chief for NBC and host of "Meet The Press," said of Limbaugh, "You have to give him credit -- he works hard at getting his facts straight." William Bennett, former Secretary of Education, even described Limbaugh as "possibly our greatest living American."\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid, 7, 10.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 10.
However, during the health care debate Limbaugh’s commentary tended to mock the Clinton administration’s health care proposal, and to misrepresent the facts about the plan and the public’s opinion of its essential elements. In effect, Limbaugh was a very influential channel for antagonists of reform. Evidence of his influence was seen when the administration organized a bus caravan to tour the country in support of health care reform, the buses were met by mobs of boisterous protesters largely organized by Rush Limbaugh and other conservative talk radio outlets.39

Jamieson has found that those who relied on Rush Limbaugh as a primary source of news during the debate were actually the least informed about the basic facts of the country’s health care system. For example, when asked, “Which groups (the elderly, poor, middle class, etc.) are most likely to be uninsured?,” they most often responded the elderly, all of whom are presently insured under Medicare. Ironically, Limbaugh listeners were also the most likely to say that they were better informed than other Americans on health care reform.40

A primary reason that people find it easy to rely on Rush Limbaugh is that he entertains them. During the health care debate he often made fun of the Clintons with humorous skits, songs and jokes. An example of this was the “Dr. Hilldare” skit aired on his radio show. The skit featured

39 Great Health Care Debate, videotape.
40 Al Franken, Rush Limbaugh is a Big Fat Idiot and Other Observations, (New York: Delacorte Press, 1996), 12.
two characters that sounded like Bill and Hillary Clinton. It began with a forewarning from the narrator, "She’s a doctor with a prescription for disaster.... She’s Hillary Clinton ... and she’s Dr. Hilldare." The voice of a patient says, "I don’t know doctor. I tend to get heartburn after eating spicy food." Dr. Hilldare would simply respond, "Heart transplant." The narrator would begin again, "Dr. Hilldare, she specializes in fixing things that aren’t really broken." A voice sounding like Bill Clinton’s responds, "Prosthetic hand replacement for a hangnail? I don’t know if I go along with that honey." Dr. Hilldare threatens, "You know what happens when you question my judgment Willie." Clinton’s voice: "Ok, I’ll get the scalpel." The narrator concludes, "Dr. Hilldare, she wants to overhaul the best health care system in the free world." 41

Beyond Rush Limbaugh’s entertainment value, his monologues were often scathing misrepresentations of President Clinton’s health care package:

Virtually no choice will exist for you if the Clinton plan passes, virtually none. It’s full of things that [are] going to harm freedom. It’s going to harm individuals. It’s going to raise costs.... What do [the Clintons], who claim to care more than anybody else, done in their lives that gives them the qualifications to orchestrate, to write and to implement and then carry out such a massive undertaking.... Forget about the money for a minute. I’m talking about the lack of freedom.... You have to get permission from the government before you can do anything in regard to health care if this thing happens. 42

41 The Great Health Care Debate, videotape.
42 Ibid.
Beyond the fact that Limbaugh is misleading -- Clinton's approach preserved fee-for-service medicine -- his accusations are effective because he avoided the complex language of health care debate. His language can be understood by anyone and it appeals to "primal fears." Most Americans are not going to want a health care system that restricts freedom, harms individuals, or requires the patient to get governmental permission. During the debate, Democratic Senator Harris Wofford understood how Limbaugh's accusations appealed to fear, just as Senator Rockefeller had warned the President from the start. Wofford contends that Limbaugh's tirades might have prevented a compromise from being reached because there is a "temptation in what Rush Limbaugh represents and what a huge amount of people fear; that the government can't do anything right. It's fear and hostility."44

What makes Limbaugh even more effective is that his audience is basically a captive one. The twenty-million people he reaches each week do not hear any other point of view during his program. As Jamieson contends, Limbaugh often makes good points that could be debated by someone who disagrees with him. In a debate, the members of the audience could at least accept or reject Rush Limbaugh's arguments. In his monologues, one does not get that opportunity.45

43 Ibid.
44 Johnson and Broder, The System, 277.
45 The Great Health Care Debate, videotape.
Unfortunately, the news media often failed to question Limbaugh's depictions of the White House or the Clinton health care package when given the chance. One of these instances stemmed from the suicide of Vince Foster.

On July 20, 1993, Foster's body was found with a single bullet wound to the temple in Fort Marcy Park next to the Potomac River in Virginia. Notwithstanding the official conclusions of the investigation, murderous conspiracy theories became a staple on conservative talk radio. These accusations intensified when in December, 1993, the Washington Times reported that certain files had been removed from Foster's office on the night of his death. The files pertained to the Clintons' involvement in Whitewater, a private land development in Arkansas that had been the subject of ethical and criminal investigations since the 1992 campaign.\textsuperscript{46}

On his March 10, 1994 broadcast, Limbaugh urgently announced, "Ok, folks, I think I got enough information here to tell you about the contents of this fax that I got. Brace yourselves.... [I]t is a bit of news which says ... Vince Foster was murdered in an apartment owned by Hillary Clinton, and the body was then taken to Fort Marcy Park (italics added)."\textsuperscript{47} Limbaugh had received this information from a newsletter put out by a Washington D. C. consulting firm.

\textsuperscript{46} Johnson and Broder, The System, 235, 260-261.

Not only did the newsletter state that the allegations were a rumor, but it also stated that Foster had committed suicide in an apartment owned by White House associates. It did not state, as Limbaugh had broadcasted to millions, that Foster had been murdered in an apartment owned by the First Lady.48

On April 19, 1994, a special episode of ABC's "Nightline" focused on the press's coverage of Whitewater. Appearing as a special guest Limbaugh claimed, "Whitewater is about health care."

Most people think that health care is a good idea, but they haven't read the plan. They're taking the President's word for it. Now I think if the President's word is what we are going to rely on for his policies ... and if people are going to base their support for the plan on whether or not they can take his word, I think it's fair to examine whether or not he keeps his word.... [A]ll of those things [i.e. Whitewater] that people are curious about are simply a window into whether or not [the Clintons are] telling falsehoods today.49

There is nothing wrong with Limbaugh connecting questions about health care reform to questions about Clinton's character. However, Koppel did not question Limbaugh on why the relationship really mattered, in policy terms. How is it

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48 Ibid., 140.

49 See Johnson and Broder, The System, 276-277; Naureckas and Jackson, eds. The Fair Reader, 139-141; and Theda Skocpol, Boomerang: Clinton's Health Security Effort and the Turn against Government in U. S. Politics (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 213. It is important to note that Johnson and Broder treat this quote as if it occurred during one of Limbaugh's radio broadcasts. Naurecks and Jackson, as well as Skocpol, explicitly state that Limbaugh made this statement during the interview on "Nightline."
that "Whitewater is about health care?"\textsuperscript{50} Does their suspected involvement in unproven scandals disqualify the Clintons from being able to "orchestrate, to write and to implement and then carry out such a massive undertaking?"\textsuperscript{51}

When, on the same show, he was questioned about the false rumor of Vince Foster’s death, Limbaugh claimed that he is not "a rumor-monger." The show’s host, Ted Koppel did not question Limbaugh on this point, saying, "As I recall you didn’t present it as accurate, did you? You represented it as one of the rumors that was going around." Producer, Jeff Greenfield added in another segment that Limbaugh had "broadcast the rumor as an example of the more wild stories circulating."\textsuperscript{52}

The benevolent treatment that Limbaugh received from the news media helped to confuse the public’s perception of the Health Security Act just as much as the press’s charitable coverage of "Harry and Louise." This begs the question, asked by PBS’s Bill Moyers, "Can we conduct public policy debates when the average Joe and Jane are confused?" Jamieson’s reply is simply no, and she contends that "the problem with this level of confusion is that it is very easy for advertising and for demagoguery to frighten people, and frighten them needlessly."\textsuperscript{53} Since most of the public did not

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{50} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{51} The Great Health Care Debate, Videotape.
\item \textsuperscript{52} Naureckas and Jackson, eds. The Fair Reader, 140.
\item \textsuperscript{53} The Great Health Care Debate, Videotape.
\end{itemize}
really know what was in the President's plan to start with, flak only contributed to the public's confusion.54

Despite Jamieson's conclusion, flak probably did more than just create confusion because the public also received a significant amount of policy information from these same sources.55 Since the press rarely provided an adequate discussion of policy matters, the opinions of the HIAA, Rush Limbaugh, and other sources of flak substituted as policy analysis. Even though these sources may have filled a "gap" in news coverage, a thorough, accurate description of health care reform requires more objective sources than political advertising or talk radio.

The following chapter, "No Exit: A Chart, A Scandal, and A Bus Tour," will focus on how the media strayed from policy analysis, concentrated on the surface aspects of the debate, and failed to probe or question various reform alternatives. By not questioning flak and following the rest of the pack, most journalists did more that just reinforce the idea that "the Clinton Plan" was an unacceptable alternative. In the end, "the media failed in a historic way to help Americans understand and decide on this issue."56

54 Ibid.
55 Johnson and Broder, The System, 635.
56 Ibid., 634,
CHAPTER 4
NO EXIT:
A CHART, A SCANDAL, AND A BUS TOUR

In 1994, better than sixty-percent of the newspaper articles on health care reform focused on either political strategies or public opinion polls rather than policy matters.¹ The previous two chapters have illustrated that anti-government sentiment and flak exacerbated the news media’s drift away from discussing matters of policy, and toward covering some of the debate’s more superficial aspects. This chapter describes how this drift often manifested into various media feeding frenzies and, ironically, how pack journalism actually inspired anti-reform sentiment, and anti-reform flak.

As Larry Sabato explains, a feeding frenzy is a “political event or circumstance where a critical mass of journalists leap to cover the same embarrassing or scandalous subject and pursue it intensely, often excessively, and

sometimes uncontrollably."² In particular, there were four political situations receiving such attention -- a flow chart of Clinton's plan published in the Wall Street Journal, the ongoing news coverage of Whitewater, an article entitled "No Exit" published in The New Republic, and the Reform Rider bus caravan in the summer of 1994. These examples symbolize how many members of the press became preoccupied with "gauging and guessing who would win" the debate on Capital Hill and "not in exploring what the consequences [of health care reform] would be for the country."³ As Haynes Johnson and David Broder suggest, this type of reporting is a product of the journalistic culture, "its professional mind-set and its commercial, competitive pressures."⁴

The news media is a business, it relies on standard sources of information. These include individuals such as government officials, academics, and other journalists, as well as groups such as think tanks, special interest groups, and other media outlets. Not only do these sources reduce investigative costs, but they are also presumptively accurate

⁴ Ibid., 634.
and thus provide some protection against critics of media bias or those who threaten libel suits.5

In October, 1993, Republican Representative Dick Armey served as an established source of information for the Wall Street Journal. They published his opinion-editorial entitled "Your Future Health Plan," in which Armey claimed that the Clinton plan would "create 59 new federal programs ... expand 20 others, impose 79 new federal mandates and make major changes in the tax code."6 Accompanying his letter was an extensive flow chart and glossary. The chart depicted a vast array of arrows darting between some forty boxed acronyms, and the glossary briefly described each of them. Armey contended, "this flow chart makes it clear that the Clinton plan is a bureaucratic nightmare that will ultimately result in higher taxes, reduced efficiency, restricted choice, longer lines and a much bigger federal government."7

However, Theda Skocpol notes that a great deal of the chart illustrated the already existing web of government and private insurance bureaucracy. Nonetheless, variations of the chart "soon appeared on television, inspired cartoonists and humor columnists, and became a staple of conservative


7 Ibid.
attacks on the Clinton plan." Army's chart was even used by Senator Bob Dole in the Republican's nationally televised rebuttal of President Clinton's 1994 State of the Union Address.

Essentially, the news media accepted the chart without questioning its accuracy, and thus gave anti-reform Republicans an opportunity to accuse Clinton's plan of being a "bureaucratic nightmare," as Armey had done in his letter to the Wall Street Journal. This theme became important because many Republicans believed that their party could regain the White House and take control of Congress if they could demonize the Clinton plan, and then defeat any compromise devised by congressional Democrats. This strategy was adamantly supported by the Project for the Republican Future and its chair, William Kristol. In a steady stream of memorandums to leading Republicans, Kristol argued for "the unqualified political defeat of the Clinton health care proposal." By January, 1994, Republicans began to follow Kristol's advice and openly adopt one of his favorite axioms, "there is no health care crisis."

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8 Theda Skocpol, Boomerang: Clinton's Health Security Effort and the Turn against Government in U. S. Politics (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 143-144.
9 Ibid., 144.
10 Ibid., 145-146.
11 Johnson and Broder, The System, 270.
In Senator Dole's rebuttal to President Clinton's State of the Union Address, he pointed to an Armey-esque chart to support his argument against the Clinton plan:

Our country has health care problems, but not a health care crisis, but we will have a crisis if we take the President's medicine -- a massive overdose of government control.... More cost, less choice, more taxes, less quality, more government control and less control for you and your family -- that's what the President's government-run plan is likely to give you.... Let me point out some of the new bureaucracies that the President's plan will create. Way up here is the National Health Board. Over here is the Advisory commission on Regional Variations of Health Expenditures.... Now you and I are way down here, way at the bottom. I don't know why we're not at the top, but we're at the bottom.  

Strewn across the chart were terms such as "taxes," "regulation," and "drug-pricing scheme." As Johnson and Broder contend, "It was all negative ... all brilliantly effective. From then on, the chart became a centerpiece in Capital Hill debates. It further frightened a public already suspicious of government...."  

However, part of the reason the chart gained such notoriety is that the Republicans used it as an accusatory tool, and accusations make inherently dramatic media content that can create fear. Reporters naturally gravitate toward these types of conflict and, as Skocpol contends, this tendency was worsened because major media outlets assigned higher-profile political reporters to the debate. Since most

13 Johnson and Broder, The System, 270.
of them were policy generalists, they often accentuated who was arguing with whom, and often failed “to help the public see the details of proposals or the validity of claims about them.” Therefore, just as Armey’s letter in the Wall Street Journal, Senator Dole’s rebuttal went virtually unquestioned by the major media.

Instead, the New York Times, anticipating the 1996 Presidential election, pitted Clinton’s proposal against Dole’s leadership. Its front page headline read, “Clinton Vows Fight for His Health Plan.” However, the article accurately noted that Clinton demanded universal health care, not necessarily the passage of his plan. Brandishing his pen at the members of Congress, the President stated, “If you do send me legislation that does not guarantee every American private health insurance that can never be taken away, you will force me to take this pen, veto the legislation, and we’ll come right back here and start all over.” The Wall Street Journal also veered away from an analysis of Clinton’s proposal or questioning Dole’s accusations, noting that, “The President’s threat to veto anything less than universal health coverage is a politically risky move ... [and] the

14 Skocpol, Boomerang, 128.
16 Ibid.
statement will thrill the left wing of the Democratic Party...."  

In describing the Republican response to Clinton's speech, the inner pages of the *Times* read, "Gone, at least for tonight, was the legislative Senator Dole, who often seeks compromise. Instead he was the combative, partisan leader ... sounding an electoral trumpet for November...."  

The article did not probe Dole's accusations -- that Clinton's plan would cost more, provide less choice, increase taxes, lower quality, and give the government more "control." When the leading news agencies accepted his claims without question it created a wake of anti-reform themes throughout the mass media.  

Notions about the "bureaucratic nightmare" even landed in the pages of the "world's most widely read magazine," *Reader's Digest.*  

It's March, 1994, cover read "YOUR RISK IN CLINTON'S HEALTH PLAN." The article began with a story about Donald Porter, a sixty-four-year-old Canadian who needed an expensive bone marrow transplant to treat his lymphatic cancer. However, "the government deemed him 'too old' for a transplant; younger people had a better chance of

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19 Skocpol, *Boomerang,* 148.

survival." So Porter decided to sell his house, take out all of his savings and come to the United States for the operation. Now his cancer is in remission. When the Canadian system failed him, Porter came to the United States, the one industrialized country that does not have universal medical coverage but, according to Reader's Digest, the one that does have the highest standard of health care in the world.

Even though human interest stories can be effective in explaining difficult policies to the public, the Reader's Digest story was more likely to misinform. Since the United States ranks in the lower tier of industrialized nations in life expectancy and infant mortality rate, it may not necessarily be true that the country has the highest standard of health care in the world. Moreover, the article was about the ills of a Canadian-style, single-payer health care system. It neither mentioned that Clinton had rejected this approach, nor clarified that the Health Security Act was a managed care proposal. Instead, the article featured large print abstracts that could have come straight from Armey's letter, from Kristol's strategy memos, from Dole's response to the President's State of the Union address, or even from Rush Limbaugh or the HIAA:

22 Ibid.
Rhetoric to the contrary, the Clintons must know this plan will result in rationing.

The plan would actually increase costs and tax many jobs and businesses out of existence.

Quality will be a forgotten concept.

They are taking away our choice of doctor.24

The vernacular of these accusations is most striking -- "ration," "tax," "quality," "choice." The former two are inherently negative and appeal to anti-government sentiment, while the latter are terms Clinton had used positively which adversaries turned against him. Moreover, these accusations were easily connected to questions about the character of Clinton, his administration, the First Lady, and how little the public trusted them.

Given the intricate nature of the President's proposal, support for his plan would have to be based on the public's belief in his word. As explained by Rush Limbaugh, "if the President's word is what we are going to rely on for his policies ... it's fair to examine whether or not he keeps his word...."25 For many members of the public, the media's intense focus on Whitewater (a late 1970's land deal in which the President and First Lady were involved), and other


seemingly connected scandals gave them an answer -- no, the Clintons cannot be trusted.

On the night of December 19, 1993, CNN broadcast portions of an article entitled, "Living with the Clintons: Bill's Arkansas Bodyguards Tell the Story the Press Missed," to be published in the American Spectator. The article presented the claims of two former Arkansas State Troopers that Clinton had numerous extramarital affairs while serving as Governor of Arkansas. Two days later, the front-page of the Los Angeles Times read, "Troopers Say Clinton Sought Silence on Personal Affairs." The troopers described "a pattern of deception and indiscretions," and claimed that "Clinton, as president, sought to discourage them from speaking out by offering them federal jobs." These allegations were never proven, but it mattered little because "Troopergate" had been born. The media's attention to the troopers' accusations also refocused the press's attention on the Clintons' doings in Arkansas, especially their involvement in Whitewater.

The Clintons, along with their friends from Arkansas, Jim and Susan McDougal, purchased two-hundred-and-thirty acres on the White River in Arkansas. After Clinton was elected Governor in 1979, the Whitewater Development

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26 Johnson and Broder, The System, 255-256.
28 Johnson and Broder, The System, 256.
Corporation was formed, incorporating the tract purchased with the McDougals. In 1982, McDougal acquired Woodruff Savings and Loan, changing its name to Madison Guarantee. Two years later, the Federal Home and Loan Bank Board issued a report on Madison stating that, "Substantial profits from the service corporation on the sale of real estate owned have been improperly recognized ... as a result of contract sales and submarket interest rates. Correcting entries will adversely affect net worth and result in an insolvent position." 29

In 1985, the Rose Law Firm, where Hillary Clinton was a partner, represented Madison before the Arkansas Security Department, concerning their restructuring plan. That same spring, McDougal held a fund raiser to help pay Governor Clinton's 1984 campaign debt. Later, questions arose as to whether these funds were illegally diverted from Madison to the Clinton campaign. In 1989, Madison was closed by federal regulators, with an estimated loss of sixty-million dollars, and the McDougals were indicted on charges of bank fraud. 30

Although most of this was known during the campaign, Whitewater was on the media's back burner during President Clinton's first year in office. Members of the press were busy reporting on "Travelgate," "Troopergate," and various other peccadilloes. So by the end of 1993 the press's disposition to interpret any hint of wrongdoing into full-

29 Johnson and Broder, *The System*, 259.
30 Ibid.
fledged scandal had increased. In addition, Johnson and Broder point out that, since Watergate, Americans have become "conditioned to expect the worst from public officials...."31 This preconception only worsens the effects of scandal-driven press coverage, and it became only a matter of time before Whitewater regained the media spotlight.

One week prior to the State of the Union Address, the headline of the Washington Post's "National Weekly Edition" read "WHITEWATER: More Questions Than Answers."32 Below the banner was a picture of a waving, jovial Bill and Hillary Clinton, superimposed over headlines from other leading newspapers (the Wall Street Journal, the Washington Post, the New York Times). Strewn across the page, the scathing headlines surrounded the Clinton's photo, symbolizing a media siege -- "Ever-Growing Paper Trail: Whitewater Records Go from Nothing to Volumes," "On Arkansas, Sex, Not Inhaling, and Whitewater," "A Special Council for Whitewater."33 The Whitewater feeding frenzy was everywhere:

It seeped into conversations, leaped out in daily headlines, blared from television sets, boomed on radio talk show commentary, and became the subject of increasingly venomous conspiracy theories -- about Vince Foster, the Clintons, the Rose Law Firm.... In one week in mid-March, at the peak of the press frenzy, the nation's seven largest newspapers published ninety-two Whitewater stories. During that one month, the three TV networks aired one hundred twenty-six Whitewater stories. By comparison, from the first of the year to the end

31 Johnson and Broder, The System, 262.
32 Ibid., 263.
33 Ibid.
of March, the three networks aired one hundred seven stories on Bosnia, fifty-six on the Middle East, and forty-two on the health care debate. More Whitewater newspaper stories were published in major papers than on the combined total of health care, welfare, and crime legislation.34

Therefore, media messages about Whitewater, health care reform, and all the President's troubles became increasingly intermingled. Representative Jim McDermott compared them, especially Whitewater, to a smog hanging over the President's health care proposal, "At first you don't see it, then you do. It's subliminal. It saps your energy ... you can't help noticing it."35 Part of the smog was created by excessive negative media coverage, and that made it much easier for Kristol, Armey, Dole and many others to say "there is no health care crisis," while the press failed to question their claims. Over time, media content increasingly portrayed both the President and his health proposal to be fraudulent.

However, when the newly elected Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich, reflected on the health care battle he pointed to another important episode which decided the fate of the President's proposal. It was an influential article that appeared in the February 7, 1994, edition of The New Republic, entitled "No Exit," by Elizabeth McCaughey. Gingrich said it was "the first decisive break point ... They never recovered from her analysis."36 At the time of the

34 Ibid., 275.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid., 272.
article, McCaughey was a virtually unknown intellectual at the conservative Manhattan Institute. According to James Fallows, the predominant view in Washington was that McCaughey, "with no ax to grind and no preconceptions about health care, sat down for a careful reading of the whole Clinton bill," and after discovering its true consequences, "she felt it her duty to warn people about what the bill might mean."38

The article began, "If you're not worried about the Clinton health bill, keep reading ... you will have to settle for one of the low-budget health plans selected by the government. The law will prevent you from going outside the system to buy basic health coverage you think is better...."39 After each of her accusations, McCaughey cited page numbers of the bill, so anyone doubting her claims could look it up. However, most of the press did not question her accusations. Instead, her contention that the Clinton plan would adversely effect the quality of American's health care and hazardously transform one-seventh of the national economy was perpetuated.40

McCaughey's claims were sustained by reactions from other members of the mass media. For example, Michael

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Kinsley, one of the nation's leading left-wing political commentators, referred to McCaughey as a "nightmare scenarist." At the same time, he contended that health care reform is "a test of our capacity as a democracy to have an honest and sophisticated debate over an important public issue." Yet Kinsley's rebuttal was not a part of the very debate for which he called. He not only resorted to name calling, he also admitted to not having read the President's plan, giving credence to McCaughey's opening salvo, "If you're not worried about the Clinton health bill, keep reading...."

Increasing the acceptability of McCaughey's claims were references to her analysis made by other media outlets such as the Wall Street Journal and Reader's Digest. Significant excerpts were also used by Newsweek's George Will. In a February editorial, Will opined, "it would be illegal for doctors to accept money directly from patients, and there would be 15-year jail terms for people driven to bribery for care they feel they need but the government does not deem necessary." He backed his claims by citing McCaughey, "To see why support for the plan plummets as analysis of it

proceeds, see the analysis in The New Republic by Elizabeth McCaughey of the Manhattan Institute...."\(^44\)

Claims such as these were simply false. The first provision of the President’s proposal stated:

Nothing in this Act Shall be construed as prohibiting the following:

(1) An individual from purchasing any health care services.\(^45\)

This was made clear when the Administration issued a full rebuttal to "No Exit." A copy was submitted to The New Republic but it was never published. Instead, they opted to publish another scathing piece by McCaughey.\(^46\)

McCaughey’s contentions that the government would police the public’s health care, and that one-seventh of the economy was going to be controlled by the federal bureaucracy, became the conventional wisdom. In reality, people were not going to lose choice, nor would there be a significant economic shakeup. In fact, more than forty-percent of health care in America is already financed by the federal government. Under the Health Security Act, the other sixty-percent would continue to filter through most of the existing corporate bureaucracy it goes through now.\(^47\)

Ironically, McCaughey wound up not being the impartial voice she claimed to be. The same year her article was

\(^{44}\) Ibid.

\(^{45}\) Fallows, "A Triumph of Misinformation," 32.

\(^{46}\) Ibid.

\(^{47}\) Ibid.
published, she became the Republican nominee for Lieutenant Governor of New York, a race she later won. Evidently, "No Exit" gave McCaughey a springboard to her own political aspirations.\textsuperscript{48} This development, and her connection to the Manhattan Institute, leads Johnson and Broder to contend that McCaughey is a policy advocate, not a journalist. Thus, any suggestion that her article contributed to media content is misguided.\textsuperscript{49}

However, Johnson and Broder are overlooking an important factor. During the debate individuals such as Kinsley and Will, and news organizations such as \textit{The New Republic}, \textit{The Wall Street Journal}, and \textit{Reader's Digest}, treated McCaughey as an accurate source. Therefore, the overall perception was that her accusations were precise. In effect, "No Exit" not only became a significant part of media content, it also fed the media's feeding frenzy. To dismiss McCaughey as "not a journalist" misses the point. The press's reaction to "No Exit" exhibited how press coverage can be driven by journalism's shortcomings. As Johnson and Broder themselves conclude:

\begin{quote}
The journalistic culture ... nudges the coverage strongly to emphasize conflict and dissent rather than clarification of alternatives and the search for consensus ... [during the debate] the press focus shifted from explanation of the problem and the proposed solutions to an emphasis on what might be called the mugging of the Clinton Plan ... the press was caught up quickly in gauging and guessing
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{49} Johnson and Broder, \textit{The System}, 634.
who would win, not in exploring what the consequences would be for the country.\textsuperscript{50}

By the summer of 1994, the press's feeding frenzy had peaked. At the same time the Administration decided to mount a public relations campaign with a bus tour across the country, tabbed the "Health Security Express." It was intended to take the positive message of health care reform to the people, and hopefully gain positive press coverage. The plan backfired, badly, and a pack of journalists were there to report about it. At each stop the buses were met by fierce protesters, often outnumbering the supporters and waving signs with various anti-reform and anti-Clinton slogans, such as "Do you enjoy the compassion of the I.R.S. and the service of the Post Office ... if so, you'll love Government-Run Health Care!" \textsuperscript{51}

The protesters fueled negative news coverage more than the positive intentions of the tour, and their presence was no coincidence. Newt Gingrich's Capital Hill office worked with other Senators and with special interests groups, such as the National Federation of Independent Businesses (NFIB) and Citizens for a Sound Economy (CSE), to derail the bus caravan. They obtained the tour's schedule and through the

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 460, 465.
use of talk radio and local contacts they organized
opposition to the President's plan.52

Essentially, the rallies became a battle to win media
coverage. The NFIB organized small business owners to be
available to the media at every stop, providing "real-life
opinions." Likewise the CSE mailed out "scripts" to local
talk radio programs along the route, urging listeners to
demonstrate against the "Phony Express," calling it a "media
stunt pushing government-controlled health care."53

All of this created exciting and politically combative
news stories. Only two days into the tour the caravan began
rescheduling stops. As reported in the Washington Post, they
"were so concerned about protesters in Boise [Idaho] that
they canceled their appearance at the planned health care
rally on the steps of the state capitol."54 Three days later,
as they pulled in to the Holiday Inn in North Platte,
Nebraska, they were met by staunch protesters, one
proclaiming, "Bill and Hillary are immoral homosexual

52 See The Great Health Care Debate, part of The Moyers
Collection, (Princeton: Films for the Humanities and
Sciences, 1994). videotape, and Johnson and Broder, The
System, 466.

53 Johnson and Broder, The System, 467, It is also
important to note: Johnson and Broder explain that CSE is
"backed financially by Richard Mellon Scaife, an heir to the
Pennsylvania Mellon bank and oil fortune ... [he also funds
with] grants and gifts totaling $400,000 a week ... the
Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute and the American
Spectator magazine, a leading force in pushing the
Whitewater/Vince Foster conspiracy theories," (p. 465)

54 Ibid., 463.
communists. I don’t want them running health care."\textsuperscript{55} That night CBS anchor Connie Chung reported, “The administration’s bus caravan for health care kept on trucking today ... but the engines are groaning and flak is getting heavier with every step."\textsuperscript{56}

What the press was not reporting was how nurses on the tour were busy collecting letters from constituents urging their representatives to support health care reform. Nor were reporters concerned about telling the stories of the “reform riders,” who were mostly private citizens, and why they had joined the First Lady’s crusade. However, there was not much room for stories such as these during the summer of 1994. The national media was focusing on other matters: an abortion clinic shooting in Pensacola, Florida, the horrifying scenes of people starving in Rawanda, the ethnic war in the former Yugoslavia, and primarily on the Simpson murder case.\textsuperscript{57} The compassionate, although political, intentions of the “Health Security Express” offered no news in a summer devoted to covering a football star, a murder, and a car chase.

Overall, the media’s coverage of the political debate over President Clinton’s Health Security Act raises serious questions as to whether American society can have an open, honest, democratic public policy debate. In fact, the debate

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 464.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 471-472.
engenders pessimism in someone like Dr. Reed Tuckson, one of the medical experts who offered advice to the Clinton planners. As head of the Martin Luther King Jr./Charles Drew Medical Center in the Watts section of South Central Los Angeles, Dr. Tuckson knows from first hand experience the struggle health providers can have. When he reflected on the debate he wondered:

how America will ever have the maturity to address complex issues of public policy given the manipulation that is possible, given the talk show mentalities that are so filled with cynicism and pessimism and can’t-do, and with two-second sound bites on news that pass for transmission of information ... it is very possible that America does not have the ability, the capacity, the competence, to come together as a unified nation of people who are able and willing to tackle complex problems and work through a logical sequence of solutions. 58

Tuckson recognizes that the health care debate lacked forthrightness, that it often failed to be representative of most opinions, and that it was often truncated by news coverage. Much of this occurred because media content was formed by an interplay of influences. Anti-government themes and flak exacerbated a media feeding frenzy -- their drift away from discussing matters of policy, and toward covering the debate’s more superficial aspects.

However, others might disagree with this point of view. For instance, Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky would most likely contend that the truncation of public debate was a product of functional control. The policymaking process is

58 Ibid., 540, 542.
dominated by a powerful elite, who used the media to guide the public against a government takeover of the health care industry. On the other hand, Larry Sabato would most likely contend that the truncation of public debate was the result of a feeding frenzy, and was not representative of day-to-day news coverage. Members of the press perceived Clinton to be a flawed president, who was proposing a flawed health care plan, thus journalists went for the jugular at every opportunity.

The concluding chapter, "The Anti-Democratic Effects of America’s Media," suggests that both of these approaches do not completely explain what happened to President Clinton’s proposal, or how the health care debate was anti-democratic. Instead of being a matter of functional control or the result of a feeding frenzy, press coverage of the debate exhibited the functional complexity of America’s market-based mass media, which hampers the press’s ability to define policy options and, therefore, truncates debate. This inability grows out of the media’s reliance on established interests, trivial points, and conventional wisdom, and manifests into a feeding frenzy.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION:
THE ANTI-DEMOCRATIC EFFECTS OF AMERICA’S MEDIA

This analysis began by making three contentions. First, America’s media has an ill-effect on the democratic process, but scholarly opinions diverge as to how those effects play out. The subsequent chapters shed light on this question by focusing on the relevant influences contributing to media content during the health care debate, and illustrating how content was saturated by anti-government themes, swayed by anti-reform propaganda, and ultimately propelled by a feeding frenzy.

Second, democracy is more than the semblance of competing ideas ratified by limited public choice, and America’s press actually have a societal role in strengthening healthy democratic participation. A democratic press empowers people “to assert meaningful control over the political process by providing them with the information needed for the intelligent discharge of political responsibilities.”

Third, the media's coverage of the health care debate illustrates how the media often fail to empower the American citizenry with the necessary information to play a meaningful role in managing governmental policy. Instead, the media often truncated the health care debate, failing to support a more substantive democratic process. Indeed, much of what passed as "debate" was either misinformation or trivial information, which lacked context and represented only the surface aspects or thin veneer of democracy.

The media were by no means legally required to cover the health care debate in a democratic fashion, and the anti-democratic effect of media content does not necessarily entail that journalists are failing to rely on an equal distribution of information sources. However, the media can have an anti-democratic effect when the information they provide is primarily sensational and trivial detail. This type of information is often unnecessary or counterproductive because it can be either false or irrelevant.

Herman and Chomsky's thesis is built on the contention that misinformation is a primary element employed by elites to manufacture the public's consent to their agenda. On the other hand, Sabato stresses the prevalence of disinformation created by media feeding frenzies, which often trivializes political discourse. The press's continuous hunt for political scandal monopolizes a substantial amount of media resources to "the insignificant gaffe rather than to issues

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2 Herman and Chomsky, Manufacturing Consent, 2.
of profound national and global impact; on many occasions, titillation has replaced transportation on the country's agenda, sex has substituted for serious debate...."3 In other words, irrelevance has replaced relevance.

The combination of misinformation and disinformation in media content clouds the facts necessary for a populace to contribute to their democratic processes. If democracy is going to function with any meaning, then the media should focus on policy issues over political bickering, and attempt to portray the world accurately, not just the world according to the HIAA, Rush Limbaugh, or a handful of select reporters. When media content is overly dependent on those who have a vested interest in the status quo, and it becomes saturated with their interpretations, its effect can be anti-democratic.

During the health care debate, the overall effect of these factors is suggested by the Wall Street Journal-NBC News poll finding that forty-five percent of the population opposed President Clinton's Health Care Security Act, but that seventy-six percent favored an unlabeled plan which contained all the essential elements of Clinton's proposal.4 Since many established interests were combative toward "the Clinton Plan," the conventional wisdom was that the population agreed and media content reflected this.


4 Hilary Stout, "Many Don't Realize It's the Clinton Plan They Like," Wall Street Journal, 10 March 1994, 1(B) and 6(B).
Herman and Chomsky would likely claim that this type of anti-democratic effect is a function of elite propaganda, "to inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behavior that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society." On the other hand, Sabato would likely claim that the press's attention to political bantering -- such as that between the HIAA and the Clintons -- guaranteed that even the passive observer would find out about the controversy of the day. Therefore, the press not only played a part in setting the country's political agenda, their coverage also engendered public cynicism about the entire political process, and "the Clinton Plan."  

Whether one agrees with Herman and Chomsky, that media content indoctrinates the public to established norms; or with Sabato, that the media tend to fortify cynicism by highlighting daily controversies; the effect of either deters democracy. However, the media's anti-democratic effect can be worsened when media content lacks context, and Sabato's analysis of feeding frenzies clearly recognizes this. When coverage is superficial, reports about specific events can lack meaning and omit the circumstances in which events occurred. 

The lack of contextual substance in the media's coverage of the health care debate was riddled by terms such as "liberal," "socialized medicine," and "the Clinton Plan."

5 Herman and Chomsky, Manufacturing Consent, 1.
6 Sabato, Feeding Frenzy, 206-207.
These terms often lacked accurate definitions, and each gained political force from its repeated use. As the public hears these terms over and over again, it can only decipher the language by relying on their own preconceived notions, and how the press frames the terminology, by way of the reporter's tone and the report's setting.

The term "Clinton Plan" is the best example of how the context of the debate deterred democratic decision making. As negative connotations were attached to the president's proposal, the phrase "Clinton Plan" was fused into what George Orwell called "Newspeak," which functions "not so much to express meanings as to destroy them." 7 Perhaps Orwell foretold the future when he opined that the language of political discourse will become "ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts." 8

The following subsections concentrate on the media's anti-democratic effects on the health care debate. Each section illustrates how established interests, misinformation and the trivial context of media content, constituted the majority of this effect.

8 Ibid., 252.
The Liberal Myth

It was argued that media coverage of the health care debate was plagued by anti-government themes and the liberal myth. The media depicted the President's plan as a "liberal, big-government approach to health care reform." Members of the media often relied on these themes instead of probing or discussing the plan or some of its suggested alternatives. In effect, this did little to enhance public understanding of what was at stake, and how the country's health care problems might be solved.

Established interests played a significant role in promoting the liberal myth. The most blatant offense was that at least one television ad supporting a single-payer system, paid for by the interest group Neighbor to Neighbor, was kept off the air. The ads never "saw the light of day" because insurance agencies are major advertisers. Members of the insurance industry have the ability to put economic and legal pressure on stations not to air ads contrary to the industry's interests. Thus, members of the status quo have greater access to the airwaves than do their less powerful counterparts.

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11 Ibid.
Not allowing a single-payer advertisement on the public airwaves narrowed mass media content to a few ads supporting Clinton's proposal and a great number opposing it. At the same time, news media content fundamentally nullified the single-payer option. ABC's "Nightline" made reference to the option only twice during a seventeen month period. One of those instances was in an interview with President Clinton. Anchor Ted Koppel suggested to the President that Canadians were dissatisfied with their single-payer system, when actually polls showed that only two percent of Canadians preferred the American health care system to their own.

Since the media concentrated on "the Clinton Plan," they lost sight of competing alternatives. In fact, Koppel could have noted that eighty-nine House Democrats had signed on to a single-payer bill sponsored by Representative McDermott, long before the President had made his proposal. In effect, the media's honing in on "the Clinton Plan" limited the public's choice of policy options to the "liberal Clinton Plan," or no plan at all.

Another fictitious element of the liberal myth was that Clinton's proposal was developed under a shroud of secrecy. In actuality, members of the Health Care Task Force,

12 Ibid.
including Hillary Clinton, wanted to ensure that they could have free discussion, airing all possible solutions, without any press leaks or misinterpretations before the plan was complete. Very little about the task force was secret. By May, 1993 they had already met with 572 organizations, and when Hillary Clinton publicly testified before Congress, "not a single legislator complained about the 'closed' or 'secretive' deliberations...."\(^{15}\) However, many journalists, such as Johnson and Broder, continue to claim that the secrecy policy was a mistake that "ultimately deprived the public of essential information on which to form judgments."

Fallows counters that not allowing the press to be part of the task force's deliberations may have been a bad idea, but it is debatable that, in these early stages of the debate, this actually caused a void in public information. To the extent that there was a void, it was filled by a greater offense — the press's inaccurate depiction of the task force being a secret collection of liberal elites developing a scheme to take over health care.\(^{16}\)

The shroud of secrecy mixed well with the conventional wisdom equating the President's plan to reform health care to being a liberal plan. It also seems that many in the public lacked a clear conception of his proposal outside the negative connotations evoked by the very buzzwords, "Clinton

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 29.
Plan. Evidence suggests that the media exacerbated the public's misunderstandings by not mentioning that "Clinton's health care program would have established the least statist, most market-oriented system of universal health insurance to be found among the industrialized democracies."^17

**Anti-Reform Flak**

Anti-reform opponents used flak to play on the public's fear of a governmental takeover of health care. To a great extent, media coverage was driven by some of the more prominent propaganda campaigns and accusations made by popular talk radio. Effectively, the media reinforced their claims instead of questioning them, and media content amplified the anti-democratic effects of these voices.

Charles Lewis, of the Center for Public Integrity, suggests that during the health care debate the comparative advantage enjoyed by some interests was not conducive to democracy:

> We have this facade, or this illusion of democracy. We have the suggestion that everyone has been consulted and that there was a great debate. When in fact there wasn't, and I think that is dishonest and that its unethical, in a general sense, in terms of our society.... What is so insidious about this is that folks can use the tools that are available to them in our open society to distort a democracy or manipulate it to their own ends and that is something we have always cherished the right to do, and folks are more adept at doing it

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today between technology and money then they've ever done in the past....\textsuperscript{18}

The illusion of there being a great health care debate was often captured by news coverage. In one instance news anchor Margaret Warner, of PBS's "MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour," suggested that "interest groups on all sides of the issue have taken to the airwaves."\textsuperscript{19} In reality, there were far more ads discounting "the Clinton Plan" than supporting it.\textsuperscript{20}

The strength of one of the more prominent television campaigns, the HIAA's "Harry and Louise" ads, was reinforced by the media crediting the couple with accuracy and effectiveness. However, Jamieson suggests that "Harry and Louise" were only effective as a public relations phenomenon. The HIAA advertised to get on the agenda of the national media, targeting areas such as New York, Washington and Los Angeles. At the same time they targeted the congressional districts of members acting on the bill in committee.\textsuperscript{21} Their two prong approach was intended to influence the decision making process, to convince Congress to stop "the Clinton Plan," not necessarily to change public opinion.

\textsuperscript{18} The Great Health Care Debate, videotape.


\textsuperscript{20} The Great Health Care Debate, videotape.

For the most part, the media’s extensive coverage of "Harry and Louise" validated the campaign’s magnitude but, in another sense the content of the coverage was even more antidemocratic. The press focused on how the ads jeopardized the President’s effort, but did not focus on their accuracy, or on how they might contribute to solving the pressing problem. By highlighting how "Harry and Louise" smeared the President’s proposal, and not on the ads’ contribution to the policy debate, the press trivialized the process.

At the same time, the press often conveyed that "Harry and Louise" represented the views of the "health insurance industry." Thus, media content inaccurately depicted a political battle between the Clintons and the "health insurance industry." In actuality, the battle was between the larger insurers, who had mapped out the President’s proposal, and the smaller ones, represented by the HIAA. Referring to Clinton’s opposition as the "health insurance industry" contributed to the debate’s narrow vernacular. It is perhaps not an exaggeration to suggest that much of the public was left assuming that "the Clinton Plan" was a "socialist scheme" cooked up by the "government" to take over one of the country’s most important enterprises -- the "health insurance industry."

Exaggeration or not, this could almost be taken verbatim from the rhetoric used by Rush Limbaugh. Standing alone, his rampages against "the Clinton Plan" were nonconducive to

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22 Ibid.
democracy because his audience is captive. Limbaugh often makes strong contentions and, in a debate, the members of the audience could at least accept or reject his arguments. However, in his monologues, one rarely gets that opportunity.23

Moreover, the press often failed to question Limbaugh's false accusations — in particular his claim that the Clintons were involved in covering up Vince Foster's death, and, more generally, his spreading false rumors such as "virtually no choice will exist for you if the Clinton plan passes...."24

Indeed, the staff of ABC's "Nightline" seemed to verify his false claims. When Limbaugh implied that questions surrounding Whitewater, Vince Foster's death and other supposed scandals should offer a window into whether or not people can trust the President and his health care proposal, anchor Ted Koppel accepted Limbaugh's analysis without question.25 Similar compliance was shown when the program's producer, Jeff Greenfield, suggested that Limbaugh had "broadcast the rumor [about Vince Foster's death] as an example of the more wild stories circulating,"26 even though Limbaugh was greatly responsible for starting the rumor.

23 The Great Health Care Debate, videotape.
24 Ibid.
26 Ibid., 140.
Since the members of the press accepted the false claims of Rush Limbaugh and the HIAA, media content exacerbated their fear tactics, and anti-democratic effects. Allowing these opinions to seep into media content without being questioned undermined the public's comprehension of events. If the press shrouds information with the misinformation of a few prominent actors, and focuses on trivial political bantering instead of matters of policy, they are failing to fulfill their societal role.

Feeding Frenzy

Anti-government sentiment and flak lead to a feeding frenzy. Media content highlighted the surface aspects of the debate at the expense of discussing more important policy matters. Consequently, press coverage tended to reaffirm both anti-reform sentiment and anti-reform flak. The former was fortified by the media's attempts to be objective. As Lindbloom and Woodhouse suggest, such attempts tend to reinforce "conventional interpretations of current events." Since the American public is skeptical about government intervention and control it was logical for the media to portray the President's proposal as a government takeover of the health care system. Flak was reinforced because the competitive pressures of America's media propels their

reliance on both sources that are presumptively accurate, such as the HIAA, and sources that are entertaining, such as Rush Limbaugh. Even though much of their flak was political misinformation, the media tended to accept it as legitimate policy analysis.

As a member of the House Republican leadership, Dick Armey is also an established source of information, and his chart depicting "the Clinton Plan" as a bureaucratic nightmare played on anti-government sentiment. Even though the chart illustrated much of the already existing web of government and private insurance bureaucracy, it "soon appeared on television, inspired cartoonists and humor columnists, and became a staple of conservative attacks on the Clinton plan."28

Two points can be made about the media's pack reaction to Armey's chart. First, most of the media accepted the Republican's interpretation of the plan. Why the press did not probe what the chart truly illustrated is debatable. On the one hand, many members of the press probably considered Armey to be an accurate news source. On the other hand, utilizing the chart was a way to save publication space, or broadcast time. Thus, media content gave the false impression that the government would have complete control of health care. Under the President's proposal, the private

28 Skocpol, Boomerang, 143-144.
insurance industry would continue running health care, just as they now run Medicare.  

Second, the news vernacular explaining the chart lacked context. The media repeated terms such as "bureaucracy" and "rationing," without defining them, but attaching them to the President's proposal. The combined effect of the media giving credence to Armey's chart, while repeating some of the ambiguous or negative terminology it spurned, was antidemocratic because it did not enhance the public's understanding of the more important aspects of the health care debate.

While some pack journalism mislead the public, scandalous feeding frenzies surrounding the White House tended to weaken Clinton's Presidential authority. The intermingling of news stories about Whitewater, Troopergate, and Vince Foster's suicide with coverage of health care reform portrayed an embattled Administration captured in headlines such as "On Arkansas, Sex, Not Inhaling, and Whitewater."  

What was left out of media content was how all of these things were connected, if they were at all. The terminology was generally negative but media content did not seem to explain why. Nonetheless, the health care issue commingled with each scandal contributing to the triviality of the debate. Thus, media content tended to distract the public's

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29 Representative Pat Williams, interview by author, Tape recording, Missoula, Montana, April 25, 1997.
30 Johnson and Broder, *The System*, 263.
attention away from the health care issue, and its importance, and not empower the public with information so that they could purposefully contribute to the debate. Instead, trivial misinformation contributed to general misconceptions about the President’s proposal and, in the end, to the public’s rejection of the plan.

Unlike Armey’s chart, or Whitewater, Elizabeth McCaughey’s article “No Exit” was a feeding frenzy originating within the media. It is true, as Johnson and Broder claim, that McCaughey is not a journalist. However, her false accusations were accepted as accurate, incorporated into media content via the New Republic, and were positively received by prominent members of the media. Since her claims were false their anti-democratic effect is apparent. Media content supporting fictional assertions is not conducive to a healthy democracy.

The press’s acceptance of McCaughey’s argument also reveals the anti-democratic effects of journalists focusing on horse race aspects of political debate. Evidence suggests that the media’s concentration on the mugging of “the Clinton Plan,” and not on proposed solutions to the country’s health care problems, eroded public support for any solution. The public turning away from comprehensive health care reform is a significant development considering that polls since 1982 have shown that seventy percent or more of the population
believes America's health care system needs to be either fundamentally changed or completely rebuilt.31

**The News and Democracy Without Citizens**

News coverage of the health care debate portrayed a "democracy without citizens." The press addressed the public as spectators, not as citizens with the ability to make a contribution to a democratic discussion.32 The result was a public lacking a clear conception of what was at stake. Even William Raspberry, a *Washington Post* columnist, noted:

> [During the debate] it dawned on me that even as a fairly attentive consumer of news, I was never quite sure what was in any package or proposal. I knew only who seemed at the moment to be ahead on points, who was cheering for whom and what it all meant for Hillary's ascendancy or demise.33

To some extent, shallow press coverage was the product of America's free-market media. Since the public demands news that also entertains, media organizations are driven to cover the more superficial aspects of the political debates. Health care reform was also a difficult story for the press

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to cover. Since time restraints restrict news programs to sound bite-journalism, television coverage of the debate was often fragmented. The print media, which "should have had more time to prepare longer in-depth articles [often] ... failed to meet the challenge; coverage was desultory, inconsistent, or focused on the political points being scored by opposing sides."  

However, market-pressures cannot be blamed for journalists drawing false comparisons between "the Clinton Plan" and a Canadian-style single-payer health care proposal. Market-pressures cannot be the reason members of the mass media accepted the misinformation of "Harry and Louise," or tolerated the misleading accusations of Rush Limbaugh. Nor were market-pressures the only factors contributing to the media’s feeding frenzy.

It was not just capitalistic pressures that swayed the media’s coverage toward trivial conflicts and disagreements, and away from an explanation of policy alternatives and the pursuit of public consensus. It was also their journalistic culture. Members of the press can be blinded by their own professional mind-set and driven by competitive pressures, but they do not tend to be a terribly rebellious lot. As Ted Koppel explains, "We tremble between daydreams of scooping all of our competitors and the nightmare of standing alone

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34 Johnson and Broder, *The System*, 143.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid., 634.
with our scoop for too long ... many of us are truly only comfortable when we travel in a herd."\textsuperscript{37} The question is how to direct the herd toward serving its citizenry, toward enhancing the democratic process, and away from covering the thin veneer of democratic debate.

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