Campaign Lite

Why reporters won't tell us what we need to know

BY BILL KOVACH AND TOM ROSENSTIEL

THE FIRST PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION of the 21st century may go down in history as the moment when campaigning disappeared into private space. Eighty years ago, radio allowed people to hear candidates by their firesides for the first time. Thirty years later, television added pictures, which transformed even party conventions into events arranged for people to absorb in their living rooms. Video tapes, computers, and direct mail added to the precision. This year, the Internet, with its personal "cookie" technology, joined automated celebrity phone calls, push-poll proselytizing, issue Web sites, and political e-mails to drive politics even further into a personalized, invisible space.

All this has presented a challenge for journalists, a challenge that the 2000 campaign suggests we are failing to understand. As the mechanics of the campaigns have become more sophisticated, the press has changed the way it focuses its attention. Unfortunately, however, the press has moved further away from the invisible space where elections now largely occur. The new culture of political journalism gives us a better understanding of large-scale campaign mechanics, but a weaker grasp of how voters are actually reacting. As a result, we have a shallower understanding of what our elections say about America, and why elections turn out the way they do.

Political Reporting to Campaign Reporting

In the last decade, the press has turned more of its focus to understanding the mechanics, tactics, and strategies of increasingly elaborate campaigns. This may seem a natural response—even logical. But it has significant implications for citizens. Political reporting has given way to something else—and something narrower. It has become campaign reporting. In 2000, the Committee of Concerned Journalists and the Project for Excellence in Journalism conducted four studies of campaign coverage that offered clear evidence of the trend.

The first study examined 430 stories in five major newspapers and nine programs on five television networks over the two-week period leading up to the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primary. This was when voters were just beginning to focus seriously on the presidential campaigns. The study reveals that during that period, the press provided only scant reporting on the candidates' backgrounds, records, or ideas. Remarkably, less than one percent of the stories—two of the 430—explored the candidates' past records in office with more than a passing reference. Instead reporters focused more than 80 percent of their stories on matters that affect the campaigns or the political parties (i.e., changes in tactics, fundraising strategies, and internal organizational problems).

This focus knocked Bush's main competitors, except John McCain, out of the race, and it played a crucial role in the final lap before the election as well. The October debates were notable, particularly the first, for being substantive and outlining differences of philosophy and policy between the two major candidates. But a study of the coverage during this period found that the reporting on the debates was quite different. In all, seven out of 10 stories focused on either the candidates' television performances or their

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strategies. Less than one in 10 stories focused on the candidates' policy differences; three percent were framed around the veracity of a campaign or candidate; a mere one percent focused on their broader vision for the country.

News You Can't Use

At times, the coverage read more like reviews than news. Just 14 percent of the pre- and post-debate stories were written as straight news, except for those about pure logistics. The great majority were notably thematic or interpretive. Consider David Von Drehle's front-page story in *The Washington Post* about the third debate: "The bigger man never looked so big as he did inside the debate hall tonight. Vice President Al Gore has a couple of inches and a couple of pounds on Texas Governor George Bush—but it might have well been feet and tons ... Bush read Gore's effort to overshadow him and, in an odd way, opted to make himself a bit smaller. There was something puppy-like about him."

The coverage also tilted more towards performance criticism as time went on, the study found. For example, Richard L. Berke's lead story in *The New York Times* on the first debate began: "Vice President Al Gore and Gov. George W. Bush presented starkly different stands on issues ranging from taxes to abortion to oil drilling tonight as Mr. Gore repeatedly cast Mr. Bush as a friend of the rich and Mr. Bush upbraided his rival as a Washington insider."

By the third debate, Berke's lead account, by contrast, went 22 paragraphs before outlining any policy positions. Even then, it cast these positions in the context of theater instead of policy. The first substantive policy mention in the story was this: "One of the most heated exchanges was over reducing the cost of prescription drugs."

Covering the mechanics, strategies, and performance of the campaigns allows reporters to become more subjective and interpretative. Assessing a campaign's strategy is safer than making judgments about a candidate's plans for Social Security. It's also easier. No one is going to accuse the reporter of ideological bias or ignorance. One can write more freely in the style of Von Drehle. Thus, the push to offer something more than simple facts also reinforces the focus on mechanics and tactics.

This focus on campaign-as-theater redounded to Bush's benefit. Bush, by most judgments, ran the better campaign. And in October, the committee study found that coverage of the two candidates was twice as likely to be negative toward Gore as it was toward Bush. The benefit went the other way as well: Coverage of Bush was twice as likely to be positive than was Gore's throughout late September and into late October. The result of this lens is that we have a sophisticated understanding of the intricacies of media buying, push polling, the techniques of consultants, the nuances of ad-making, and other tactical considerations.

In the process, however, reporters became adjuncts of the campaigns they covered. They became, as Susan Herbst noted in her book, *Numbered Voices: How Opinion Polling Has Shaped American Politics*, "particularly interested in how consultants work. These days, the names of major consultants are almost as familiar ... as the names of candidates." As the journalists become more concerned with strategies and tactics of the campaigns they cover, their perspectives come to reflect those of the consultants and managers who necessarily see voters as an abstract mass that can be manipulated and moved with just the right mixture of fear and promise.

The consultants and campaign professionals themselves are focused on the presentation of a candidate rather than the substance of his ideas. Bob Shrum and Karl Rove don't tell Gore or Bush what to believe, but they can shape how the candidates present it. Implicit in the focus on campaign mechanics is a cynicism about voters, a notion that they respond to the amount of rouge Gore might be wearing, his hair style, or the body language of the candidates during campaigns. Bush's unexamined position on Social Security is a given; the news is whether he flubbed the numbers. This implicit sense of a readily manipulated public bleeds into the coverage, suggesting citizens are so much putty being shaped by artisans. The critical issue is what has been lost.

Politics is broader than campaigns. In the hands of the father of modern reporting, Theodore White, presidential elections were quadrennial mirrors on the nation. The point of the election in White's work was less who won than why—what the election told us about ourselves as a people. This kind of political reporting is concerned with a dizzying array of information, which is now missing in political coverage.

Voters Become Abstractions

As the campaign has moved into the private space of people's homes, the press has not followed it there. The campaigns are narrowcasting, but because

journalists are trying to understand the intricate nature of the campaign organization and strategies, we are less able to understand the effects of that narrowcasting. It is axiomatic that the press is always trying to cover the previous campaign, but the changes in campaigning have occurred so rapidly that we have fallen further than four years behind. With each campaign, the press focuses on the new uses of technology and sophisticated management but falls even further from understanding their effect on voters. Effects are always elusive. Franklin Roosevelt's campaign manager Jim Farley once said, "I know half the money I spend is wasted. I just don't know which half." As campaigns become even more expensive and sophisticated, the problem is compounded.

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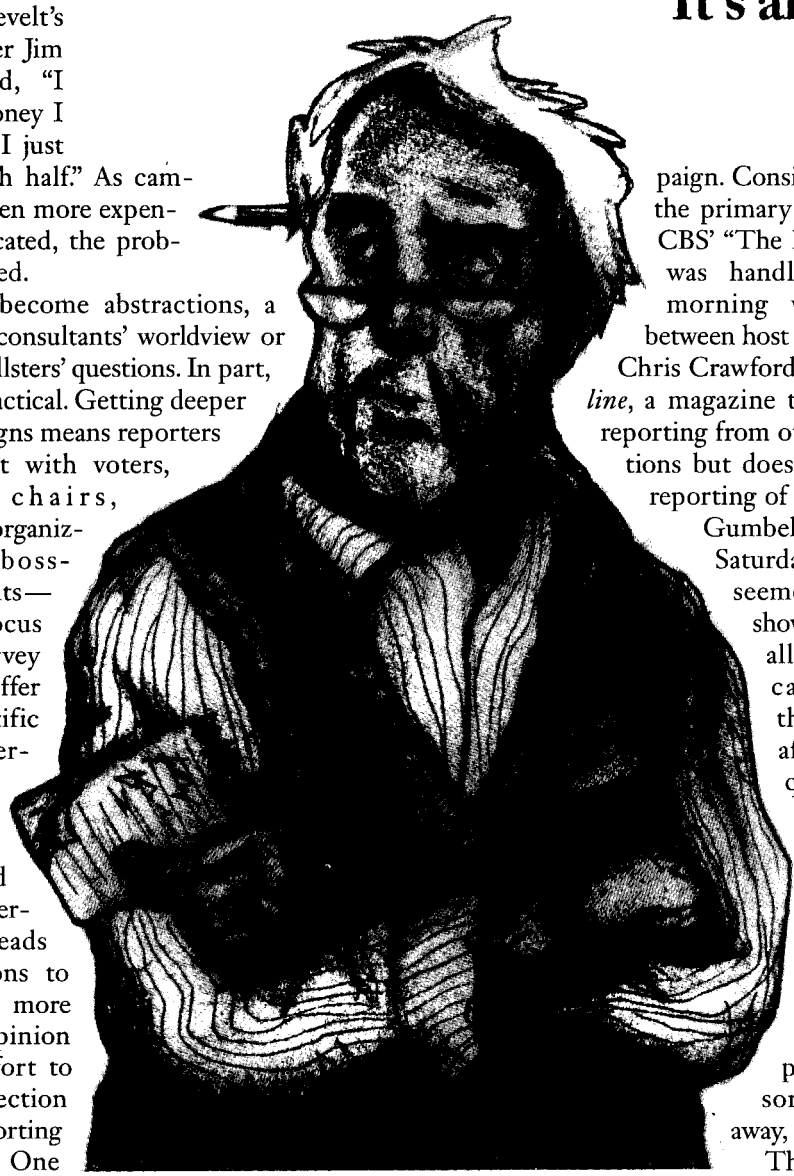

Voters have become abstractions, a reflection of the consultants' worldview or the creation of pollsters' questions. In part, the problem is practical. Getting deeper inside the campaigns means reporters have less contact with voters, county party chairs, local political organizers, activists, and bosses. Consultants—with their focus group and survey data—appear to offer a more scientific shortcut to ascertaining the public's views. This lack of contact with voters and local political leadership in turn leads news organizations to depend more and more on public-opinion polling in an effort to forge a connection between their reporting and the public. One result is a sense that the public doesn't care about the race or about politics, since that is the impression left more by polls than by actually talking to voters. Even network focus groups find political coverage bad for ratings. This anti-political attitude seeps into reporting in odd ways, even in the form of an overt cynicism about the authenticity and value of the campaign. Consider the coverage of the primary debates offered by CBS' "The Early Show," which was handled each Monday morning with glib chatter between host Bryant Gumbel and Chris Crawford, the editor of *Hotline*, a magazine that aggregates the reporting from other news organizations but does little or no actual reporting of its own.

Gumbel: "I stumbled upon Saturday's [debate] and it seemed a rather sad show. I mean, here were all the Republican candidates sitting there on a Saturday afternoon answering questions from people in Iowa, and it seemed like, you know, it was just going through the motions."

Crawford: "Yeah, ... these debates are sort of like phantom pain ... It's sort of—it's gone away, but we still feel it."

The reliance on polls

Art by C. Larson

versus people becomes self-fulfilling. "[W]hen newspaper journalists use the sample survey to describe public opinion on an issue, they are less likely to conduct in-depth interviews with knowledgeable citizens and political activists," Herbst writes. Such door-knocking is laborious and seems unnecessary. It also can seem less useful, since it's less scientific. But is this assumption correct?

Who's There?

Polls obviously have the advantage of large representative samples. But they are constricted by the limits of the questions. The reporter lacks the serendipity of discovering how voters frame ideas in their own minds. Anyone who has talked to voters over time knows that the rationale campaign professionals or polling researchers may use is often quite different than the constructions that voters arrive at. In a country of 100 million voters, there are far more reasons why people vote than can be found in a survey—and they may not always seem rational. One need look only at the few stories by reporters who do talk to voters to see it. When Jennifer Steinhauer of *The New York Times* interviewed people in their neighborhoods near Pittsburgh, this is just what she found. "For some people, the shifts [in attitudes about the candidates] have sprung from large single events—a convention speech, a tax proposal, a choice of running mate. But for many others, their change in thinking has emerged from the smallest but most resonant of details, like a well-placed bottle of wine in a televised home video of Al Gore ... or the discovery that Mr. Bush's running mate did not favor the Head Start program. Rebecca Hepka, 23, was more or less indifferent to the race until she heard one of Mr. Gore's people use the term 'living wage,' which sent her into paroxysm of rage and made her decide to vote for Mr. Bush. 'I don't like that term, no way,' said Ms. Hepka, who sells medical insurance. 'I don't want to give away all my taxes to have other people set up for life,' she added." A survey won't help you understand a voter like Ms. Hepka, who only became passionate after hearing a tangentially related phrase.

Such insights are not discerned by polls, but they reinforce all the odd, idiosyncratic, and unexpected nuances of elections that political reporters who have spent time with voters have encountered themselves. This is the kind of stuff that makes politics interesting. It also does not comport with the rationality of polling questions, focus groups, and consultant-driven use of language. The disconnection from voters increased exponentially in 2000 with the explosion in the use of daily tracking polls by the media. This development has come as a direct result of the rapid growth of the number of outlets for news and information spawned by the new communications technology. Even outlets that devote few resources to reporting, such as MSNBC, apparently feel a need to brand themselves with their own poll. The growing reliance on tracking polls adds another dimension to this shallowing out of our understanding of voters. Tracking polls are different from more in-depth, stand-alone polls. They were originally used by campaigns to test the efficacy of ads and other tactical maneuvers. The samples were too small, and the margins of errors too large, to trust the actual numbers. But the trend lines up or down were considered an important indication of whether the latest maneuver was working. ABC was the first news organization to use them in New Hampshire to sense motion toward Gary Hart. But the precise numbers were considered too rough for anyone to put on the air until CNN did so in 1988.

By 2000, any inhibitions had been swept away. A host of news organizations, from *The Washington Post* and *USA Today* to CNN and MSNBC, featured daily tracking in their coverage. As it turns out the polls were generally accurate, since the race was usually well within the margin of error, but most of the reporting failed to communicate the margin of error or its real meaning—a margin of error of plus or minus three points does not mean a spread of three or less indicates a tie. The margin of error applies to each candidate's number, which means the margin is closer to six points. Thus even the polls that predicted, the day before the election, a slight popular vote victory for Bush were technically accurate.

The bigger issue is that tracking polls are limited, with only occasional exceptions, to measuring *only* the horse race. Unlike more in-depth polls, they rarely get at the reasons behind voter attitudes or the reasons behind any shifts in those attitudes. They tell us how the race is going, but never why. That is left to reporters to infer, and they don't seem equipped to do this well.

Coverage of citizens tends to take on a surreal dimension. Journalists, especially on television, assemble citizens into the artificial surroundings of focus groups and dial groups, especially to listen to debates. They remove people from their homes and communities. Social scientists scoff at the value of such unrepresentative and easily manipulated environments. Talking to voters at their kitchen tables can offer the reporter endless clues about how someone

really thinks.

The Meta-Narrative

To bridge the loss of connection with the public, journalists have begun to rely on story-telling themes as a way of organizing the campaign in an engaging manner. They use story lines such as: Bush is a different kind of conservative. Bush is a natural politician. Bush is dumb. The Bush campaign is in shambles. Gore is a stiff. Gore is a liar. Gore is a political carnivore. We call these story lines the meta-narrative. As campaigns progress, coverage swings from one meta-narrative to another, and sometimes the story lines begin to contradict each other. The meta-narrative poses grave risks for journalists.

One difficulty is that the narrative tends to trump reporters' judgment. It becomes difficult for an individual reporter to write a story that differs from the popular meta-narratives. How does one write a story in which Bush is a good debater when the conventional wisdom holds that he is not? Ann Richards, the one politician who had been up against Bush in debates, warned reporters not to underestimate him, but her hard-earned wisdom was seldom reported. An initial faulty performance early in the primaries set the meta-narrative that Bush could not hold his own, and he benefited from this enormously in the general election.

The second problem is what to do with facts that betray the meta-narrative. The most dramatic case in 2000 is the argument that Gore was a liar. After *The Washington Monthly* cast doubt over several of the key allegations of Gore's lying, journalist Mickey Kaus decided to scour "the whole, worst case against Gore," expecting to find that the vice president really was a serial liar. Kaus found, to his surprise, "Gore isn't as big a liar as I thought."

Gore's claim that he "invented" the Internet was a misquote. He actually said he "took the initiative in creating the Internet," and it is true that he took the initiative in getting funding for it. Gore, it turns out, actually was one of the prototypes for the male character in the book *Love Story*, though his wife was never the prototype for the female character. Gore's fudge on his abortion record, Kaus concluded, was "mostly a bum rap." And Gore did support campaign finance reform in the Senate, though the bill was not yet called the McCain-Feingold bill. As for Gore's discovering the Love Canal toxic waste site, Gore never said he did. The meta-narrative of Gore as liar led to strange epistemological debates in the press over whose lies were more serious, Gore's because

they were so niggling or Bush's because they were about bigger things. It's not that Gore didn't lie, but the notion that this defined who he was—or distinguished him as a less honest person—was questionable.

There are other examples of facts not supporting the dominant story line of the moment. When Bush's campaign appeared to be in trouble after the conventions, the notion that he was a bumbling idiot—helped initially by an ambush interview by a Boston TV station—resurfaced. Bush's habit for malapropisms became a sign that he had sub-par intelligence for a man in public life.

Perhaps just as easily, Bush's misstatements could have been accepted as the flaws of anyone under pressure and constantly on the record. But they fit a meta-narrative—despite the evidence of his performance in the debates and his popularity as Texas governor. In reality, Bush's lack of intelligence and Gore's lying are examples of media stereotyping—all in an effort to forge a connection with citizens that has been lost through the neglect of more compelling storytelling.

Even worse, the meta-narrative device can become an impediment to reconnecting with voters. In the early months of the campaign, journalists assumed that the race for president would come down to character, since there was supposedly little meaningful policy difference between the candidates. By the eve of the conventions in midsummer, that meta-narrative had been turned on its head. Policy differences were the decisive factor, and the conventions focused on these matters as much as anything.

Either the public is tuning out the press or simply rejecting what it has to say. Whichever it is, the evidence suggests that the public forms different impressions of the candidates than the meta-narratives the press offers.

A study by the Committee of Concerned Journalists of the five months of coverage from February to June probed the major character themes the press used to organize the race for audiences. Using a sample of one week from each month, the study found a striking similarity among reporters on how they defined Bush and Gore.

The most common theme of the campaign was that Gore was scandal-tainted. This accounted for 42 percent of all the assertions about Gore's character. The second most common assertions about Gore was that he was a liar. These accounted for 34 percent of stories about him. The least common of the major themes, accounting for 14 percent of assertions, was that he was competent, experienced, and knowledgeable.

It is arguable how accurate a picture these themes paint of the former vice president. Regardless, the study made it fairly clear that at least as of July, citizens either were not receiving or not accepting the messages the media were offering them.

While the least common theme about Gore was his competence, by late July the public was more likely to attribute this feature to Gore than any other quality surveyed, and noticeably more than for Bush. Similarly, despite the heavy press coverage of Gore as scandal-tainted, by late July, only a quarter of the public attributed this to Gore.

The most common assertion in the coverage about Bush was that he was a different kind of Republican. This accounted for fully 40 percent of all assertions about the Texas governor. Next was the idea that he was unintelligent, which accounted for 26 percent of character assertions. Last was that he was coasting on his family name and connections, which accounted for 10 percent of assertions about him.

Yet again, the public had formed quite different impressions. On the eve of the conventions, a greater percentage of Americans actually attributed being "a different kind of politician" to Gore than to Bush, despite the coverage. A slightly greater percentage of Americans also attributed "not being a serious person" to Gore than to Bush as well. And though it received little coverage, the most common perception of either candidate was that Bush had gotten where he was on family connections. The one point that ultimately stuck with voters was Gore's shading of the truth, but the public did not come to this judgment until after the debates.

Here, early press coverage probably helped shape attitudes but voters still had to see for themselves. One may question the rationality of these public judgments, but that is precisely the point. The public is less monolithic than either polling or crude story lines can cope with. It may also be less logical. The pluralistic nature of the American electorate suggests that trying to weave a complex campaign into a single narrative is fraught with difficulties. The older method of reporting—the inverted pyramid of the daily campaign story—may no longer work in an era when people already have instantaneous access to the news and are skeptical of what politicians have to say. But the thematic narrative may be a dangerous substitute.

We Understand Spin Doctors, But Not Substance

Taken together, the move inside campaigns, the

loss of connection with voters, and the reliance on faulty story lines create a serious vulnerability in the modern campaign press culture. We have a better understanding than ever before of what is occurring inside campaigns at any moment. We have a stronger understanding of the horse race and more information about the strategies inside the campaigns. We know the "what" of campaigns as never before, but we have little idea why.

Despite the televised debates and an extraordinary quantity of coverage of the campaign, the meaning of the 2000 election remains remarkably opaque. We know less about the underlying factors of this race than we did at the time of other close races, including those in 1960, 1968, and 1976. The reason is that the bulk of the information provided about the public was how it factored into the grand plan of the campaigns, not on the leadership it expected from the ultimate winner.

The definition of political reporting has been seriously thinned. This not only robs us of understanding; arguably, it makes it harder for the victor to govern. It also leads to press coverage of government as a continuing campaign, dictated by winning the war for the message of the day, and measured by another set of polls. The ability of a president to accomplish anything is determined by the latest approval rating. These trends cannot be laid entirely at the feet of the press. But as we understand the mentality of the spin doctor and the consultant better, we have come to view the world through their eyes, and helped make their definitions self-fulfilling.

Solutions

How can journalists think about covering these campaigns in more meaningful ways? Evidently, especially after the election-night debacle, many news organizations are already rethinking their campaign coverage. We suggest a few ideas that might not only make election reporting more accurate, but also make the coverage more relevant to the audience.

Armed with the understanding of changing demographics the polls provide, the election cycle could be preceded by reporting on the changing society and the issues that energize it. Not only will this reporting help us recognize how communities have changed, but it would focus on the trends that the successful candidates will face once in office. There is no better context within which to report an election than the changing face of the community. Because it might really connect with voters where they live and also make the election coverage relevant, it might even draw journalism and the public closer together.

Journalists should also think about how members of a community come to their political conclusions and where they discuss their political judgments. Most news organizations conduct very sophisticated surveys of how people in their regions spend their time and money, which are used for advertising purposes. But the treasure trove of demographic information in these studies is seldom used by the news department. A thoughtful analysis of such material—plus the mountains of similar data compiled by the Census Bureau, the Labor Department, and other agencies—can help editors understand the venues within which political opinions are being formed.

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The press should also do more bottom-up reporting. Grassroots decisions begin just there, at the grass roots. Why not report them that way? Cover the venues in which the political conversations are likely to occur: civic clubs, lodges, union halls, church organizations, local political organizations, and coffee shops. Regular reporting that sweeps through these venues during an election year could provide a wealth of information about the mood and the interests of the voters. It could provide insights into whose ideas are changing and why. The same technology that allows campaigns to disappear into private space can be used to monitor their work there. But first we have to recognize that what makes elections interesting is what they say about the people, and here the press is moving profoundly in the wrong direction. ●

The Washington Monthly Journalism Award

NOVEMBER 2000

JOHN HEILEMANN

The Truth, The Whole Truth and Nothing But The Truth: The Untold Story of the Microsoft Antitrust Case

Wired, November 2000

[illegible] pages, Heilemann looks beyond the conventional explanations of how and why Microsoft lost its antitrust [illegible] into two companies. He examines the witnesses chosen by both sides, the court battles, Bill Gates' failure during his cross-examination [illegible] characters who crossed the stage. Most of all, Heilemann shows us the pride and stubbornness of the [illegible] in the world—a company run by a man who just didn't realize what he was up against.

BONNIE HUNT

Prescription for Errors

The Indianapolis Star, November 12-14, 2000

[illegible] Health Professions Bureau's delays in processing nurse suspension orders and its inconsistent monitoring of [illegible]. She then explores drug abuse among nurses and reveals that the head of Indiana's program to monitor nurses in drug abuse programs [illegible] his job.

FOX BUTTERFIELD

[illegible] Out—A Special Report: Often, Parole is One Stop On the Way Back to Prison

The New York Times, November 29, 2000

[illegible] examines the potential "collateral damage" of the recent prison construction boom that while allowing us [illegible] deep cuts in parole supervision and certain rehabilitation programs. Butterfield [illegible] changes that have come in California and follows the lives of several families that have been changed by the state's new parole rules.

NICHOLAS KULISH AND JIM VANDEHEI

GOP Protest in Miami-Dade is a Well-Organized Effort

The Wall Street Journal, November 27, 2000

Kulish and VandeHei document how the Bush campaign paid to send the aides of conservative Republican members of Congress [illegible] to protest recounts in largely Democratic counties. The story explains why Gore protesters were outnumbered [illegible] outside some vote counting venues. Kulish and VandeHei found [illegible] organized by [illegible] to Miami from D.C. with all-expense paid [illegible] of the Bush campaign.

[illegible]