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From Irangate to Olliemania **How TV News Covered The Hearings**

How did the cameras cover the most eagerly anticipated drama of media politics since Watergate? We analyzed 462 stories on the ABC, CBS and NBC evening news shows throughout the public hearings lasting from May 5 through August 3.

The results:

- * Only one story in 11 addressed substantive policy issues. Most stories dealt with investigative details, legal issues, or Reagan's leadership. **See p. 2.**
- * CBS had the most critical coverage, with 59% negative judgments. ABC was most favorable toward the administration, with 52% positive judgments. **See p. 3.**
- * George Shultz got the best press from all sources (60% positive), John Poindexter the worst (79% negative). **See p. 3.**
- * Reporters' on-air judgments contained four times as much blame as praise (79% to 21%). **See p. 3.**
- * Before his testimony, 92% of reporters' comments about North were critical. After he took the stand, 63% were favorable. During the same period, judgments of President Reagan went from bad to worse, declining from 37% to only 14% favorable. **See p. 4.**

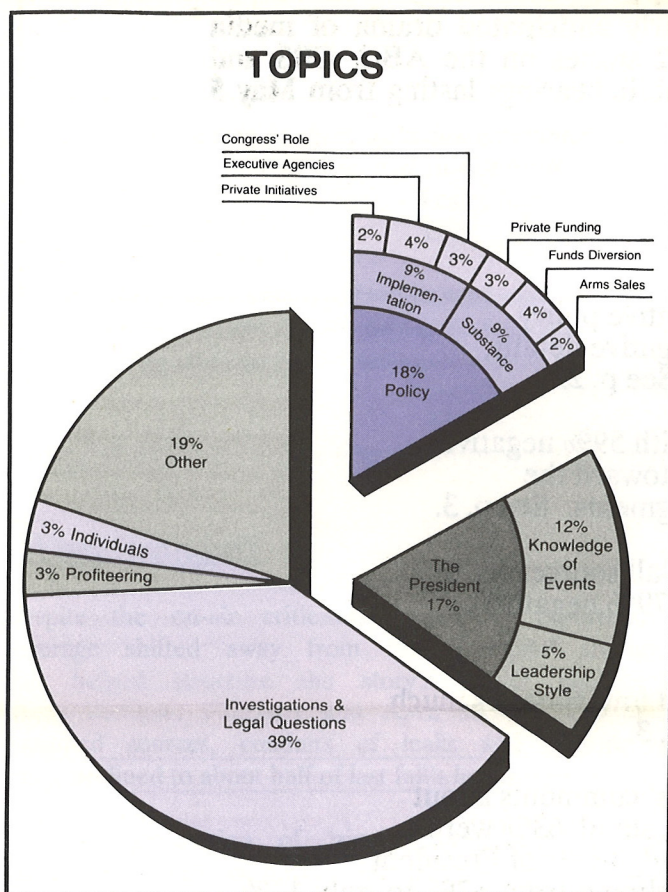
THE BOTTOM LINE

The networks came to bury the White House cowboys but left praising the charismatic colonel. The story also shifted away from the "scandal" framework that had previously structured Iran/Contra coverage.

No Time For Policy

The network evening newscasts ran 462 Iran/Contra stories during the hearings, an average of five a day including weekends and recesses. Coverage was heaviest on NBC (170 stories), followed by CBS (148) and ABC (144).

The focus was almost identical on the three networks. Investigative details and legal questions got the lion's share of coverage, followed by issues of Presidential leadership. That left little room for policy issues. Substantive policy debates (e.g. arms for hostages) and policy implementation (e.g. the proper role of Congress) each made up only 9% of all topics covered.



American Heros and Villains

A major aspect of the coverage was its assessment of figures involved in the Iran/Contra affair. Coders examined 1,877 judgments from journalists, witnesses, and other sources. Over half were aimed at Ronald Reagan and Oliver North.

Eyes on Ollie:

*I'd follow him to hell if he'd lead the way,
'cause I figure we could get back.*

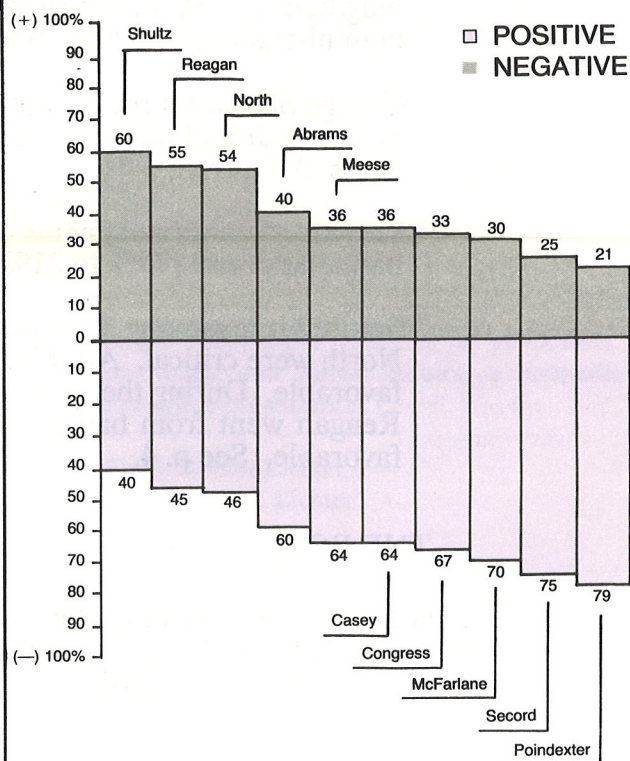
- Vietnam veteran
ABC, 7/6

He is Gordon Liddy with finesse.

- Radio show host
Interviewed on NBC, 7/10

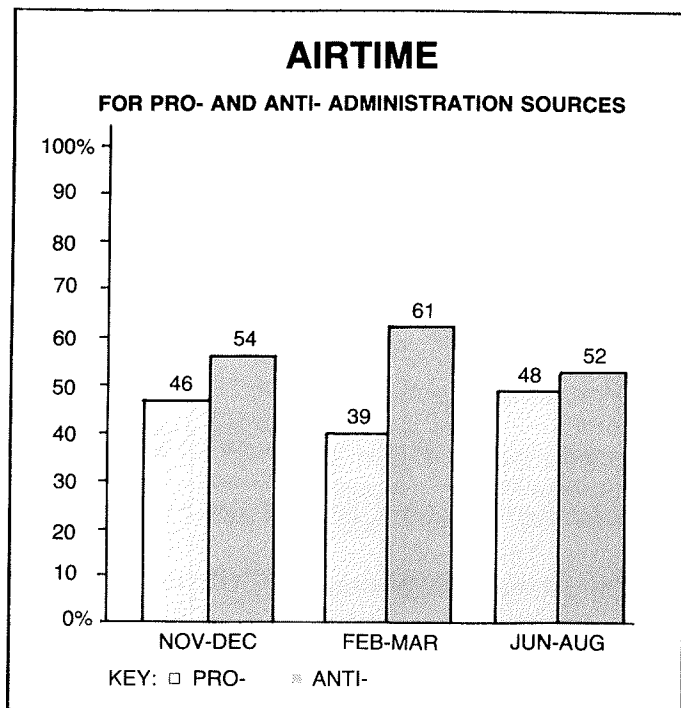
Of 1,117 judgments that clearly indicated either praise or blame, 55% were negative and 45% positive. George Shultz fared best (60% positive); Reagan and North also got better than even coverage. All other major players suffered mainly bad press. John Poindexter did worst with almost 4 to 1 negative coverage. The legislative branch also fared badly. Two out of three judgments on the Congress and the hearings themselves were negative.

RATING THE PLAYERS (%)



CBS had the most critical coverage overall, with 59% negative judgments. NBC followed with 56% negative judgments. Only at ABC were most evaluations favorable, by 52% to 48%.

Network ratings of the various players often differed sharply. George Shultz was the only figure to get mostly good press on all three networks. ABC offered the most positive portrayal of seven of the nine major players and the most negative portrait of the hearings themselves. CBS was toughest on six of the nine (including Reagan) but bullish on McFarlane, giving him 60% positive mentions, compared to 29% on ABC and 18% on NBC.

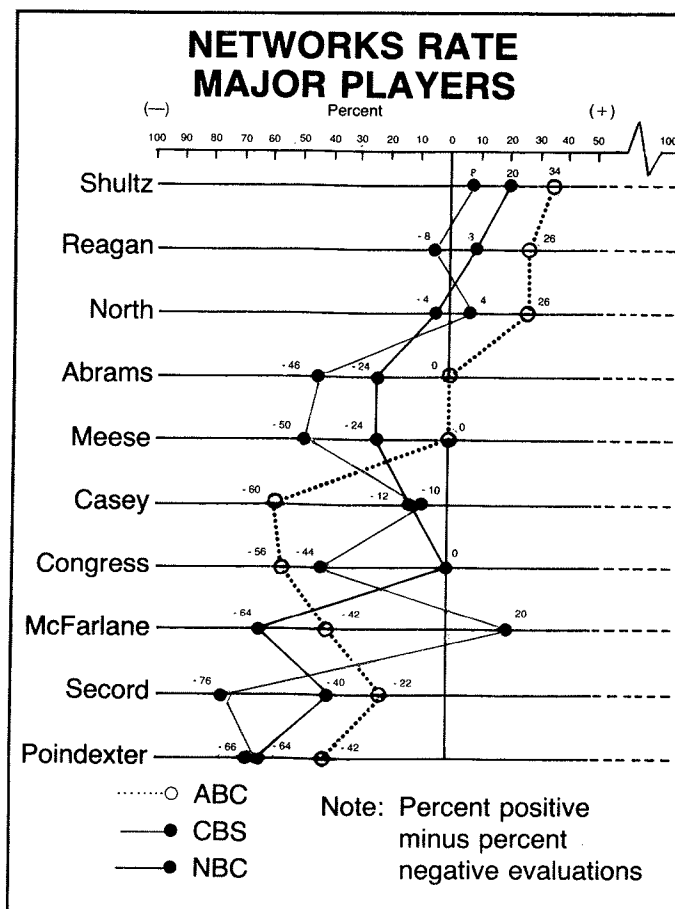


*I would not underestimate Ollie North.
I think (he) may emerge in better
shape than many people anticipate.*

- Congressman Richard Cheney
CBS, 7/6

*I am here to tell you the truth -- the
good, the bad and the ugly.*

- Oliver North, 7/7



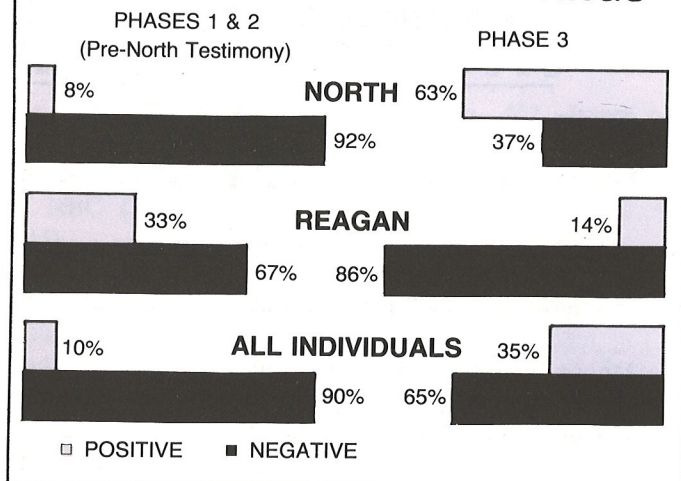
Down With Everybody

Journalists' own on-air judgments were much more critical than those of other sources. Reporters and anchors proffered 835 evaluations, nearly 2 per story, and about the same number as all other sources combined (excluding witnesses).

Only 90 of these were clearly one-sided. In contrast to the overall balance among outside sources, however, these judgments contained nearly four times as much blame as praise (79% to 21%). The bulk of their criticism was aimed at North (61% negative) and Reagan (75% negative). Among all other individuals, only Shultz garnered any positive comments.

The bad news would have been even worse but for a dramatic upturn in Col. North's coverage. Before his testimony, only 8% of journalists' judgments of North were positive. After he took the stand, the figure jumped to 63% positive. The unexpected good press didn't rub off on anyone else, however. During the same periods, positive judgments of President Reagan dropped from 33% to only 14%.

JOURNALISTS' ON-AIR RATINGS



*North's team was, in effect, a shadow government....
They operated off the books and outside the law.*

- Lesley Stahl
CBS, 5/7

*At best (Reagan's explanation) tends to reinforce
the notion that Mr. Reagan isn't up to the job; at
worst, the idea that he isn't telling the truth.*

- Sam Donaldson
ABC, 5/15

What Scandal?

Despite the on-air criticisms voiced by reporters, the coverage shifted away from the "Irangate" framework that helped structure the story's earlier phases (see *Media Monitor*, February and April 1987). The use of unnamed sources, conduits of leaks and rumors in a crisis, declined to about half of last fall's levels.

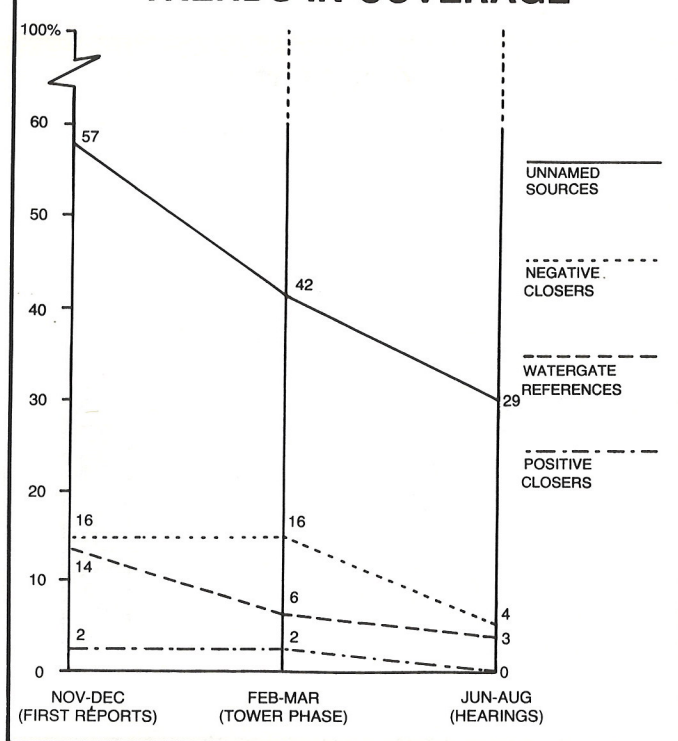
The proportion of "zingers", the negative closers that often impart an adversarial tone, dropped even more sharply. (Positive closers, always infrequent, disappeared entirely.) During the hearings, reporters were more likely to let the politicians speak for themselves than to add their own conclusions.

Most telling, references to Watergate itself declined precipitously. Only 3% of all stories mentioned Watergate, and most of those came at the outset. That compares to 14% when the Iran/Contra story broke last November and December.

Finally, as Irangate gave way to Olliemania, the airtime given to outside sources became more balanced. After the Tower commission's report last winter, on-air criticism of the administration outweighed support by a three to two margin. During the hearings, the critics' advantage narrowed to 52% of source airtime.

Thus, the burden of criticism rested mainly on the shoulders of the reporters themselves. Our other measures of balance gave only a slight edge to the administration's critics.

TRENDS IN COVERAGE



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