

Political Contests and the Press

While recognizing and being overwhelmingly thankful for the critical role that the press has played in uncovering the despicable practices of the Committee to Re-Elect the President and others during the last presidential campaign, I wish to call attention to a habit of newsmen which, it seems to me, has serious negative consequences on the vigor of our body politic. I am referring to the tendency to cover political contests and their outcomes very much as sports events are covered—with tremendous reportage concerning who the players will be and who is likely to win, while giving scant attention to what the candidates stand for or what the substantive issues to be decided during their incumbency will mean for their constituents. The ballots are hardly counted in one presidential election before pundits and newscasters begin the speculation as to whom the candidates will be four years later. This is not as harmless a practice as it might seem, since the message it implies is that the popularity contest is the political process rather than merely the basic preparation for the work of democracy.

A particularly annoying example of this took place on Friday July 26th at the National Press Club luncheon. Senator Lowell Weicker (R-Conn.) had just given an informal but quite inspir-

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ing talk affirming the strengths of our political system and the importance of vigilance to protect them. The early questions had reference to the speech, but by the fourth or fifth question the speech was forgotten and the questioners were trying to hang the mantle of presidential hopeful on Senator Weicker. Questioning in almost any political situation almost inevitably takes this sort of turn.

I submit that the constant preoccupation of the media with turning every person who gains public notice of a positive sort into a presidential candidate trivializes our whole political process. It truly does not matter a whit at this time whether the senator does or does not wish to become president. In any event his actions not his words will eventually tell us. It does matter tremendously however, that the public understands the seriousness to the democratic system of the threat imposed by Watergate or other similar distortions of elections. Those who deflect attention from these significant issues onto the personalities of the politicians involved, do a serious disservice to all of us and to our endangered political system.

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