The Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy

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Our President/Their Scandal:
The Role of the British Press in Keeping the Clinton Scandals Alive

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Introduction

The spring of 1994 was an interesting time for news in Washington. The Clinton administration's flagship domestic policy, health care industry reform, was being debated; intervening in Haiti to restore the democratically elected government was being openly discussed; nuclear diplomacy was being carried on with varying degrees of urgency in relation to North Korea, India and Pakistan; the first free elections in South Africa's history were coming up. Hanging over all events was the ongoing war in Bosnia.

If you lived in America and read the newspaper you could read about all these things. You would come away from reading the day's news with a general sense that the Clinton team was still trying to find its feet. You would certainly not come away thinking the Administration was in crisis. If you lived in London you would have had quite a different impression. The President most of the American press was covering, and the President the British press was covering were entirely different. The British press corps in Washington seemed wholly focussed on the sexual harassment lawsuit against the President being made by Paula Jones. They gleefully reported every sordid allegation coming out of Arkansas. In some quarters of the British press Vince Foster's corpse was exhumed to be anecdotally examined for proof that he had been murdered.

I live in London. That spring I was working as National Public Radio's London correspondent. Part of my job was to read the British press and the American press every day. It seemed to me the British papers had gone mad. That the tabloids would want to play up sex scandals involving the President was understandable. Scandal is an essential part of their editorial mix. But the quality press: The Times, The Daily Telegraph, The Guardian and the Independent all took an astonishing interest in scandal stories – at the expense of other news.

I wasn't the only person having this epiphany. Historian Arthur Schlesinger visited London that spring to give a lecture. He was reported to have asked Bruce Gornick, the local head of the organization Democrats Abroad, "The British press are really hard on President Clinton. Why?"

It was a good question. It was a question asked frequently at the White House in ensuing years. It remains a good question. To find the answer it's necessary to understand the competitive nature of the British press; the increasingly symbiotic relations of the media and political elites in London and Washington; and, the way Clinton opponents tried to use the media – including the British press, to get their stories into American discourse.

I. The White House View

On January 9, 1997, two weeks before President Clinton's second inauguration, at the daily White House press briefing presidential spokesman Mike McCurry found himself facing a barrage of questions not related to current policy problems or the prospects for the second Clinton term. The questions concerned a White House memorandum entitled "Communication Stream of Conspiracy Commerce." The memo was put together by White House lawyers to help staffers handle questions from the press about some of what they considered to be the wilder allegations concerning the Whitewater scandal. The memo was meant to be for internal administration use only, but inevitably had leaked, three days previously, into one of the most Clinton unfriendly zones in the press: the editorial page of the Wall Street Journal. Editorial page writer Micah Morrison described it as an example of "the extremes of White House Press management."… The transcript of the briefing shows McCurry trying to deal with questions about the purpose of the report.

> Does this purport to show a
> conspiracy on the part of the news media?
>
> MCCURRY: No, absolutely not. It purports to show that the conspiracy theorists who are very active on the subject of Whitewater and other subjects very often plant their stories, plant their information in various places, and then we kind of give you a theory of how things get picked up and translated and moved through what we call "the media food chain," or what others have called "the media food chain."

Pressed by other reporters, the president's spokesman went on to explain how the food chain worked.

> MCCURRY: They talk about stuff about some of the work of a couple of so-called "media centers," a couple of wealthy philanthropists that subsidize the work of organizations that present themselves as news organizations -- they write stories, they get picked up elsewhere on

> the Internet. Sometimes they get picked up overseas, typically in London, typically by one particular reporter, that stuff then gets fed back into news organizations here.

McCurry's mention of the London connection was a public acknowledgement that the White House had long been concerned that some outlets in the British press were playing a key role in disseminating scandalous stories about the president. The "Communication Stream of Conspiracy Commerce" was originally put together in the summer of 1995. It consisted of a two page cover memo written by White House counsel Mark Fabiani, attached to around 300 pages of newspaper clippings culled from Democratic National Committee files. Fabiani's cover memo defined the White House's view of how the President's political enemies got their allegations into the mainstream press:

> "Communication Stream of Conspiracy Commerce" [excerpt], prepared circa July 1995.
>
> Communication Stream of Conspiracy Commerce: The Communication Stream of Conspiracy Commerce refers to the mode of communication employed by the right wing to convey their fringe stories into legitimate subjects of coverage by the mainstream media. This is how the stream works. First, well funded right wing think tanks and individuals underwrite conservative newsletters and newspapers such as the Western Journalism Center, the American Spectator and the Pittsburgh Tribune Review. Next, the stories are reprinted on the internet where they are bounced all over the world. From the internet, the stories are bounced into the mainstream media through one of two ways: 1) The story will be picked up by the British tabloids and covered as a major story, from which the American right-of-center mainstream media (i.e. the Wall Street Journal, Washington Times and New York Post) will then pick the story up;

The memo than addressed itself to giving specific examples of how the communication stream worked

> The "Blow-Back" Strategy
>
> One specific "food chain" strategy is the "blow-back." The blow-back starts with conservative groups feeding material to the British tabloids, such as the Sunday Telegraph. Conservative

American tabloids and mainstream American media then report on the British reports.

What the memo describes is a kind of money laundering operation, except in this case it's not illegal profits being washed clean. The currency in this case is innuendo, rumor and half-truth sent over the Atlantic to Britain, where it is published in the national press and then blown-back over the ocean as fact reported in reputable newspapers. The memo makes one small, but crucial error. It refers to the Sunday Telegraph as a "tabloid". It is not. It is a broadsheet newspaper with an influential and serious readership.

The notion that stories were planted or picked up in British papers pre-dates the Communication Stream memo. The term "media food chain" was first used on April 6 1994. Former Clinton campaign manager James Carville, introduced it while addressing a breakfast for reporters hosted by the Christian Science Monitor. Several reporters attending the breakfast reported Carville's theory in their columns. Using a flow chart Carville described how anti-Clinton allegations worked their way around the media, including via British newspapers.

The date of the breakfast is significant: April 6th, 1994. Paula Jones had just announced her intention to sue the president. To see if there really was such a thing as blowback and to understand the role of the British press in the coverage of the Clinton scandals it is necessary to review how the American and British press covered her arrival on the scene.

II Paula Jones

It took a bit of time for Paula Jones to achieve national prominence. She was alluded to by her first name in David Brock's January 1994 American Spectator article about Arkansas state troopers being used to procure women for Bill Clinton when he was governor of that state. On February 11th, she appeared at a press conference in Washington to make her allegations public. Her stage-managed coming out for the press was a key event in a three-day convention of the Conservative Political Action Conference.

If Jones and her hosts' purpose was to stir up a new round of trouble for the President it failed. A Nexis search shows that 13 American papers had coverage of the press conference. Most of them ran it as wire copy in the "News in Brief" section. The Washington Post did not cover the press conference as news. Jones was mentioned in a Style section round up of the CPAC confab. The New York Times buried the item in an unsigned article inside the paper. Only the Los Angeles Times had a lengthy by-lined article. But then, the L.A.. paper had known about Jones for months – it had run the original story on the allegations of the Arkansas State troopers.

Paula Jones seemed likely to disappear very quickly.

Then on Sunday March 27th, two British newspapers brought her name to prominence. The Sunday Telegraph and The Sunday Times each ran the news that Paula Jones was planning to sue the President. The Telegraph's story, datelined Little Rock, was splashed across the front page with the headline: "Clinton Accused of 'Grotesque' Sexual Harassment." The Sunday Times story had slightly less scorching play: "Clinton Faces Sexual Harassment Charge in Receptionist's Lawsuit."

No American paper had the story on that Sunday.

In Britain, unlike America, the Sunday newspapers are separate entities from the daily papers. They have separate reporting and editing staffs. Monday's papers picked up the news from the previous day with their own particular slants on the impending lawsuit. The tabloid Daily Mirror had the story splashed across two inside pages with the three-tier banner headline:

PRESIDENT AND THE LAY PREACHER'S DAUGHTER;
CLINTON DROPPED HIS TROUSERS IN FRONT OF ME, SAYS BLONDE HOTEL GIRL;
PREACHER'S DAUGHTER CLAIMS SHE WAS ASKED TO PERFORM ORAL SEX ON BILL CLINTON

Even as the British press was gearing up for a scandal feeding frenzy, no American paper reported the news of Jones impending suit. On Monday April 4th, the conservative media watchdog group, Accuracy in Media, took an ad out in The Washington Post to lambaste the Post for not reporting the Paula Jones story. The ad claimed the Post had been withholding a story on Jones allegations for months. The ad at least got reporters in Washington talking to one another. The Paula Jones case slowly began to work its way in to the American press.

On April 6th, James Carville decided to counterattack before the story began to grow too big. He brought his flow chart to breakfast and laid out his media food chain distribution system including its connections to Britain. Acknowledgement of the role of the British press in keeping the story going began to appear in the U.S. press. As example being this piece of wire copy filed shortly after the Monitor breakfast.

JULIA MALONE, COX NEWS SERVICE

DATELINE: WASHINGTON

BODY:
Most Americans have never heard of Paula Jones, unless they read foreign newspapers. But her largely untold story of sexual harassment has set off a finger-pointing row in the capital's press establishment.

In the next 90 days, Nexus indexes 158 Paula Jones items in the British press. Many of these items are straight news reports concerning the filing of the lawsuit, the President's hiring of lawyers to defend him and other legal maneuverings. But the Jones case opened a floodgate. Scandal and gossip could turn up anywhere.

On May 16th, Martin Fletcher, The Times Washington Bureau chief, filed a story on Stephen Breyer's nomination to the Supreme Court. The final paragraph of the story read:

> Little Rock: Kathy Ferguson, former wife of the Arkansas state trooper who is the co-defendant with President Clinton in the Paula Jones sexual harassment suit, was found dead in a flat. The cause could not be established immediately, but there was no evidence of foul play.

The volume of British coverage of Jones and all the President's alleged women certainly had an indirect impact within the Washington press corps. The Washington Post's Howard Kurtz addressed the issue in his media column of the first week of May. The piece noted "The inevitable impact of these stories is to further belittle Clinton in the eyes of the Europeans." Kurtz also writes "Some of what appears in London soon echoes back across the Atlantic." The Wall Street Journal and The Washington Times being the main outlets for Pritchard's allegations.

A similar article appeared the following month in London's Independent newspaper. The Independent article by Cal McCrystal quoted R.W. Apple, Washington Bureau Chief of The New York Times, "I resent being lectured at by the more sensational elements of the British press and having our news media polluted by British and Australian journalists and their shabby standards."

The Guardian newspaper, a left-of-center, British broadsheet, acknowledged the prominence of the British press in getting the Jones story into America's mainstream press in an editorial published on May 9, 1994: "The jump from supermarket sleaze to mainstream concern has been performed along a British loop line. The Sunday Times and The Sunday Telegraph, embracing Ms. Jones have provided a sort of echo chamber, picking up the story in outwardly respectable form so that it may be reprocessed back across the Atlantic in pinstripes and waistcoat."

III Blowback

But are there any examples of the phenomenon of blowback? How many stories that appeared first in fringe publications in America were picked up in the mainstream British press, blown back across the Atlantic newly legitimized and picked up by the mainstream American press?

Specific instances of blowback are hard to find. Here is an example of one. In January of 1994, the same month that David Brock's Troopergate article appeared in the American

Spectator, the Sunday Telegraph's Washington correspondent, Ambrose Evans-Pritchard had a story about a woman claiming to be a former lover of Bill Clinton's. No it wasn't Paula Jones, it was a woman named Sally Perdue. Pritchard's paper gave the story page 1 play with the following headline:

'I was threatened after Clinton affair' Ex-beauty queen fuels presidential scandal

The 500 words of copy on the front page were a tease. The full story ran at 1,771 words on p.5. Pritchard detailed allegations made by Perdue, a former Miss Arkansas, who claimed that when she let it be known she was going public about her relationship with Bill Clinton she was visited by goons who threatened to break her legs. The story in a Sunday quality paper, of course, set off a minor feeding frenzy in the British tabloid press. The tabloid Daily Mirror carried the story on January 25th under headline Sexy Bill Wore My Nightie. The same date the story was picked up in the tabloid Daily Mail, the more discrete Mail headline read: Clinton Mistress Demands Inquiry into his Sex Trysts.

Needless to say no American paper covered the story as news. On February 13, William Cheshire, a conservative columnist for the Arizona Republic, brought the story to his readers' attention. Under the headline: The Story the Media Won't Touch, Cheshire began:

> While the American media have been panting after Lorena Bobbitt and Tonya Harding, British journalists have targeted bigger game: Bill Clinton and the harem of bimbos whose periodic eruptions fail in this country to hold the interest of the usually salacious-minded press.
>
> London's Sunday Telegraph, a reputable paper, recently interviewed at length Sally Perdue, a former Miss Arkansas whose hair-raising allegations make the memoirs of Gennifer Flowers seem like Uncle Wiggly.

An article by Dave Shiflett in the Rocky Mountain News on February 21st also refers to the Pritchard story..

> … the British press has done a much more detailed job on the Clinton charges than the U.S. media. Some of its discoveries are startling.

The Sunday Telegraph, for example, has interviewed Sally Perdue, …

Shiflett than quotes the article at length before concluding:

> …Which brings us back to equal coverage. The Telegraph is a highly respected paper, more so than the small Beirut paper from which the Iran-contra scandal was hatched. Its story should be checked out. Besides that, if a woman had gone on record saying she'd not only trysted with Ron Reagan, but lent him her nightgown, the response would not have been to ignore the story. Nor should it have been. We could always use a few more laughs.

Those two examples are all that turn up in Nexis for this first period of scandal.

As the Jones story picked up steam The New York Post occasionally quoted The Sunday Times but as both papers are owned by Rupert Murdoch and as the Post has a fair number of British reporters and editors on its staff it seems unlikely that the information "blew back" from London to New York. It is more likely that colleagues simply picked up the phone and told one another what bit of scandal one paper or the other was running.

Intentionality:

Mark Fabiani's memo infers that the right wing used the British press intentionally to get its allegations into the mainstream American media. I have found one example of this.

During late 1994 and early 1995, reporters Roger Morris and Sally Denton were working on a story about drug running in Arkansas during the early to mid-'80's. The piece had been commissioned by the Outlook section of The Washington Post. The story contained devastating allegations about close associates of then governor Clinton being involved in drug smuggling and the gun running end of the Iran-Contra operation. It was scheduled for publication on Sunday January 29th. At the last minute it was spiked by the paper's managing editor Bob Kaiser.

Copies of the article circulated like samizdat among Washington's anti-Clintonites. One person who read the article was Jim Davidson, publisher of a monthly newsletter called Strategic Investment Review. His partner in the venture is William Rees-Mogg, or Lord Rees-Mogg to

give him his official title. Rees-Mogg is a former editor of the Times of London and currently the senior columnist of that paper.

By 1995 Rees-Mogg, author of a book about Richard Nixon, had concluded that Bill Clinton was not fit for office. According to Davidson, he was happy to use his column to report allegations American reporters wouldn't. Davidson recalls Mogg discussing the best way to cover these scandals was not to involve regular reporters. Mogg told Davidson "When he edited the Times and ordered coverage of a scandal he would put reporters on the case who didn't normally cover a beat because the possibility for retribution is substantial on the part of a government." The columnist based in London didn't face that situation so Davidson passed a copy of the Morris and Denton article to his partner. A week after the story was spiked at the Post, Rees-Mogg devoted his widely read Monday column to endorsing its central tenets. The headline read:

Even Watergate was Small Beer to This.

Again, it's hard to find specific examples of the story being blown back and given credence. In fact in this specific case just the opposite occurred. It was blown back and comprehensively dismissed. On Sunday February 26th, Chicago Tribune columnist Mike Royko took on Rees-Mogg and the British press in general in the robust , language for which the late street-corner sage of Chicago was famous.

He's a scumbag, hyphenated name or not

THE English have a knack for making Americans feel clumsy and self-conscious. They seem so poised, suave, well-bred, articulate and self-possessed. So very civilized.

Even their mischief, as with the royal family's romantic scandals, is done with a certain casual sophistication.

So it is always jarring to look at the English press and find that the journalists seem to be a bunch of scumbags.

In this case, the scumbag is one William Rees- Mogg, a featured writer for the Times, the big, influential English newspaper.

Royko then ripped Rees-Mogg and his employer Rupert Murdoch apart for reprinting Morris and Denton's allegations. The Royko column is syndicated and it turns up in Nexis digested from several different newspapers. So it is possible to calculate how many people might have read it. But the question is, how did Royko hear about Mogg's article? It wasn't reprinted in the U.S. The story doesn't seem to have been picked up by other papers. Did a friend in London send him the clip? Or was it something he heard on talk radio? This is the great question about the whole blowback proposition. It would seem that much of what the right wing press in Britain was writing about the president was not being picked up in America's mainstream press. But there is no way of gauging its impact if the stories' allegations were re-packaged on talk radio. Rush Limbaugh's transcripts are not part of the Nexis database.

Certainly, those inclined to believe the latest conspiracy theories about Vince Foster being murdered, or Clinton's cocaine use paid attention to what was coming out of London. Ambrose Evans Prtichard says that some of these folks could hardly wait to hear what he was working on. The first edition of Pritchard's paper, The Sunday Telegraph, hits the streets of London around 11 p.m. on Saturday night. Pritchard claims that a newsagent at London's Heathrow airport would take the first edition, photocopy whatever the reporter had written on Clinton and fax it to anti-Clintonites in California. The West Coast is eight hours behind London so it was just the late afternoon on Saturday when the fax came through. According to Pritchard, his stories were frequently posted on the Web in America before The Sunday Telegraph was being consumed with breakfast in Britain. By 1998, the Telegraph web site was getting so many requests for the reporter's stories that a special Ambrose Evans-Pritchard archive was set up with links to other anti-Clinton material.

IV

This extreme coverage of the Clinton scandals was very much a British phenomenon. In the 90 days after Evans-Pritchard and Adams revived the Paula Jones suit, Nexis shows 14 Paula Jones items in the German press, 24 in the Italian press, and 10 in the French Press.

So why did the British papers cover these episodes with such zeal? A simple and succinct answer is provided by Godfrey Hodgson, director of the Reuters Foundation, at Oxford University. “You cannot go around the world proclaiming yourself the most powerful nation on earth and your president the most powerful person and not expect other people not to take an interest in what the President does.”

A slightly broader explanation relates to the nature of the British press.

Britain remains overwhelmingly a newspaper culture. It is a nation served weekdays by 10 national newspapers. There are nine national papers on Sunday. 94 percent of men and 72 percent of women, around 38 million people, read one of those papers regularly. In comparison, national television news reaches around one-third that number of people. The BBC’s main evening news program airing at 9 p.m., the heart of prime time, is watched by an average of 4.5 million people. The commercial and hence more populist ITV draws around 7 million.

Despite their dominant position as sources of information and shapers of opinion, newspapers are experiencing a slow, long-term decline in circulation. Competition for sales is fierce

In American journalism, competition is an abstract notion, a vestige of the days when cities had many newspapers and being first with a story made a difference to circulation. The New York Times’ Jeff Gerth is widely credited with the reporting that made Whitewater a big news story. People say the Times beat the Washington Post. But what is the consequence, what is the Times’ prize for being first on that story? Is the Post going to start losing circulation to the Times in Washington?

In Britain, competition is real and there are economic prizes to be won. To be beaten by a rival paper on the kind of headline news story that makes people buy a paper they don’t usually buy, such as a scandal story involving a major politician, is commercially as well as journalistically a sin.

When one paper began to pump out stories about the President and Paula Jones a feeding frenzy was bound to ensue. When Arthur Schlesinger stepped off the plane that spring day in 1994 he had walked right into that frenzy.

Operating within that frenzy are very specific dynamics. The British national newspaper market can be divided in several different ways. Traditionally the most common way is to divide papers by their shape: tabloid and broadsheets. Within those two groupings papers are usually in paired competition. The pairs are broadly defined by either their market segment or their political slant. Among the Broadsheets no competition is more fierce than that between the two conservative leaning newspaper groups: the Telegraph newspapers, owned by Canadian Conrad Black, and the Times newspapers, owned by Australo-American Rupert Murdoch.

Godfrey Hodgson says that when you speak of the British press in relation to the Clinton scandals you are "speaking of five newspapers owned by two proprietors neither of them British … so to some extent this is not the British press acting as the British press."

The competitive relationship between the Daily and Sunday Telegraph and The Times and Sunday Times shaped coverage of Clinton's problems says Andrew Neil, the Sunday Times editor in 1994. "Rupert said how well Ambrose Evans Pritchard was doing. The Sunday Times interest comes from that pressure. When your Rivals are getting Page 1 on the American Story you better have it as well."

The combined circulation of the Sunday Telegraph and Sunday Times in 1994 was close to two million. If both papers were splashing Clinton scandal across page 1 it was a reasonable bet that on Monday morning the rest of the papers would weigh in.

While Murdoch and Black are business competitors, the two proprietors share a political agenda, according to Andrew Neil, "Rupert Murdoch and Conrad Black are professional Clinton Haters,"

Neil claims that Murdoch and Black intended for their British papers to take the lead in reporting Clinton scandal. "In the back of their minds they think the American press is a bunch of useless

liberal wimps who weren't investigating Clinton in the way they had investigated Nixon. They were happy for their papers to run these stories to shame and show up the American press and in the hope it would play back in America."

Charles Moore, editor of the Sunday Telegraph in 1994, concurs with Neil on one point. "If it had been a Republican president the New York Times would have covered it (the scandals) more thoroughly." But he disputes the point that Conrad Black was using the Telegraph to get the President. Moore, currently editor of the Daily Telegraph, explains that Black's relationship with his editor is "Like the definition of the Sovereign in Bagehot. Bagehot says the Constitutional monarch's role is to advise, encourage and to warn. He (Black) might say to me, this is an interesting area – be careful how you deal with it; but there wouldn't have been an agenda of "Get Clinton."

Moore's editorial rival Andrew Neil vehemently disagrees, "They wanted to get rid of Clinton."

Certainly several of the key British reporters at the Telegraph and the Times hoped that their reporting would lead to the President's downfall.

"He damn well ought to be brought down," says Ambrose Evans Pritchard. The Times William Rees-Mogg explains, "We are not dealing with a normal presidency. He's a corrupt man, it has come out in terms of sex. But I mean corrupt -- corrupt. We have every right to pursue investigations even if they lead to an American president's downfall."

Was Mogg concerned that his reporting might lead to the downfall of another country's freely elected leader? Not at all. "Although we have no right to vote for him he is the most powerful man in the world. In some areas of life his decisions have more effect on us than those of our own Prime Minister."

Charles Moore says he had no problem with the "national question."

Not all British journalists were so blithe about the impact of their work. Sir Peregrine Worsthorne, Charles Moore's predecessor at the Sunday Telegraph, disapproves of the paper's relentless pursuit of the President. "It isn't part of a British journalist's job to hassle the American President," he says, adding, "I would have felt the same about covering Nixon. It was not our job to pursue Deep Throat." Worsthorne thinks "it is not the remit of a foreign correspondent" to actively pursue domestic scandal about the head of government in the country where he or she is posted. He adds, "I would have found it improper if a New York Times correspondent in London had done reporting in an attempt to bring down a British government."

Worsthorne says knowing Pritchard's feelings about Clinton he would not have assigned him to Washington. 'I disapprove of a reporter becoming a detective pursuing criminality going back long before he became president. He wanted individually to take the lead in convicting Clinton of charges of murder for example. That's out of proportion and improper."

IV Our President/Their Scandal

With specific examples thin on the ground, it's possible to conclude that there really isn't much to the theory that there was a grand conspiracy to destabilize the Administration. But most of the participants agree that there was an informal connection among those on the right who wanted Clinton to be a one term-president. There was a "mutuality of interest" that led to the sharing of information – "information" in its unfortunate 1990's usage: rumour, innuendo, opinion and, only occasionally, fact. This information was considered fit for mainstream publication in Britain but would be confined to the fringe in America. This information sharing network pre-dated the 1992 election.

Ever since the confluence of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan's elections in 1979/80 the Conservative political and media elites in London and Washington had been growing closer together. The British Conservative Party learned the basic techniques of modern electioneering from the Reagan team. With a strong party leader, friendly press, divided opposition and sophisticated media machine, the conservatives easily won three elections in a row. But

Thatcher was deposed in 1990. A general election had to be held by April 1992, and Thatcher's replacement, John Major, was a decidedly weak candidate. The Conservatives entered the election campaign behind in the opinion polls. Party operatives, including the campaign's director of communications Sean Woodward, reached out to Republican pollster Richard Wirthlin. With Wirthlin's help the Conservatives devised an attack strategy on the Labour Party and its leader, Neil Kinnock. The two-pronged attack claimed Labour would raise taxes dramatically, then personally assaulted Kinnock's patriotism claiming he had links with the KGB. The stories were disseminated through the Conservative friendly press.

The strategy worked, the Conservatives won the election.

In the autumn of 1992, America entered its election season with the basic shape of the campaign mirroring that in Britain earlier in the year. Reagan's successor George Bush was seen as weak. The Democratic candidate Clinton was ahead in the opinion polls. A group of British Conservatives decided to return the favor American conservative strategists had done for them. At the invitation of then House minority whip Newt Gingrich, Sir John Lacey, a leading Conservative party official, flew to Washington and held a series of meetings with the Bush campaign team. He urged them to borrow the twin attack strategy that had been successful for the Conservatives earlier in the year. The Bush team did. They immediately attacked Clinton on taxes. The Bush campaign then enlisted the help of the American Embassy to check into Clinton's activities when he was a student at Oxford University in 1969. They were preparing to attack Clinton's patriotism. The Republicans decided to claim that Clinton, who had visited Moscow in 1969, had met with the KGB while he was there.

Initially the attacks were the made by far-right congressmen such as Bob Dornan. But the attacks brought few headlines. On October 7, George Bush finally brought up the Clinton trip to Moscow on CNN's Larry King Show. The story was then picked up by the national press and echoed over the Atlantic with big splashes in the conservative supporting press.

But the Clinton team had its own connections back to Britain. Key staffer Bennett Freeman had been at Oxford more than a decade after Clinton and followed British politics closely. Links

between Clinton's new Democrats and the operatives who would come into prominence as part of Tony Blair's New Labour party were being forged. The Labour party's younger strategists had decided that if the Conservatives could learn modern electioneering techniques from the U.S. so could their party. One of them, Philip Gould, flew to Little Rock to help douse the potential fire. Gould had worked with Kinnock and was able to anticipate that the Republicans would mimic the Conservative Party's attack on Kinnock's patriotism. When the Republicans did bring up the Clinton trip to Moscow. The Clinton campaign's research team was ready with its rebuttal.

This example demonstrates clearly how closely the media-political elites from both parties in Washington and London work. But so far only the right wing parties have used those connections for transatlantic attack purposes. And these attacks, with scandal as their basis, have only been aimed from Britain at Democratic Party politicians. Why?

Certainly there isn't an absence of scandal in Britain for American journalists to report. There have been opportunities for Democrats to aid the Labour Party by bringing pressure on the Conservative Party. For example, in late 1993 then Prime Minister John Major initiated his "Back to Basics" initiative. The "basics" referred to were basic morality. There was no legislation involved. The Major government, already falling off the end of the earth in terms of its approval ratings, needed a media initiative to regain some of its core support. Major's operatives decided the Conservatives, the self-styled party of the family, should re-dedicate itself to those values as a way of regaining its core constituency.

But in a brief period over New Year the British press managed to find several members of Major's government who were singularly failing to meet those high standards of morality. Several were forced to resign. One prominent and unfortunate Conservative backbencher who was seen as a likely candidate for promotion to fill one of the newly vacated cabinet seats managed to asphyxiate himself during an autoerotic act. The tabloids screamed their stories out for the nation's amusement. This would have been a perfect time for the American press to weigh in – and bring pressure on an already shaky government. But a Nexis search reveals that neither the New York Times nor The Washington Post paid much attention to the situation. The

Post's longer stories, published at the height of the furore, were written by journalists from The Guardian newspaper.

A better example of a story that might have been exploited for attack from the U.S. in the direction of Britain is the role of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's son Mark in the sale of arms to Saudi Arabia in the mid-1980's. Mark Thatcher was part of the official delegation that negotiated the multi-billion dollar al-Yamamah arms deal with the Saudis in 1988. Allegations have been made for years that Thatcher creamed off multi-million dollar commissions for his role in the talks. A parliamentary enquiry cleared him of the charge in 1994, but the allegations still persist.

This story is more legitimate news than mere sex scandal. It had relevance to Americans. The deal involved both the balance of military power in the Middle East as well as market competition for one of America's best customers for armaments. It also could have been hugely embarrassing for Margaret Thatcher. Although the original deal was covered by major American papers, the subsequent allegations about Thatcher's son were ignored.

There is a simple explanation why neither of these stories was used by the Democrat/Labour parties in the American press in a way analogous to the use of the British press by the Republican/Conservative parties in the case of the Clinton scandals . The American press is not as pliant an instrument for implementing covert political agendas. The notions of impartiality and freedom from proprietorial influence in news coverage make it difficult for party political operatives to co-opt newspapers in the same way that the news pages of Britain's daily press were used to run allegations about President Clinton.

V. Questions and Conclusions

In the end, did the British press influence the coverage of the Clinton Scandals? Was "Blowback" a real phenomenon?

The answer to both questions is yes. But there is no way to accurately measure how much influence the stories in the Murdoch and Black papers actually had. One of the many bits of conventional wisdom to grow out of the Clinton-era is that it saw the rise of alternative ways of obtaining news "information." People in increasing numbers turned to the Web or to talk radio for "news." Whether one can define the half-truths, uncontextualized facts and naked propaganda posted on the web or issuing from the mouths of the Rush Limbaughs of the world as "news information" is the subject for another dissertation. We live in a world of soundbite discourse. In soundbite discourse a simple assertion is its own proof – because there is no time in the discourse to examine the proposition. Rush Limbaugh or Joseph Farah of World Net Daily web site (sponsored by Richard Mellon Scaife) can call what they broadcast or post "news" and "information" and not be challenged on their definition. Certainly, people inclined to believe that they are getting "real" news from these places won't challenge the definition.

I mention Limbaugh and Farah because this is where the bulk of the Evans-Pritchard and Rees-Mogg allegations ended up being re-distributed in America. The Washington Times occasionally gave space to Ambrose Evans-Pritchard. The editorial page at The Wall Street Journal occasionally raised similar questions to those raised in Britain. But it is in these new areas of "information" dissemination that "blowback" had an effect. Since transcripts of the Limbaugh show or any of his imitators are not included in the Nexis database it is not possible to quantify how often "reputable British papers" were cited as the source of "information" disseminated on those programs. There may be studies of how talk radio shapes attitudes among its listeners and in the nation as a whole. I haven't found one. Certainly I haven't found a study that looks at how talk radio and the net shaped attitudes about the Clinton Administration.

I am inclined to think that these new providers of information had less impact than they give themselves credit for. Certainly, that's the view of Mark Fabiani, author of the Communication Stream of Conspiracy Commerce memo. "People had to choose among all the things that were out there in the media. If they were inclined to believe the President was bad they found their view confirmed" by the talk radio and the anti-Clinton websites he says. But Fabiani doubts whether the sites or the radio shows persuaded many others to their point of view.

From the other side of the Atlantic, former Sunday Telegraph editor Sir Peregrine Worsthorne, concurs with Fabiani. He doubts the reporting, particularly in the paper he used to edit, did much to change American views of Bill Clinton. Worsthorne says, "It (British reports) did have an effect on maintaining the atmosphere of scandal around the White House but it grotesquely underplayed all the way through the role American public opinion would play in the process. British papers would carry from time to time headlines "Game up for Clinton" And of course it wasn't. That indicates how ill equipped British reporters are to report the state of public opinion in U.S. They are as capable of doing it as the man on the moon. Washington is not a good listening post."

So, blowback, while a real phenomenon, had very little effect. Whatever anti-Clinton allegations blew back across the Atlantic went straight into a self-contained box.

The British press's activities raise another question which has nothing to do with the Clinton White House and everything to do with the way America's elite newspapers cover the Presidency: to what degree does rigid adherence to standards of proof before writing about a President's personal life provide a cover for not publishing anything at all? The question arises because although many of the allegations the President's enemies reported in the Murdoch and Black newspapers were badly sourced and just plain wrong. One story wasn't: the Paula Jones story.

Given what was known about Bill Clinton's sexual past, why did so much of the American press dismiss Jones from the get go? Why was it that Jones had to actually sue the President for sexual harassment before the American press reported the story?

This is not a question with an easy answer. The Washington Post because of its unique position in the nation's capital and it's special history in reporting Presidential scandal is a good place to look for at least the broad outline of an explanation. Bob Kaiser was the paper's managing editor when Jones was introduced to the nation in February 1994. In his memoir, Uncovering Clinton, Post reporter Mike Isikoff describes the frantic activity at the paper that weekend, activity which led to the decision not to report Jones' claims in the news section but to include them in a Style section piece about the Conservative conference where she made them.

Bob Kaiser, the paper's managing editor at the time, remembers the decision making process. "We worried a lot that first day about the venue in which her accusations were first made, the conservative venue. She seemed to lend her story to Clinton's enemies for their purposes—an odd way to bring her story to the public if it was legit. But we decided right away to report out her charges carefully."

Too carefully, for Isikoff. He spent weeks checking out Jones' allegations. He pushed hard for the paper to run a story. The Post continued to play it cautiously. This led to a confrontation with his editor, his suspension from the paper and his ultimate transfer to Newsweek magazine.

Bob Kaiser adds that the question of why the Post seemed to wait so long in taking Jones seriously raises an important point. "Clinton's history certainly did color our thinking about him, but it would not justify reporting an unsubstantiated accusation from an unknown person as though it were a serious, credible charge. Indeed, you could argue that because Jones made her accusation among Clinton's most fervent enemies, and THEY of course knew about his history, this could have been a case of tendentious people taking advantage of a presumption of guilt that, in fact, might not have been fair."

One has to respect Kaiser's explanation. But many in the British press, not just those who work at the Murdoch and Black papers think their American colleagues fell down on the job.

Finally, what is the answer to Arthur Schlesinger's question, asked back in 1994, back in the days when Monica Lewinsky was a household name in her parents' and friends' homes and nowhere else, "The British press is really hard on President Clinton. Why?"

The answer is this. We live in partisan political times. We also live in times where there is a unique confluence of the political parties in Britain and America. The post-Reagan and Thatcher parties of the left – the Democrats and Labour – have re-tooled their ideologies and taken up residence in the re-located center. The parties of the right -- the Republicans and Conservatives -- no longer practice politics as the art of the possible. For them politics is adhering to and legislating in accordance with a set of inflexible principles. Their motto is found in the words of

Margaret Thatcher, in a speech given early in her premiereship when her radical free market policies had forced Britain into a recession. "You turn if you want," she told the Conservative Party's annual conference in 1992. "The lady's not for turning."

What Arthur Schlesinger did not know was that these shared political principles led some elements in the British press to help their fellow conservatives in America drive the President from office. Initially the coverage was aimed at making Clinton a one-term president. After his re-election in 1996 The Daily Telegraph's Charles Moore says, "We were trying to force his resignation. There is no question if Clinton had been a British Prime Minister he'd have been out ages ago." Moore adds, "We underestimated or misestimated his ability to survive."

How closely the President's domestic political enemies worked with his enemies in Britain isn't clear. Conservative MP Sean Woodward, the man who brought Richard Wirthlin into John Major's campaign, says, "A conspiracy of the right? It was more a coincidence of views than a conspiracy. Might there have been one? They are that obsessed. They are not that sophisticated."

The coverage of the Clinton scandals by the British press demonstrates one thing clearly. Any future Democratic administration will have to include in its news management strategy a plan for dealing with British papers owned by North American media magnates with Conservative Party connections. Their papers are at the service of the Republican opposition.

Sources:

In preparing this paper, I interviewed, among others, the following people:

James Adams, Washington Bureau chief, The Sunday Times
David Brock
James Davidson, publisher, Strategic Investment Review
Ambrose Evans-Pritchard, reporter The Sunday Telegraph and The Daily Telegraph
Mark Fabiani, former White House Counsel
Martin Fletcher, former Washington Bureau chief, The Times
Bennett Freeman, Clinton campaign British liaison
Godfrey Hodgson, director, Reuters Foundation, Oxford University
Reed Irvine, Accuracy in Media
Robert Kaiser, former managing editor, The Washington Post
Charles Moore, editor, The Daily Telegraph
Andrew Neil, former editor, The Sunday Times
Lord Rees-Mogg, columnist, The Times
Robert Emmet Tyrell, Editor, The American Spectator
Martin Walker, former Washington Bureau chief, The Guardian newspaper
Philip Weiss, former reporter, The New York Times
Sir Peregrine Worsthorne, former editor The Sunday Telegraph

Three books were helpful for facts and statistics:
The British Press and Broadcasting since 1945 by Colin Seymour-Ure
The Unfinished Revolution by Philip Gould
Uncovering Clinton by Michael Isikoff

The transatlantic debate, at times acrimonious, over the way the British and American press covered the Paula Jones case led to a conference at Ditchley Park in England in 1996. The conference was attended by senior journalists. An abstract of the discussions including papers by Robert Kaiser of The Washington Post and, Peter Stothard, editor of The Times appears in the British Journalism Review, Volume 8, number 2