

Journalism

By STANLEY P. FRIEDMAN
UPI New York

Muskie Never Cried No Tears, Say AP, UPI At Scene But Reporting It Differently From 60 Other Boys On The Bus Would History Be Different If All Those Reporters Stood Where The Wire Service Men Were Standing?

One evening, at a noisy party after a Guild meeting in New York last February, I complained to several people that I really wanted to find outside contributions to the Journalism column in **WiReport**.

"I've got one for you," said Adolphe Bernotas, AP staffer in Concord, N.H. "Did you know Muskie never cried?"

"You're kidding!" I said. "He didn't?"

"No. It involves Watergate, too. It's a great story. . ."

To interrupt Bernotas for a moment, I'll fill you in on the background. In 1968, Muskie's popularity had risen while running for Vice-President with Humphrey against Nixon. By 1971, from February through July, Harris polls showed Muskie could beat Nixon.

The first Democratic presidential primary in 1972 was in New Hampshire. Muskie's staff predicted their candidate carrying the vote by 50% over Sen. George McGovern, Wilbur Mills, Vance Hartke and Mayor Sam Yorty of Los Angeles.

The Committee for Re-election of the President decided to work political sabotage to weaken Muskie, hoping for a McGovern win. They believed McGovern was the easier candidate for Nixon to beat. Three weeks before the end of the campaign a phony letter signed "Paul Morrison" was sent to William Loeb, publisher of the Manchester **Union Leader**, saying Muskie had called French-Canadians Canucks, a disparaging, slang word, in Florida two weeks before at a meeting with young people at a drug rehabilitation center. Nearly half the Democratic vote in Manchester, N.H., is French Canadian.

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an. Publisher Loeb reprinted the letter itself in the place where he ran political cartoons, and wrote a signed editorial headed "Senator Muskie Insults Franco-Americans" on Feb. 24. A check of voters by Muskie workers found a strong reaction against Muskie. Muskie's people consulted their Washington office. Muskie, at the time, was resting in Palm Springs, Calif., for two days.

He was tired. He was asked to come back and confront Loeb. When he arrived, the night before on Feb. 25, he was also shown an article about his wife, Jane, reprinted from **Newsweek**, originally condensed from **Women's Wear Daily**, describing her in earthy ways. Muskie called a press conference on the 26th. . .

What follows are conversations telling the story from three separate interviews, plus clarifying information added in parenthesis.

Bernotas (AP) I was working in the AP bureau at Concord. I saw the story develop at the bureau and the source lose control of it in Boston. The two guys who wrote it were standing right in front of Muskie. That was Joe Zellner of AP, who is now the press aide to the governor of New Hampshire, and UPI's John Milne, now in Washington. It was in

the middle of a snow storm. They were the nearest to him. They were right at his feet. And they were the only two guys out of 60 who didn't have tears in their leads. They said he was moved, choked up, upset. But, all the heavyweights, the dudes from the **New York Times**, the **Los Angeles Times**, the **Washington Post**, and whoever was there, they wrote about tears. All those guys (except the **New York Times**, which carried it in the sixth paragraph) had leads that had said, "In a tearful denouncement of Bill Loeb, etc. . ." But, Joe and John swear to this day there were no tears.

John Milne (UPI) I was the manager at Concord. I went down 15 miles to Manchester to see this deal. We'd been called more than once about a big special announcement that Muskie was going to make. Nobody knew what announcement it was going to be. Just about the entire press corps covering the presidential primary at the time was there. So it was pretty substantial. It was probably a crowd of a couple hundred people, most of them reporters. There wasn't very much walking public as you'd expect on a snowy cold February morning.

Joe Zellner (AP) I was running the Concord bureau. I came down the day Muskie had called a news conference at the Sheraton Carpenter hotel in Manchester.

From there we all walked over to the **Union Leader** in a party. Five blocks at most. It was snowing pretty heavily at the time. I don't remember exactly when in the primary campaign that was (Feb. 26, 1972). It was near the very end. Muskie and his campaign people had a flat bed truck set up on the street in front of the **Union Leader** when I arrived.

John Milne and I were standing right at Muskie's feet. I could reach out my arm and touch his foot. Muskie started taking Loeb apart. (Loeb had called Muskie a hypocrite. Muskie called Loeb a gutless liar.) It was over the Canuck letter. The other thing was an article that he later talked about. The article was run in a condensed form in **Newsweek**, out of **Women's Wear Daily**, and Loeb reprinted it. When Muskie was discussing the article attacking his wife he appeared to be fairly emotional, and at one point put his hand to his forehead and his eyes, and sort of looked down and close to the voting day, Joe called his story directly into Boston, not filing through Concord where I am. One way or another, both desks at AP and UPI got word that Muskie

bowed his head. (He wore no hat.) Now at this point he snow was blowing, and water was trickling down his hair line just like it was on most of us, down Muskie's cheeks and down mine, too. (He had no hat.) I was very careful for accuracy's sake, and I never saw wet eyes. . .

Milne (UPI) At the point where he discussed the article about his wife, he stopped and his voice started to quiver. The phrase I used was that he choked up, and that's the phrase Muskie used later (a month afterward) about himself.

And I remember it in detail, because I was sure it was all going to be a big deal. I looked very carefully to make sure if he actually cried or not. And as I remember Zellner, he was looking, and then going down under the truck to take notes because it was snowing and everything he'd write would get washed away. . .

Zellner (AP) Some of Muskie's aides were in the back of the crowd, with some newsmen. I was told by a couple of correspondents that they asked a Muskie aide if he was crying and they were told yes. It was going to be a plus to show him human in that way. Of course, a week or so later, it didn't matter if he had or had not, because he got credit for it. But, it probably cost him the majority vote.

Milne (UPI) At the end, I went very quickly and filed a day lead. (11 a.m.) And then I later filed a night lead. I don't know how Joe handled it. But, in my night lead, I again used the phrase choked up. And the Boston desk called, and Bill Middlebrooks (the day managing editor) in New York called, because they thought that was imprecise. He said, did he cry or didn't he? I said no. And they said well, then that's the way we're carrying it in the lead. And that's what I would have done if I had been in the same position. I was being asked specifically did he cry and I said no. In any case, there was never the situation that Dave Broder (of the *Washington Post*) had, tears streaming down his face, Muskie wept openly, which was Broder's lead which was why we all had to rush around and explain why we didn't have it. . .

Bernotas (AP) So what happens? Because of the importance of the story (it was very

cried. I'm now being asked at Concord, "Opposition says Muskie is crying, where are tears, please." But, then I have no way of getting in touch with Joe Zellner, because he was dealing directly with Boston. Now, the editors choose to put tears and that stuff in the second lead. So the reporter lost control of it once the editor took over. That's it, the editor makes the final judgment. I suppose part of it is reporter versus editor; the editor thinks the reporter is a shmuck, and the reporter thinks the editor is a butcher. At any rate, as it turned out, in the early leads, both AP and UPI did not have tears. Everybody else did. As a matter of fact, I recall watching TV that night, they said yes, too, but you couldn't tell whether his eyes were wet. After the election, Muskie was eventually asked about it, and he said he choked with rage, but didn't cry. Now a week or so later, the *National Observer* wrote an analysis of how the story was covered. And this guy James Perry lambasted the hell out of the wire services. As I recall the story began something like "Last Saturday Ed Muskie stood in front of the *Union Leader* and cried. Tears were falling down his cheeks. . . ." And, he went on to say, this is how the *New York Times* wrote it, this is how the *Washington Post* wrote it, this is how CBS reported it. But, what about the wire services? And he just knocked the shit out of the wires. The ultimate irony! And I remembered getting a call, asking when did you guys move the second lead? (2nd lead carried "tears.") I thought the guy was just curious. But he was reconstructing the story, saying we moved the story with no tears, and then recognized the mistake, and finally put the tears in, several hours later! The ultimate irony. Here are two experienced wire service reporters getting zapped for reporting the truth, for being accurate. And Joe and John were no pishers. They were really cracker-jack wire service guys. Christ, Joe had covered everything from Selma riots to Mercury space shots. He had spent considerable time doing rough service in the South. I

don't remember John Milne's service credentials, but hell he had worked in the South, in Boston, and was the bureau manager in Concord. He was a very competent, fine political writer. . .

Milne (UPI) The *National Observer* had a guy there named Jim Perry, and a story he wrote on us is now in a book, in "Us and Them," which is another of the boys on the press bus deals. And in it, Perry does not ask whether we were right or wrong about tears, although he does draw a negative conclusion by tone. Rather he says you really can't expect the overworked bureau chiefs of hillbilly wire services, who aren't in Washington, to grasp the news, the great implication of this great event. . . .

Zellner (AP) I remember the *National Observer* story. They took us apart personally by name. I never replied because when you're in the wire business you expect that kind of thing. But, if the *National Observer* had called asking me why I did it, I would have told them exactly what I'm telling you now. But, they never did. . .

Milne (UPI) There was one thing — and you'll have to check Joe personally for his

part — that I always felt very good about. Both of us later got queries from newspaper clients at both New York offices. And H. L. Stevenson (UPI editor) asked me what happened. And I said he didn't cry. And that's what Stevenson wrote back to whoever complained. Zellner, on the other hand, had a problem with a newspaper in Birmingham and the AP was not so forthright. . .

Zellner (AP) Some time later a client wrote the New York office and asked about it, and the reply was, there was a possibility that it was an error, and that AP was wrong. They replied before they asked me. Now the least they could have done is to have checked with me — the man who wrote the story. I got this from the bureau chief's copy of the sent letter, asking for a (late) comment. . .

Bernotas (AP) Every now and then, the Muskie thing gets mentioned on the wire. I always send a little message to Washington, there were no tears. But, it's impossible. It's going to remain (in history) forever. It's like "Go West, Young

Man" by Horace Greeley. One of our New Hampshire notables here. He never said that. He rewrote or reprinted somebody's editorial from an Ohio newspaper, where it said **go west, young man.**

When you think of Horace Greeley, you think of **Go west, young man.** When you think of Muskie, you think of tears in front of the **Union Leader.** Then, too, I suppose you get into the philosophical thing. What do you mean by "cried"? But, if you mean he wept out of control, no. Of course, whether he wept or didn't weep, the guy pulled a blunder. No doubt about it from a political point of view. In terms of journalism, it really raises the point, what competition can drive you to.

Zellner (AP) I'd been in much controversy over the years. I was at Selma. I'd covered elections. I'd covered a lot of major stories, including space shots, and I'd been through the mill reporting campaigns. I think you're very prone to the emotion of the moment. But, I'm at the back of the crowd, like some of those guys were, and they said the man is crying, I think I would have pushed my way to the front to see if it's so. It's not a matter of getting involved in a story, but being able to detach yourself to check accuracy. If you're in a riot you can be scared, you've got to be scared, but you've got to take a deep breath and look around you. See what you see and retain it. You know, covering a politician you don't stop to feel sorry for the man. You don't have time. This was obviously an emotional thing. But I wasn't going to be tearful about it myself. And getting it right might have made a difference in the vote. It might have made a difference on the bumper stickers in the next primary, in Florida. "Vote for Muskie or He'll Cry." So I have no apologies for the way I handled the story. If anything, I think it's laudable. We were standing in a better position than any reporter. We both had years of experience in pressure situations. That neither of us reported it is enough and we are the most highly competitive two outfits around town.

We had no reason to report it the same. There was no brotherhood. We knew each other, and we spoke to each other. But I'm not going to get carried away and start inventing something, see something that is just not there. I think John was in the same frame of mind. If somebody objects to that, so be it. . . . Incidentally, I'm going to have to talk to Adolphe for getting me back into the news.