Major Findings:

The Candidate
In 1980 Reagan and Jimmy Carter both got five times as many negative as positive comments on TV news. Page 2

But in 1984 Walter Mondale got a majority of good press, while judgments of Reagan sank to 10 to 1 negative. Page 2

Enter Reagan
In 1981 the new administration's coverage was over 2 to 1 negative. Page 3

Reagan's policies fared even worse, running a 3 to 1 negative ratio in the national press; his foreign policy took the hardest hits. Page 4

Reagan, Clinton, and George W. Bush all got mostly negative coverage during their first year in office, but Reagan's was the worst. Page 3

The Incumbent
In 1983 Reagan's "mid-term reviews" were 13 to 1 negative on TV News. Page 6

Gorbachev fared better than Reagan in coverage of their summit meetings. Page 5

Exit Reagan
As a “lame duck” after the 1988 election, Reagan's TV news coverage was 2 to 1 negative - about the same as when he entered office. Page 6
Both Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter received overwhelmingly negative coverage on TV news during the 1980 general election campaign. But in 1984 the Democratic challenger, Walter Mondale, received a majority of positive coverage, while Reagan's coverage was ten to one negative.

(To determine how much good or bad press a president receives, we note every positive or negative evaluation of their record, policies, personal character and performance. Our tallies include all on-air opinions expressed by sources and reporters, excluding neutral or ambiguous statements. For examples of evaluations see page 7.)

Note: In addition to our own studies, this Media Monitor draws on the work of former Georgetown political scientist Michael Robinson, who pioneered the statement-based scientific content analysis that was the original model for CMPA's political news studies. The references for the data represented in these tables appear on page eight.
The national press rated Reagan's foreign and domestic policies worse than those of Clinton and Bush. On TV news Reagan's foreign policies also got the lowest marks.
A 1983 study by Robinson found that Ronald Reagan's press was 13 to 1 negative on TV news midway through his first term. CMPA studied Reagan's TV news coverage as a "lame duck" president, from election day 1988 to inauguration day 1989, when George H. W. Bush took office. The 2 to 1 negative ratio of evaluations suggests that the media's first look back at the Reagan presidency was far less laudatory than the coverage that followed his death in June 2004.
Examples of evaluations:

Domestic Policy:

“Saying he’s [Reagan] balancing the budget while cutting bureaucracy... just shows where the insensitivity is and how removed he is from the lives of most people.”
—day care center operator, NBC, 10/10/81

“While President Reagan was in St. Louis today speaking about an America on the mend, there was another America not far off... of 12 million unemployed, where the wounds are still too fresh and painful to mend.”
—Dan Rather, CBS, 2/1/83

Elections:

“[Reagan's] campaign highlights the images and hides from the issues.”
—Lesley Stahl, CBS, 10/04/84

“The president offered pomp and platitudes... a cynical campaign, manipulative.”
—Chris Wallace, NBC, 11/06/84

The Summits:

"The three images [of Reagan] are: he's an actor; he's a cowboy, and... he's a Rambo, some sort of wild man.” —British professor, CBS, 6/3/88

“I think Mikhail Gorbachev is an outstanding statesman.”
—Andre Sakharov, ABC, 6/3/88

Iran Contra:

“At best (his explanation of IranContra) 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, 5/15/87

Transition to GHW Bush:

“Mr. Reagan got off to a bad start and ended badly.”
—Vernon Jordan, Urban League, ABC, 1/14/89
References:


9. Based on evaluations on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news during the Washington, D.C. (11/30-12/10/87) and Moscow (5/22-6/5/88) summits.