

A Big Story—but Only Behind the Scenes

Media Fretted Over Reporting Dole Affair

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In their instant histories of the 1996 election, news organizations have been putting the spotlight on a story that most of them studiously avoided while the campaign was raging. Two major publications dug out the facts during the fall, then anguished over whether to publish them in an episode that preoccupied Bob Dole's campaign for weeks.

The story—which quickly became an open secret in Washington—was that Dole had had an extramarital affair that began in 1968, while he was married to his

first wife. Reporters for *The Washington Post* and *Time* magazine conducted extensive interviews with the Virginia woman involved in the relationship, which was eventually made public by the *National Enquirer*.

Now, in the wake of Dole's defeat, three lengthy magazine reports have emblazoned the story in the history of the campaign.

Newsweek reported that Dole's operation was "obsessed with the potential Post story" and regarded it as a "mortal threat." *Time* offered a similar account, asserting that Dole refrained from attacking President Clinton's personal char-

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acter because he "was worried that a story would break about his character." And the New Yorker said that "Dole feared a media frenzy that would doom his candidacy."

For all the heated debate at Time and The Post over how to handle the story, news of Dole's long-ago affair landed quietly when it was finally published in the last week of October. Reaction to the Enquirer report was muted in comparison with the frenzies sparked by similar tabloid tales. One newspaper—the New York Daily News—confirmed and published the story. Some news organizations—the Boston Globe, Newsday, the New York Post, the Orange County Register, Newsweek and CNN—gave the matter brief mentions. Many others ignored it, including the New York Times, Los Angeles Times, Wall Street Journal, USA Today, NBC, CBS and ABC.

The Washington Post, having decided against publishing the story on its own, mentioned the Enquirer report and the newspaper's own role in several paragraphs deep in a routine campaign story.

Andrew Rosenthal, Washington editor of the New York Times, captured the reaction of many news executives in saying: "This was a story about an alleged affair that happened 30 years ago. Big deal."

But behind the scenes, it surely seemed like a big deal. Though Nelson Warfield, Dole's press secretary, called the Newsweek and Time accounts of a paralyzed campaign "far overblown," campaign officials acknowledge that they expended considerable energy on the matter.

"It froze our ability to do a number of things," one official said last week, "most importantly to have the candi-

date commit to television interviews" because of fear that he might be questioned about the story if it was published.

The Dole camp dispatched its general counsel, Doug Wurth, to meet with the woman, Meredith Roberts, and learn how much evidence she had of the affair. (Plenty, it turned out; she kept detailed datebooks and told several friends at the time.) Some campaign strategists considered having Dole break the news himself in an interview with a friendly television reporter. And they made sure his wife, Elizabeth, and his daughter from his first marriage, Robin, were available for a possible news conference.

To argue that the story not be published, Dole's communications director, John Buckley, visited Time Managing Editor Walter Isaacson, while Warfield and Dole adviser Mari Will sat down with top Post editors. Elizabeth Dole called Post Publisher Donald E. Graham to urge that the story not be printed. Graham said he merely notified the paper's executive editor, Leonard Downie Jr., of the call. Dole, meanwhile, was kept apprised of the situation.

It is not clear whether concern about the story affected Dole's message as well. After the first presidential debate, a senior Dole campaign official asked Bob Woodward, one of two Post reporters pursuing the story, to remind Downie that the candidate had not criticized Clinton on character.

A top campaign official denied that the story thwarted plans for Dole to attack Clinton's character, saying that Dole never planned to criticize Clinton's personal life and that "you can't pull a punch you never intended to throw." He said the call to Woodward was an effort to say, "See? You guys should not be motivated to do the story on a 'relevance' basis."



Magazine stories on Dole's long-ago affair popped up after the election.

"As best I can tell, it was never altering their core strategy," Woodward said in an interview. If he believed the pending story was altering Dole's strategy, Woodward said, "I would have argued very strongly and vociferously that our reporting and interroga-

tion had changed what the campaign was doing and that made it important news."

Caught in the middle of this high-stakes maneuvering was the Australian-born Roberts, an editor at a Washington area trade association. Her main goal was to avoid becoming tabloid fodder. She was dismayed to see the Enquirer break the story after her extensive conversations with Time and The Post. "I am appalled at how the lines of distinction between the tabloid and mainstream press get blurred. And how they use innocent people as pawns," Roberts, 63, told the Boston Globe. She said she had shown "ridiculous naivete" in dealing with reporters and that "I lost three months of my life."

For the media, the larger debate is a familiar one. This was the third straight presidential campaign in which the press grappled with allegations of infidelity, and yet the rules are not much clearer than when Gary Hart's candidacy was derailed in 1987. The disclosure about Dole provided another difficult journalistic test of that highly subjective concept—"relevance"—in the heat of a campaign.

Downie said in an interview that the story did not meet his longtime standard that to be newsworthy, an instance of private behavior must involve the politician's conduct in office. "The fact that it was 28 years ago . . . played a role, and also it did not involve in any way his use of public office," he said of Dole.

As for Dole's criticism of President Clinton on matters of character, Downie said: "It was all about the president's conduct of office, not about his personal life. . . . So I don't feel he was engaged in hypocrisy."

Time's Isaacson said he "wasn't comfortable" with the story, particularly late in the campaign. "The bar is a little higher a couple of weeks before the election because everything is more explosive," he said. He was, however, willing to publish the information

as part of what he called a "broad context story" after the election.

National Enquirer Editor Steve Coz sees it differently. "It's news, period," he said before the election. "This is a guy who's got a family values campaign, who's constantly pointing a finger at Bill Clinton on ethics issues. He says, 'I keep my word.' What about his marriage vows?"

Most news executives said in interviews that the affair took place too long ago to be of significance. But other behavior from the past has been deemed relevant in campaign stories—like Bill Clinton's use of marijuana in 1969, and his efforts to avoid the draft. Four years ago, President Bush even tried to make an issue of Clinton's 1969 student visit to Moscow.

The vehemence of the accuser may affect how such stories are handled. In January 1992, Gennifer Flowers, who harbored an obvious animus toward Clinton, took about \$100,000 from the tabloid Star to publicize her charge that she had a 12-year affair with the then-governor of Arkansas. Flowers even held a news conference, which CNN carried live.

By contrast, Roberts spoke only reluctantly to a handful of reporters. Dole brushed off a question from a Fox producer about the Enquirer's story, which his campaign was quick to label "trashy gossip."

Yet another factor in the play of such stories may be the degree to which the controversy affects the campaign. Even news organizations that initially ignored Flowers's charges were forced to deal with the resulting brouhaha that threatened Clinton's candidacy.

But the Dole story broke at a time when Clinton appeared to be cruising to a relatively easy reelection. "I think if the race had been closer and it had been further away from the election, there's a greater chance the story would have come out," said Evan Thomas, Newsweek's Washington bureau chief, who interviewed Roberts with the understanding that the story would run only in the magazine's post-election issue and subsequent staff-written book.

The Post's involvement began in August, when the paper published a front-page story detailing how Dole obtained an "emergency divorce" from his first wife, Phyllis, in 1972. This led to tips that Dole had an affair well before the marriage broke up. Reporter Charles R. Babcock located Roberts and, with Woodward, eventually persuaded her to speak on the record.

At a series of meetings, a number of

Post editors and reporters debated the story. Participants said a majority of those involved favored publishing the story. Several, including Woodward, sent Downie memos arguing for publication.

Downie said that "some women had particularly strong feelings that this should be published," while other female staffers told him they were "opposed to publication or at least very ambivalent."

Some staff members questioned whether Downie's judgment might be affected by the fact that he was separating from his wife and starting a new relationship. He said the two issues were "coincidental." "I didn't feel a conflict myself," he said, adding that he took the step of consulting publisher Graham and several senior Post editors, who agreed.

In mid-October, Enquirer reporters approached Roberts and offered her \$50,000, which she declined. But she said enough in brief conversations to enable the tabloid to name her as Dole's "secret mistress."

Daily News Managing Editor Arthur Browne said his paper interviewed Roberts and ran its own story because "a candidate's background and life story is of importance to the voters." CNN made several unsuccessful attempts to locate Roberts.

Rush Limbaugh read the Daily News report on the air, calling it "a Bob Dole bimbo eruption" and saying it was "probably not true." He said such allegations about Dole "pale in comparison" to the "body of evidence" involving infidelity and sexual harassment by Clinton, ticking off allegations by Flowers and Paula Jones.

Downie said those allegations are in a different category because Flowers and Jones were Arkansas state employees while Clinton was governor, and there were charges that state troopers had helped arrange liaisons for Clinton.

Despite the burst of publicity, most news outlets did not pursue the story. "I think it has to have some relevance to your capacity as a government official," said Tim Russert, NBC's Washington bureau chief.

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