

# Battle of the Sound Bites

## TV News Coverage of the 1992 Presidential Election Campaign

How is TV news covering the race for the presidency? Has the coverage changed since the primaries ended? And how does this year's coverage compare to 1988? This month's *Media Monitor* examines the 1,559 election stories that appeared on the network evening news shows from January 1 through August 21, when the Republican National Convention ended. We also compare current campaign coverage with results from our previous study of the 1988 election. Finally, this issue tracks campaign jokes from late-night talk show hosts Jay Leno, David Letterman, and Arsenio Hall.

### Major findings:

*Media Monitor* (Copyright 1992) is published ten times a year by the Center for Media and Public Affairs, a nonpartisan and nonprofit research organization. The Center conducts scientific studies of how the media treat social and political issues. Yearly individual and organizational subscriptions are available.

Editors:

Dr. S. Robert Lichter  
Dr. Linda S. Lichter

Research Director:

Daniel Amundson

Election Project Director:

Richard E. Noyes

Research Assistants:

Jennifer Dickemper  
Elizabeth Gross  
Swain Wood  
Jessica Mendelson

Production and Graphics:

Mary Carroll Gunning

Public Affairs Director:

Toni Mann

\*\*\*

■ **Same Old Story** The amount of TV news election coverage is almost exactly the same as in 1988. *Page 2*

■ **Policy Over Polls** Policy issues have received more coverage this year than the campaign horse race. *Page 2*

■ **Dems Over GOP** Clinton and Gore are getting better press than Bush and Quayle. Unlike 1988, Democrats also fared better than Republicans during the primaries. *Page 3,5*

■ **No Views Is Good Views** Both nominees got mostly bad press for their views on policy issues. *Page 4*

■ **Conventional Wisdom** 1992 convention coverage favored Clinton over Bush; in 1988 it favored Bush over Dukakis. *Page 5*

■ **Campaign Comedy** Late night comedians have aimed nearly three times as many jokes at the Republicans as the Democrats. *Page 6*



## Road to the White House

From January 1 through the end of the Republican National Convention on August 21, the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news shows broadcast 1,559 stories on the presidential campaign, with a total airtime of 49 hours 16 minutes. At this point in 1988, the three networks had aired nearly identical totals of 1,543 stories and 49 hours 44 minutes of airtime. NBC has provided the most coverage this year, with 529 stories totalling 17 hours 29 minutes of airtime followed by ABC (527 stories, 15 hours 40 minutes), and CBS (503 stories, 16 hours 7 minutes).

Although the amount of coverage has remained constant, its focus has changed since 1988. At this point four years ago, the "horse race" - the standings and prospects of the presidential candidates - was the single most heavily covered topic. This year the horse race ranks fourth, and policy issues have received the most attention of any aspect of the campaign. TV news discussion of policy issues is up by 66 percent from 1988 (544 stories compared to 327). Major contributors to this increase include the nation's economic troubles and the discussion of urban problems and race relations that followed the Los Angeles riots. Two other old reliables of election coverage, campaign strategy and campaign trail controversies (scandals, gaffes, etc.), are receiving roughly the same levels of attention this year as in 1988.

## Rating the Players

Since January, we have tabulated 2,852 statements by sources or reporters that either praised or criticized candidates for national office.

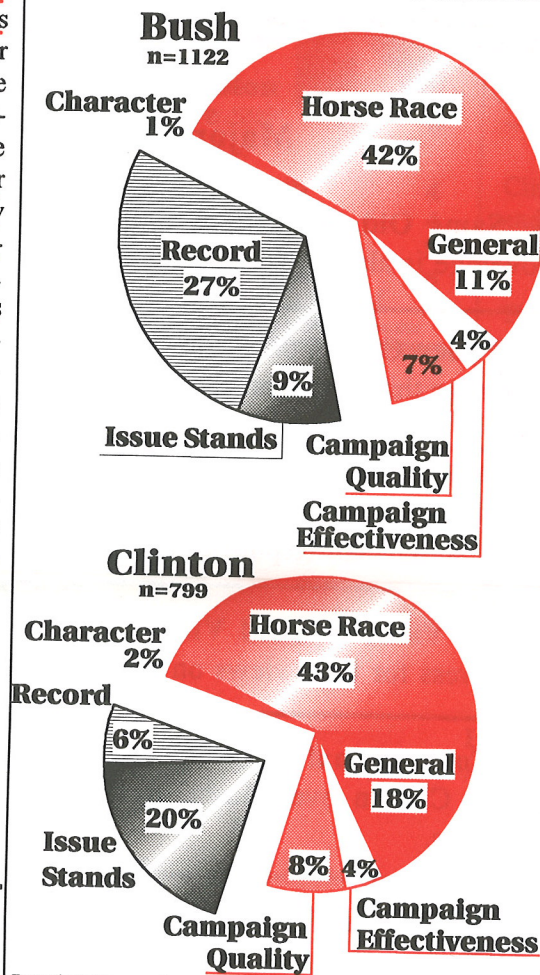
The virtues and vices that were evaluated most often included a candidate's record in office,

## Campaign '92 Topics

	Primary (1/1-6/2) stories	Post- Primary (6/3-8/21) stories	Total stories
Policy Issues	266	278	544
Campaign Strategy	260	260	520
Campaign Controversies	270	203	473
Horse Race Standings	270	103	373

Note: stories may have more than one topic.

## Areas of Discussion



Based on the number of evaluations by sources in election stories on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts (6/3-8/21).

his positions on policy issues, personal character, effectiveness on the campaign trail, and the appropriateness or ethical quality of his campaign. In addition to these evaluations of each candidate's desirability, we have logged an even greater number of statements (3,268) that rated their viability - their standing or prospects in the campaign horse race.

Since the primaries ended, 1,921 sources have evaluated the two major party nominees along these dimensions. Horse race assessments accounted for just over two-fifths (42%) of these judgments. When the discussion turned from the candidates' chances to their merits, the focus of debate was split about evenly between their positions or records on public policy matters, and non-policy related subjects, such as their campaign behavior or personal character.

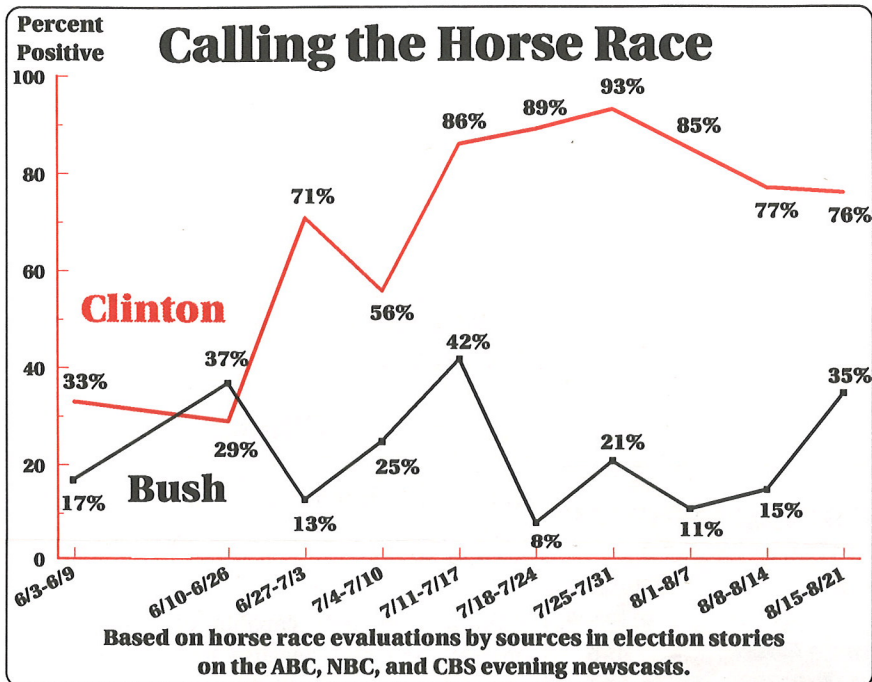
As the incumbent, Bush's policies were most often rated in terms of his Administration's performance, rather than his public statements. In contrast to Bush, Clinton's media profile was shaped more by his proposals and positions than his record in public office. But, a smaller proportion of Clinton's coverage has been substantively oriented. Character assessments made up only two percent of Clinton's media profile since June, down from eight percent during the primaries.

## Calling the Race

Horse race evaluations include assessments of poll results, campaign organization and fund-raising, crowd response, interest group support, etc. Since late June these reports have been far kinder toward Clinton than Bush. During the first three weeks after the

primaries ended, Clinton's horse race notices were 69 percent negative. Since then, they have been 83 percent positive. The perception





while two out of three have criticized Dan Quayle. Conversely, Barbara Bush has been applauded by nine out of ten sources, while three out of four have panned Hillary Clinton's performance. (Evaluations of the nominees' wives are relatively rare, however - only 43 since the primaries ended.)

George Bush has received his lowest marks for the quality of his campaign. Four out of five sources (82%) criticized the president for running a misleading or negative campaign, or for avoiding important issues. After Bush's convention speech, for example, Clinton called him "a great farmonger," and CBS convention analyst Joe Klein seconded Clinton, reporting that the speech contained major "untruths" about taxes. (CBS, 8/21)

Bush also scored low when the talk turned to his record as president. Sixty-two percent of

that he had enjoyed a successful convention, coupled with his upward movement in the polls, triggered a wave of positive horse race evaluations for Clinton. On the Democrats' post-convention bus tour, for example, Richard Threlkeld described the crowds as "big, vocal, and enthusiastic" (CBS 7/18), while Garrick Utley said Clinton was "on a roll" (NBC 7/18). Clinton's rise served to spotlight how far Bush had fallen. Even during the week of the Republican convention, nearly two out of three assessments of Bush's prospects were negative, while three out of four judgments of Clinton's chances continued to be positive.

### Campaign Face-Off

Apart from assessments of the horse race, the tone of TV news coverage has been mainly negative toward both camps. During the primaries Clinton and Bush each received more negative coverage than their opponents. Clinton's media image has improved recently, while Bush continues to get mainly negative notices. Since June, evaluations of Bush have run three to two negative, while assessments of Clinton have been evenly balanced. The gap between their running mates is far greater. Three out of four sources have praised Al Gore,

### Rating the Rivals

Percent Positive

(6/3-8/21)

#### Clinton

<b>Overall Campaign</b>	<b>50%</b>
(n=546)	
<b>Bill Clinton</b>	<b>49%</b>
<b>Hillary Clinton</b>	<b>22%</b>
<b>Al Gore</b>	<b>79%</b>
<b>Campaign Staff</b>	<b>47%</b>
<b>Evaluations of Clinton by Topic:</b>	
<b>Character</b>	<b>13%</b>
<b>Job Performance</b>	<b>61%</b>
<b>Campaign Quality</b>	<b>34%</b>
<b>Campaign Effectiveness</b>	<b>77%</b>
<b>Issue Positions</b>	<b>35%</b>
<b>General Evaluations</b>	<b>65%</b>
<b>Evaluations of Clinton by Source:</b>	
<b>Republicans</b>	<b>9%</b>
<b>Democrats</b>	<b>81%</b>
<b>Non-partisans</b>	<b>53%</b>

#### Bush

<b>Overall Campaign</b>	<b>41%</b>
(n=792)	
<b>George Bush</b>	<b>40%</b>
<b>Barbara Bush</b>	<b>90%</b>
<b>Dan Quayle</b>	<b>38%</b>
<b>Campaign Staff</b>	<b>31%</b>
<b>Evaluations of Bush by Topic:</b>	
<b>Character</b>	<b>--</b>
<b>Job Performance</b>	<b>38%</b>
<b>Campaign Quality</b>	<b>18%</b>
<b>Campaign Effectiveness</b>	<b>61%</b>
<b>Issue Positions</b>	<b>39%</b>
<b>General Evaluations</b>	<b>50%</b>
<b>Evaluations of Bush by Source:</b>	
<b>Republicans</b>	<b>80%</b>
<b>Democrats</b>	<b>9%</b>
<b>Non-partisans</b>	<b>29%</b>

Based on evaluations by sources in election stories on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts for categories receiving 15 or more evaluations.



sources criticized Bush's record, mainly on matters of domestic policy. For example, an economist complained on ABC that, "He [Bush] has articulated no vision of where this country should go in an economic sense." (ABC, 8/17) A voter interviewed on NBC was equally critical: "He's not done anything, he don't (sic) stand for anything." (NBC, 8/17)

Bush and Clinton have both taken flak for their issue positions. Bush rated best when the subject was foreign policy (50% positive compared to Clinton's 29% positive). Clinton re-

ceived slightly more positive press on domestic issues (39% positive compared to 32% positive for Bush). But the domestic policy debate has consistently revolved around President Bush, his approach, and his record. On major issues such as education and the environment, the networks have provided almost no debate over Clinton's record or proposals. However, both Clinton and Bush received heavily negative coverage on their economic proposals. For example, one budget expert dismissed Clinton's economic plan: "... if the vice president is criticized because he can't spell, the Clinton campaign can't do its arithmetic." (CBS, 7/29)

### Good Press On the Issues (Percent Positive)

#### All Issues

Bush (n=339) 38%  
Clinton (n=175) 38%

#### Partisan Sources

Bush 47%  
Clinton 38%

#### Non-partisan Sources

Bush 23%  
Clinton 37%

#### All Domestic

Bush 32%  
Clinton 39%

#### All Foreign Policy

Bush 50%  
Clinton 29%

#### Budget Deficit

Bush 16%  
Clinton 17%

#### Economy/Recession

Bush 20%  
Clinton 35%

#### Education

Bush 47%  
Clinton\*

#### Environment

Bush 31%  
Clinton\*

#### General Foreign Policy

Bush 74%  
Clinton\*

#### Persian Gulf

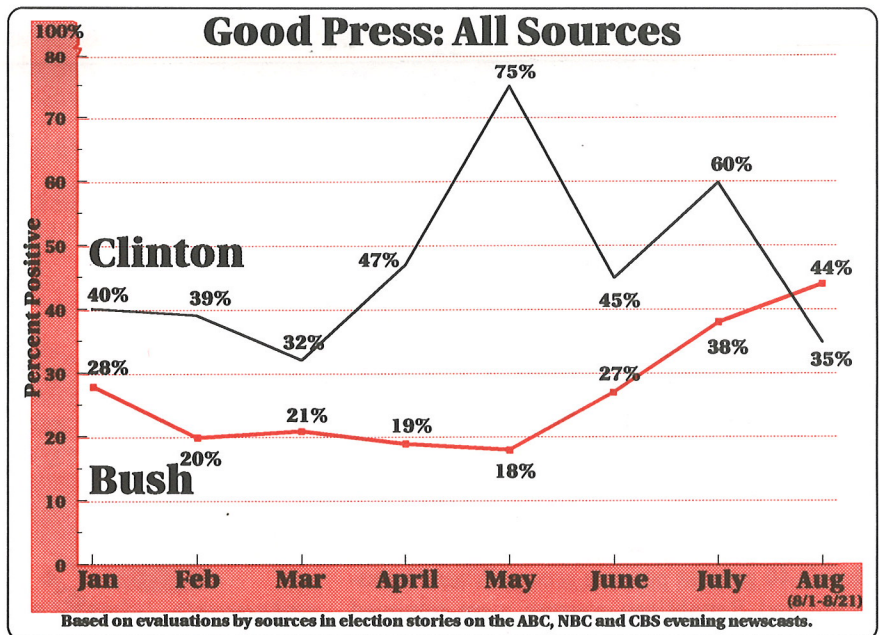
Bush 43%  
Clinton\*

#### Taxes

Bush 7%  
Clinton 28%

\*Numbers were reported only if there were 15 or more evaluations.

Based on evaluations by sources on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts (8/3-8/21).

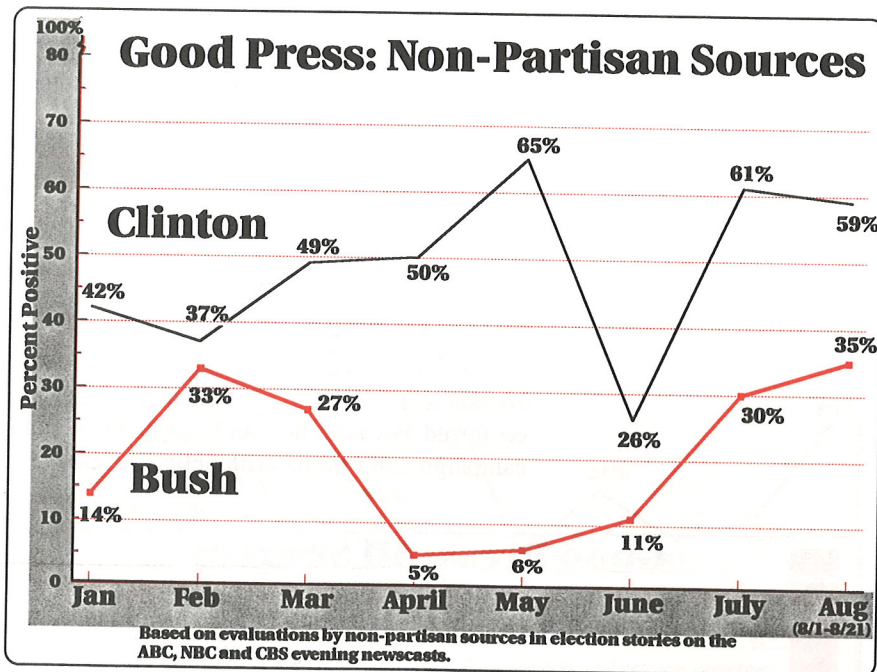


### As Time Goes By

George Bush has received lower marks on television news than any other presidential candidate during seven of the last eight months. During the primaries, Bush was criticized by 78 percent of news sources. Since then, his coverage has improved only slightly, to 60 percent negative assessments. The single exception has been the month of August, when Bush's reviews rose to 44 percent positive, while Clinton sank to just 35 percent positive, his lowest rating since March.

Bush's rise coincided with the Republican convention, a period when the nominee's party





traditionally dominates the news coverage. Thus, Republicans provided the lion's share of the sources praising Bush and panning Clinton during August. Among non-partisan sources (such as voters, pundits, and reporters), Clinton's good press margin over Bush remained as wide as ever during August (59% positive for Clinton, 35% positive for Bush).

The same pattern held true throughout the entire post-primary period. Among all sources, Clinton's 49 percent positive press bested Bush's 40 percent positive score. When Democratic and Republican sources were removed from the mix, Clinton's evaluations improved to 53 percent positive, while Bush's dropped to 29 percent positive. When ratings of Gore and Quayle were added, the Democratic ticket boasted a two-to-one advantage over their Republican counterparts, by 58 percent to 29 percent good press.

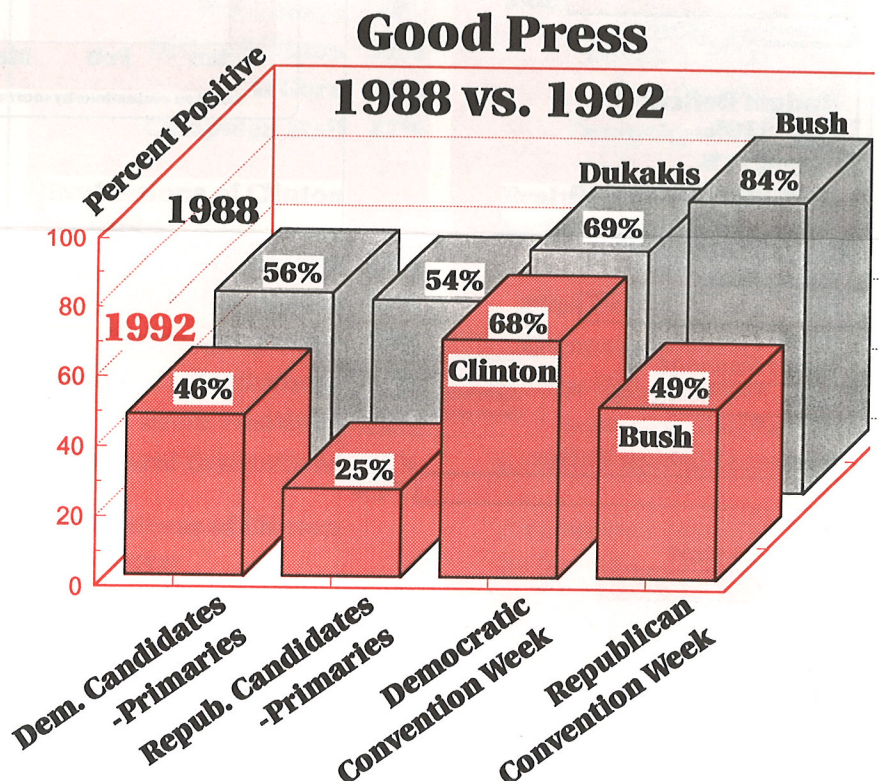
### That Was Then ...

So far this year, the tone of TV news election coverage has favored the Democrats over their Republican opponents. But these results are notably different from the pattern of coverage four years ago. After the 1988 primaries, we compared TV news evaluations

of all Democratic presidential candidates to the field of Republican contenders, and found that as groups the two sides received roughly balanced treatment (56% positive press for the Democrats, 54% positive for the Republicans). During the 1992 primaries, by contrast, Republicans faced criticism from three out of every four sources (25% positive evaluations), while Democratic contenders received roughly balanced press (46% positive).

There was a similar change since 1988 in network portrayals of the two nominating conventions. Bill Clinton garnered 68 percent positive evaluations during the week of his party's convention in New York City. That showing was nearly identical to the 69 percent positive coverage that Michael Dukakis received during his convention in July, 1988. A month later, George Bush's own 84 percent positive convention press actually bested Dukakis' showing. During the Houston convention this August, however, Bush received only 49 percent positive coverage.

Will television's treatment of the two contenders even out after the traditional Labor Day kickoff of the general election campaign? The next two issues of *Media Monitor* will track the final phase of Campaign '92.





## Campaign Comedy

Although the Democrats lead the campaign horse race, the Republicans lead the humor race. Since the primaries ended, the Republican presidential ticket has been joked about almost three times as often as the Democrats by comedians on late-night television. Not only is George Bush well in the lead as the most joked about individual in 1992, but Dan Quayle is also outdistancing Bill Clinton, with Senator Al Gore so far failing to register more than a blip on the joke meter.

### Bush

Hurricane Andrew is causing death and destruction in Florida. Today President Bush blamed the Democratic Congress. --Leno, 8/25

Do you know the main difference between Elvis and Bush's economic plan? Some people claim they've actually seen Elvis. --Arsenio, 8/21

Bush is being accused of manufacturing a crisis with Iraq. If true, it's the first manufacturing job he's brought to America in years. --Leno, 8/02

If Bush wants to destroy Iraq he should run for President of that country. --Leno, 8/28

Bush says he will only put his political commercials on programs that reflect his agenda. He can advertise his economic plan on "Rescue 911," he can go after Clinton on "A Current Affair," and he can explain why he chose Quayle on "Unsolved Mysteries." --Leno, 8/11

### Quayle

George Bush is as smart and caring as the next guy, especially since the next guy is Dan Quayle. --Leno, 8/19

There are rumors going around Washington that the government will attack Iraq and dump Quayle. Why don't we dump Iraq and attack Quayle? --Leno, 7/24

Bush said that he definitely will not dump Quayle. On the bright side, he's lied to us before. --Letterman, 7/23

The Republicans attack Clinton for the 38 percent illiteracy rate in America. Big deal, there's a 50 percent illiteracy rate on the Republican ticket. --Arsenio, 8/19

Quayle is excited about the prospect of being president. It means that at the next state dinner he wouldn't have to sit at the little card table. --Arsenio, 8/17

### Clinton

Bill Clinton recently spoke at the American Legion. I guess Jane Fonda wasn't available. --Leno, 8/25

Clinton said he's capable of being Commander in Chief because he has called out the Arkansas national guard. Isn't that like saying you can fly the space shuttle because you've seen every episode of "Star Trek"? --Leno, 8/31

Clinton is a religious man. He says he would endorse nine out of the ten commandments. --Leno, 8/26

There are tapes of Princess Di talking to a boyfriend, and it's a pretty explicit conversation. And Bill Clinton thought he had that all behind him. --Leno, 8/26

Automakers in Detroit say the Clinton-Gore ticket demands too much of them. They can't get the gas mileage Gore wants and the big backseat Clinton wants in the same car. --Leno, 8/28

### "Twofers"

Every time President Bush denies that he's had an affair, Bill Clinton gets a royalty. --Letterman, 8/13

The premier of Yugoslavia says that if the West intervenes there, it will look like another Vietnam. I guess that rules out Clinton and Quayle going there. --Leno, 8/11

Note: The wording of some jokes has been altered slightly for brevity.

