



## **Al Gore and the “Embellishment” Issue: Press Coverage of the Gore Presidential Campaign**

In late 1999, in the midst of a hotly contested race for the Democratic Party nomination for president, word of a potentially damaging “gaffe” by Vice President Al Gore began circulating in the press. *The New York Times* reported on December 1 that the vice president, addressing a student forum at Concord High School in New Hampshire, “said he was the one who had first drawn attention to the toxic contamination of Love Canal,” a notorious hazardous waste site in the Niagara Falls area that had made national headlines in 1978. Gore was relating the story of a letter he had received, when he was a congressman, from a young girl in Toone, Tennessee—his home state—about suspected contamination of her family’s well. The *Times* account continued: “[Gore] then added: ‘I found a little place in upstate New York called Love Canal. I had the first hearing on that issue and Toone, Tennessee,’ he said. ‘But I was the one that started it all.’” *The Washington Post* carried a similar story, using virtually identical quotes from Gore.

In the days that followed, as the story was picked up by other newspapers and by television, Gore was pilloried for portraying himself as the one who had first sounded the alarm about Love Canal. While he had indeed chaired the first hearings on toxic waste dumping there, critics pointed out, they had come two months after the site had been declared a disaster area by President Jimmy Carter in the wake of vociferous grassroots protests organized by a local resident.

Many commentators saw in Gore’s statement another example of what one called his “punchant for embellishing the facts,”<sup>1</sup> and the latest in a string of exaggerations that had exposed the vice president to ridicule on talk shows and in newspaper editorials. Others, however, saw in the reportage of Gore’s remarks another example of the media’s own predilection for

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Turque, “Back on the slippery slope,” *Newsweek*, December 12, 1999, p. 45.

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*This case was written by Esther Scott for Alex Jones, Director of the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, for use at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. (1202) Revised October 2003*

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highlighting—and sometimes exaggerating—the vice president’s minor verbal missteps on the campaign trail. The discovery, some days later, that Gore’s comments on Love Canal had been misquoted (and therefore, some believed, misinterpreted) set off a debate over whose foibles—Gore’s or those of the press—were most tellingly revealed in the incident. More generally, it prompted a fresh look at the dynamics at work in media coverage of presidential campaigns.

### **Background: Al Gore in the Press**

The “embellishment” issue was not a new one for Gore. When he ran for the Democratic nomination in the 1988 presidential race, the press homed in on a number of his “misstatements” and “exaggerations,” as they were frequently termed. For example, Gore told the *Des Moines Register* that while working as a reporter for the *Nashville Tennessean*, he had gotten “a bunch of people indicted and sent to jail.” Later, he apologized for making a “careless statement” when it was discovered that only two city officials had been indicted and none actually went to jail.<sup>2</sup> Gore also “exaggerated the danger he faced as an Army journalist in Vietnam,” according to a *New York Times* article, and came under fire from reporters for including in his campaign brochure a picture of himself carrying an M-16 rifle in Vietnam—an image that some considered misleading in view of his noncombatant status.<sup>3</sup>

It was this perceived tendency to embroider the facts, several newspapers reported, that had prompted his campaign secretary at the time, Arlie Schardt, to write a memo warning Gore that his “main pitfall is exaggeration.” In a letter to *The New York Times* on February 16, 2000, Schardt disputed this account, maintaining that his memo was intended as “pre-emptive advice” about a specific issue—a claim Gore had made about his experiences as a home builder—and not a cautionary message about a chronic problem.

But such protestations notwithstanding, the embellishment label stuck to Gore, helped along by the vigilance of political foes and the press. “Ever since [the 1988 campaign], Gore’s opponents, and the media, have been on the lookout for more examples [of exaggerations],” the *Post* would later note, “and Gore has provided them.” In 1992, the *Post* cited by way of illustration, he described his sister, the late Nancy Gore Hunger, as “the first Peace Corps volunteer.” While Hunger had worked for the Peace Corps in its earliest days, it was as a paid staff member in its

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<sup>2</sup> Bill Turque, *Inventing Al Gore* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2000), p. 193.

<sup>3</sup> Katharine Seelye with John Broder, “The 2000 Campaign: The Vice President; questions of veracity have long dogged Gore,” *The New York Times*, February 17, 2000, p. 26A; “Gore defends brochure with a Vietnam photo,” *The New York Times*, October 26, 1987, p. 10B. Gore had told reporters that he had been “shot at” and “fired upon” while in Vietnam. In the final piece of a 1999 biographical series on Gore, two *Post* reporters concluded that “those war stories seemed enhanced in the retelling.” [Ellen Nakashima and David Maraniss, “Disillusionment deepens amid sordid crusade,” *The Washington Post*, December 31, 1999, p. A1.]

Washington offices, not as an overseas volunteer.<sup>4</sup> Others pointed to his speech at the 1996 Democratic National Convention in which he gave a moving account of the death of his sister, a longtime smoker, from lung cancer. It was this tragic loss, Gore said, that had led him to “pour my heart and soul into the cause of protecting our children from the dangers of smoking.” Critics quickly pointed out that Gore had continued to accept contributions from the tobacco industry for several years after his sister’s death and had grown tobacco on his own land in Tennessee.<sup>5</sup>

These and other statements would come back to haunt Gore as he began gearing up for his 2000 bid for the presidency, and his political opponents—Democrats as well as Republicans—and the media prepared to take a fine-tooth comb to his utterances on the campaign trail. This in turn would feed what some viewed as the press’ appetite for “typecasting candidates,” in the words of one observer: assigning “roles” to each participant in the election race and highlighting stories that reinforced them<sup>6</sup>—in Gore’s case, portraying him as a compulsive embellisher at best and a liar at worst. Over time, a series of remarks he made at different points early in the 2000 presidential campaign came to serve as a kind of shorthand in the media to describe what one commentator mockingly called his “Pinocchio problem.”<sup>7</sup>

***Love Story.*** The first in the series actually dated back to 1997, long before the presidential campaign officially began. In December of that year, *Time* ran a lengthy profile of Gore, written by Eric Pooley and Karen Tumulty. Midway through the piece, the authors described a late-night encounter with Gore, when he visited the press quarters on Air Force Two, the vice presidential jet. Gore, they wrote, “spent two hours swapping opinions about movies and telling stories about old chums like Erich Segal, who, Gore said, used Al and [his wife] Tipper as models for the uptight preppy and his free-spirited girlfriend in [the 1970 novel] *Love Story*.”

Though the *Love Story* anecdote was a small part of the profile, it quickly captured the attention of the press. On December 14, *The New York Times* ran an article, titled “Author of ‘Love Story’ Disputes a Gore Story,” by Melinda Henneberger. In it, Henneberger wrote that Segal “knocked down recent reports, based on comments by the Vice President,” that the Gores were the original models for the protagonists in his book. These reports were “half-true,” said Segal: the character of Oliver Barrett IV was based both on Gore and on one of his college roommates, actor Tommy Lee Jones. Tipper, he added, was not the model for Barrett’s love interest in the novel.

Further along in the article, however, it emerged that Gore’s own source for the anecdote had apparently been an interview with Segal, printed years ago in the *Nashville Tennessean*, in

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<sup>4</sup> David Von Drehle and Ceci Connolly, “GOP homes in on Gore’s credibility; final assault links embellishments to flaws of Clinton era,” *The Washington Post*, October 8, 2000, p. A1; Walter Robinson and Michael Crowley, “Record shows Gore long embellishing truth,” *The Boston Globe*, April 11, 2000, p. A1.

<sup>5</sup> Stuart Taylor, Jr., “Clinton’s apprentice: How much does honesty matter?” *National Journal*, February 5, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> E.R. Shipp, “Typecasting candidates,” ombudsman op-ed, *The Washington Post*, March 5, 2000, p. B6.

<sup>7</sup> George Stephanopoulos, as quoted in “He’s No Pinocchio,” by Robert Parry, *Washington Monthly*, April 2000, p. 24.

which the author had been asked “if there was not a little bit of Al Gore in Oliver Barrett.” Segal had answered yes, but the *Tennessean*, Segal told the *Times*, had “just exaggerated,” emphasizing the “local-hero angle” for its Tennessee audience. In the course of a phone call Segal made to clear up the matter, Gore told Segal that he had cited the Tennessee newspaper when he talked to the *Time* magazine reporters. “Al attributed it to the newspaper,” Segal said in his December 1997 *New York Times* interview. “... They conveniently omitted that part. *Time* thought it more piquant to leave that out.”<sup>8</sup>

What stayed largely in the public eye, however, was Segal’s comment that he had been “befuddled” by Gore’s remarks in the *Time* profile, and the general sense that Gore had grandiosely portrayed himself and his wife as the inspiration for the hero and heroine in *Love Story*. As the tale of his late-night “boast” spread, a Gore spokeswoman offered a qualified apology for “a miscommunication with reporters in an off-the-record conversation where they did not take notes”; but this did little to quash the story or the derision it frequently elicited. Writing in the *Times* on December 16, for example, critic Frank Rich maintained that Gore’s “effort to overcompensate for his public stiffness by casting himself as the role model of [Oliver Barrett] is so culturally tonedeaf you wouldn’t be surprised if he took credit next spring for inspiring [pop singers] the Captain and Tennille.”

Republicans, too, mined the incident for satirical purposes. In what would become something of a routine over the course of the long campaign—a Gore comment followed by a Republican gibe—they seized the opportunity to poke fun at Gore while turning the spotlight on the issue of his “veracity.”<sup>9</sup> That December, the Republican National Committee issued a press release announcing a contest to find the “best ‘Love Means ...’ slogan for Al and Tipper Gore.”<sup>10</sup> The committee’s own entry: “Love means never having to tell the truth.” This dig would prove to be “[o]ne of the first salvos,” according to a later report in the *Times*, in a “skillful and sustained ... campaign by Republicans to portray the vice president as flawed and untrustworthy.”<sup>11</sup>

Later, Gore’s defenders argued that the press had failed to get across a nuanced account of Segal’s comments on the *Love Story* controversy. In *The Daily Howler*, a website devoted to media criticism, Bob Somerby—the founder of the website and another of Gore’s college roommates—maintained that the lead on Henneberger’s story in the *Times* (i. e., that Segal “disputed” Gore’s

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<sup>8</sup> Karen Tumulty confirmed this account. “[Gore] said Segal had told some reporters in Tennessee that it was based on him and Tipper,” she told the *Times*. “He said all I know is that’s what he told reporters in Tennessee.”

<sup>9</sup> Later, the Republican National Committee would put out “a regular new feature,” the *Post* reported, called “The World According to Gore,” which chaffed the vice president on his exaggerations. [Ceci Connolly, “Gore exhorts Democrats to ‘Stand with me’; at DNC gathering, vice president tries to explain gaffes, vows to carry on Clinton’s work,” *The Washington Post*, March 21, 1999, p. A5.]

<sup>10</sup> The slogan contest takes off on a famous line spoken by the heroine of *Love Story*: “Love means never having to say you’re sorry.”

<sup>11</sup> Alison Mitchell, “The 2000 campaign: the credibility issue; a sustained GOP push to mock Gore’s image,” *The New York Times*, October 15, 2000, p. 28.

version of the story) was at odds with the content of the piece, in which Segal largely agreed with what Gore had said.<sup>12</sup> But the impression that Gore had told “a trivial fib,” in Rich’s words, and a laughable one at that, lingered on. Although the story eventually faded from view, it would be resurrected repeatedly as the 2000 presidential campaign moved into higher gear and Gore came under increasingly close scrutiny from the press.

***The Internet.*** The next remark by Gore to draw the attention of the press came during an interview with Wolf Blitzer that aired on CNN on March 9, 1999. In the course of their conversation, the vice president said, “During my service in the United States Congress, I took the initiative in creating the Internet.” Almost immediately, this comment became the butt of jokes, particularly from Republicans, who derided what they considered Gore’s habitually inflated sense of self. “If the Vice President created the Internet,” said House Majority Leader Dick Armey (R-Texas) in a written statement, “then I created the Interstate highway system.” Soon after, then-Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.) chimed in with his own statement, which began, “During my service in the United States Congress, I took the initiative in creating the paper clip.”

While Republican gibes were duly recorded in the press, some reporters also noted the reaction of computer scientists and experts in the field, many of whom came vigorously to the vice president’s defense, testifying to his role in encouraging—though not quite in creating—the Internet. Gore was “absolutely instrumental” in promoting the expansion of the Internet into a widely accessible network, one Cisco Systems official told the *Times*. “Although [Gore] exercised a certain amount of hyperbole,” the official said, “his contributions were a lot more than many of his colleagues in Congress.”<sup>13</sup> Others maintained that Gore’s comment reflected less a grandiose overstatement of his role than the awkward wording common to impromptu remarks. “The statement is clumsy,” Somerby wrote in *The Daily Howler* in December 1999, “but that’s often the way with extemporaneous speech.”

Nevertheless, as with the Love Story incident, it was more the “hyperbole” than the basis in fact that fixed itself in the public mind—or at least in the mind of many commentators and political opponents. Over time, Gore’s words were transmuted into a much stronger statement of his role in the development of the Internet than he had claimed in the CNN interview. Both in the press and on television, a number of commentators, in alluding to Gore’s remark, took to saying that he had claimed to have “invented” the Internet—an assertion that was easily disproved, and

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<sup>12</sup> “Our current howler (part II): Sticking to the story,” *The Daily Howler*, March 31, 1999. [Online] Available at [http://www.dailyhowler.com/h033199\\_1.shtm](http://www.dailyhowler.com/h033199_1.shtm). Somerby wrote that “Segal explicitly agreed with what the VP turned out to have said,” but this could be argued either way. Segal did, for example, dispute Gore’s assertion that Tipper Gore was the model for the female protagonist in *Love Story*, but agreed with Gore’s recollection of the story in the *Tennessean*. Moreover, he noted that the Oliver Barrett character was in fact based in part on Gore.

<sup>13</sup> Katie Hafner, “No father of computing, but maybe he’s an uncle,” *The New York Times*, March 18, 1999, p. 3G. No less a person than Newt Gingrich, the former Republican Speaker of the House, would later say that Gore was “the person who, in Congress, most systematically worked to make sure that we got to an Internet.” [James Gerstenzang, “Campaign 2000: Gore can misspeak and that’s no exaggeration,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 22, 2000, p. A23.]

mocked.<sup>14</sup> According to one account, the distortion could at least in part be traced back to Republicans. The Republican National Committee had picked up a story on the *Wired News* website, which reported that Gore had claimed he was “the father of the Internet.” The RNC faxed an excerpt from it to journalists, and shortly after that, the committee’s own faxes began asserting that Gore “claimed to have invented the Internet.”<sup>15</sup> Whatever the source, “invented the Internet” slipped into common parlance, resurfacing whenever the subject of Gore’s remark arose.

Gore himself tried to make light of the situation, and the evolving language. In an appearance before members of the Democratic National Committee on March 20, he joked, “The truth is, I was very tired when I made that comment [about the Internet], because I had been up very late the night before inventing the camcorder.”<sup>16</sup> Later, during a debate with his Democratic opponent, former New Jersey Senator Bill Bradley, Gore would humorously, and ruefully, respond to a question about what mistake he had learned most from during the primary campaign: “Claiming that I created the Internet.”<sup>17</sup>

**Farm Chores.** Hard on the heels of the Internet incident, a comment by Gore during an interview with *The Des Moines Register*, printed on March 16, 1999, provided fresh fodder for satirists. In the midst of a discussion of what his father—former US Senator Al Gore, Sr.—had taught him, Gore said, “I’ll tell you something else he taught me. He taught me how to clean out hog waste with a shovel and a hose. He taught me how to clear land with a double-blade ax. He taught me how to plow a steep hillside with a team of mules. He taught me how to take up hay all day long in the hot sun.” Gore’s critics quickly pounced on these remarks, labeling them “preposterous,” as the conservative *Weekly Standard* put it, in view of his “blue-blood upbringing.”<sup>18</sup> As a child, they pointed out, Gore spent most of the year in Washington, DC, living with his family in the Fairfax Hotel—which, depending on who described it, was either essentially an “apartment building” or a “swank” hotel<sup>19</sup>—and attended St. Albans, a private day school.

Gore’s recollections of life on the farm quickly became the stuff of parody. Writing in *The Washington Post* on March 24, Michael Kelly, then editor of the *National Journal*, lampooned the notion of Gore’s rustic childhood in a piece entitled “Farmer Al.” “It wasn’t yet dawn,” it began, “a good two hours to go till first light, but young Al was already up, out of his warm little bed high up in the eaves of the Fairfax Hotel on Embassy Row.” Later, in June 1999, on the day Gore officially declared his candidacy for president in his family’s hometown of Carthage, Tennessee,

<sup>14</sup> For example, a March 28, 1999 article in *The Washington Post* mentioned that Gore was “ridiculed for claiming he invented the Internet. . . .” On television, Brian Williams of MSNBC referred to Gore as “the inventor of the Internet.” [As quoted in *The Daily Howler*, December 8, 1999.]

<sup>15</sup> Sean Wilentz, “Will pseudo-scandals decide the election?” *The American Prospect*, September 25, 2000.

<sup>16</sup> Connolly, *The Washington Post*, March 21, 1999.

<sup>17</sup> G. Robert Hillman, “GOP turning Gore’s phrases against him; Republican spin machine distorts his exaggerations,” *Dallas Morning News*; reprinted in the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, April 7, 2000, p. A11.

<sup>18</sup> As quoted in *The Daily Howler*, April 3, 1999.

<sup>19</sup> See *The Daily Howler*, October 19, 1999.

Jim Nicholson, chairman of the Republican National Committee, rode up in a mule-drawn cart to “the elegant Washington hotel,” in the words of one account, where Gore had lived and took reporters on a tour of the “real Gore homestead.”<sup>20</sup>

While many of the satirical barbs came from Republicans and conservative publications, such as *The Washington Times* and *The Weekly Standard*, the mainstream press reported the story and the comments of critics like Nicholson, who chided the vice president for trying to “pass himself off as this hardscrabble, homespun central Tennessee farm boy.”<sup>21</sup> Occasionally, journalists weighed in as well, as when *The Washington Post* wrote of Gore’s early campaign missteps, which included telling “partial truths (I grew up slopping hogs on the farm, claimed this prep school alum).”<sup>22</sup>

Gore’s defenders—most notably Bob Somerby, who took up the “farm chores” issue a number of times on his *Daily Howler* website—pointed out that Gore had in fact worked at the family farm in Carthage during the summer, and offered the testimony of friends who remembered the long hours and hard work imposed on Gore by his father. Somerby also posted on his website excerpts from other written accounts (including a 1987 profile of Gore written by Michael Kelly for the *Baltimore Sun*) that detailed Gore’s life on the family farm, without satirical commentary.

The “farm chores” flap was minor compared to the criticism and ridicule generated by the Love Story and Internet incidents, but it became part of the lore of exaggerations and misstatements associated with Gore. With the presidential campaign heating up, the press, as one commentator would later note, was “on full embellishment alert” with regard to Gore, which meant that “the slightest deviation from fact, no matter how innocuous, will stick like chewing gum to the heel of his shoe.”<sup>23</sup>

It was in the context of this searching, and skeptical, examination of his statements that Gore sat down with students at Concord High School on November 30, 1999 for a forum on school violence. A comment he made there would lead to one of the most visible, and embarrassing, “gaffes” of his campaign to date.

## Love Canal

Three major print news sources—*The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and The Associated Press—reported the next day on Gore’s remarks on his involvement in Love Canal. Of

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<sup>20</sup> Ceci Connolly, “‘Restless’ Gore launches campaign of ‘values,’” *The Washington Post*, June 17, 1999, p. A1.

<sup>21</sup> Mitchell, *The New York Times*, October 15, 2000.

<sup>22</sup> Ceci Connolly, “For Gore, a more polished stump speech begins to bear fruit,” *The Washington Post*, May 18, 1999, p. A5.

<sup>23</sup> Turque, *Newsweek*, December 12, 1999.

these, the most extensive accounts and, arguably, the most influential, appeared in the *Times* and the *Post*.

***The Times’ Story.*** Gore’s Love Canal comments appeared in the middle of a larger account, printed on page 20 of the *Times* on December 1, of the vice president’s campaign activities the previous day in New Hampshire. Reporter Katharine Seelye, along with the handful of journalists who were then following Gore’s primary campaign,<sup>24</sup> had begun that day listening to a talk the vice president had given at a breakfast meeting with a group of business executives; to her, “the really big news of the day,” she recalls, was the fact that Gore “was taking credit for the economy.” Her article, entitled “Gore borrows Clinton’s shadow back to share a bow,” led with that theme. It began: “Vice President Al Gore asserted today that the nation’s prosperity was the central imperative of his campaign, and he gave credit to President Clinton—and himself—for the booming economy.”

Midway through her piece, Seelye reported briefly on the vice president’s appearance at Concord High School that afternoon. Gore was at the school, she says, “for a good two hours, as I remember, and he had a lot of really good questions from people. ... There was a wealth of material there, because he was being very personable and chatty.” But the *Times*, Seelye explains, required its reporters “to shape their stories, barring unexpected news,” by 10:00 a.m., and Seelye had already determined that the economy was the news. She planned to write up a longer piece on his appearance at Concord High School—which ran in the *Times* the following day—but for her December 1 article, she mentioned only the remark Gore had made about Love Canal. “It was kind of an afterthought, almost,” she says. She wrote: “Later in the day, Mr. Gore, who suffered from embarrassment when he took credit for developing the Internet, said he was the one who had first drawn attention to the toxic contamination of Love Canal.” Seelye’s article continued: “He was telling a school audience that each person can make a difference and he recalled a child writing to him when he was in Congress about a hazardous waste site in Tennessee. He then added: ‘I found a little place in upstate New York called Love Canal. I had the first hearing on that issue and Toone, Tenn.,’ he said. ‘But I was the one that started it all. And it all happened because one high school student got involved.’”

Seelye recalls thinking at the time that “there was something odd” about Gore’s comments on Love Canal. Afterward, she says, “a lot of [reporters] around said, ‘Did you get that Love Canal quote? And [is] anybody using that?’ ... We all had basically the same tape, ... and so we listened to it.” The tape she listened to was recorded by *Washington Post* reporter Ceci Connolly from the back of the high school auditorium on a small hand-held tape recorder; when she listened to it, Seelye says, “I thought, it sounds like he’s taking credit for this.” However, feeling that his words were ambiguous, she included “the more extensive quote” to “try to put it in the context in which

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<sup>24</sup> At this point in the campaign, Seelye recalls, a “relatively skeletal crew of national reporters,” representing the major US newspapers and wire services, were traveling with Gore.



he said it.”<sup>25</sup> Moreover, her story on Love Canal noted that Gore was “not available to answer questions from reporters after he made this statement,” as a “signal,” she explains, “that there was some ambiguity in his remarks.”

*The Post’s Story.* Ceci Connolly attended the same events as Seelye and came away with a different story line for her account, printed on page 10 of the December 1 edition of *The Washington Post*, of Gore’s campaign activities on November 30. Her piece—entitled “Gore paints himself as no beltway baby; on stump in New Hampshire, vice president highlights days as ‘home builder,’ soldier”—covered the “official message of the day” (the Clinton administration’s economic record), but looked more closely at some of the “lesser-known items on his resumé” that Gore had cited. It began: “In his ongoing effort to present himself as a regular guy, Vice President Gore today told business leaders he was once a developer, confessed to high school students he is a big fan of the satirical cartoon ‘The Simpsons’ and reminisced with veterans about his days in the military.” Her story, Connolly says, “focused on what he did when he lived in Alabama [where he was stationed for awhile during his Army duty], whether or not he was a homebuilder in Tennessee,” as he had asserted.<sup>26</sup>

It was in this context that, toward the end of her article, Connolly reported on Gore’s talk at the high school. Like Seelye, she singled out his comment on Love Canal for mention. “From my perspective,” she explains, “it sort of followed the day’s pattern.” She wrote: “Speaking later at Concord High School, Gore boasted about his efforts in Congress 20 years ago to publicize the dangers of toxic waste. ‘I found a little place in upstate New York called Love Canal,’ he said. ... ‘I had the first hearing on that issue.’” Connolly then repeated Gore’s story of the letter he had received from the young girl in Toone. “Although few remember his hearings on that site in Toone, Tenn.,” she continued, “Gore said his efforts made a lasting impact. ‘I was the one that started it all,’ he said.” Connolly then noted: “Gore’s shorthand description of Love Canal—and his failure to note that the hearings he chaired came a few months after President Jimmy Carter declared the neighborhood a disaster area—were reminiscent of earlier attempts to embellish his role in major events. He had been ridiculed for claiming to have been the inspiration for the movie ‘Love Story,’ and today even he poked fun at his earlier assertion that he invented the Internet.”<sup>27</sup>

As Connolly recalls, Gore’s remarks on Love Canal struck her immediately. “I was surprised,” she says. “I had never heard him say that.” She had been traveling with the vice president since 1998, she notes, and this was “something I had never heard him mention before. So that’s why it caught my attention—you’re always looking for something new, fresh, different.”

<sup>25</sup> This was in contrast to, for example, The Associated Press’ initial coverage, which included only one line of Gore’s Love Canal remarks. Reporter Sandra Sobieraj wrote that the vice president, “who recently said his biggest mistake in this campaign was claiming credit for the Internet, recalled chairing 1978 House hearings on toxic waste. ... ‘I found a little place called Love Canal,’ he said.”

<sup>26</sup> Connolly reported that, in the summer of 1971, Gore “signed on” with a homebuilders’ company, “but it did not occupy much of his time.” Soon after, he began work as a reporter and then enrolled in divinity school.

<sup>27</sup> In a discussion on overdevelopment, Connolly reported, Gore joked, “I am not the inventor of urban sprawl.”

Connolly checked with the research library at the *Post*, which “walk[ed] through with me the timelines on Love Canal.” What she learned—that Gore’s hearings came months after the story of toxic waste at Love Canal had been featured in news articles and the town evacuated—“didn’t seem to jibe” with what Gore appeared to have claimed. “We’re not mind-readers,” Connolly observes, “but was I clear in terms of what he was conveying to that audience? Yes, I was pretty clear that he was saying that he, Al Gore, had a major role in drawing attention to Love Canal.”

Both Seelye and Connolly point out that the Love Canal remarks were not highlighted in their December 1 articles, which were themselves routine reports from the campaign trail and, as such, not given page-one treatment. Nevertheless, sharp-eyed Republicans were quick to spot another apparent Gore embellishment, and rushed to bring it to wider attention. Republicans, says Seelye, “got a lot of mileage out of [Gore’s] Internet remark, and tried to do the same with this.” On December 1, Republican National Committee Chairman Jim Nicholson faxed Gore’s remarks, along with some of his own, to media outlets. “Al Gore is simply unbelievable—in the most literal sense of the word,” he declared. Nicholson also sought to place the Love Canal comment in the context of others made by Gore. “It’s a pattern of phoniness,” he wrote, “[that] would be funny if it weren’t also a little scary.”<sup>28</sup>

But on the same day, another reporter was trying to get out a different story. Hadley Pawlak, a correspondent with The Associated Press in Buffalo, New York, learned that Gore had been misquoted, identically, by both the *Times* and the *Post*. Only one word was quoted incorrectly, but it was enough, she believed, to change the meaning of his remark and, consequently, undercut the validity of the original reports.

***Hadley Pawlak’s Story.*** Fresh out of college, Pawlak was working in AP’s Buffalo office as “acting correspondent” for the western New York region. On December 1, 1999, she got a call from AP’s state political reporter in Albany. He said, Pawlak recalls, “I was just reading *The New York Times*, and Al Gore is quoted in this article saying he discovered Love Canal,’ ... which was about twenty minutes away from Buffalo. ... And he said, ‘Take this story and run with it.’”

Pawlak began by putting in calls first to the local newspaper in Niagara Falls, which, she had been told, had originally broken the Love Canal story in 1978, and then to Lois Gibbs, the activist and single mother who, as Pawlak puts it, “quit her job to really raise hell full-time” about the contamination at Love Canal, and in the process became a local hero. Gibbs was not surprised by the call. By this time, word of Gore’s remarks had reached her, and she was already scheduled to appear on national TV, on “Hardball” with Chris Matthews and on “Larry King Live.” In her phone conversation with Pawlak, Gibbs gave the vice president “credit for the hearings about Love Canal,” Pawlak says, “and she said they were the first hearings on toxic waste sites and that his work led to [enactment of] Superfund”—the bill providing for clean-up of major hazardous waste

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<sup>28</sup> As quoted in Parry, p. 24.

disposal sites. At the same time, however, Gibbs labeled Gore’s claim to have discovered Love Canal as not only false but “pathetic.”

After her phone interview with Gibbs, Pawlak felt she had the outline for a byline piece. “In my head,” she says, “the story was, Al Gore exaggerated again. It really was a citizen, especially this single mom, who brought attention to the issue. .... [It was] the ‘little people’ [that] brought the issue to the forefront.” By mid-afternoon on December 1<sup>st</sup>, an AP national editor was asking to see a draft of her story, which would run on the wire later that day; before submitting it, however, Pawlak wanted first to talk with someone from the Gore camp.

Pawlak had already put in a call to Gore campaign headquarters in Nashville. Later that day, Chris Lehane, Gore’s spokesman, called her back. “I explained the story that I was working on, and told him that I wanted a response,” she says. “And his response was that Gore was misquoted.” Pawlak was taken aback and, initially, “very, very skeptical.” The same quote had appeared in both the *Times* and the *Post*, she notes. “I never questioned that [Gore] said it. To me, it was fact, especially because it was in those two different places.” Lehane promised to fax a transcript of Gore’s talk at Concord High School. In the meantime, Pawlak told her national editor about her conversation. “I think she could probably tell ... that I was kind of impressed by [Lehane],” Pawlak says, “and she said, ‘You know, someone like Gore, they only hire the very best spin doctors.’”

When the promised fax did not arrive, Pawlak called Gore campaign headquarters again, and eventually Lehane returned the call, this time from the campaign airplane. “I told him,” she recalls, “... that I needed a response now. I told him I had talked to Lois Gibbs; I read to him the Republican National Committee’s faxes that they had been sending. So he asked me to hang on for a second,” and then, as she recalls, a voice came on the line and said, “Hi, Hadley. This is Al Gore.”

***Gore’s Version.*** Startled to find herself in conversation with the vice president himself, Pawlak proceeded to repeat what she had earlier told Lehane. Gore listened intently, then gave his version of events. “He was never defensive in his tone,” Pawlak remembers. “He told me he never claimed to have found Love Canal. He told me that a teenager in the audience asked him, basically, why should teenagers think that [they] can make a difference,” and he had responded with the story of the letter he had received from the girl in Toone, Tennessee. The letter, Gore had told his high school listeners, had prompted him to visit Toone to assess the problem firsthand. “But,” as Pawlak relates what Gore told her, “[he] didn’t really know anything about toxic sites, and he had no idea how to handle the situation. He said that he looked around the US to see if there were other communities facing something similar. And that’s when he found this little place in upstate New York called Love Canal. He said that he had the first hearings on the issue and that those hearings were the ones that had started it all”—i.e., led to the enactment of the Superfund law—“and made a huge difference. And the huge difference was made all because this high school

girl decided to write her congressman.” In short, Pawlak realized, Gore “wasn’t saying that he was the one that started it all; he was saying that his hearing was the one that started it all.” Moreover, he was saying that he had “found” Love Canal only in the sense that he was “looking for other places like [Toone].”

After Gore finished his account, Pawlak asked him, as she recalls, “‘Can you see how citizens in Love Canal could read *The New York Times* today and get the impression that you were taking credit for what they worked so hard to do?’ And he apologized if that misimpression was given.” But by this time Pawlak was no longer convinced that an apology was needed. “When I got off the phone with Gore,” she says, “I believed him.”

Still, Gore’s version had to be checked out. At some point that day, December 1, Pawlak remembers, either she or her editor decided to ask reporter Sandra Sobieraj, who was covering the Gore campaign for AP, if she had taped his talk at Concord High School. As it happened, she had. Sobieraj agreed to listen to the critical section of the tape and send a transcript of it to Pawlak right away. When she received it, Pawlak says, “I very quickly realized I had an awesome story.” According to Sobieraj’s transcription, Gore had in fact said, “That was the one that started it all,” not, as reported, “I was the one that started it all.” An excited Pawlak called Sobieraj again to ask her to “please listen to the tape again; please promise that it says ‘that’ and not ‘I,’ ... because that one little word difference was basically what I, a 21-year-old recent graduate, was going to use to take on *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*.”

The story Pawlak now envisioned was not about Gore’s propensity to exaggerate, but the fact that the nation’s two leading newspapers had quoted him incorrectly and, consequently, misrepresented his meaning. “And maybe it could even go further,” Pawlak remembers thinking. “Maybe we can explore how easy it was for things to get out of control. ... One word difference by these two newspapers gets this whole thing blown out of control.” Her editor, however, thought otherwise, and told her, as Pawlak recalls it, that “the AP is not in the business of correcting the *Times* and the *Post*.”<sup>29</sup>

***The Associated Press’ Story.*** The piece that ran on the AP wire late afternoon on December 1—written by Pawlak and reworked by her editor—did include the correct wording of the soon-to-be notorious claim. Moreover, it printed additional remarks by Gore, not reported in the *Times* or *Post*, which provided context for his statement on Love Canal. After receiving the letter from Toone, it quoted Gore as saying, “I called for a congressional investigation and a hearing. I looked around the country for other sites like that. I found a little place in upstate New York called Love

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<sup>29</sup> The national editor would not comment on the record, but Jack Stokes, AP’s director of media relations, says that in general AP’s “priority” was the accuracy of its own reporting. “Our main concern [is] ... did we get it right?” he explains. “... We’re responsible for our coverage. That’s what we’re looking for. We’re looking to see whether or not there’s anything we did that’s inaccurate, taken out of context, or anything else. That’s what we correct. We don’t correct anybody else’s stuff.”

Canal. Had the first hearing on that issue. That was the one that started it all. ... We made a huge difference and it was all because one high school student got involved.”

But the article made no mention of a misquote in other newspapers. Moreover, it opened with Gore’s apology to Pawlak and a reference to past embellishments. “Vice President Al Gore moved quickly Wednesday to stop Love Canal from turning into ‘Love Story,’” it began. The article continued: “The vice president telephoned an upstate New York reporter to explain his latest hyperbole. ... ‘If anybody got the misimpression that I claimed to do what citizens in Love Canal did, I apologize,’ Gore said.” The piece went on to note that Gore’s remarks “rang of earlier exaggerations dropped along the campaign to his subsequent humiliation: that he invented the Internet and was the inspiration for the movie [*sic*] ‘Love Story.’” It closed with an excerpt from Nicholson’s faxed remarks decrying the “pattern of phoniness” in Gore’s speech, and a sampling of the satirical barbs that had become a standard feature of the Republican response. “Next, he’ll be telling us how he discovered Niagara Falls,” Nicholson was quoted as saying, “how Tipper first navigated the Hudson River. ...”

For Pawlak, the article bearing her byline was a profound disappointment. “It wasn’t really newsworthy,” she maintains. The Love Canal story, she argues, “should have been about the *Times* and the *Post*,” but her editor “still wanted an exaggeration story.” Although the “right quote” was printed, she continues, “the story still sounds that way.”

**Fallout.** Pawlak’s story hardly stemmed what would prove to be a tidal wave of criticism and derision aimed at Gore. The rewording of Gore’s original comments in the article went largely unnoticed, although the vice president’s apology for the “misimpression” did not.<sup>30</sup> On December 2, the day after Pawlak’s piece went out on the AP wire, Ceci Connolly led off the *Post*’s “political notes” column, which she characterizes as a “grab bag of small news items,” with a summary of “an Associated Press story in which Gore telephoned a reporter in Buffalo to apologize for any ‘misimpression.’” The column, printed on page 14 and entitled “First ‘Love Story,’ Now Love Canal,” began: “Add Love Canal to the list of verbal missteps by Vice President Gore. The man who mistakenly claimed to have inspired the movie ‘Love Story’ and to have invented the Internet says he didn’t quite mean to say he discovered a toxic waste site when he said at a high school forum Tuesday in New Hampshire: ‘I found a little place in upstate New York called Love Canal.’ Gore went on to brag about holding the ‘first hearing on that issue’ and said ‘I was the one that started it all.’”

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<sup>30</sup> In an effort to get the word out about the misquote, Pawlak shared her notes with a reporter from *The Buffalo News*, but to little effect. On December 2, 1999, Douglas Turner, the paper’s Washington bureau chief, wrote that an AP reporter “released notes taken during [an interview] and quotes Gore as saying essentially what was quoted in the *Times* and the *Post*.” Later, on December 13, Turner wrote that Gore’s “public relations troops” had “tried localizing the story by getting the Buffalo Associated Press to put out a story with quotes that didn’t quite match those buried deep in the national press that started the fuss.”

In the weeks following his appearance at Concord High School, Gore’s remarks on Love Canal, often as originally reported in the *Times* and the *Post*, as well as his apology, were featured in newspapers across the country, and even abroad. The Love Canal incident proved to be a particularly rich vein for satirists to mine. David Letterman featured it on his late-night show’s “top ten” routine as “Top Ten Other Achievements Claimed by Al Gore”—number one being “gave mankind fire.”<sup>31</sup> On the television show “Hardball” on the night of December 1, host Chris Matthews jokingly compared Gore to Zelig—the colorless character in the Woody Allen film who somehow managed to turn up at momentous events—and, as many others would, brought up the other “Love” in the litany of Gore exaggerations. “Here’s a guy who said he was the character Ryan O’Neal was based on in *Love Story*. ... [H]e’s now the guy who created the Love Canal. I mean, isn’t this getting ridiculous? ... Isn’t it getting to be delusionary? Isn’t this the stuff of Zelig?”

Even normally sober commentators poked fun. In a December 6, 1999 editorial, entitled “Al Gore in Fantasy Land,” *The Buffalo News* mockingly commemorated a number of the vice president’s “firsts”: “First candidate to put his foot in his mouth, by virtue of his ‘Love Story’ claim two years ago. First candidate to put his other foot in his mouth by virtue of his Internet claim last spring. And now first candidate to be caught impersonating a woman, claiming credit for exposing the Love Canal debacle that is synonymous with Lois Gibbs.” On a more serious note, the paper added, “Of course, all of this would be funny if it weren’t so disturbing.” Whether Gore was being “desperate and reckless” or “just plain so out of it” that he failed to see that “blatant fibs” were unacceptable, his habit of hyperbole, the editorial maintained, was “hardly evidence of presidential timber.” And, in a December 13, 1999 commentary in *Newsweek*, Bill Turque—author of a biography of Gore—took note of Gore’s troubles in the New Hampshire Democratic primary race, where he had lost ground to Bradley. “Perhaps most disabling for Gore,” he wrote, “are episodes like the Love Canal stretch: small but easy-to-spot untruths. Together with past misstatements—like claiming to have created the Internet—they feed the notion that he’s a phony.”

**Counter-Offensive.** Pawlak was not, however, the only one to have caught wind of the misquote in the *Times* and the *Post*. Bob Somerby—perhaps Gore’s most ardent and persistent defender in the “embellishment” debate—took on the Love Canal issue a number of times, beginning with the December 3 edition of *The Daily Howler*. In what Seelye characterizes as Somerby’s “very inflammatory style,” he made note of the “baldly false quote” and castigated both newspaper reports on Gore’s remarks as “simply full of error—plain, flat-out deceptions. ...”

In addition to Somerby, some of the Concord High School students who had been in the audience when Gore made his comments on Love Canal sprang to his defense. It was from their teacher, Joanne McGlynn, whose “media literacy” class had sponsored Gore’s and other

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<sup>31</sup> As quoted in Scott Shepard, “Campaign 2000: Don’t believe hype? Media critic blasts reports on Gore’s exaggerations,” *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, April 9, 2000, p. A14.

candidates’ appearances at the school, that Seelye herself first heard of a possible misquote—although that was not their only, or perhaps even their most serious, complaint. McGlynn phoned her, Seelye recalls, after her students had watched “Hardball” on December 1 and heard Chris Matthews skewer Gore for being “delusionary.” She was “making the point,” Seelye says, that “this was a great visit, a lot happened,” but “all the [press] wrote about was this niggling little thing.”<sup>32</sup> In addition, McGlynn told Seelye, her students had gone back and looked at their videotape of Gore’s appearance at their school. “And she said,” Seelye recounts, “on the tape, he didn’t say, ‘I [was the one that started it all]; he said, ‘that’ [was the one that started it all].”

McGlynn and her students went public with their complaints. They issued a news release entitled “Top Ten Reasons Why Many Concord High Students Feel Betrayed by Some of the Media Coverage of Al Gore’s Visit to Their School.”<sup>33</sup> More helpfully for Gore, they “lobbied the *Post* and the *Times*,” in the words of one report, to correct their stories.<sup>34</sup> On December 7, 1999, *The Washington Post* printed the following correction: “A Dec. 1 article and a Dec. 2 Politics column item about Vice President Gore’s involvement in the Love Canal hazardous waste case quoted Gore as saying ‘I was the one that started it all.’ In fact, Gore said, ‘That was the one that started it all,’ referring to the congressional hearings on the subject that he called.” It took *The New York Times* three more days to publish its correction. On December 10, it wrote: “An article on Dec. 1 about a campaign appearance by Vice President Al Gore in New Hampshire rendered a passage incorrectly in a comment he made about the contamination of Love Canal. Mr. Gore said: ‘I found a little place in upstate New York called Love Canal. I had the first hearing on that issue and Toone, Tenn. But that was the one that started it all.’ He did not say ‘But I was the one that started it all.’”

These “decontextualized retractions,” as one account termed them, did not satisfy everyone.<sup>35</sup> “They fixed how they misquoted him,” one Concord High School student remarked, “but they didn’t tell the whole story.”<sup>36</sup> Students at the school expressed lingering disappointment and disillusionment with the media as a result of their experience. “Now I wonder about other things,” said one. “It’s the way they present it. It’s the spin.”<sup>37</sup> Still, some viewed the retractions as a victory for the students and a chastening moment for the press. “Guilty as charged,” wrote the “Washington Whispers” columnists in *US News & World Report* on December 27. In a brief

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<sup>32</sup> As it happened, that day, December 2, Seelye did return to the subject of Gore’s visit to Concord High School, as well as a number of other appearances, in a front-page article in the *Times*, entitled “Gore’s open meetings; Gore is using new medium to convey message: himself.” The piece focused on the vice president’s efforts to “appeal to real people by portraying himself as a real person, too”—eschewing “full-blown speeches” in favor of more informal gatherings and “Oprah-style discussions, which he calls open meetings.”

<sup>33</sup> Laura Dolce, “Class lesson in media 101; NH students catch an error, but faith in the press is a casualty,” *The Boston Globe*, December 26, 1999, p. B10.

<sup>34</sup> Institute for Public Affairs, *In These Times*, editorial, March 20, 2000, p. 4.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Holly Ramer, “High school students play media watchdog,” *Associated Press Newswires*, December 14, 1999.

<sup>37</sup> Dolce, *The Boston Globe*, December 26, 1999.

acknowledgement that Gore had been misquoted in the magazine’s own “In Quotes” feature, they noted, “It was a major lesson in the faults of daily journalism for the Concord, NH, high school Gore was addressing.”

***The Reporters Respond.*** But some members of the press—particularly the reporters at the center of the Love Canal controversy—believed that too much was being made of the incident and its impact. “I really do think the whole thing has been blown out of proportion,” Seelye maintained, when questioned about the Love Canal misquote in December 1999. “It was one word. The Gore campaign never disputed the meaning of the quote.”<sup>38</sup> Some months later, Connolly argued, as did Seelye, that “the one word did not change the context that the vice president had claimed to have found Love Canal,” and pointed out that Gore had apologized for his remarks—a “rare occurrence,” Connolly said, “with the vice president.”<sup>39</sup>

In fact, Connolly points out, Gore apologized twice: in a wide-ranging interview with her and fellow *Post* reporter Dan Balz, Gore himself, as Connolly recalls, brought up the issue of Love Canal. Apologizing for “a remark he made last week in which he suggested his congressional hearing had made Love Canal a national issue,” Balz and Connolly wrote on December 6, 1999, Gore “said his hearing ... was the first to highlight ‘a nationwide problem.’” Neither the vice president nor his campaign staff, Seelye and Connolly note, complained about their treatment of his remarks at Concord High School. The “Gore campaign,” Connolly observes, “was not afraid to say when they felt that coverage was in some way unfair. I never, ever once got a complaint from the Gore people about the way that I covered Love Canal.” Seelye approached Gore spokesman Chris Lehane about the issue shortly after she heard about the misquote from Joanne McGlynn and other reporters the teacher had contacted. “I said to him,” she recalls, “‘Is this a problem for you? Is this something that you are making a big deal of?’ And he distinctly said to me, ‘We can’t bring it up, because the more damaging quote is, ‘I found a little place in upstate New York.’ And we don’t want to bring it up.’ ... That’s what he told me, but apparently at the same time he was telling Hadley [Pawlak], ‘Oh, you know, they got it wrong.’”

***The Ambiguity Factor.*** Lehane’s response to Seelye’s query pointed up an underlying problem in Gore’s remarks on Love Canal and, to a degree, his other statements that had been identified as embellishments: the unclear language in which they were couched. This ambiguity touched off debates in the press, and prompted close analysis of Gore’s choice of words and their precise meaning. In the case of Love Canal, there were disagreements about the meaning of two small, but key, words in the corrected version of his comments: “that” and “found.” In the case of the former, some—including Pawlak and *The Washington Post* in its December 7 correction—were convinced that when Gore said “that was the one that started it all,” he was referring to his congressional hearings. For Seelye, at least, this reading represented a “distinction without a

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<sup>38</sup> Ramer, *Associated Press Newswires*, December 14, 1999.

<sup>39</sup> Shepard, *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, April 9, 2000.



difference,” when compared with the original misquote. “If his hearings started it all,” she says, “that’s the same as [saying he] start[ed] it all.” Others, like Bob Somerby and commentator Mickey Kaus, argued that the “that” referred to Toone, Tennessee. Kaus, for example, maintained that Gore was “clearly ... saying that the Toone problem started his investigations and hearings.”<sup>40</sup>

More consequentially, there were sharp differences of opinion over what Gore meant when he said he had “found” a place called Love Canal. Some—including Seelye, Connolly, and a number of commentators—believed that Gore was, at a minimum, “trying to put himself,” as Connolly terms it, “at the front of the line for spotlighting Love Canal.” Several commentators went a step further, arguing that “found” in this context meant “discovered.” For these critics, this assertion revealed Gore’s ultimately self-aggrandizing intent, regardless of whether he was partially misquoted. Chris Matthews, the host of “Hardball,” who was one of the first to spot the misquote, belonged to this camp. On the night of December 1, he played an abbreviated videotape of Gore’s remarks, beginning with the line “I found a little place in upstate New York called Love Canal.” Matthews then noted: “The *Times* went further than they should have and they misquoted him—now this is the paper of record misquoting—and said ‘But I was the one that started it all,’ when in fact he said, ‘That was the one that started it all.’” Nonetheless, Matthews continued, the *Times* “did get it right in the beginning” of Gore’s remarks. “... We just heard [Gore take] credit for having found this little place in upstate New York,” Matthews said. “... He quotes as, ‘I found a little place in upstate New York. I discovered the Love Canal issue.’ And that’s not the case.”<sup>41</sup>

Others believed that Gore was not claiming to have discovered the toxic waste dump at Love Canal, but rather saying that, as Robert Parry wrote, he had “looked for other examples [like Toone] and ‘found’ a similar case at Love Canal.” Among these was Bob Somerby, who printed a more complete text of Gore’s remarks on his *Daily Howler* website. It read:

I called for a congressional investigation and a hearing. I looked around the country for other sites like that. I found a little place in upstate New York called Love Canal. Had the first hearing on that issue and Toone, Tennessee—that was the one that you didn’t hear of. But that was the one that started it all. We passed a major national law to clean up hazardous waste sites. And we had new efforts to stop the practices that ended up poisoning water around the country. We’ve still got work to do. But we made a huge difference. And it all happened because one high school student got involved.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Mickey Kaus, “The compleat Gore fib-file,” Kausfiles special, April 3, 2000. Online at <http://slate.msn.com>.

<sup>41</sup> Transcript of “Hardball,” December 1, 1999. It was on this show that Matthews asked whether Gore was “delusionary.”

<sup>42</sup> Somerby also printed an excerpt from Gore’s 1992 book, *Earth in the Balance*, on the same topic. In it, Gore wrote that he “organized the first congressional hearings on toxic waste and focused on two sites, the small rural community of Toone, Tennessee, and one other recently discovered waste dump at a little place in upstate New York, Love Canal.”

In the exegesis that followed, Somerby pointed out that the *Times* had not only misquoted Gore’s remarks, but edited them as well, using no ellipsis to alert readers “that material from Gore had been left out.”<sup>43</sup> In addition, Somerby noted, Seelye had paraphrased Gore’s comments. According to her paraphrased account, the vice president had “said he was the one who had first drawn attention to the toxic contamination of Love Canal.” “We invite you,” Somerby wrote, “to search this statement for those words.”

Still, even those who agreed with Somerby’s interpretation did not always sympathize with the vice president. “Even if Gore meant only to describe his search for cases similar to Toone’s to showcase at his hearings,” Mickey Kaus maintained, “saying he ‘found’ Love Canal—where the evacuation of an entire town had been widely reported—is still a solipsistic distortion. It’s as if he today said he’d ‘found’ a case of a nuclear accident, involving ‘a little place called Chernobyl.’”<sup>44</sup>

### **The Press Reflects**

The Love Canal incident prompted a certain amount of soul-searching about the media’s treatment of Al Gore. An article in the April 9, 2000 edition of *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution* raised the question of whether the vice president had been unfairly portrayed in the press. Some critics answered strongly in the affirmative. “I just don’t understand the venom that the press directs at Al Gore,” observed New Hampshire teacher Joanne McGlynn. Appended to the *Journal and Constitution* article was the by-now familiar list of Gore exaggerations—Love Story, Internet, farm chores, Love Canal—organized into a point/counterpoint of “myth,” as reported in the press, and “reality,” as recorded verbatim or revealed by further investigation. In each case, the paper found that Gore’s original statements had been “distorted.”

Writing in the *Washington Monthly*, Robert Parry, editor of the investigative magazine *American Dispatches*, reviewed the same list of Gore exaggerations and found that “journalists often engag[ed] in their own exaggerations or even publish[ed] outright falsehoods about Gore.” While the vice president had “contributed to his own media problem with some imprecise phrasing and the kinds of exaggerations that all candidates make on the campaign trail,” he wrote, “... journalists seem to have singled out Gore for extraordinary attention, with story after story reprising Gore’s alleged pattern of deception.” As a consequence, he charged, the media had turned a presidential candidate “who, by all accounts, is a well-qualified public official and a decent family man” into a “national laughingstock.” Parry concluded on a dark note: “What hope does a candidate have when the media can misrepresent his words so thoroughly that they become an argument for his mental instability—and all the candidate feels he can do about the misquotes is to apologize?”

<sup>43</sup> Seelye points out that “it is *The New York Times* policy not to use ellipses in news stories,” a policy with which, she adds, “I strongly disagree.”

<sup>44</sup> Kaus, Kausfiles special, April 3, 2000.

Some months later, another critique of coverage of Gore arrived at a similar conclusion. “Gore’s motives,” wrote Jane Hall, a former media reporter for the *Los Angeles Times*, “are frequently questioned, frequently framed in the most negative light” in the press. As evidence, she pointed to a study by the Pew Research Center and the Project for Excellence in Journalism, which showed that, during five different weeks between February and June 2000, a “whopping 76 percent” of coverage in some 2,400 newspaper, television, and internet stories included “one of two themes: that Gore lies and exaggerates or is marred by scandal.” In contrast, the “more common theme” about Gore’s Republican opponent, George W. Bush, was that he was “a different kind of Republican.”<sup>45</sup> Hall, like some others, raised the possibility that Gore, who was guarded and stiff with reporters on the campaign trail, suffered from comparison with Bush, whose relaxed and accessible manner disarmed the press.<sup>46</sup> It was perhaps for this reason that, as the election campaign progressed, Bush was perceived by some to be getting “a free ride” in the press. While Bush and his running mate Richard Cheney got away with “rhetorical murder,” wrote Richard Cohen in an op-ed piece in the *Post*, “poor Al Gore has not been able to make a single exaggeration or the slightest fib without the hall monitors of the press issuing multiple demerits.”<sup>47</sup>

Others viewed the press’ treatment of Gore in a relatively benign light—the result more of editorial laziness and a fondness for “story lines,” than of malicious intent. In a commentary piece in the British newspaper, *The Guardian*, Harold Evans, former editor of *The Times* of London, wrote that it was “surprising” how Republican National Committee Chairman Nicholson’s “faxes have infiltrated coverage in [the] mainstream press and television.” But Evans did not see this so much as evidence that the media were “recycling Republican propaganda,” as Democrats charged, but rather as the American press’ tendency to get “locked in Story Mode Syndrome ... much more than the more varied, more cantankerous British press.” In story mode, he maintained, “awkward facts that would spoil a story line are flotsam on a surging tide.” Moreover, Evans continued, in the fast-paced world of modern media, “the old standards of checking have lapsed. By three or four news cycles, a minor piece of misrepresenting can incrementally morph into a monster. ...”<sup>48</sup>

**Counterpoint.** But some members of the press strongly defended their treatment of Gore, arguing that his minor exaggerations were properly seen in the context of his record of questionable assertions. In reporting on the vice president’s alleged penchant for stretching the truth, they argued, the press was not being venomous but merely responsible. “We have an obligation to our readers,” Connolly said in December 1999, “to alert them [that] this continues to

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<sup>45</sup> Jane Hall, “Gore media coverage—playing hardball,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, September 1, 2000.

<sup>46</sup> For example, a November 20, 2000 article in *Newsweek* maintained that “[w]ith few exceptions, the Bush charm offensive paid off. Reporters began to show signs of losing their impartiality toward the GOP candidate.” Gore, on the other hand, could elicit real hostility. After observing the New Hampshire Democratic primary, commentator Mickey Kaus wrote that reporters “hate Gore. They really do think he’s a liar. And a phony.” [Mickey Kaus, “Gore’s press problem,” *Kausfiles* special, January 31, 2000.]

<sup>47</sup> Richard Cohen, “Truth be told,” *The Washington Post*, August 10, 2000, p. A29.

<sup>48</sup> Harold Evans, “Inside America: No nose for the truth,” *The Guardian* (London), June 12, 2000, p. 17.

be something of a habit [with Gore].”<sup>49</sup> *Newsweek* correspondent and Gore biographer Bill Turque made a similar argument. While conceding that some reporters were “on a kind of hair trigger” with Gore—and that, where Love Canal was concerned, “there probably was a rush to judgment based on some garbled quotes”—he nonetheless contended that Gore had laid the groundwork himself for his harsh treatment in the press. Pointing to earlier “falsehoods”—regarding, for instance, his experiences in Vietnam and as a newspaper reporter—Turque maintained that the press was not “being unfair. What happens is when you establish a reputation like that, all the little stuff sticks to you that you might have gotten a pass on if all this other stuff hadn’t happened.”<sup>50</sup>

The media’s close scrutiny of the vice president’s statements took place, some noted, in an atmosphere of growing alienation between the press and the vice president. As the campaign progressed, Seelye recalls, relations between Gore and the press corps that traveled with him became “increasingly tense.” Kept at arm’s length from the candidate, Connolly says, the press had little other than “his record and public statements to go on.” Consequently, she continues, on “those rare occasions when [Gore] offered some unscripted insight into his own life experiences, we used those moments to examine the man behind the stump speech.” Reporters were fulfilling one of their “fundamental duties,” according to Connolly, in comparing “campaign trail anecdotes with the historical record. ... Seizing upon any single verbal slip is unfair and inaccurate; compiling a series of those to paint a fuller portrait of an individual seeking higher office is of great value.”

The debate over Gore’s Love Canal remarks did prompt some journalists to delve into the vice president’s earlier statements—some going as far back as his 1984 Senate campaign—for signs either of untruth or media bias. Some found a mix of the two, but others judged Gore to be largely responsible for his reputation as an embellisher. Two *Boston Globe* reporters studied Gore’s statements made in campaign speeches and ads—excluding the standard list of embellishments—and concluded that “Gore has regularly promoted himself, and skewered his opponents, with embroidered, misleading, and occasionally false statements to a degree that even some of his allies concede is rare for a politician of his stature.” A review of statements over a period of twenty years, they added, “suggest[ed] that the pattern has been more pronounced than previously believed, and that it remains unchecked.”<sup>51</sup> Commentator Mickey Kaus came to a somewhat milder conclusion. Arguing that Robert Parry’s *Washington Monthly* piece dealt only with “the three most *Letterman*-ready Gore controversies” (Love Story, Love Canal, and the Internet), Kaus set out to examine ten of Gore’s statements—from such “boasts” as Love Story and Love Canal, to his policy positions—and found that “Gore isn’t as big a liar as I thought!” Still, he took issue with Parry’s assertion that Gore was guilty only of “imprecise phrasing” and normal campaign rhetoric,

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<sup>49</sup> Ramer, *Associated Press Newswires*, December 14, 1999.

<sup>50</sup> Shepard, *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, April 9, 2000.

<sup>51</sup> Robinson and Crowley, *The Boston Globe*, April 11, 2000.

arguing that the vice president’s statements showed “a disturbing pattern” of exaggeration and grandiosity, and even “a bit of delusion, egomania, and bullying.”<sup>52</sup>

### **Epilogue: Beyond Love Canal**

In the months after the Love Canal incident, Republicans strove to keep the issue of Gore’s veracity alive in the public mind, often through mockery. The Republican National Committee, for example, produced a compact disc—“The Best of Al Gore”—featuring, the AP reported, “its favorite gaffes by Gore.” These included taped snippets of both the Internet and Love Canal remarks, spoken by Gore himself.<sup>53</sup> In addition, Bush’s staff took to sending the press e-mail messages with the header, “The Gore Detector: A Regular Report on Al Gore’s Adventures With the Truth.”<sup>54</sup> Republicans were unabashed about their willingness to make such attacks, humorous or otherwise, on Gore’s truthfulness a cornerstone of their campaign strategy. “I can hardly remember a time,” one RNC spokesman said, “when it wasn’t on our radar screen that Al Gore had a propensity to both exaggerate and fabricate.”<sup>55</sup> Bush himself, the *Post* reported, had “planted the seeds of his strategy in March [2000], suggesting that the vice president had ‘a major credibility problem,’ and vowing [to] ... ‘keep the pressure on.’”<sup>56</sup>

***The Tables Turn.*** Still, despite the Republicans’ best efforts, the focus on Gore’s embellishments gradually diminished. Buoyed by his appearance at the Democratic National Convention in August 2000, Gore enjoyed a late summer surge in the polls and—according to a number of observers—an improved image in the press. By September, Republicans and conservative commentators—along with a few journalists—were complaining of a pro-Gore tilt in election coverage. Some attributed this to reporters’ “Pavlovian” response to whoever was the frontrunner in the polls, others to the “liberal bias” of the media, still others to a series of missteps by Bush—including a much-publicized “vulgar” remark about *Times* reporter Adam Clymer that was picked up by microphones—or a combination of all three.

Whatever the precise cause, conservatives were up in arms about election coverage in the press. In an op-ed piece in *The Washington Post*, Charles Krauthammer listed twelve front-page

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<sup>52</sup> Kaus, Kausfiles special, April 3, 2000.

<sup>53</sup> “Republicans aim to make Gore a recording star,” *Associated Press Newswires*, May 1, 2000. Just one line on Love Canal was included in the CD: “I found a little place in upstate New York called Love Canal.”

<sup>54</sup> Howard Kurtz and Terry Neal, “Bush team devised truth trap that’s tripping Gore,” *The Washington Post*, October 15, 2000, p. A11. Democrats were not above humorous jabs themselves. The Democratic National Committee produced a “Bob Jones Redemption Tour” t-shirt—a dig at Bush’s controversial appearance at the South Carolina college. [Kevin Merida, “Elephant jokes; the GOP’s laugh attack on Gore,” *The Washington Post*, May 30, 2000, p. C1.]

<sup>55</sup> Mitchell, *The New York Times*, October 15, 2000.

<sup>56</sup> Kurtz and Neal, *The Washington Post*, October 15, 2000. Seelye notes that Bush wasn’t the only candidate to press this issue. Democrat Bill Bradley had sparred with Gore on a number of occasions over the veracity of some of the vice president’s assertions during the primary campaign. “At the top of every [Bradley] press release,” says Seelye, “was the phrase, ‘If you can’t trust him as a candidate, how can you trust him as president?’”

headlines in *The New York Times* relating to the Bush and Gore campaigns: e.g., “Bush approves new ad attack mocking Gore,” or “Gore offers vision of better times for middle class.” “It would take a mollusk,” Krauthammer declared, “to miss the pattern” of “subtle slanting” that cast Bush in a negative, and Gore in a positive, light.<sup>57</sup> Other data seemed to substantiate the perception that election coverage had swung in favor of Gore. A study by the Center for Media and Public Affairs found, according to one report, that since September 4, 2000, “comments about Gore on ABC, CBS and NBC evening newscasts have been 55 percent positive, compared with 35 percent positive for Bush.” The previous July, by contrast, Bush had received “62 percent positive evaluations.”<sup>58</sup>

On a more anecdotal basis, Krauthammer, and some others, pointed to recent coverage of two incidents on the campaign trail as evidence of press bias. One was the *Times*’ “astonishing editorial decision,” as Krauthammer put it, to run a front-page article on a “two-week-old story” about the so-called “rats” ad, a Republican TV commercial criticizing Gore in which the word “rats” was said to have appeared for a fraction of a second. By contrast, when *The Boston Globe* reported on September 18 that Gore had “mangled the facts” when he maintained that his mother-in-law’s arthritis medicine cost roughly three times that of his dog’s, the *Times* relegated the story to page A18.<sup>59</sup> The perception of press bias was not, however, limited to conservative commentators. Before the Democratic convention, wrote political analyst Charlie Cook, coverage by the media was “more fair than normal.” But after Gore’s strong showing in the polls, he continued, “it was as if a firehouse bell had gone off. The tilt in coverage that drives conservatives to distraction resurfaced.”<sup>60</sup>

By mid-October, however, conservatives’ outrage had largely abated, as the “wheel turned again in Bush’s direction,” in the words of one commentator.<sup>61</sup> A number of factors contributed to the reversal of fortunes, but perhaps the turning point came during the first presidential debate, on October 3, when a remark by Gore re-ignited the furor over his veracity problem.

**A New “Gaffe.”** Gore made his comment after Bush had praised the work of the Federal Emergency Management Agency and its head, James Lee Witt, when wildfires were raging in Parker County, Texas, in 1998. “I accompanied James Lee Witt to Texas when those fires broke out,” the vice president said. It soon emerged, however, that Gore had not in fact traveled with Witt; he had come to the state in the company of a FEMA deputy and, at least according to one

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<sup>57</sup> Charles Krauthammer, “Slanting to the left,” *The Washington Post*, September 29, 2000, p. A33.

<sup>58</sup> Howard Kurtz, “Are the media tilting to Gore?; charges of bias hang over campaign coverage,” *The Washington Post*, September 25, 2000, p. A1.

<sup>59</sup> Krauthammer, *The Washington Post*, September 29, 2000; Kurtz, *The Washington Post*, September 25, 2000.

<sup>60</sup> Charlie Cook, “It’s much, much more than just a kiss,” *National Journal*, September 23, 2000.

<sup>61</sup> John Leo, “Media hopscotch; how yesterday’s hero becomes tomorrow’s heel,” *US News & World Report*, November 13, 2000.

account, “said a few words about the fires” at the Houston airport and then continued on to attend a fundraiser.<sup>62</sup>

Gore quickly amended his statement—acknowledging that it was a “mistake” to say that he had gone to Texas with Witt—but Republicans had already pounced on it, calling it a “flaming whopper” and branding him a “serial exaggerator.” The vice president, declared Bush strategist Karl Rove on NBC’s “Meet the Press,” was “a man who has difficulty telling the truth. He constantly exaggerates and embellishes.”<sup>63</sup> As in earlier incidents, the extent to which Gore had skewed the facts depended on how his statement was parsed. Rove asserted that Gore had exaggerated “about being at the Parker County fires.” But, as the *Times* pointed out, the vice president did not claim to have gone to Parker County; he said merely that he had “accompanied James Lee Witt down to Texas when those fires broke out.” Moreover, as one commentator noted, Gore had made “dozens of trips with [Witt] to other disaster sites,” so it was “understandable how he might confuse them. ...”<sup>64</sup>

Nevertheless, Gore’s statement prompted a new round of questions about the vice president’s honesty and the damage such incidents inflicted on his candidacy. Writing in *The New York Times* on October 15, Melinda Henneberger warned that in a “tight presidential race [Gore’s] colorized storytelling is no minor issue with Republicans clearly exaggerating the exaggerations. ...” And Republicans were unquestionably pressing the issue. “An offhand boast by Gore at the first debate last week,” the *Post* noted, “turned out to be untrue—and that has put straw on a fire that Republicans have been trying to feed all year.”<sup>65</sup> In addition to alluding to Gore’s remark about Witt in their own television appearances—on “Meet the Press” and “Fox News Sunday,” for example—Bush campaign officials worked assiduously to ensure it got wide play in the media. “At 6 a.m. on October 4,” the *Post* reported, “Bush campaign spokesman Ari Fleischer called a producer in ABC’s ‘Good Morning America’ control room to push the notion that Vice President Gore had made an important blunder in the previous night’s debate.” Later that morning, the show’s anchor, Charles Gibson, told Gore that Bush aides were “going to go after you today ... questioning whether you actually went with James Lee Witt down to Texas. ...” Gore conceded that he “got that wrong,” the *Post* continued, “and questions about his tendency to exaggerate dominated the news for a week.”<sup>66</sup>

The James Lee Witt remark, wrote John Leo in *US News & World Report* in November, “was the last straw to many reporters, who began to see the embellishments as a character flaw of some

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<sup>62</sup> William Safire, “Bush wins by not losing,” *The New York Times*, October 5, 2000, p. 35A.

<sup>63</sup> As quoted in Richard Perez-Pena, “Locked in a dead heat, both sides drop civility,” *The New York Times*, October 9, 2000, p. 14A.

<sup>64</sup> Jonathan Alter, “Al Gore and the fib factor: cleaning up his image in a politics where truth-telling is never as simple as it sounds,” *Newsweek*, October 16, 2000.

<sup>65</sup> Von Drehle and Connolly, *The Washington Post*, October 8, 2000.

<sup>66</sup> Kurtz and Neal, *The Washington Post*, October 15, 2000.

importance.” It launched a spate of articles on Gore’s exaggerations, resurrecting old ones and repeating more recent examples. At the same time, however, some members of the press acknowledged that “misstatements” and false claims were commonplace among politicians and seldom given the prominence, or the significance, that attended Gore’s utterances. In one spectacular example, offered by *The Wall Street Journal*, President Ronald Reagan “told Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir ... that he had been one of the first photographers to take pictures of emaciated inmates of Nazi concentration camps.” Reagan, in fact, had remained on US soil for the duration of World War II.<sup>67</sup>

Others pointed out that George W. Bush himself had misstated the facts on occasion. In the first presidential debate, for instance, he asserted that Gore had outspent him during the campaign, when, according to one account, Bush had “outspent Gore about 2 to 1. ...”<sup>68</sup> He also incorrectly stated in another debate, the *Post* reported, that all three men convicted in the notorious murder of a black man dragged to his death by a pickup truck would receive the death penalty (one faced life imprisonment). But these remarks, while noted in the press, were not prominently featured. This was due in part, some observers speculated, to “Gore’s knack for inserting himself into overblown anecdotes,” which “made his missteps easier to ridicule,” but in part as well to the press’ habit of stereotyping candidates.<sup>69</sup> “Braggadocio,” as one commentator wrote, was not “one of the traits” that the “media have assigned [to Bush].”<sup>70</sup> As a result, stories of his misstatements quickly faded from view. ABC correspondent Cokie Roberts made a similar point. “The story line is Bush isn’t smart enough and Gore isn’t straight enough,” she observed. If another politician had made the claim about Witt, she added, “people wouldn’t have paid any attention.”<sup>71</sup> It was Gore’s seemingly inescapable reputation that prompted Jonathan Alter, writing in *Newsweek*, to tag him “Velcro Al, whose every misstatement sticks to him.”

What the public made of the tempest in the press was not clear, but there was some evidence that it had begun to pay attention to the issue of his veracity. After the first debate, a Time/CNN poll showed voters agreeing more with Gore than Bush on a variety of policy issues, but taking a more skeptical view of the vice president’s character. When asked whether Gore and Bush were “honest and trustworthy enough to be President,” 67 percent of respondents answered yes for Bush, 54 percent for Gore. Moreover, while Gore was considered the “winner” of the debate by a majority of respondents, Bush outpolled Gore as the “more likable” candidate, 49 to 42 percent.<sup>72</sup> Similarly, the *Times* reported that a survey by the Pew Research Center for the People

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<sup>67</sup> James Perry and Jeanne Cummings, “A little embroidery is par for the course in presidential politics,” *The Wall Street Journal*, October 11, 2000, p. A1.

<sup>68</sup> Alter, *Newsweek*, October 16, 2000.

<sup>69</sup> Kurtz and Neal, *The Washington Post*, October 15, 2000.

<sup>70</sup> Eric Black, “Candidates in a box: media decide if shoe fits,” *Star Tribune* (Minneapolis), March 9, 2000, p. 16A.

<sup>71</sup> As quoted in Kurtz and Neal, *The Washington Post*, October 15, 2000.

<sup>72</sup> Nancy Gibbs et al., “Where is the love? Most folks thought Gore won the debate—but that doesn’t mean he’s winning the race,” *Time Magazine*, October 16, 2000.



and the Press had found that “recent events, including the first presidential debate, have taken a toll on Mr. Gore when voters are asked about the candidates’ likability and honesty.”<sup>73</sup>

As the presidential race entered the final stretch, the Gore camp countered with questions of its own about his opponent’s veracity. On CNN’s “Late Edition,” for example, Democratic vice presidential candidate Senator Joseph Lieberman noted that Bush had listed *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* as one of his favorite childhood books; the book, Lieberman pointed out, had been published when Bush was in his twenties.<sup>74</sup> More substantively, Gore campaign officials charged that Bush had “exaggerated,” and “didn’t know what he was talking about” during the second presidential debate. They noted that he had, for instance, taken “credit for expanding a children’s health insurance program in Texas without acknowledging that he had tried to limit access to it,” and they accused the press of applying a “double standard” in its treatment of the two candidates’ misstatements.<sup>75</sup>

But, as a number of observers had noted, Bush was having a different problem with his portrayal in the press. The subject of the Republican candidate’s intelligence was a favorite topic with late show hosts—Jay Leno, for example, suggested that the “W” in Bush’s name stood for “What?”—and the online magazine, *Slate*, chronicled his language problems in a “Bushism of the Week” feature.<sup>76</sup> In one of the most publicized incidents on this theme, during an interview with Andy Hiller of WHDH-TV in Boston in early November, Bush was surprised—“ambushed,” according to critics—by a pop quiz on world leaders. When Hiller asked him to identify the leaders of Chechnya, Taiwan, India, and Pakistan, Bush could only name one, President Lee of Taiwan. The incident was widely covered in the press, both in the US and abroad. Although a number of commentators were sympathetic, noting that few outside of foreign policy circles could pass the test, Bush’s performance on the quiz provoked new questions, and jokes, about an issue that had haunted his campaign: whether, in the words of one account, he had “the brainpower to become president.”<sup>77</sup>

**Postmortems.** Whether Gore and Bush received equally harsh treatment at the hands of the press continued to be a matter of some debate in the final weeks of the campaign, and beyond.

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<sup>73</sup> Alison Mitchell, “The 2000 campaign: the credibility issue; turning tables, Gore camp raises truth issue,” *The New York Times*, October 11, 2000, p. A30.

<sup>74</sup> Perry and Cummings, *The Wall Street Journal*, October 11, 2000.

<sup>75</sup> Kurtz and Neal, *The Washington Post*, October 15, 2000.

<sup>76</sup> David Daley, “Serious candidate or running gag?; TV comics’ late-night slings can cause mortal wounds,” *The Hartford Courant*, December 20, 1999, p. A1; Black, *Star Tribune*, March 9, 2000.

<sup>77</sup> Richard Wolffe, “Sniggers over Bush’s intellect overshadow his campaign,” *The Financial Times of London*, December 11, 1999, p. 7. Various gaffes of his own, such as calling Greek people “Grecians,” wrote Wolffe, had made Bush “easy fodder for the kind of late night television satire which effectively demolished the career of his father’s vice president, Dan Quayle.” After a disastrous appearance by Bush on the Late Show in March 2000, Michael Kelly wrote an op-ed piece in *The Washington Post* on the issue of the Republican candidate’s intelligence; the title referred to the label the show’s host, David Letterman, had bestowed on Bush: “The Pinhead Factor.”

In a stinging critique of the media’s job of reporting on the 2000 presidential race, journalists and media critics Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel asserted that press coverage had generally “tilted more towards performance criticism” as the campaign proceeded, and that the “focus on campaign-as-theater redounded to Bush’s benefit.”<sup>78</sup> A study by the Committee of Concerned Journalists and the Project for Excellence in Journalism (headed, respectively, by Kovach and Rosenstiel), they reported, found that “coverage of the two candidates was twice as likely to be negative toward Gore as it was toward Bush” in October 2000 and that, conversely, coverage of Bush “was twice as likely to be positive than was Gore’s throughout late September and into late October [2000].”

Nevertheless, Kovach and Rosenstiel argued, with both candidates the press was guilty of relying on “story-telling themes as a way of organizing the campaign in an engaging manner.” These “meta-narratives” provided shorthand keys to understanding the candidates—e.g., “Bush is dumb” or “Gore is a liar”—but, the authors warned, they posed “grave risks for journalists.” For one, the meta-narrative tended to “trump the reporters’ judgment,” making it “difficult for an individual reporter to write a story that differs from the popular meta-narratives.” For another, it led to problems with “what to do with facts that betray the meta-narrative.” Either way, they suggested, voters were ill-served by reportage that tried “to weave a complex campaign into a single narrative. ...”

What effect, if any, these meta-narratives ultimately had on public opinion remained difficult to determine. Alluding to the study of “common themes” in press coverage of the Gore and Bush campaigns—e.g., that Gore was “scandal-tainted” or “a liar,” and that Bush was “a different kind of Republican”—Kovach and Rosenstiel reported that, at least into late July, the public’s perceptions did not necessarily align with these themes. For example, they noted, the feature the public was most likely to attribute to Gore by late July 2000 was his competence, which was “the least common theme” in press coverage of the vice president during the period under study. Conversely, “despite the heavy press coverage of Gore as scandal-tainted, by late July, only a quarter of the public attributed this to Gore.” However, they continued, the “one point that ultimately stuck with voters was Gore’s shading of the truth, but the public did not come to this judgment until after the debates.” While the content of press coverage “probably helped shape attitudes,” Kovach and Rosenstiel observed, “voters still had to see for themselves.”

The 2000 election results spawned new controversies over other, very different ambiguities—this time, largely concerning some Florida voters’ intent in casting their ballots—but the debate over coverage of the Gore campaign periodically resurfaced, as in a January 2003 *American Prospect* article by Paul Waldman, which raised the question of whether Gore’s decision not to run for president in 2004 was “affected by his treatment in the press.” To buttress his

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<sup>78</sup> Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, “Campaign Lite,” *Washington Monthly*, January 2001, pp. 31-37.

argument that the former vice president could not “get a fair shake from journalists,” Waldman reprised at some length the Love Canal misquote, as an example of the press’ animus toward Gore.

Seelye and Connolly sharply disputed the suggestion that incidents like Love Canal played a role in the outcome of the election or Gore’s later decision not to run again, and questioned some of the analysis brought to bear on the issue of campaign coverage. The effort to examine the press’ role in the 2000 campaign was “valuable,” Connolly concludes, but “in many instances [it had] resulted in misrepresentations, if not outright inaccuracies, regarding the coverage.”

Both acknowledged that the misquote was “a mistake,” based, in Connolly’s words, “upon a single inferior tape recording taken from the rear of the high school auditorium,” and later corrected in both the *Times* and the *Post*. “I’ve made mistakes before,” Seelye notes. “People make mistakes all the time. What was it about this mistake that turned it into this mushroom cloud?” Both reporters underscored the comparatively little space they had given to the Love Canal story. By her own rough count, Connolly notes, she authored or co-authored some 560 articles over the course of the long 2000 election campaign; but critics of press coverage focused on “a handful of stories,” she maintains, about essentially trivial issues that got scant mention in the mainstream press. “Good experienced journalists who care about their work and care about credibility,” Connolly says, “don’t go for the easy, sexy, cheap shot of ‘Love Story.’ And they don’t put it on the front page. ... I think that the vast majority of mainstream reporters covering the campaign trail approached those trivial [incidents] the way I did. They got mentioned here and there. Sometimes people would have a little fun with it.”