

D.C. Journalists and the Revolving Door

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The advantages the public derives from politicians, press aides, and policy makers jumping into a career in journalism are few. The best defense of this practice has been advanced by Charles Peters. Peters, editor of *Washington Monthly*, argues that too many journalists don't understand how government really works, and that their reporting would benefit from a turn in the public sector. If Peters had his way, reporters in their late 20s and early 30s would work in government for several years and then return to journalism. "It would last you a lifetime as a journalist to go into government while you are young," he told *American Journalism Review*. "You would have a sense of where the bodies are buried, where the story really lays, who to call."

There's something to be said for Peters' point, since it's only logical that familiarity with government improves a journalist's ability to report on its activities. Two frequently cited examples of how government service can add to a journalist's or commentator's ability to do their job are NBC's Tim Russert, who hosts *Meet the Press*, and *New York Times'* columnist Bill Safire. Russert was a flack for Democrats Pat Moynihan and Mario Cuomo; Safire wrote speeches for Nixon's White House. A lot of people think such experience helps Russert separate Washington spin from real news, and enables Safire to understand the pressures and pitfalls inherent in running a presidential administration. Fair enough.

Yet for the credibility of journalism as a whole, the drawbacks of the revolving door outweigh its advantages. Journalism suffers when TV news executives choose to hire former politicians and press secretaries to provide commentary, rather than seasoned reporters who have spent years honing their craft.

An important line was crossed when former Congresswoman Susan Molinari and 2000 presidential candidate Bill Bradley served stints as CBS commentators. (Thankfully, neither lasted long.) The same was true when erstwhile Clinton aide George Stephanopoulos blithely skipped over to journalism, snagging major dollars and face time as a "news analysts" for ABC. This aspect of the revolving door phenomena amounts to stunt casting aimed at bringing in viewers, and reinforces the image of television news as a business driven primarily by entertainment values. Rather than receiving the thoughtful analysis of a reporter who's covered Washington for over 30 years, like the *Washington Post's* David Broder, viewers are treated instead to the musings of retired members of Congress and political hacks who inevitably bring partisan bias to their commentary. News execs and the freshly minted pundits themselves insist they are scrupulously even-handed, but their assurances are dubious. George Stephanopoulos, for example, might write a piece in *Newsweek* (which he did) detailing the spin methods employed by the Clinton White House and predicting how the president would react to an impending battle with Congress. Media critics wondered at the time whether Stephanopoulos, in his role as news analyst, was offering valuable insights into the Clinton administration or

actually using his position to shape the tone of press coverage, thereby continuing to carry water for his former boss.

Politicians and political operatives who become pundits or reporters, or journalists who have worked in government, represent a fairly straightforward ethical conflict. These folks usually cross the line in one direction or the other a single time. For example, Mary Matalin was an operative in President Bush's '92 election campaign, then became co-host of CNBC's *Equal Time*, and has now migrated to CNN's *Crossfire*. Bernard Kalb was a longtime journalist before serving as spokesman for President Reagan's State Department. He is now co-host of CNN's media program, *Reliable Sources*. Bill Kristol was Vice President Dan Quayle's Chief of Staff before becoming editor and publisher of the *Weekly Standard*.

More troubling are those who twirl through the revolving door at regular intervals. David Gergen served three Republican presidents, became an editor for *U.S. News & World Report* and political commentator on *The MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour*, returned to the White House in the early '90s to advise President Clinton, and then resumed his editorial duties at *U.S. News*. To his credit, Gergen no longer pretends to be a journalist. (Even so, Gergen can still be seen on TV in quasi-journalistic settings; last year he conducted a series of interviews with authors for *The Newshour*.) The unrepentant Patrick J. Buchanan is in constant transit between the worlds of politics and journalism. Once an editorial writer for *The St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, Buchanan became a speechwriter for Richard Nixon, and then a syndicated columnist and co-host of CNN's *Crossfire*. After that, he was

Ronald Reagan's second Communications Director (taking over for Gergen in 1985) and is now set to launch his third bid for the White House. In between forays into government, Buchanan returns to *Crossfire*, which furnishes a ready-made platform from which to air his views (and, presumably, initiate his next presidential campaign).

In addition to encouraging the perception that individuals who jump back and forth between government and journalism are interested less in public service than in advancing their careers, the revolving door increases skepticism about both institutions. I recall doing a double-take when I saw NBC's Pete Williams doing a stand-up in front of the Justice Department only months – or was it weeks? – after I'd seen him serving up the official line to reporters as Pentagon spokesman during the Gulf War. I was incredulous, and angry.

There are, of course, no laws prohibiting movement from journalism to government service, or government service to journalism, but there ought to be. People need to know there's plenty of daylight between reporters and the government they cover. Like the White House Correspondents dinners that expose the clubby elitism of Washington reporters and politicians, the revolving door reveals an incestuous relationship that undermines public trust. Inevitably, the practice degrades democracy and journalism. As Pat Buchanan's shenanigans attest, however, the sad fact is that it's likely to continue.