

Around-the-Clock News Cycle a Double-Edged Sword

Madeleine K. Albright, interviewed by Nicholas Kralev

Mr. Kralev: Madam Secretary, how, in your view, has the twenty-four-hour news cycle influenced foreign policy making?

Ms. Albright: It has changed a lot of aspects. If you look back at how the press used to operate, there were only set briefings and plenty of time to write. Now, it's a constant cycle—twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. But it doesn't have a uniform effect. Some of it is very good, because you know what's going on and there is a real-time sense about things. I know that they are watching CNN in Belgrade, for example, and that everybody is watching everybody else. But, in other ways, it makes you have to respond to events much faster than it might be prudent, because facts may come in incorrect, but you don't have time to put them in context, so you respond just to a little nugget of fact, and when you learn the context later, things change. So it's a double-edged sword: it helps us when we need to get a message out quickly, but the boomerang effect plays a huge role.

There is no question that the press is very much part of our lives, and I think it has a big effect on foreign policy. I have spent my life studying the role of the press in political change. The press is not just a reporter of foreign policy anymore. So when you interview a foreign leader and get information that is either different or enhanced from what we have, it becomes part of the policy.

K: How would you characterize the reporters covering the State Department, and what kind of relationship do you have with them?

A: They are very foreign policy focused, while the White House press is very politically focused. They are very educated about foreign policy and ask very specific questions. One of the problems is that when I have a leader here, they don't ask a question that has to do with the man or woman standing next to me, but whatever is on their minds, and it creates a weird impression. To be fair, we use each other. When we want to get a message out, which one has to as a

government, we make a statement, and without the press it'll be like a tree in the forest falling and nobody knowing. So there is definitely a great symbiotic relationship that develops.

K: Is that also true of the press traveling with you on the plane?

A: Yes. We go some place in a capsule together and we brief and do background on the plane. In some ways—and I don't want the press to be irritated by this—we are a team. It's very interesting when I do a press conference and I see the people that I brought with me; there is obviously much more of a team activity. At the same time, the press that travels with me asks some pretty tough questions, and press people on the ground don't have a clue what they are talking about.

I think the relationship has been pretty good. They have a hard job, and I respect what the press does. I was married to a journalist, and I wrote my dissertation on journalists. So I have always respected it. It's funny because it's like bringing your own problem with you, but I need you and you need me. You need me to be interesting in order to get a story. If I travel around and there is no press, who cares? So we are locked in this symbiotic relationship.

I usually try to have a social dinner with the journalists. The hard part for me has always been how you separate the two things. My former husband told me a reporter is always a reporter, even if you are having a social dinner. And I have been disappointed on occasion that some of the people, who are very nice and say nice things, then write some really hideous story. I have to say, it is somewhat disappointing.

K: What about the local press in the countries you visit—how different is it from the U.S. media?

A: There was a perfect example of how the local media tried to move the story in a particular direction in Sharm el-Sheikh [Egypt, on October 5, 2000], where the reporters, instead of asking questions, seemed to be making statements. I got irritated at the very beginning when a woman said that the United States is a "supposedly unbiased mediator." I was trying to figure out whether it was worth getting mad or not, and I decided it wasn't. I said the United States is an "honest negotiator and mediator." Then every time they asked a question, they loaded it up with a bunch of stuff, which automatically changed the tone. I think that that is not the role of the media. As it turned out, it actually made my answers more specific and sharper, and I never have said what I said there—that I'm tired of having questions be editorialized. That was a good example of the press, instead of reporting a story, exacerbating it and pushing it into a different direction.

K: Do you think the U.S. media have been fair to you in their coverage over the past four years?

A: I do think they have been fair. There have been a couple of ones I haven't liked, but how can I look thin as I develop a thicker skin. But I think the press needs to look at the broader picture of foreign policy, just the way the American public does. We are in this together. I know how hard it is to get on the front page, or to get a minute on TV, and stories are not printed unless they have something dramatic, and straight reporting doesn't get you where you want to be. But the issues are quite different and they need to be explained longer. They may not be sexy right away, but they can get that way if people really understand them. In some ways, it depends on how the media see their role.

Something negative that has happened is that there are stories that are just wrong, absolutely wrong. Somewhere a quote is taken misread or misunderstood, and we all feel victimized by that.

For example, one of the discussions that had been going on about the bombing of Kosovo was whether this would involve us in a long-term, Vietnam-type war. I had never believed it would. And then there was the question of whether the bombing would get rid of Milosevic. I was asked on PBS whether I believed the bombing would take a long time. I know what was on my mind. There were a couple of questions that I didn't answer exactly and Jim Lehrer kept pressing me. I wanted to make it very clear that it would not be a Vietnam-type war, nor that it would be overnight. So I very carefully chose to say that it would be a *relatively* short-term, and *relatively* was very important. When the stories were written, they left out *relatively*. I'm now accused that I'd said the bombing would get rid of Milosevic. I never said that. I know what I thought and said, and I know how it was reported. So it can create problems that simply were not there. That's why it's so important for the reporters to understand the responsibility that goes with it.

K: How have you dealt with the overwhelming media interest in your personal life ever since President Clinton selected you as his secretary of state?

A: First of all, I have never really been a very private person. But, at the same time, I never had a reason that people should be interested in my life. I'm pretty open about it, so it doesn't bother me and I don't mind it—I mind it to the extent that it affects my kids, because they don't like it, but I figure it goes with the job. I have always been an extrovert, and I really like people. But this so-called popularity is not exactly the way that I had seen myself in my previous life. Nor did my high school friends see me that way.

K: Thank you, Madam Secretary.

Note

Nicholas Krlev, editorial assistant of the *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, interviewed Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright in her office at the state department on September 29, 2000, and aboard her plane on October 5, 2000.