

PERSPECTIVE ON THE PRESS

# Cranky Lapdogs of the Power Elite



The news media, cozy with the government, attack anyone (like Oliver Stone) who disturbs the relationship.

By KITTY KELLEY

Once, messengers bearing bad news were beheaded by kings. Today, the chieftains of the news media swing the ax.

Oliver Stone, who directed "JFK," produced a riveting film of fact and fiction. His movie, which seems to blow holes in the Warren Commission report on the assassination of John F. Kennedy, became the target of bilious media commentary. The press lambasted his work as intellectually dishonest and historically irresponsible. He was pilloried for propounding a theory of conspiracy that ran counter to the findings of a presidential commission.

Yet the controversial film, for which he received an Academy Award nomination for best director, posed questions that the public clearly wants answered. The ensuing uproar forced Congress to respond with proposed legislation to unseal some of the secret files surrounding the assassination.

Stone told a story that the public wanted to hear but could not get from the Establishment press, which was snoozing in the lap of the power structure. When awakened by a kick in the pants, the members of the press went on the attack.

Stone's collision with the news media reminded me of the dervish that accompanied last year's publication of "Nancy Reagan: The Unauthorized Biography."

My book was first reported in a front-page story above the fold in the

Sunday New York Times. Such prominent placement immediately baptized the biography with respectability. Days later, the newspaper backtracked with a story and an editorial almost apologizing for allocating prestigious coverage to something negative about a former First Lady. This reversal was quickly

followed by vitriolic cover-story attacks in Time, Newsweek, People, Entertainment Weekly and the New Republic, plus enough coverage by columnists and commentators to make the book one of the 10 most prominent news stories of 1991.

Why such outrage? Some of the venom is easily dismissed as partisan wrath. The rest, though, was fueled by an angry, defensive media, some of whom attacked my character in an effort to discredit my reporting. While I thought I had written a book about power and hypocrisy, the Establishment press corps derided it as cheap sensationalism. They chose to ignore the book's larger implications and instead focused on the sexual aspects—a minuscule portion, approximately seven out of 603 pages.

The press seemed to be saying that in writing about Nancy Reagan I had committed an unpardonable sin. I could not be forgiven for the impertinent suggestion that the occupants of the White House practiced a morality far different from what they preached. In focusing on what went on behind the palace gates, I inadvertently exposed a genuflecting press corps that had treated the Reagans reverently for eight years and failed to write about what was there for all to see.

The howling reaction to my book brought to mind Robert Bolt's play, "A Man for All Seasons," in which Sir

Thomas More is told that Richard Rich, an overly ambitious sort, has been appointed attorney general for Wales.

"For Wales?" said Sir Thomas More, looking into Rich's face with pain and amusement. "Why, Richard, it profits a man nothing to give his soul for the whole world . . . but for Wales?"

At the height of the fury I wanted to hover above fulminating columnists at the Washington Post and whisper, "Why, fellas, it profits a man nothing to give his soul for the whole world . . . but for Nancy Reagan?"

Daniel Defoe, writing about power during the 16th Century, ventured that a man is invested with the high attributes of leadership and the right to rule by those around him. "If he comes to office without these characteristics, his environment equips him with them as surely as a diet of royal jelly transforms a worker into a queen bee."

During presidential election years the press corps warns voters against taking candidates' claims at face value and treating victors as monarchs. Yet that is exactly what the press did when Ronald Reagan assumed the presidency. Intimidated by his overwhelming popularity, reporters and editors, too, wanted to be liked, so they refused to look at the dark mass festering beneath the glitzy facade. Instead, they shoveled royal jelly. I came along with "Nancy Reagan" and smashed the honeycomb with a sledgehammer. As a result, I got royally stung.

Oliver Stone has now learned the same timeless lesson: You cannot challenge the media's complacent love affair with the Establishment and walk away unscathed. The press does not appreciate wake-up calls.

*Kitty Kelley is preparing to host a syndicated television talk show that is scheduled to air this fall.*





Kitty Kelley's last interview

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