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By November 3, they will have racked up 100,000 frequent-flier miles, filed as many as five stories a day, flirted with



candidates, and learned to get by on four hours of sleep. **Clara Bingham** reports on the women correspondents who are changing the way we see presidential politics

the girls on the bus

One night during the presidential primaries, Elizabeth Arnold was waiting to meet a colleague for a nightcap. Arnold, thirty-two, is a political correspondent for National Public Radio. She drives a Harley-Davidson motorcycle to work. She's no shrinking violet. Her colleague, one of the "boys on the bus," the pack of reporters that every four years follows presidential hopefuls from New Hampshire to November, never showed. The next day, Arnold asked for an explanation and learned that Governor Bill Clinton had summoned her colleague to his hotel room at 2 A.M. for an exclusive interview. Annoyed, Arnold wondered why Clinton didn't give private interviews to radio reporters. Then she realized that her exclusion probably wasn't an issue of print versus radio. "What would I have done," she had to ask herself, "if Bill Clinton had asked me to go to his room at 2 A.M.?"

Arnold is one of a new breed of female journalists who have penetrated the once exclusively male preserve of political reporting—and are asking a lot of tough questions. In 1992 women make up almost half the White House press corps and fill one-third of the planes that have replaced the all-male buses and spittoon-studded trains of campaigns past. The nation's highest-ranking political reporter this year is a woman—Robin Toner, who is also the first woman to be *The New York Times's* chief political correspondent. Anne Devroy is the senior White House reporter for *The Washington Post*; presidential aides live in fear of waking up and finding themselves "on the front page of Devroy." Maureen Dowd of *The New York Times* is also in a class by herself. She is such a sharp-eyed observer that George Bush once interrupted an Air Force One news conference and begged Dowd, "Stop staring at me."

By November 3, these women and many of their colleagues will ► 160

Today's "ladies of the press": Elizabeth Arnold, LEFT, of National Public Radio, on her Harley-Davidson. ABOVE, clockwise from lower left: Karen Tumulty (*LA Times*), Mary McGrory (*Washington Post*), Ann Compton (ABC), Ann McDaniel (*Newsweek*), Susan Page (*Newsday*), Mara Liason (NPR), Cokie Roberts (NPR, ABC), Ellen Warren (Knight-Ridder), Helen Thomas (UPI), Sarah McClendon (McClendon News Service).

have logged one hundred thousand miles and filed as many as five stories a day. Some will have left young children at home to spend half of every month somewhere between California and Maine. Two of them will have delivered babies. Most will have grown accustomed to checking into a new hotel in a different city every night and to working sixteen-hour days in buses, planes, and ladies' rooms, where tray tables and laps substitute for desks.

But these women aren't simply filling spots once occupied by men. Outsiders still, they are changing the way we see and play the power game of presidential politics.

The trailblazers in this endeavor are Sarah McClendon of McClendon News Service, *Washington Post* columnist Mary McGrory, and United Press International White House correspondent Helen Thomas. Once referred to condescendingly as "ladies of the press," these three women are still covering politics, though they're less visible than they used to be (McClendon is eighty-two; McGrory and Thomas are both seventy-two.) Until 1933, when Eleanor Roosevelt began holding regular press conferences at the White House, women reporters had appeared only in the East Wing to cover the social season. McClendon attended her first presidential news conference in 1944 as leg woman for a male correspondent, and she was so afraid of losing her newly issued White House press pass that she dared not tell her employer that she had given birth to a daughter nine days earlier.

By 1956, McGrory was one of two women covering the presidential campaign, but then only because no newsmen at the *Washington Star* volunteered to follow Democratic vice-presidential candidate Estes Kefauver. "I just loved it," says McGrory. "The advance men would stand up in the bus and announce that 'the wires and the ladies' would be staying with the candidate and his staff at the Blue Stone Hotel, while everyone else would be sent to a greatly inferior place." McGrory says she never felt excluded from the smoke-filled rooms or patronized by male colleagues, and she didn't mind a bit when they carried her luggage or passed along tips. "We were treated," she says a little wistfully, "like white goddesses on safari."

Nevertheless, Helen Thomas felt like an "intruder" when she went to work in the West Wing for UPI in 1961. And during Ronald Reagan's first term in the White House, Susan Page of *Newsday* felt as though she were "crashing a stag party" every time she entered the press room. Real change, says ABC's Cokie Roberts, who began covering politics for National Public Radio in 1978, came in 1984, the year of Geraldine Ferraro's vice-presidential candidacy. "In 1980 there were some women covering the campaign," she says. "In 1984 there were a lot more, and by 1988 we had 'shop ops,' as shopping opportunities on the campaign trail were jokingly called.

But it can still be difficult to infiltrate what Ellen Warren of Knight-Ridder calls the testosterone club. "Washington is still very much a male-power town," says Warren. "Most of the men in the administration are generally not as comfortable with women. It's a rare source indeed who is willing to spill his guts to me instead of my male colleagues."

Marlin Fitzwater, the unreconstructed good-old-boy White House spokesman, angers women reporters when he occasionally calls them "dear" in press briefings. But he says women are "more professional" than their male counterparts. "They usually put a stop to the beer swilling and the joke telling 'cause they have something to prove," he says.

In the 1988 campaign, the women on the Bush campaign bus invaded one of the last bastions of male bonding. A handful of male reporters had a nightly blackjack game with key Bush staffers such

as deputy campaign manager Rich Bond and press secretary Pete Teeley. After listening to blackjack stories every morning for weeks, the women realized that they were missing out on a unique chance to develop sources. Carole Simpson of ABC asked the blackjack players why women were never invited to join. The answer, according to every man she asked, was that the game was "all play and no work." "They were finally shamed into letting us play," says *Newsweek's* Ann McDaniel. At the first coed game, the women as a group won more money than the men. After Super Tuesday in early March, the women went shopping together with their winnings. McDaniel bought a coat that became known on the bus as the blackjack jacket, a symbol of her victory.

By necessity, campaigns are intimate. Hotel rooms, late nights, distance from home, a cocoonlike sense of unreality—plus the proximity of men and women—create a situation where flirting, at the very least, is commonplace.

"Being on the campaign trail is like being at a big moving party," says Mara Liason of National Public Radio. "It's not a button-down atmosphere, the way Congress is. You're living with people twenty-four hours a day, sharing experiences day in and day out." For the first time since the campaigns of Adlai Stevenson, the charm and sex appeal of unmarried candidates Bob Kerrey and Jerry Brown raised the stakes, turning every available female reporter into a potential Cinderella—for a time, at least. "It was the ultimate glass-slipper thing," admits one woman reporter. "You, after all, could have been first lady. On campaigns there is always sex, but this was different." Items about flirting abound.

Item: Bob Kerrey sent "cute" note on napkin to *New York Times* reporter Alessandra Stanley.

Item: Jerry Brown complimented Mara Liason on one outfit after another.

Item: Bob Kerrey sauntered to back of campaign plane to serve a bowl of fruit to Maralee Schwartz of *The Washington Post* and Alessandra Stanley.

Item: Jerry Brown, who was suspected of having a crush on Associated Press's Karen Ball, asked her, "Have you been on any dates since I saw you last?"

Item: Clinton campaign adviser James "Ragin' Cajun" Carville was nominated the biggest flirt on the campaign. Carville's defense: "I will never criticize anybody for flirting. I will never raise my voice against that."

Item: White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater confessed that in twenty-five years, only one woman has tried to "date me to get news out of me."

Item: Bob Kerrey "pinned" Maralee Schwartz with alligator breastpin; pin is later discovered to have been given to candidate at an elementary school during a campaign stop. Still later, Kerrey sent Schwartz personal note and campaign memento. Says Schwartz: "He was totally professional. I don't think there was any flirting—well, maybe a little."

Moving party or not, presidential campaigns are grueling and hallucinatory. From one chaotic event and one Maalox moment to the next, the pressure is relentless: at 7 A.M., live shots from windy tarmacs. At ten, a speech. At noon, a press conference. At three, a rally. At five o'clock comes the real panic when daily reporters tap out their stories on laptop computers side by side in crowded buses, planes, and filing centers, screaming questions at each other, checking quotes, and trying to hide their "exclusives."

► 164

When *The Washington Post's* Maralee Schwartz took Gwen Ifill's spot on the Jesse Jackson campaign during the New York primary in 1988, Ifill warned Schwartz that it was a tough job. "You're going to get back to your hotel room every night at 1 A.M. after a full day of campaigning," she told Schwartz, "and all you're going to want to do is cry." Schwartz soon discovered that Ifill was right. Added to the work load was "the emotional intensity of seeing life in New York at its most difficult; the total disorganization of the campaign, never knowing where your next meal would come from; the events that went on until after midnight, and the 5 A.M. baggage call the next morning." Says Schwartz, who is thirty-nine and unmarried, "It takes a lot of physical endurance and stamina. The older you get the more wearing it is, and if you have any ideas about your appearance, forget it."

Katherine "Kit" Seelye of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* has followed Clinton since the start of his campaign and now feels lost in campaignland. "When I first started losing contact with my personal life, I worried about my house, my bills, how my mortgage would get paid. My life was extremely disrupted. But then there came a time when it turned into a heart-of-darkness experience. I went native and crossed over to the other side, and I realized that it was easier to be on the road than at home." Seelye, forty-two, also realized that she was so obsessed with Bill Clinton that she had nothing to talk to her old friends about. "I realized that I was not interested in the rest of the world. I don't see how you could possibly be married with a job like this."

Having a family is even more difficult. The number of women who cover politics for major news organizations and also have young children can be counted on one hand. They include White House reporters Ann Compton of ABC (four children), Ellen Warren of Knight-Ridder (two), Ann Devroy of *The Washington Post* (one), and Susan Page of *Newsday* (two). About three-quarters of the male White House reporters are fathers, but it's the moms who are in the hot seat.

Susan Page's husband, *Dallas Morning News* bureau chief Carl Leubsdorf, shares a lot of the parenting of their two sons (ages five and six), and they also have live-in help. Still, "there's constant tension," says Page. "Both my job and my family are full-time jobs, both need real commitments, but my family comes first. I am constantly juggling and balancing the obligations of both sides."

Ellen Warren's two sons, Ted, nine, and Emmett, eight, have grown so accustomed to their mother's traveling that "they think it's normal." But when their father, a communications consultant, goes on the road, "it really unnerves them." To assuage her guilt, Warren brings Ted and Emmett a present home from every presidential trip. As a result, the boys have one of the best baseball-card collections in Washington. "There was a period when a candy bar off Air Force One was big stuff," she says. "Not anymore."

"There's never a good time to have children," warns Ann Compton, who had a child in between the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primary in 1980 and was more than three months pregnant by Election Day in November. She juggles job and family by calling home throughout the day on her cellular phone. Her daughter once drew a picture of her family's life: Annie, nine, placed herself, her father, and her three brothers, Bill, twelve, Ted, eleven, and Michael, six, inside their house. Her mother was in a plane flying overhead.

After surviving the 1988 campaign together, a group of women reporters started an informal support group known as the New

Girls' Network. The network got together for dinner in New York before the April primary and discussed their usual topic—"life choices." Since 1988, one of their members left journalism, and one had a baby and left political reporting for a desk-bound editing job. Because combining family and political reporting is so hard, women who travel constantly with the campaigns will probably always be in the minority and will always be lonely.

"If I want to borrow a tampon on the plane, my choices are limited," says Gwen Ifill, who is the only national newspaper reporter covering the Clinton campaign every day and who was inducted into the network this year. "I'm also not a computer nerd, and I'm not interested in rotisserie-league baseball," which cuts Ifill out of

"When it was all guys on the bus, there were unwritten rules: everybody worked together, everybody played together, and everybody kept quiet together"

most of the noncampaign-related conversations on the plane.

Robin Toner, who has no special love for sports, says that she has become so brainwashed by the men on the bus that she sometimes uses sports analogies in her stories. "You get hungry for female bonding," says Toner. She remembers being the only woman reporter on the Dukakis plane in 1988 when Kitty Dukakis asked if she wanted to skip the next event and go shopping. Toner was tempted but dutifully covered a Dukakis economics speech instead.

Minority status does have its advantages. "One of the dangers of political reporting is that reporters often identify more with the political community than with their readers," says Toner. "Because women are in the minority, we are, de facto, still outsiders, which I think is healthy." Says Cokie Roberts, "When it was all guys on the bus, there were unwritten rules: everybody worked together, everybody played together, and everybody kept quiet together." As Timothy Crouse pointed out in his classic book on the 1972 presidential campaign, *The Boys on the Bus*, it was no accident that some of the toughest stories of that race came from women reporters.

It's arguable that the central issue of this year's campaign is also a function of women's presence. "For better or for worse, I don't think the character issue would be as high on the list if there weren't so many women covering politics," says Karen Tumulty of the *Los Angeles Times*. "Women define character differently. How a man treats his wife is, for most women and therefore most women reporters, a basic cut on his character."

Veteran *New York Times* political correspondent R. W. "Johnny" Apple argues that male reporters are often too caught up in their own self-importance to notice the same qualities in the politicians they cover. He points to Maureen Dowd's unconventional portraits of politicians—from Jerry Brown's "crumpled wet towels and half-made beds" to George Bush's tie patterns ("little pumpkins for Halloween, big bunnies for Easter")—as evidence. "Women like Maureen," he says, "have the capacity to see some of the foolishness of politics—the preening, posturing, and self-promoting that politicians do."

In a year when nobody wants to look like an insider, women on the bus may have the best seats of all. ●

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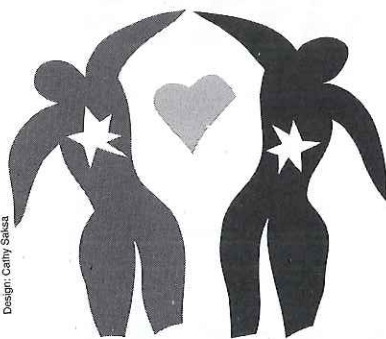
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contributors



jane mayer

"Politics is the ultimate boys' poker game," says Jane Mayer, who this month profiles Mary Matalin, the only woman strategist on George Bush's reelection campaign. "Matalin interested me a lot because of that—and because she's so funny and hip." Mayer is a senior correspondent for *The Wall Street Journal*, where she has filed reports on, among other things, the 1983 bombing of the U.S.

Marine barracks in Beirut, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the spectacle of wealthy Kuwaitis discoing in Cairo during the Gulf War. The coauthor of *Landslide: The Unmaking of the President*, she's currently at work on a book about the confrontation between Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill—"the story that you didn't see on TV."

clara bingham

"I realized I loved politics when I covered my first campaign as a stringer for UPI in Papua New Guinea," says Clara Bingham, whose "Girls on the Bus" piece in this issue reports on the women who are covering the presidential-election campaign. "I spent most of the time racing around in helicopters because it was the only way to get to the villages." Curious to know how the other side of the political ring worked,

Bingham became a press secretary for the Dukakis campaign in 1988. She quickly discovered that "it's better to cover the elections from the reporter's end because, one, you have a job when the campaign is over, and two, it's interesting to watch them make mistakes instead of making them yourself." Bingham now covers the White House for the Washington bureau of *Newsweek*, where she has been working for almost three years.

