

Volume X Number 2

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## The Bad News Campaign

### TV News Coverage of the GOP Primaries

#### Major findings:

##### ■ Whose Campaign Is It...

Journalists got six times as much airtime as candidates did. *Page 1*

##### ■ Fast Talkers

Candidate soundbites averaged only 7.2 seconds. *Page 2*

##### ■ Love the Race

News of the horse race rose almost 50% over Campaign '92. *Page 2*

##### ■ Hate the Runners

Every major candidate got mostly bad press. *Page 3*

##### ■ Campaign Cynics

The campaign itself got over 90% negative reviews. *Page 4*

##### ■ ...Anyway?

The candidates' speeches and ads were more positive and substantive than the TV news reports. *Page 5*

How did TV news cover the GOP primaries? And how well did the network coverage reflect what really happened along the campaign trail? This special report on Campaign '96 examines the messages of both campaign journalism and the candidates themselves. This is one of a series of reports from the Markle Presidential Election Watch, sponsored by the John and Mary Markle Foundation.

From January 1 through the March 26 California primary, the ABC, CBS and NBC evening newscasts broadcast 573 stories on the 1996 presidential primaries, an increase of nearly 20 percent over the 1992 totals. But the upsurge in campaign news was confined to ABC and CBS, while NBC's coverage actually declined. In terms of airtime, CBS led the pack with 6 hours 28 minutes, up 34 percent from 1992; ABC offered 6 hours 18 minutes, up 20 percent; NBC (5 hours) was down 12 percent from its Campaign '92 total.

Only one-eighth of the total airtime (2 hours 9 minutes) consisted of comments from the nine GOP presidential candidates. The candidates were quoted more than a thousand times, but the average length of their "sound bites" was only 7.2 seconds. Only three percent of candidate sound bites exceeded 20 seconds; nearly half lasted five seconds or less.

GOP nominee Bob Dole received 41 minutes of speaking time, an average of less than 10 seconds per newscast. Pat Buchanan received just over 36 minutes of speaking time, while Steve Forbes

(continued on page 2)

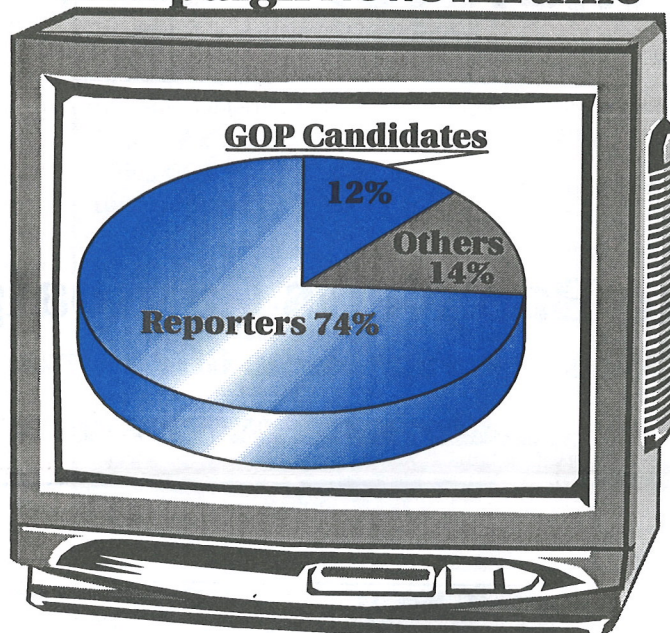


and Lamar Alexander each totalled 18 minutes. Also-rans Bob Dornan, Phil Gramm, Richard Lugar, Alan Keyes and Morry Taylor received a combined 15 minutes of airtime. Quotes from all other sources (voters, experts, campaign aides, interest groups, etc.) totalled just over 152 minutes. Reporters' own voices occupied the remaining 74 percent of airtime — more than 13 hours.

## Off to the Races

Stories about the campaign horse race — assessing each candidate's viability — grabbed the lion's share of the Campaign '96 news agenda. Nearly half (47%) of all election stories contained extensive discussions of the horse race, up almost 50 percent from Campaign '92. The primary coverage was front-loaded, as news about the Iowa caucuses (92 stories) and the New

## Campaign News Airtime



issues were taxes (34 stories, most about Forbes' flat tax proposal); the economy (32 stories); jobs (20); international trade (19); and the federal budget (18). Jobs and trade received heavy attention after Buchanan's New Hampshire victory.

"Candidate issues" got almost as much attention as policy issues — 29 percent of the total. These issues involve controversies over the campaign trail conduct of the candidates or their staffs. The most frequently discussed candidate issue was the perceived negative tone of the GOP campaign (36

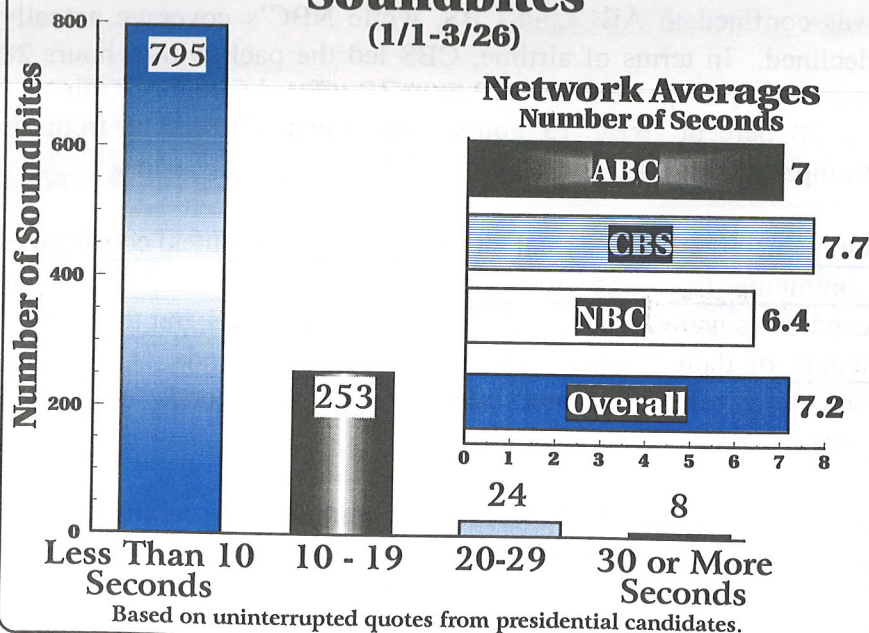
stories), followed by stories about Forbes' campaign spending (16) and his use of negative ads (11). Charges that Buchanan was an "extremist" were featured in 10 stories, a total equalled by allegations that Buchanan used racially divisive rhetoric or was personally bigoted. Overall, CBS ran as many stories about the candidates' behavior (82) as ABC and NBC combined (49 and 33 respectively).

Hampshire primary (98 stories) dwarfed that of later primaries like Arizona (24 stories), California (21), and South Carolina (20). No other state contest generated as many as a dozen stories.

Policy issues placed a distant second to the horse race. The policy debate was featured in less than 30 percent of Campaign '96 reports. The top five

## Soundbites

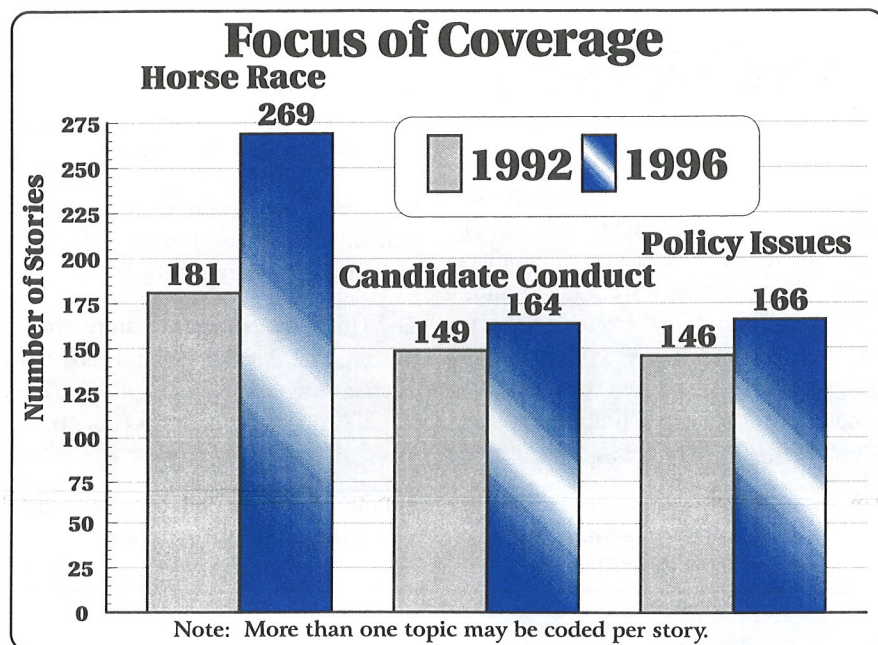
(1/1-3/26)



## Bashing the Candidates

All four leading Republican candidates — Dole, Forbes, Buchanan and Alexander — received more bad press than good press during the primary season. (We calculate good press by tallying every positive or negative evaluation of a candidate's record, policies, personal character and behavior on the campaign trail. Our tallies include all on-air opinions expressed by reporters and sources who are not affiliated with a candidate or party. "Good press" does not include opinions about a candidate's





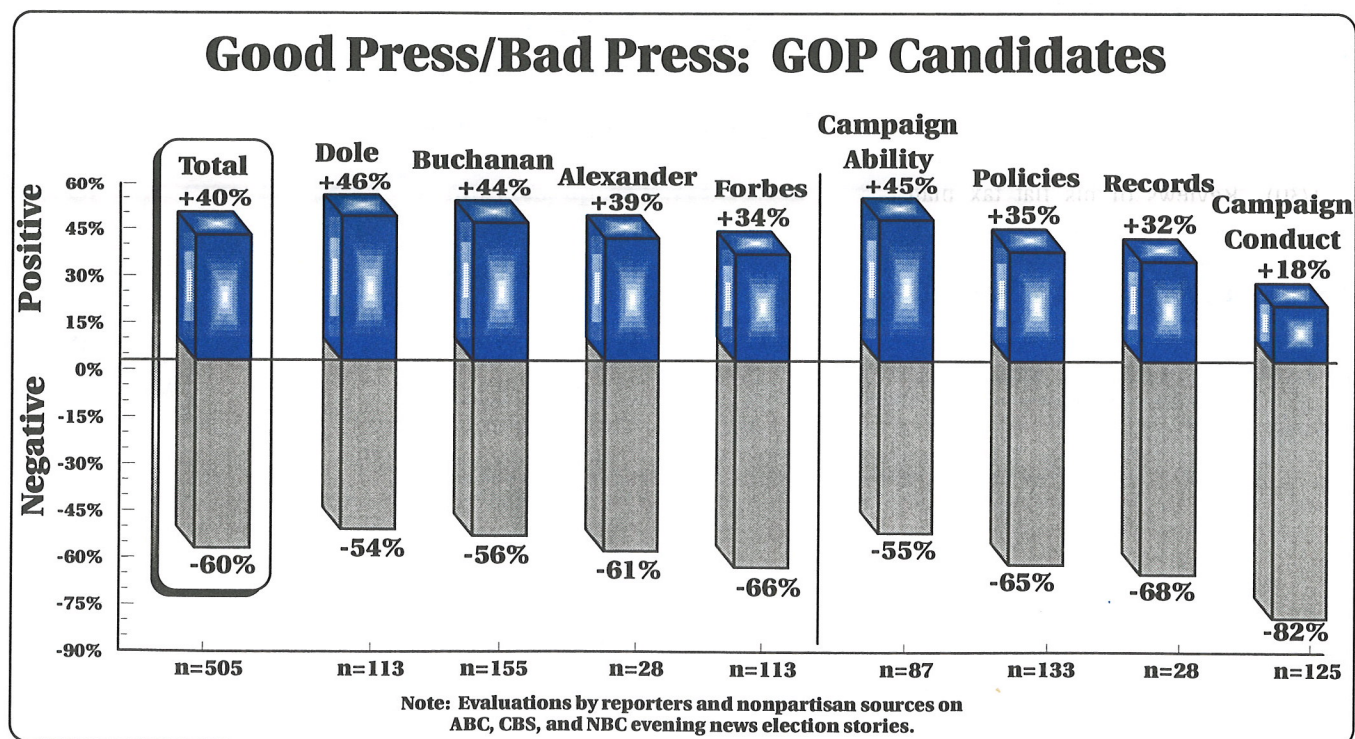
prospects in the horse race, which we tally separately.)

Among the major contenders, Bob Dole received the most balanced reviews: 46 percent positive and 54 percent negative evaluations. Typical was a comment from an Iowa voter, "I

am going to vote for Bob Dole because I think he's an experienced leader, [and] he's fiscally responsible." (CBS, 2/12) Sen. Dole was criticized for using negative campaign tactics and for perceived weakness as the GOP standard-bearer. "I think his central problem is he's

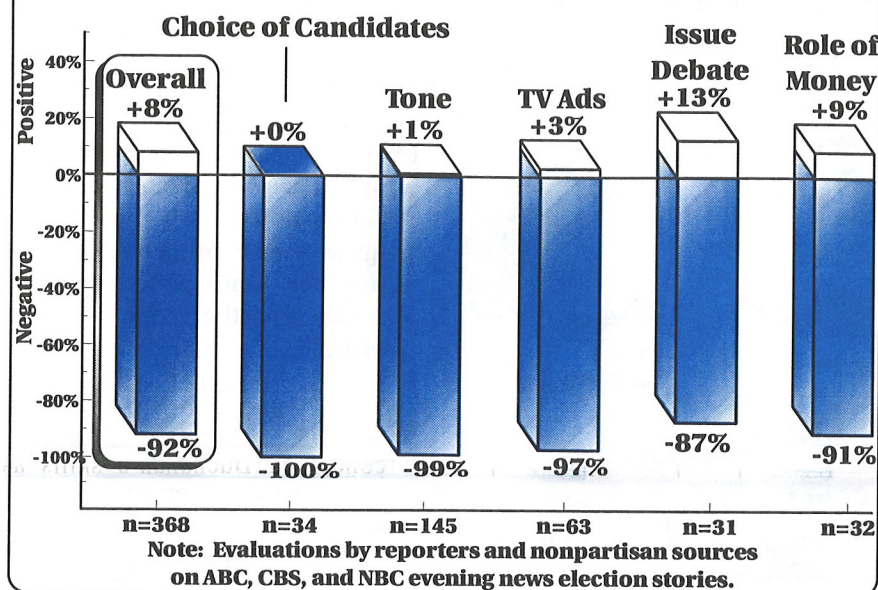
tired," said CBS analyst Kevin Phillips. "He's been running for national office for 20 years, he's 73 before the inauguration, and he shows the wear and tear and that lack of initiative and that lack of spark." (CBS, 2/28) ABC's John Cochran agreed that, "most of [Dole's] appearances have been as flat as his native Kansas." (ABC, 2/19)

Overall coverage of Pat Buchanan was also relatively balanced — 56 percent negative vs. 44 percent positive evaluations. But much of the praise concerned Buchanan's skills as a candidate (67% positive); his ideas and policies were heavily criticized. As NBC's Gwen Ifill put it, "He has a clear, provocative message, and he is the best messenger. Pat Buchanan can hit a hot button from a mile away." (NBC, 2/21) But the next night, her colleague Mike Jensen focused on Buchanan's economic policies: "Buchanan is calling for a kind of Fortress America. Most economists and business leaders call that a disaster." (NBC, 2/22) Buchanan faced heavy criticism of his trade





## Good Press/Bad Press: Campaign '96



policies (80% negative) and his alleged extremism (85% negative) and bigotry (91% negative).

Steve Forbes' coverage was the most lopsided: 66 percent negative evaluations vs. 34 percent positive. The worst reviews centered on his campaign conduct — 75 percent of sources accused him of buying the election, while 86 percent criticized his negative ads. NBC's Lisa Myers dubbed Forbes "Malcolm the Mudslinger," adding, "with ads like these, Forbes may find it tougher to persuade voters he's all that different from those career politicians." (NBC, 1/30) Reviews of his flat tax plan were also mostly (62%) negative. On the positive side, one voter enthused, "Steve Forbes... has a plan he understands, that there is a vision of America where everybody succeeds." (CBS, 1/28) But CBS's Eric Engberg observed, "the last time we tried something like this we ended up with these hideous deficits," before recommending that the flat tax (which he called "one giant, untested theory") first be tried out "someplace like Albania." (CBS, 2/8)

Alexander's coverage, though sparse, was also mostly critical (61% negative). Most of his negative

reviews centered either on questions surrounding his Tennessee business dealings or charges that his persona as an outsider was contrived. The remaining candidates — none of whom were ever painted as likely winners — all fared relatively well. Among the also-rans, Richard Lugar had the best media image, finishing with 88 percent positive press, followed by Alan Keyes (86% positive) and Phil Gramm (67% positive). None, however, were featured in more than a handful of Campaign '96 stories.

### Trashing the Campaign

Although the candidates faced heavy criticism, each had his on-air defenders. But few defended the campaign itself; the quality of Campaign '96 was criticized by 92 percent of network reporters and nonpartisan sources. Nearly two-thirds (64%) of these criticisms were voiced by journalists themselves. By overwhelming margins, the critics portrayed Campaign '96 as a negative exercise in big money manipulation

of inattentive voters, dominated by mean and misleading television commercials devoid of substance. "On and on it goes, like a dog chasing its tail," complained CBS's Bob Schieffer. "Any serious discussion of the issues is lost in this maw of 'Yes, you did,' and 'No, you didn't.'" (CBS, 2/12)

The most frequent complaints centered on the antagonistic tone of the campaign debate (99% negative), the role of TV ads (97% negative), and the importance of money in the election process (91% negative). Peter Jennings led one newscast by asserting, "Forget about the issues... there is enough mud being tossed around... to keep a health spa supplied for a lifetime." (ABC, 2/16) Voters were universally portrayed as dissatisfied with their choice of candidates. "None of these nine candidates... has inspired voters, nor are many voters persuaded that these candidates have the secret to improve their lives," reported Lisa Myers. (NBC, 2/11) CBS's Bob McNamara agreed that "the campaign has left many voters as cold as the weather." (CBS, 2/9) According to election results, however, voter participation in the early GOP primaries was higher than in either 1988 or 1992.

### Reality Check

The news media convey the tone and substance of the campaign to voters unable to personally witness its major events. But how well does the media image reflect the campaign trail reality? To find out, we compared the news reports to the actual speeches the major candidates gave and the commercials they broadcast.

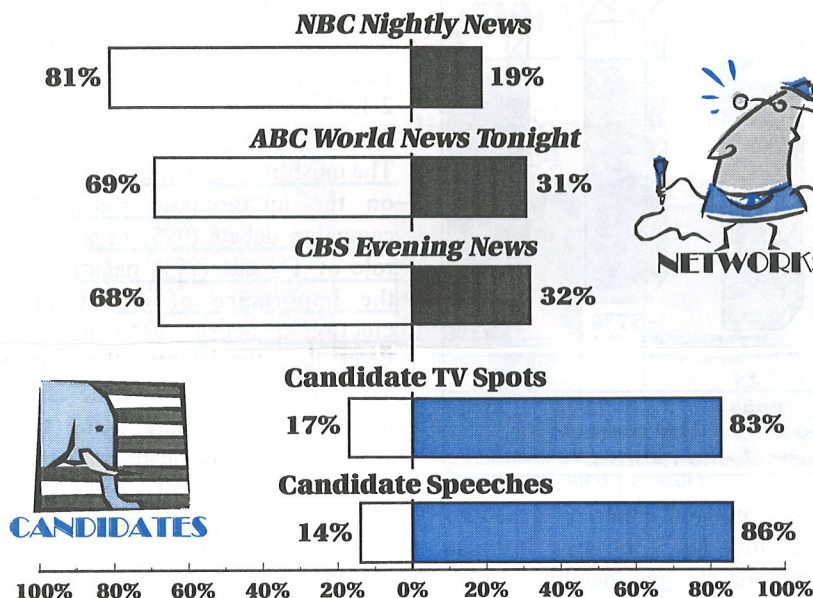
During the New Hampshire primary campaign (January 1 through February 19), we analyzed 28 major



## Campaign '96 Reality Check Substance

Percent Non-substantive

Percent Substantive\*



\* News stories, speeches, or TV spots primarily about the candidates' qualifications and policy issues, 1/1-2/19.

(83%) focused on substantive discussions of policy issues or candidate qualifications. During this period, the candidates focused mainly on taxes, the federal budget, the role of government, welfare reform and what the candidates termed "traditional values." The most frequent theme of news coverage during the same period was the allegedly hostile tone of the campaign.

But the candidates actually conducted a more positive campaign than the news coverage indicated. Two-thirds (66%) of all evaluative statements within the candidates' speeches were positive references to themselves, the campaign, or other election year players (such as the Congress or the political parties). TV commercials were less positive (56%), but positive messages outnumbered negative ones. News stories, however, emphasized criticism of the

speeches and all 59 television ads aired locally by the four leading contenders — Alexander, Buchanan, Dole and Forbes. We applied the same methods to their campaign messages that we used to study the network coverage. The results show that TV news failed to fully convey the substance of the campaign, while exaggerating its negativity.

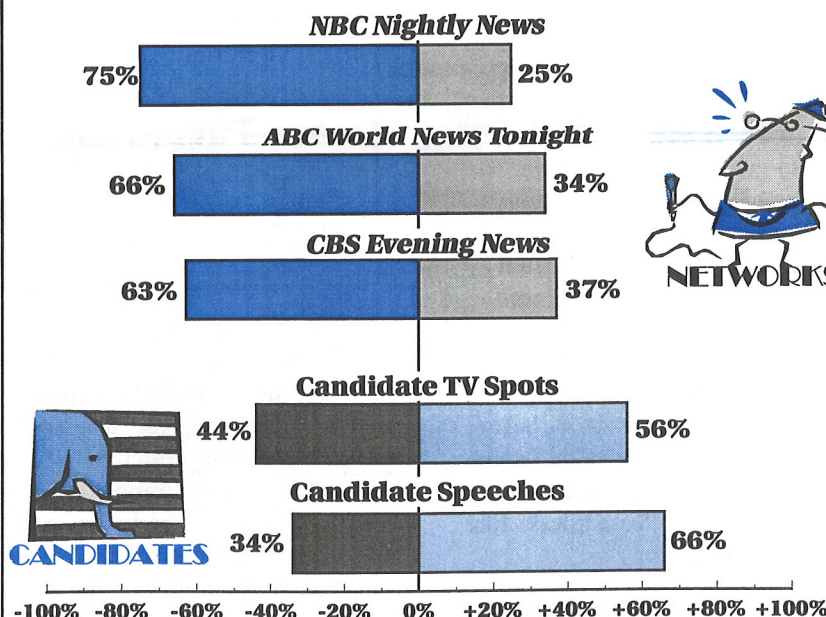
From the beginning of the year until primary day, the three networks aired 315 news stories about the road to New Hampshire. Only about one in four stories (28%) focused on matters of substance: policy issues such as taxes, abortion, and immigration, or the candidates' backgrounds and qualifications. Nearly three out of four (72%) featured discussions of the horse race, the candidates' motives or tactics, or other campaign controversies not involving public policy issues.

In contrast, the vast majority of the candidates' speeches (86%) and ads

## Campaign '96 Reality Check Tone

Percent Negative

Percent Positive



\*Based on negative and positive comments about the candidates, the campaign, and the political parties from reporters and nonpartisan news sources appearing on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news programs, or on the TV spots or in speeches, 1/1-2/19.



candidates and the campaign. Negative judgments outnumbered positive ones on the evening news by a two-to-one margin (67% negative to 33% positive) — almost the precise opposite of the tone conveyed by the candidates. Ironically, many of these negative comments came from reporters bemoaning the conduct of the campaign — comments which were at odds with reality but may have reinforced the very trend that reporters so frequently deplored.

### Campaign Comedy

Bob Dole drew more barbs (135) from TV's latenight comics than any of his GOP rivals, but runners-up Pat Buchanan (113) and Steve Forbes (78) also drew a hearty share of laughs. After New Hampshire, Jay Leno, David Letterman and Conan O'Brien zapped Buchanan more than Dole, Forbes, or any other personality (including President Clinton and O.J. Simpson). Some sample one-liners:

☺ Buchanan's campaign is generating the most heat — from burning books and crosses. (Leno)

☺ When Bob Dole first ran for office it was much easier. There were only 13 colonies. (Letterman)

☺ Letterman's suggested campaign slogan: "Vote for Forbes. In your heart you know he's nuts."

☺ Hotels in New Hampshire are reporting that Pat Buchanan's staff have been cutting eye-holes in pillow cases. (Letterman)

☺ Because of equal time laws, Pat Buchanan can no longer host *Crossfire*, and Bob Dole can no longer host *Tales from the Crypt*. (Letterman)

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