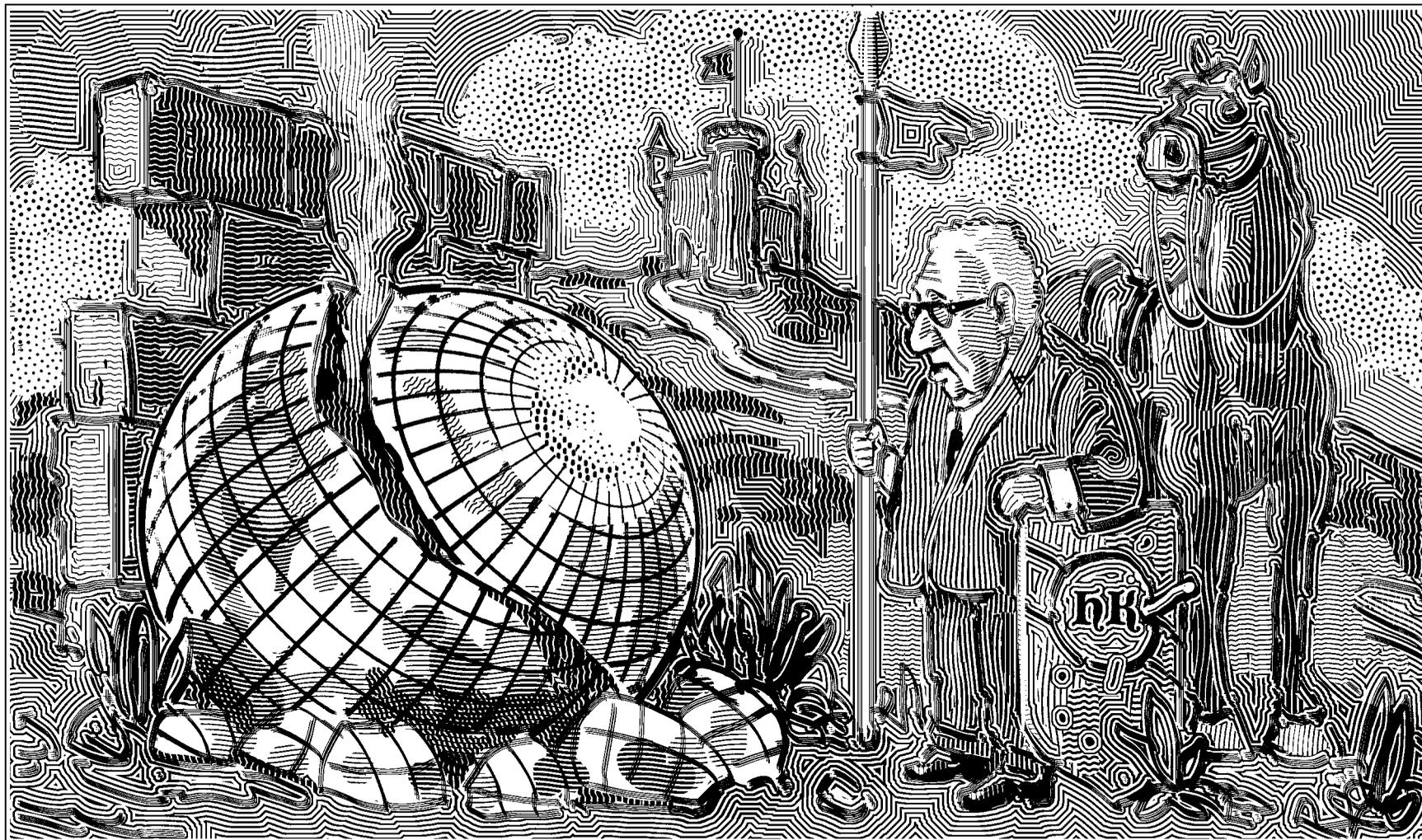


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CLAREMONT

REVIEW OF BOOKS

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Book Review by Mollie Ziegler Hemingway

MONKEY BUSINESS

All the Truth Is Out: The Week Politics Went Tabloid, by Matt Bai.
Alfred A. Knopf, 288 pages, \$26.95



“FOLLOW ME AROUND,” GARY HART told a reporter in 1987, in an attempt to quell rumors of infidelity. “I don’t care. I’m serious. If anybody wants to put a tail on me, go ahead. They’d be very bored.”

The rest is history. The press did as Hart requested and found him cavorting with a gorgeous young model named Donna Rice. By the time pictures of her sitting on his lap appeared—on a boat felicitously christened “Monkey Business”—Hart was forced into political exile.

It’s a great cautionary tale about hubris that to this day makes Washington operatives smile or shake their heads. It’s also not entirely true, according to former *New York Times Magazine* writer Matt Bai. In *All the Truth Is Out: The Week Politics Went Tabloid*, Bai meticulously recounts the media’s role in the fall of the Democratic Party’s frontrunner for the 1988 presidential nomination. On the same morning the “follow me around” challenge appeared in the *New York Times*, the

Miami Herald published an investigation into Hart’s relationship with Rice. The *Herald* hadn’t waited for permission to snoop on his nocturnal wanderings, and the pictures weren’t part of the equation until an associate of Rice’s sold them to a tabloid months after Hart had suspended his campaign.

Bai has two goals with his book: the first is to rehabilitate Gary Hart’s reputation and paint him as a victim of media excess; the second, in discussing how the changing media landscape of the early ’80s helped to bring Hart down, is to diagnose the serious problems with the celebrity-obsessed and tabloid-influenced political coverage of today. Lamenting the current state of political journalism, where politicians “retreat behind iron walls of bland rhetoric, heavily guarded by cynical consultants,” and journalists keep an “incessant focus on granular data and emerging demographics...constantly predicting winners and losers,” Bai points to Hart’s campaign as the moment when unfavorable forces

began spiraling out of control. Ultimately, Bai is much more successful as a media critic than as a judge of political character, and his failure to see the connection between pernicious modern media trends and the media’s warped view of public morality is a glaring flaw in an otherwise insightful, interesting book.

B AI’S LOVE FOR THE FORMER U.S. SENATOR from Colorado is pronounced. “Hart’s gift was to connect politics and culture and theology and history and technology seamlessly and all at once—to draw from all available data points (extemporaneously, it seemed) a larger picture of where *everything* was headed,” he writes. He claims Hart could have won the Cold War simply by being elected, praises his “agenda that neatly presaged the two decades of political debate that followed,” and writes that he feels sorer for the country than for Hart over his demise. Bai’s love is overwrought—but not infectious. In fact, the litany of details about Hart’s po-



litical and personal style confirms that Hart's critics were right to find him deeply odd and arrogant.

Bai dismisses as trivialities that Hart made his family change their name from Hartpence, claimed to be younger than he was, and was a serial philanderer. Noting Hart's 26 years of unwavering silence about precisely what happened with Rice, Bai praises his "fierce conviction that private affairs had no place in the public arena." There's "a way to describe a man who holds that tightly to principle, whatever the cost. The word is character." Others might not be so moved to conflate what is at best moral aloofness with moral excellence.

Americans get few opportunities to see candidates for president display the crucial decision-making skills they seek in an executive. Bai is skeptical of the value of the evidence Hart's lies supplied, favorably quoting former Jimmy Carter speechwriter Hendrik Hertzberg: "The fact that a person will lie in the context of adultery proves nothing about his general propensity to lie." Likewise, Bai scoffs at reporters for saying they didn't care about the sex so much as about how Hart's behavior reflected a lack of stability, steadiness, or the judgment necessary to be president.

But had Hart shown self-restraint, self-respect, and loyalty to the people in his life

prior to the Rice affair, he might have quickly dealt with the scandal. Instead, he unraveled the moment anyone expressed an interest in it. Voters saw an undisciplined man whose selfishness and desire for short-term benefits might cause him to throw all sorts of principles to the side.

A review of Hart's political career shows many policy papers—on everything from reindustrializing America to reforming the military—but few political victories. Hart won only two races for office, including his 1980 reelection to the Senate by a margin of under 0.5% of the vote; before that he managed George McGovern's terrific 1972 presidential loss, one of the most lopsided defeats in history. (In so doing, he may have planted the seeds of his own ruin by changing the Democratic nomination process to empower Democratic voters in primary elections, thus prioritizing the vetting of candidates by the media rather than party bosses who were known to overlook indiscretions.)

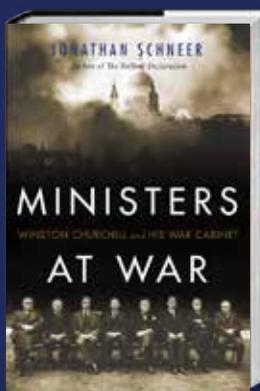
IT'S A SHAME BAI TELLS HIS STORY OF MEDIA excess through such an unsympathetic character, because his critiques of political journalism are often right on target. Something is broken when candidates can't explain the evolution of their thinking or speak with

any nuance, when "essentially they give up trying to win the larger debate in the country, choosing to focus solely on the tactics of the next election instead."

Bai points fingers in many directions. For much of the 20th century, news was limited, tightly controlled by a few key players, and disseminated by elites. The 1980s saw the rise of 24-hour cable news stations needing constant content. Improvements in recording and transmission technologies allowed reporters routinely to get stories on the air from remote locations. Fax machines enabled cheap and immediate distribution of news to political reporters and influencers across the country. The Hart saga was "the first visible drop of rain in a violent storm system that was just at that moment beginning to coalesce in newsrooms around the country."

It has only gotten worse. Journalists have always been interested in scandal, but they also used to mediate political debates as a means of getting politicians to answer questions about policy and general philosophy. Now they are eager to become part of the story, as Candy Crowley did when she mistakenly corrected Mitt Romney in the 2012 presidential debates. Most journalists don't have anything approaching the policy chops required to ask

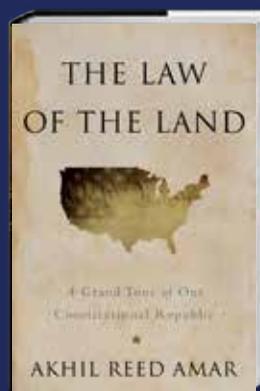
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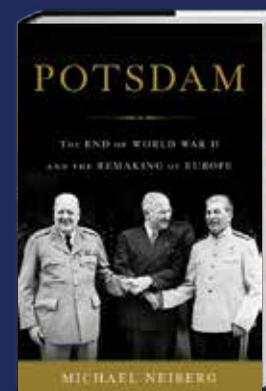
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good questions or respond to inadequate answers, let alone to divine the true intent of politicians. Instead, they ask marginal questions designed to induce bloopers.

As media theorist Neil Postman wrote in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985), “The problem is not that television presents us with entertaining subject matter, but that all subject matter is presented as entertaining, which is another issue altogether.” Our news is packaged as a “show,” with bright faces smiling as they describe the day’s horrors. Political candidates are presented for our entertainment. When, Postman wrote, “a people become an audience and their public business a vaudeville act, then a nation finds itself at risk; culture-death is a clear possibility.”

OF THE HART IMBROGLIO, BAI WRITES, “the finest political journalists of a generation surrendered all at once to the idea that politics had become another form of celebrity-driven entertainment, while simultaneously disdaining the kind of reporting that such a thirst for entertainment made necessary.” Their decision has kept politicians ever since from communicating unguardedly lest they be attacked for being weird, having a character problem, or making a gaffe.

There’s a good deal of truth in that observation, but it doesn’t match the facts in the Hart case. It’s certainly an unfair charge to level against the *Miami Herald*, the target of much of Bai’s opprobrium. The reporter who

launched the Hart investigation had in fact written a critique of earlier media speculation about Hart’s problem with marital fidelity. A reader responded to that critique by calling him and saying, “Gary Hart is having an affair with a friend of mine.” Only when she gave credible information regarding this claim did the paper pursue the lead.

E.J. Dionne and his journalistic cohort would make a better target for Bai’s anger and disappointment. Dionne was the *New York Times* reporter whom Hart challenged to follow him around. He was working on a lengthy profile exploring Hart’s psyche. “I was trying to figure out, ‘What does it mean to be an existential politician?’” Dionne recalls. His idiosyncratic definition of an existential politician was one detached from traditional forms of faith but still feeling obliged to serve. If Dionne could understand Hart’s stages of psychosocial development, he could understand what made him such a confounding politician.

“I think you’ve got the coin reversed,” Hart told Dionne.

I think I’m the healthy one. I think you ought to be asking all those other guys who have done nothing but hold public office and have no other sides to their personalities: Why they don’t write novels and why they don’t read Kierkegaard? Why they don’t broaden themselves out? Why is it that somebody like me is thought the oddball?

THROUGH A SURFEIT OF GREAT QUOTATIONS such as this, Bai does a good job of portraying Hart as an interesting and thoughtful man, though he is a bit too ready to sympathize. There’s an endearing anecdote about the meaning Hart found in William Butler Yeats’s poem “To a Friend Whose Work Has Come to Nothing.” Bai thought so much of this story that he borrowed his book title from the poem’s first line—“Now all the truth is out, / Be secret and take defeat.” Yet some of the poem’s other lines illuminate how Gary Hart’s career implosion presaged today’s shallow and immodest political contests:

For how can you compete,
Being honor bred, with one
Who were it proved he lies
Were neither shamed in his own
Nor in his neighbors’ eyes.

The media’s desire to understand politicians not in terms of a universal human nature but as a function of their personal psychology is telling. Only a media establishment that has completely bought into progressivism’s aims for perfected man could pursue such lines of questioning. And the rejection of a belief in man’s sinful nature also means a rejection of the possibility of forgiveness. That’s what made Hart’s downfall a tragedy, and one that continues to haunt us.

Mollie Ziegler Hemingway is a senior editor at The Federalist.

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