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The Press and the
Presidential Hopefuls:
Too Close for Comfort?

The Candidates and the Media Character Cops



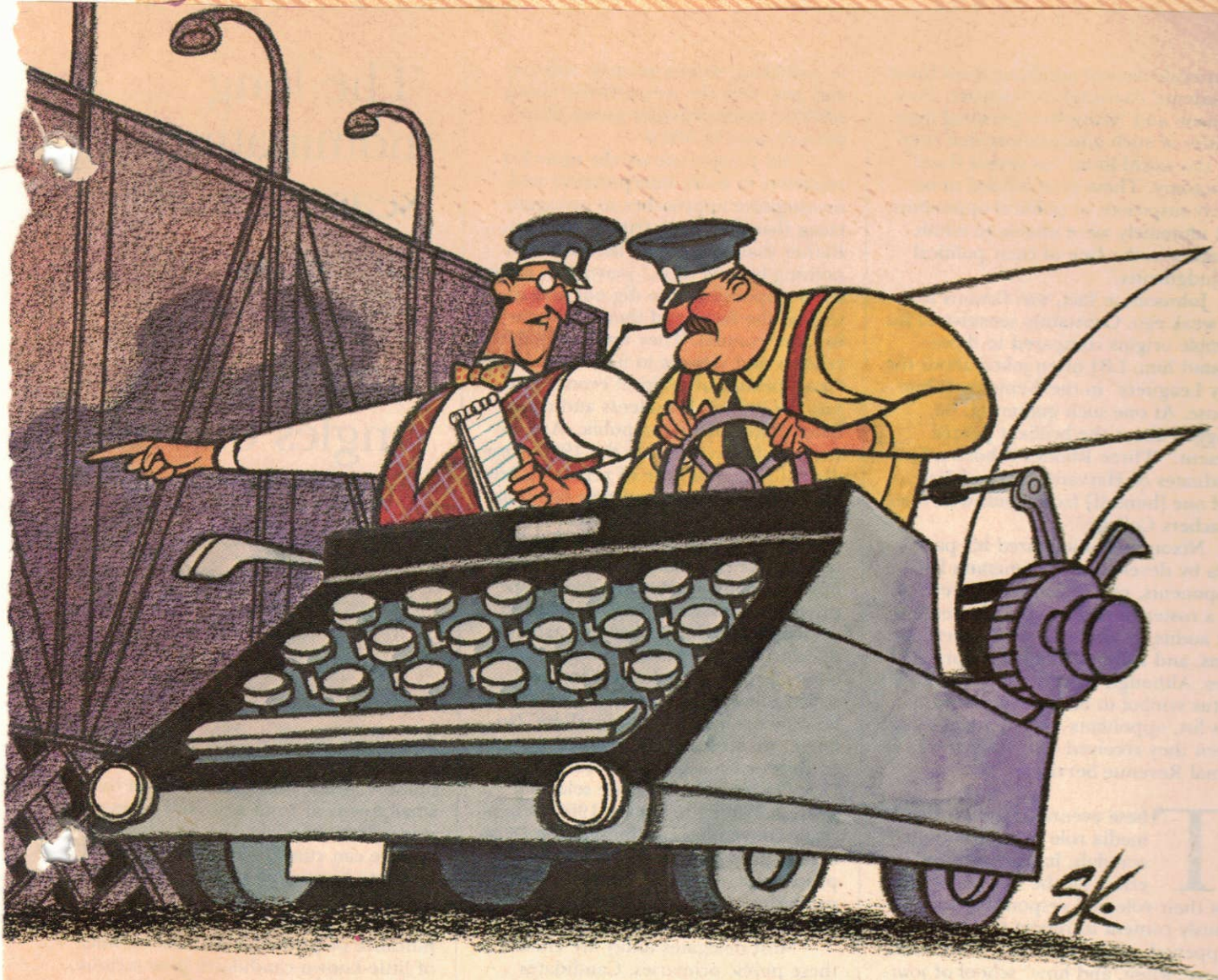
By Darrell M. West

Illustrations by Sean Kelly '84

A Brown political scientist assesses the impact on national elections of our obsession with the personal lives of potential leaders

Kingmakers and giant-killers, or sanctimonious hypocrites? The descriptions vary, but ask anyone what they think about the mass media in this country and you invariably will hear an opinion. It won't be the vague or wishy-washy views you get when asking about major policy questions facing the nation. Instead, you will hear real, live, strongly held opinions—the media as saints or scoundrels, saviors or villains. Few people are neutral about journalists and reporters in contemporary American politics.

Recent events have renewed debate about the proper role of the media in national affairs. With the fall of Gary Hart, the forced exit of Joseph Biden, the “attack videos” of the Michael Du-



kakis campaign, stories about Pat Robertson's deceptive resumé and family background, rumors about Jesse Jackson's private life, and revelations about marijuana smoking by former Supreme Court nominee Douglas Ginsburg, this year may go down in history for having introduced a new term (but an old concept) into the political lexicon: media character cops. In fact, if developments of the last few months are any indication of what is to follow, the controversy over character reporting on the part of the media may just be beginning.

Investigative journalism obviously is not a new role for the media. Muckrakers from the turn of the century as well as writers investigating Vietnam, Watergate, and the Iran-Contra affair exposed abuses, lies, and outright ille-

galities on the part of government officials. In two of the latter three cases, press coverage actually helped topple incumbent Presidents. And in the third case, the President (Reagan) was seriously weakened.

Nor is the analysis of personal traits a new activity for the media. The press has been famous for highlighting personality over substance in presidential campaigns, and for emphasizing daily events over in-depth analysis of leading national issues. Presidents from the earliest days of the Republic have complained about unfair attacks on their activities. Thomas Jefferson, for example, described newspaper reporters as "the scourge of public opinion" after they printed a story calling Thomas Paine, a friend of Jefferson's, a

"lying, drunken, brutal infidel." What, then, is all the fuss about today?

There are several features of the current climate that cast new light on old controversies. One is the realization, based on events of the past two decades, that the character and personality of a President are extremely important. There is great personal stress involved in the job of President of the United States. Several times in recent years, America has suffered through national crises produced at least in part by character flaws in top leaders.

Lyndon Johnson's conduct of the Vietnam War and Richard Nixon's intransigence in the face of the deepening Watergate scandal often are cited as examples of policy mistakes and politi-

cal miscalculations resulting from these Presidents' character deficiencies. Both Johnson and Nixon had personal insecurities of such a magnitude that they saw the world in an "us versus them" dichotomy. These men tended to be overly suspicious of political opponents, and ultimately were unable to admit mistakes in the face of clear political misjudgments.

Johnson, in fact, was famous for his weak ego. Constantly sensitive to his humble origins compared to those around him, LBJ often joked about the "Ivy Leaguers" in the Kennedy White House. At one such gathering, he bragged about the brilliant people present: "Three Rhodes Scholars, four graduates of Harvard, three of Yale, and one [himself] from Southwest State Teachers College."

Nixon institutionalized his paranoia by developing an "enemies list." Opponents, real or imagined, were put on a roster to receive special attention: tax audits, behind-the-scenes investigations, and rumors about their private lives. Although it eventually became a status symbol to have been placed on this list, opponents were not laughing when they received calls from the Internal Revenue Service.

These events, as well as the media role in exposing the scandals, had a profound effect on the way reporters saw their role and responsibilities. Previously content to report the news as it happened, in the so-called "who, what, where, when, and how" school of journalism, the media gradually began to see their job as giving the story behind the events. Why did leaders act the way they did? What hidden motives governed leadership behavior? How could outsiders make sense of the ups and downs of daily political events?

Leadership character, veracity, and indulgences, generally thought to be off-limits to public commentary, became fair game for media discussion and analysis as a result of these crises. If a President lied about public activities, the media had an obligation to report that deed. If a leader were prone to temper tantrums and uncontrollable emotional outbursts (as was demonstrated by Edmund Muskie in his 1972 presidential campaign), reporters had to question publicly whether that individual would be able to withstand the pressures of high office (particularly in the nuclear age). And if a leader's private life revealed excesses in the areas of drinking, philandering,

or gambling, stories must be written and sent over the airwaves discussing whether these activities would affect performance in office.

This perspective on the news led reporters to more interpretative and investigative approaches to newsgathering than had been true in the past. Rather than reporting "the facts and nothing but the facts," journalists today see a responsibility to dig out and interpret the facts, and then put them in broader context. They want to enable readers and viewers to understand the "real" picture of political events, not just the version Presidents and candidates place before the public. And as we already have seen in the 1988 presidential race, this style of reporting creates new challenges and new dilemmas for candidates and journalists.

The other major change that has taken place involves the way we select our Presidents. Just as the media approach to newsgathering has evolved over past decades, so has the structure by which Presidents are chosen. Once controlled by party leaders in small-scale caucus settings, nominations have become open and lengthy affairs. No longer do bosses of the style symbolized by former Chicago Mayor Richard Daley control the delegate selection process. After the bloody 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago, the Democratic party reformed its nominating process, increased the number of public primaries, and fundamentally altered the nature of presidential selection.

Most delegates today are chosen in these public primaries. Candidates must appeal to voters directly through personal visits, media advertising, and informal contacts. Traditional barriers to entry into the presidential sweepstakes have been eliminated, and candidates of widely varying backgrounds now seek the chief executive's job.

Given these changes, it is hardly surprising that over the past two decades we have seen a series of dark-horse candidates do unexpectedly well in nomination politics: Eugene McCarthy in 1968, George McGovern in 1972, Jimmy Carter in 1976, John Anderson and George Bush in 1980, and Gary Hart in 1984. Even if few people have heard of the candidate, or that person's national experience is limited, he or she is not precluded from running for President. In fact, past elections have shown that being a new face or living outside of Washington is an advantage to voters tired of the same old political slogans and the "mess in Washington." And if that individual has a position

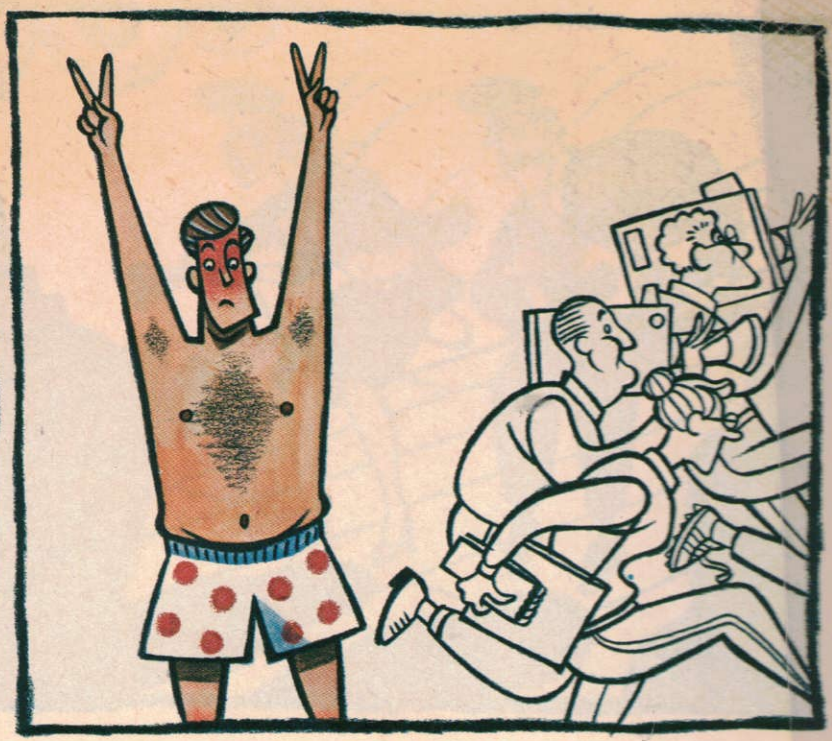
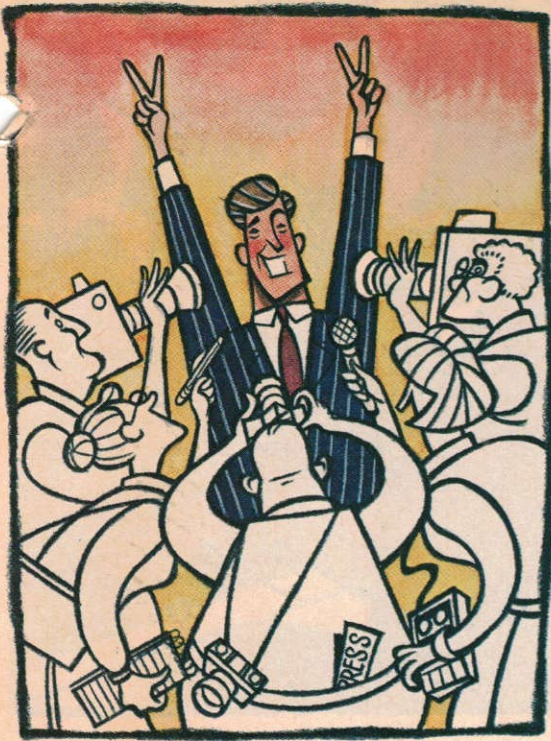
The long nominating season puts pressure on reporters to uncover new angles on the candidates

that allows full-time campaigning, it is even better; he or she can spend months, if not years, stumping in the small towns of Iowa and New Hampshire. The old adage that in America anyone can run for President really seems to be coming true in contemporary politics.

For reporters, the increased significance of primaries and the viability of little-known candidates pose serious challenges. The long nominating season puts great pressure on reporters continually to uncover new angles on the candidates. There are a limited number of stories that can be written about presidential aspirants. With campaigns starting earlier and earlier, it becomes difficult for journalists to generate fresh material on the same field of candidates.

Furthermore, voters and party activists know little about darkhorse candidates. Yet with the type of nominating system in existence today, voters ultimately select the delegates who will decide which candidates will receive their party's nomination. How do voters learn about these candidates, and what do they need to know?

In the "good old days," a variety of institutions specialized in public education. Political parties helped to define voter choices, while voluntary associations tried to instruct their members in the issues of the day. Today, however,



parties are no longer respected, and group leaders have difficulty delivering their troops. The decline of traditional political institutions has created an information vacuum, and media reporters have stepped forward to fill that void.

The media clearly have become one of the major power brokers in contemporary elections. Both print and electronic journalists provide information on the candidates and their campaigns. We learn about their backgrounds, personalities, family members, birthdays, favorite songs, and hobbies. When a candidate's campaign starts to accelerate, the press becomes almost insatiable in its curiosity about these individuals. In the *People* magazine and *National Enquirer* era in which we live, journalists want to provide at least as much information about the personal lives of presidential candidates as they do about rock stars, athletes, and television celebrities.

This expansion in the mission and role of the press is, in certain respects, a logical step. Investigating presidential candidates is merely the next step beyond investigating abuses in government policy. In fact, several of the investigative tools honed in Vietnam and Watergate coverage—reliance on leaks, background documents, and anony-

mous interviews—are applicable in presidential races.

Many of the scandals that have broken this year about individual candidates, such as Hart's womanizing and Biden's plagiarism, had the look of Watergate-style stories: rumors and allegations, quick denials from the candidates, a slow seepage of facts contradicting the candidates' denials, saturation coverage by the media, and eventual withdrawal by the candidates from the race. Viewed in this manner, the movement from coverage of government abuses to candidate scandals seems a quite natural development on the part of the media.

However, there is at least one feature that makes coverage of nominating affairs different from exposés of official government policy. That difference is the fuzziness of the baseline of evaluation for political candidates. Assessing the character and "presidential qualities" of prospective nominees is at best a forecasting job. It is not easy to decipher character, given the complexity of human nature and the uncertain relevance of various personal characteristics for future behavior. Reporters constantly try to evaluate the honesty, steadfastness, and integrity of national office-seekers, based on the candidates' public statements, private rumors, and other bits of evidence. But as any good meteorologist knows, fore-

casting of any sort inherently is a risky proposition. When dealing with human beings, the art of forecasting based on limited information is even less reliable.

In addition, the new style of interpretative journalism means events and personal characteristics must be put in broader contexts. A misstatement or foolish comment on the campaign trail is no longer attributed merely to confusion, fatigue, or boredom. These words become clues to broader behavior. Are they evidence of chronic lying? Do they suggest the person is guilty of covering up some pattern of behavior that all decent human beings would condemn? Are they warning signals of underlying problems or character deficiencies?

This style of reporting based on the interpretation of remote clues by skeptical journalists raises obvious problems. While facts can be reported in more or less factual ways, interpretations and forecasts almost invariably are going to be based on hints, clues, and tentative facts.

Our society has devised an elaborate set of rules to safeguard privacy and fairness in social discourse. There are restrictions in legal proceedings on the nature of proper evidence, procedures concerning who can testify in legal proceedings, a requirement that defendants have the right to confront their accusers, and a growing apprecia-



tion that a right to privacy exists. Judges, for example, routinely throw out testimony based on hearsay evidence, rumors, or unclear facts.

But in political settings, rumors, hints, and clues become evidence of irreversible character flaws. They often are reported as such by newspapers and television networks, and their airing sometimes can affect individuals' fates. The right to privacy that has gained general acceptance among the legal community and public-at-large apparently does not extend to presidential candidates. And if the Douglas Ginsburg case is a harbinger of future nomination proceedings, it also does not cover Supreme Court nominees.

It is here that the media character cops pose their most serious dilemma for election campaigns. Character cops are needed to warn us about genuine personal flaws in prospective leaders. The country might have been better off had character cops slowed the ascension of Johnson and Nixon to the White House.

Journalists also help fill the information vacuum left by the decline of traditional institutions in American politics. By cultivating inside sources, reporters can uncover stories that the rest of us would not hear otherwise. Seen in this light, character reporting is both understandable and necessary. And it even can educate voters about the choices facing them.

Yet there are risks to this style of coverage. If reporters become unduly prissy about the rough-and-tumble world of politics, it may affect the type of individual who chooses to seek public service. The current emphasis on personal characteristics as opposed to substantive knowledge about the issues may scare qualified candidates away from politics. Such potential leaders may choose not to seek office rather than run the gauntlet of prying questions from reporters in presidential campaigns.

Some of our most prominent and successful Presidents had flaws that by today's standards would have disqualified them from seeking high office: Lincoln was manic-depressive; Wilson was barely functional in the final years of his presidency; Roosevelt, Eisenhower, and Kennedy had mistresses; and Jefferson is alleged to have fathered a child with one of his slaves. How would Mike Wallace have handled these interviews if he were given the exclusive story? And what would the polls have looked like thereafter?

There is, in addition, a risk of error in reporting based on forecasting and interpretation. More so than traditional styles of "who, what, where, when, and how" journalism, which had a more explicit factual basis, the new journalism runs a higher probability of getting the story wrong.

So far in the current campaign,

reporters have managed to confirm the accuracy of the rumors that have surfaced about individual candidates. But it is easy to imagine in a competitive and deadline-driven industry such as the media that reporters someday will produce an inaccurate story, and that lives and careers of innocent men and women will be irreparably damaged. Prudence now on the part of the media may avoid more serious problems in the future, both for the industry and political leaders.

Finally, character reporting is problematic because it inevitably crowds out issue-oriented coverage. Stories about prospective leaders based on personal or lifestyle characteristics are no replacement for serious discussion of major national issues. Reading about personal lives, sexual habits, or youthful indulgences is more fun for most Americans than listening to dry discussions about macroeconomic or foreign policy. Given a choice between public policy and lifestyle articles, many voters probably would skip the former and read the latter.

Yet that type of story does little to educate citizens about the important issues facing them in elections. We do not know how philandering behavior, lying about transcripts, employing "attack videos," or having smoked marijuana in one's youth is linked to lead-

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cording to Court, that is why you see so many freshmen and sophomores on the roster. They haven't necessarily supplanted the upperclassmen. The upperclassmen simply have had enough of gymnastics. Court says, "The question might be, 'Is there life after gymnastics?' Or better put, 'There are other things in life besides gymnastics.'" And unlike swimming, for example, gymnastics is not a sport that an athlete is involved in long after her competitive career is passed. Quitting gymnastics is quitting it forever.

"You have to remember how intensive gymnastics are," Court reminds. "You have to perform four events. I think that is tantamount to performing four different sports." So when a gymnast arrives at Brown, Court can count on one, maybe two years.

This was not always true. "Prior to three years ago," Court says, "I had many more athletes competing for the entire four years of their college career. But now the pre-college experience, especially at the club level, is more intense. There are many more cases of burnout." Coinciding with the higher burnout rate are freshmen performing "at an equal or higher level than the previous year's freshmen."

For Court's gymnasts, the most difficult adjustment has to do with priorities. "They are accustomed to spending most of their waking hours in the gym. When they arrive at Brown, they have to realize that they have to take time out for academics, which are very demanding. They can't stay in the gym for six hours a day any more. That's upsetting, because they are all very committed to their athletics." But that's how Court can gauge the level of their commitment. "The more they complain about how they can't be in the gym all the time," she says, "the more I know how serious they are about gymnastics."

The ideal recruit for Court is one who has competed for a club but who has also had some experience on a high school team, thereby acquiring a healthier blend of individual competition and team experience. One such recruit was Lynn DeNucci, the top gymnast throughout most of the 1986-87 season. She was All-Ivy and qualified for the ECAC tournament. Her teammates included three other freshmen, three sophomores, and one junior.

She was a member of the East Longmeadow (Mass.) High School team as well as a club team. "I was excited about coming to Brown and becoming

part of the gymnastics team," she recalls. "I wanted to compete on a team after spending so much time working for individual honors." The experience was a positive one. "I enjoyed the team unity, the team dinners, and, in big-meet competition against the other Ivies, it was fun having other teammates pulling for you and you trying to add to your team's win with your performance."

Being part of the gymnastics team has made DeNucci's adjustment to college life a lot easier. "I think every freshman should play a sport," she says. "I was able to meet more people, find an identity for myself, and also meet upperclassmen." DeNucci has also learned the reality of being an athlete at Brown; she can no longer spend six hours a day in the gym. She practices three hours a day, five days a week—which allows time for academics. But her scaled-down training program has its merits. "It has forced me to take a more mature attitude toward training," she says. "In high school you're in the gym for six hours, but you really waste a lot of time. Here, I can spend three hours in the gym and I really waste only about fifteen minutes. That's quality time."

And quality time is what all these freshmen have given to their teammates and their coaches. ■

GERRITSEN

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more time for his interests in music, particularly Renaissance and medieval music, which he has performed on recorder and harpsichord for his own pleasure and as a member of various groups.

Any misgivings he has about his realigned research priorities are overridden, Gerritsen emphasizes, by his belief that "it's very important in life, from time to time, to make changes. You have to keep the flame burning." When he retires, he plans to try new things: "Maybe I'll volunteer to teach science at a high school or in a prison. I'll spend more time on humanitarian activities. I'm not thinking," he says, somewhat unnecessarily, "of sitting back in a deep armchair." Even now, when Gerritsen is in an armchair he invariably is catching up on his "leisure" reading: serious things, he says, such as Dostoyevsky and Camus. "I read books in the original German and French so I can work on keeping the languages I learned in high school," he

says. "Time is precious to me."

Time, yes; and also ideals, and people who cherish them. "It's amazing to me what courage people have," Gerritsen says at the conclusion of our talk. He is walking me out to George Street, our feet crunching through a crust of brown and scarlet leaves. "I don't want to sound like a saint. I think there *are* saints, and often they are religious people like the Berrigans, who go to jail for their beliefs. I am religious, but..." He stops, and faces me.

"We all make compromises," Gerritsen says, and there is almost a note of apology in his voice. "Until recently I had children living at home, and I felt my responsibilities to them acutely, so I chose not to be arrested and go to jail. None of us can judge the others' compromises."

This reminds me of a quote Gerritsen used, together with the Laing "abnormal man" passage, in an essay he wrote for Brown's *George Street Journal* last year. "The hottest places in hell," he quoted from Dante's *Divine Comedy*, "are reserved for those who, in time of great moral crisis, maintain their neutrality." Even while he frets about compromises, it seems clear that this could be the credo of Hendrik Gerritsen. Like Don Quixote, he seems perfectly at ease with his restless conscience and the lifelong quest it requires of him. ■

MEDIA COPS

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ership performance. We cannot even be sure whether candidates who are faithful to their spouses will make better Presidents than those who are not.

We do know that it is not very likely that the type of personal characteristics being covered this year will predict the ideological proclivities or policy positions of the next President. Even if we knew everything about the character of that individual, we still would not know his or her positions on conservative or liberal policy matters, tax and spending questions, continuing aid to the Contras, controversies over abortion, or other major policy decisions facing the next President.

Given the tenuous link between character and the "big issues" of presidential politics, it is probably unwise to make character the only dimension of evaluation in political campaigns. Personal character is part of the overall picture and it can tell us important things about prospective Presidents. But it is not the only thing that will

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matter to us in the next four years. What the candidates plan to do about relations with Moscow and the size of the federal deficit may have a more direct bearing on our overall quality of living than the personal and lifestyle questions attracting attention today. **18**

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rative research project—the one that has Steim pounding his fist—is to explore ways of using phospholipids to slow down or prevent infection by altering the physical properties of the AIDS virus. This approach is unorthodox, but it holds out the possibility of a low-cost, non-toxic AIDS treatment.

Several years ago, an Israeli chemist happened upon a non-toxic and inexpensive phospholipid mixture known as AL-721. The mixture appears able to disarm partially the AIDS virus by removing cholesterol from its outer membrane. There is growing evidence from hospital tests and laboratory experiments that this prevents the virus from penetrating the outer membranes of white blood cells. If the virus cannot pirate the cells' reproductive memory, it cannot replicate itself and multiply.

Perhaps because its effects are so little understood and so unusual, AL-721 has been overlooked by most researchers. While he admits that "the notion is a new and different one," Steim has been encouraged by preliminary test results. Apart from its "spectacular results" in the test tube, AL-721 decreased concentrations of the AIDS virus in patients by between 20 and 90 percent in limited trials at Roosevelt Hospital in New York. Steim hopes to stumble on an AL-721 derivative "that is far more effective than this first crude recipe."

If Steim and Turcotte come up with any promising compounds, they will send samples to the National Cancer Institute, where the samples will be tested in white blood cell cultures infected with the AIDS virus. If the compound suppresses the virus without killing blood cells, it will be sent to Smith Kline and French, where it will be tested to see if it is toxic to laboratory animals. The unusual collaboration is designed to shorten the usual time between discovery of an effective drug and clinical testing.

Talbot Brewer