

of news. Paid for by advertising, newspapers no longer aimed so much at readers as voters, but at readers as consumers. They had also gone from a rag-tag collection of partisan, fragile journals (when Jefferson resigned as Secretary of State in 1793, his friendly editor lost his job and the paper died), to massive enterprises.

But Federal subsidies of the news did not end. They simply took different forms: lower postal rates, government support for the telegraph, allocation of the broadcast spectrum, and, in Cook's view, the public relations offices that proliferated through the bureaucracy.

Judging from Cook's account, it was at the turn of the century that the tacit agreement governing today's news beats was struck: Government officials realized that the press could be an efficient way to get the word out, and the press realized that the officials could make good copy.

The great innovator was the Agriculture Department. Through much of the 19th century, under pressure

from Congress, the government tried to improve farming techniques by getting farmers the most up to date information, and bulletins distributed through the newspapers presented an obvious means. But Gifford Pinchot, who became chief of Agriculture's Forestry Division in 1898, sensed greater potential. Eager to push forest conservation and the creation of forest reserves (which his agency might supervise), he upped the volume of bulletins and began monitoring the results through clipping services. In 1905, he assembled a "press bureau" of ex-journalists, and started mailing out summaries of speeches and reports in the form of news stories.

At the White House, McKinley, in 1897, first invited reporters in past the gates where they gathered to grill entering and exiting officials. Later, McKinley even ordered his secretary to brief reporters every day. It was Teddy Roosevelt, that instinctual photo-opportunist, who set aside a separate room for the White House press corps. He declared: "The newspaper men—pub-

lishers, editors, reporters—are just as much public servants as are the men in the government service themselves."

This historical excavation provides a useful backdrop for Cook's discussion of how reporters and politicians have come to use each other. And he is persuasive on this subject, though other writers have made the case before. Yes, it is true that reporters, with an hour to file in Wichita, find it easier to judge style than content, and too often take that easy way out. Yes, reporters are too reliant on "official" sources, and too quick to define as news that which officials do. And it is often true, as Cook writes, that "the sine qua non of news is not conflict in and of itself but an endless series of conflicts and momentary conclusions." With an emphasis, I would add, on the "momentary."

But what do we do about all this? It is a source of enormous aggravation to beat reporters that media critics, blessed with more time to reflect, so rarely suggest any solutions for the press that have meaning in the real world. Cook, a political scientist, does not concern himself with improving reportage. He focuses instead on freeing politicians from the grip of the news media.

I think that is backwards, for two reasons. First, if, as Cook writes, the press has become a branch of government, then we should take advantage of that and use it to push important issues onto the agenda. Second, I think politicians already are breaking free of the news media. With the Internet and cable television fracturing the audience, wonderfully diversifying the coverage, and providing more opportunities for direct access to audiences, I wonder how the mainstream media can stay relevant.

I hope the answer, at least for Washington coverage, will lie in consistent editorial sorting of the official news of the day; clear and reliable reporting and interpretation of what politicians are doing; and an ability, still under development within the news business, to spot and raise important stories long before the Dick Morris of the world are prepared to have their candidates face them. News values might then start interfering more in political values, the right way.

JAMES BENNET is a White House correspondent for The New York Times.

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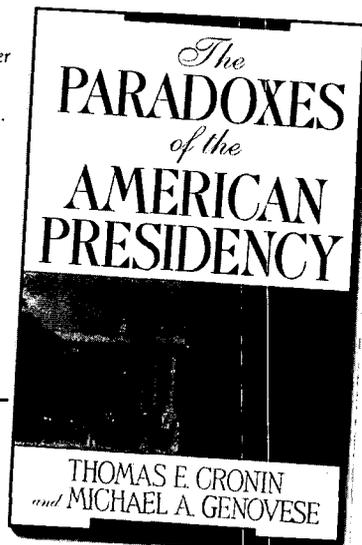
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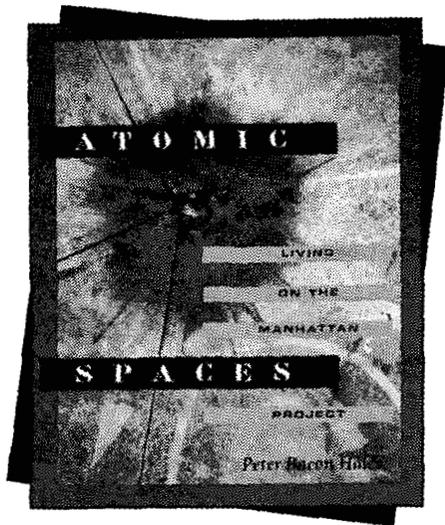
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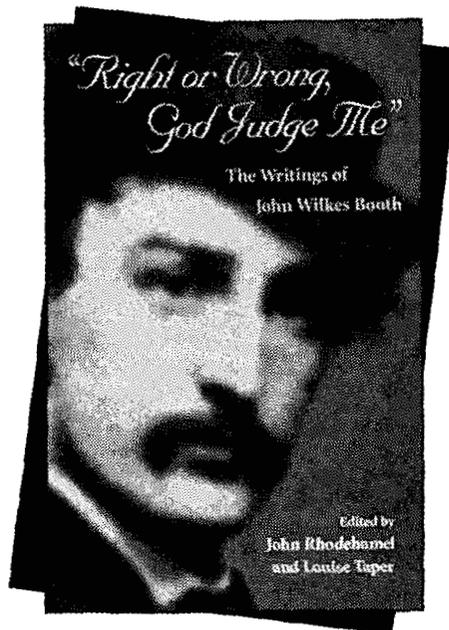
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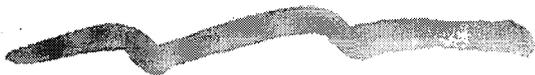
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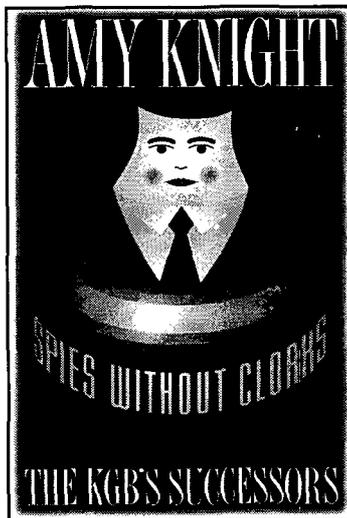
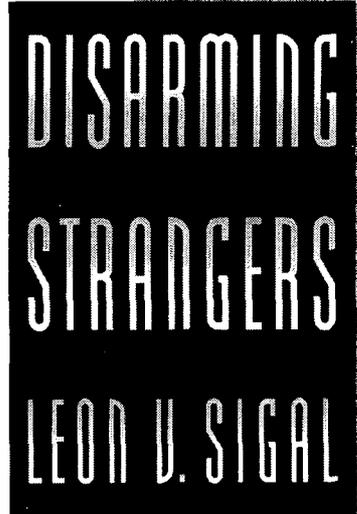
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