

### **Shaping the Race Issue: A Special Kind of Journalism**

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**Abstract** The paper examines the press coverage of the Los Angeles Times in the 1982 gubernatorial election between Mayor Tom Bradley and George Deukmejian in terms of the proclivity to highlight Bradley's race in campaign news stories. The paper focuses on the statement made by Deukmejian campaign manager, Bill Roberts, in the early days of October, with his candidate trailing badly in the polls, that 'there was a hidden anti-black vote' that would aid Deukmejian on Election Day. The authors detail the Los Angeles Times coverage of this statement and the tendency of the Times to focus on this story during the entire month of October rather than to report on the issues addressed by the candidates. The analysis notes that as campaign coverage zeroed in on the race issue, so did pout and voter interest. After examining the coverage and Deukmejian's narrow victory, the author poses questions of ethics to reporters engaged in this writing and outline concerns for such practices in future elections and campaigns.

### **Introduction**

It is axiomatic that any stratagem pointed to the selling of a public official must be flexible enough to allow the candidate's image to embrace the political reality of the accusations, the innuendo, and the unique demands that shape the modern political environment. However, out of a universe of potential issues, a highly specific campaign agenda is sometimes fashioned for the candidate by a powerful external force: news headlines that give sustenance to questionable campaign issues as they test the candidate's ability to respond to the dutiful probing of the media. This paper seeks to explore how California candidate Tom Bradley's race attained a formidable campaign presence in the *Los Angeles Times*' coverage of the 1982 gubernatorial campaign. It seeks to demonstrate the agenda-setting capability of today's media by historically examining how California's largest newspaper highlighted a highly questionable issue in the mediated reality it presented to its public.

### **The 1982 California Gubernatorial Election**

What this election means, the message it sends to you, all the children of California when you see me here tonight, is that if you set your mind to it, develop high goals, and never lose sight of them. . . if you work hard, if you remain determined you can do anything you want. This election sends the message loud and clear that California is still a very special place. A special place where what matters is not your name, not where you live,

but what you do. What this election says to the children. What it says to all of us is yes, we can redeem the California dream . . . and with your help—I'll become governor who will make a difference.

This was the victory message Mayor Tom Bradley planned to deliver at his election headquarters on November 2, 1982. Election-day reports described large numbers of people standing in line to vote throughout the state.<sup>2</sup> A heavy turnout was an essential — component in the Bradley campaign's strategy to defeat his conservative rival, State Attorney General George Deukmejian. The mayor's supporters sensed victory. Bradley's own campaign pollster, Hugh Schwartz, predicted an eleven-point Bradley victory.<sup>3</sup> Seconds after the polls closed, Mervin Field projected that Bradley would be the state's next chief executive.<sup>4</sup> Moments later, KABC's pollster Steve Teichner concurred. The final pre-election edition of the *Los Angeles Times* Poll presaged Tom Bradley a winner by a comfortable ten-point margin. And, across town the *Herald Examiner's* late edition announced that it had been "Bradley in a Squeaker." After the polls closed, there was a consensus that the popular Los Angeles mayor had just become California's governor-elect.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, history failed to play out the musing of the president. As the votes were tabulated it was evident, that the outcome gubernatorial race was far from certain. At one point during the early morning hours of November 3, only 137 votes separated the two candidates, out of a total of more than seven million votes cast.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the supportive poll predictions and morning-after headlines, the final ballot tally showed that Tom Bradley had lost his bid to become the nation's first elected black V governor. Bradley's victory had at the last second melted into defeat in the closest California gubernatorial contest in the state's modern history.<sup>7</sup> The coverage of the 1982 California gubernatorial election underscores the lack of consistent standards among journalists about how to cover an ethnic candidate running for public office. A postmortem of the Bradley and Deukmejian campaigns and the massive media coverage they generated suggests that, contrary to the numerous public pledges by both candidates to keep the race issue out of the campaign, Bradley's racial heritage emerge! as the decisive issue during the last six weeks of the 1982 gubernatorial contest. <sup>8</sup> In this period, pollsters and the state's largest newspaper, the *Los Angeles Times*, began to focus public attention on the matter of Bradley's race. The race issue quickly evolved in campaign coverage from a passing journalistic reference to become a dominant election theme. By isolating and critiquing the *Los Angeles Times'* role in packaging race into an election issue, this study aims to illuminate the tensions inherent between the profession's awesome responsibility to preserve an accurate historical picture and the consequences of *its* inadvertent acts of change.

### **Addressing the Racial Constraint: The California Dream Metaphor and an Issue-Oriented Campaign Plan**

I remember when my parents brought me to California. I was six, and my mother told me we were going to a place where it did not matter what your name was, or where you lived. She told me California was a special place where people judged you on deeds, what you did, and nothing else. -I've remembered that. I studied hard and even though my high school guidance counselor

told **me** I had no chance, I went to UCLA on a track scholarship. Then I became a policeman and went to law school at night. I've always believed that California is a very special place. I know what it has done for me and I know what it can still do for everyone. It's a place where if you put your mind to it, if you work hard, you not only can dream dreams, but here in California you can go out and realize them.<sup>9</sup>

Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley often related this message to voters in the 1982 California gubernatorial election. The passage typifies the Bradley campaign's attempt to meet any concern the voting public might have regarding the volatile "non-issue" in the **V** contest, Bradley's race. The latent message behind this "California dream" metaphor was that of a candidate for governor who abided by and valued the additional protestant work ethic. It communicated Bradley's currency for success as determination, hard work and a spirit of cooperation. Bradley was not a black candidate for governor but was merely the democratic candidate for the state's highest office who happened to be black. His record of thirty-nine years of public service was presented to the public as evidence of his assimilationist ideology, an outlook and image which had benefited all of Los Angeles during his tenure as mayor. The overall campaign goal was to present Bradley as the issue-oriented candidate with a portfolio of programs designed to benefit the entire state's constituency.

### **Journalistic Framing of the "Unspoken Issue"**

While the Democrat's campaign attempted to squarely meet its racial constraint, the campaign coverage of the state's largest newspaper, the *Los Angeles Times*, frequently made references to Bradley's race. In early September, as he covered traditional Labor Day political activity, *Times* reporter William Endicott wrote in a front-page story:

An unspoken but underlying issue is the question of race as Bradley bids to become the nation's first elected black governor. Although he publicly discounts race as an issue, Bradley has expressed concern over Deukmejian's failure to agree to a fair campaign practices agreement. . . . But both Deukmejian and his campaign manager, Bill Roberts, have promised a "high road" campaign and both have vowed that, as far as they are concerned, race will not be an issue.<sup>7</sup>

A comprehensive analysis of the *Los Angeles Times*' coverage of the 1982 California gubernatorial campaign reveals that this one reference to Bradley's "bid to become the first black Governor in the nation's history," was in fact, *an* example of the paper's ongoing emphasis on Bradley's race as a legitimate election issue. By the beginning of October, the *Times*' campaign coverage had included numerous major stories, headlines, and poll that generated public focus on Bradley's race.

Polls in the summer months of the campaign showed Bradley increasing his lead over his Republican opponent; a Teichner poll for the *Times* reported the Los Angeles mayor ahead by twenty-two points on September 26.<sup>12</sup> Yet, the last six weeks of the election witnessed a gradual erosion of Bradley's lead. Reporting the results of a Field poll on page one in its September 26th edition, the *Times* focused on the campaign's "non-issue," Bradley's race. According to Field, 6% percent of those polled favored Deukmejian because Bradley "is black or because they thought he

would favor minorities.” Field viewed it as “remarkable that even 6% would *admit* to that. . . . Whatever it is, it’s an understatement. “c’ An earlier Field poll had detected 2 percent with similar viewpoints.’<sup>4</sup> I.A. Lewis, director of the *Los Angeles Times* poll, explained the difficulty in assessing the impact of the racial factor: “Social scientists point out that there is a tendency for people to respond in a socially acceptable manner— to give an answer that is socially acceptable. . . . It’s not socially acceptable to be a racist. “

A *Times* poll a week earlier had found “a higher percentage than usual of registered black voters—who make up about 7% of the electorate—indicating they will turn out on election day . . . and Bradley gets 95% of the black vote.”<sup>6</sup> It is significant that the *Times* report offered an analysis only of black voter preference. No mention was made of the preferences of Hispanics, the state’s largest minority, or Asians, who account for 6 percent of the state’s population. Bradley’s overwhelming support among blacks was once again highlighted in a front- page early October *Times* headline: “DEMOCRATIC POLLSTER SEES HEAVY BLACK TURNOUT.” Pollster Peter Hart reported that blacks “hate Ronald Reagan with a vengeance and I mean a vengeance” and “are motivated to express their opposition at the polls.” In the story White House aide Edward Rollins speculated that if black voters participate “in far greater numbers than they have before, in greater proportion than they have to white voters, then certainly that’s going to make a difference (on November 2).”<sup>17</sup>

In response to the growing interest and press questions on the role of race in the campaign, Bradley continued to downplay the importance of the issue: “I have never said—nor do I believe, that race will become a significant factor in this campaign.”<sup>18</sup> However, in spite of the candidate’s best efforts, it soon was.

#### Roberts’ Allegation of a “Hidden Anti-Black Vote. . . It’s a Fact of Life”

Journalistic posturing toward the race issue took a dramatic turn on October 8, 1982. At a decisive point in the election a *Times* story trumpeted: “DEUKMETIAN SIDE; BIAS CLOSES GAP, HIDDEN ANTI-BLACK VOTE ‘FACT OF LIFE.’ “Deukmejian campaign manager Bill Roberts had been caught in a careless attempt to rationalize the many polls showing Deukmejian far behind: “If we are down only 5 points or less in the polls by election time, we’re going to win (because of) the hidden anti-black vote. . . . It’s (the hidden anti-black vote) just a fact of life. If people are going to vote that way, they certainly are not going to announce it for a survey (poll) taker. You will not get the truth from people regarding the race issue. . . . We’re not getting involved in the issue at all, and I think George Deukmejian already has pretty well repudiated racist voting.”<sup>9</sup>

Roberts’ campaign assertion of an anti-black vote dominated media campaign coverage for the next five days. Bradley’s reaction, voiced to a campaign reporter who queried whether the candidate took the statement as an insult, was entirely consistent with his earlier efforts to eviscerate the race issue: “It’s an insult—not to me—but to all the people of California—to suggest that in 1982 people will vote for governor based on something other than the merits of the candidates.”<sup>20</sup>

An October 9th *Times* article again featured the Roberts’ charge on page one. The *Times* account revealed that the incident had “caught Deukmejian completely by surprise:” Deukmejian said he called Roberts and “we had a very serious discussion. I’m not going to relate our verbatim conversation, . . . Race is not relevant to this Campaign,” the attorney general said.

“And I disagree with (his) comments.” Deukmejian added that Roberts is a political professional who has worked for him before and has “always has served me very, very well. . . But the GOP candidate noted that “sometimes when he (Roberts) looks at these issues, he looks at them as a professional, as sort of theorizing, and yet there are other practical aspects to issues like this and discussions about such issues.” Deukmejian said he knows that Roberts has repeatedly advised the campaign staff that references to Bradley’s race are not to be permitted and said, ‘we’re not counting on anything like that (the anti-black bias of some voters) in the campaign.’”<sup>21</sup>

By the week’s end, Deukmejian publicly announced the departure of *his* campaign director. The internal campaign move was bluntly captioned on the front page in the *Los Angeles Times*: “HEAD OF DEUKMEJIAN DRIVE QUILTS AFTER RACIAL RE- MARK.” In the article, Deukmejian discounted the political liability created by Roberts’ actions by accentuating the accelerating fortunes of his gubernatorial bid:

“Our own surveys show there is a shift taking place, that Bradley is beginning to lose support, that there is a growing number of persons undecided in the campaign ....I’ in very confident we’re going to go on and are going to win. We’re in the last three weeks (of the campaign), the most critical period, the period we’ve been pointing for.”

The *Times* account depicted the Roberts’ departure as an act of purgation contrasted with the GOP campaign’s past attempts to distance itself from the race issue: “The attorney general has religiously avoided the slightest sign of an attack on Bradley because of his color and Roberts himself had said earlier that Deukmejian would not make race an issue.” The October 13th front-page story also summed up the reaction of a White House advisor that it was “just idiotic” for Roberts to talk publicly about an “anti-black vote” in a contest with “Bradley, the Democratic nominee, who is black.”<sup>24</sup>

Massaging the “Non-Issue”—“He’s Not the Stereotypical Black”

In spite of continuing Deukmejian and Bradley efforts to confront and downplay the race issue, Roberts’ remarks served to invite, dignify, and legitimize the presence of race as a proper dimension of campaign coverage. Working together, the media and pollsters gathered in a synergistic combination to highlight the race factor for the California public. In an October 14th Associated Press story, pollster Mervin Field agreed with Roberts that there are some voters who won’t admit their prejudice to a pollster but disagreed that this would be a “hidden vote for Deukmejian.” Field shamelessly speculated that even racist voters might justify a vote for Bradley:

People are really in conflict when they have that kind *of* bias. . . . So when a black candidate comes along who’s qualified, they feel good about voting for him, because it sort of exorcises this guilt. . . . He’s not the stereotypical black, not a confrontationist or very aggressive. He’s not the kind of black who is unsettling.

On October 14, the *Times* elaborated on its late edition coverage of the Roberts story. In covering

the Deukmejian campaign's new directors, the *Times*' renewed reference to a "hidden anti-black vote." Going further, the story featured an uncharacteristic evaluative — comment by the *Times* newswriter:

Nevertheless, the candidate made it clear that Roberts and his associates are out because the campaign manager said publicly what had been discussed privately by many political professionals—that public opinion polls are unable to measure accurately how many voters are influenced by some hidden anti-black bias.

The story then recounted Deukmejian's perspective on what was fast becoming the "race issue:" "Deukmejian disavowed Roberts' remarks and told reporters Wednesday that the campaign manager's departure means 'we have put that issue aside, that we'll be able to concentrate on the issues, and nor be diverted to issues that are really not relevant.' 27

The day after Roberts' departure, a *Times* headline provided further frontage for the race issue: "BRADLEY SEES NO SIGN OF RACIST Campaign: MAYOR'S COMMENTS COME IN WAKE OF REMARKS BY EX-DEUKMEJIAN & AIDE."28

On October 17, a *Times* Poll reported that, for the first time in the campaign, Deukmejian had cut Bradley's lead. Explaining the gain, William Endicott wrote:

Deukmejian's gain on Bradley in the governor's contest appears attributable in large part to the attorney general's ability to draw back into his campaign a large number of conservative voters who were uncommitted earlier or favored Bradley. . . . Those voters who showed an anti-black sentiment in response to such questions as whether government has paid too much attention to blacks and other minority groups go heavily to Deukmejian.29

The following day a *Times* front-page headline proclaimed: "BRADLEY UN- DAUNTED BY DEUKMEJIAN'S GAIN IN POLL." Commenting on Deukmejian's political legacy of fast finishes, the story subtly revived the ghost of Roberts' thesis:

Curb, comfortably ahead in the polls two weeks before the primary, lost to Deukmejian after a hard hitting final effort led by Deukmejian's former campaign manager Bill Roberts. Roberts last week left Deukmejian's campaign after the candidate objected to Roberts telling reporters that a hidden anti-black vote would work in Deukmejian's favor.30

During the campaign's final month, Bradley's race became more prevalent in campaign coverage. Analysis of the *Times* coverage of the campaign from the June primary to the November election reveals nine headlines that referred to Bradley's race;31 more than half were in October editions, immediately after the ballyhooed Roberts incident.32 Surreptitiously at first, openly toward the end, race joined crime and the economy as the dominant media issues in the California gubernatorial campaign.

The final Sunday edition of the *Times* before the election observed that Bradley's lead had slowly diminished during the course of the campaign and included yet another bold reference to

Bradley's race: "Deukmejian has a history of fast finishes," including beating 'then Representative Yvonne Braithwaite Burke in an aggressive closing effort in the 1978 attorney general's race. Like Bradley, Burke is black. ' Also included in this last-minute campaign coverage was another reference to the Roberts incident and, ironically, a repudiation of the race issue by the *Times*:

Race has had virtually no part in the Bradley-Deukmejian battle. Bradley has not campaigned as a black, although he has overwhelming support in the black community. And Deukmejian has not made Bradley's race an issue. When Deukmejian's campaign manager, Bill Roberts, was reviewing poll results recently and commented that there is an anti-black bias among voters that pollsters are unable to measure accurately, he caused such a fuss that his top campaign aides resigned.<sup>34</sup>

The *Times* November 1 edition reported the findings of the final Field pre-election poll, a 49—42 percent spread and a one-point increase in Bradley's lead over Deukmejian. <sup>35</sup> Yet, the *Times*' November 2 election-morning edition reported Field's latest poll in which "he (Field) cautioned that unless blacks and other minorities turn out in substantial numbers, it is conceivable that Deukmejian could emerge the winner on the basis of white votes."<sup>36</sup> The *Times* coverage also noted that Deukmejian was counting on "Proposition 15, the Handgun Control Initiative, to bring out a flood of 'no' voters, most of whom will be Deukmejian supporters."<sup>37</sup> In addition, the last pre-election edition of the *Times* again recounted the Roberts incident for its readers. The article detailed Deukmejian's account of the entire incident and was followed by another superfluous, if not downright awkward, mention of Bradley's race:

During one brief retrospective on his campaign, Deukmejian was asked if the resignation of his campaign manager, Bill Roberts, three weeks ago because of comment on a hidden anti-black bias among some respondents in poll surveys, had actually helped the campaign. "Well, that's difficult to assess. I think there's no question that it (the campaign) had gotten to the point that we had gotten off on some issues that should not have been proper issues in the campaign, and as soon as that situation was concluded, we were back on the main issues again." Deukmejian referred to the race issue. Bradley is black.<sup>38</sup>

### **The Day After: Verification of the "Anti-Black" Vote**

The November 3 *Times* announced Deukmejian a "razor thin" winner in the gubernatorial contest. At the same time, the paper resumed its policy of emphasizing the historical significance of Bradley's race in the gubernatorial contest:

And, if Bradley, bidding to become the first elected black governor in the nation's history, was going down to defeat, so was 65-year-old Wilson Riles. The state superintendent of public instruction, the first black to hold statewide office in California, lost to Bill Honig, 44, former Mann County school official.

In stark contrast to its pre-election coverage of the "hidden anti-black vote," the *Times* post-election coverage made no mention of the Roberts incident. Choosing to label the gubernatorial

contest “bland,” the *Times* offered its readers a narrow campaign summary: “In style, Bradley and Deukmejian ran relatively cautious, conservative campaigns, venturing little and relying instead on attacks on each other’s record. “40

Verification of the Roberts thesis was provided in the front-page headline of the — November 7 *Times*: “ANTI-BLACK VOTE KEY IN GOVERNOR RACE.” Based on a poll conducted by I.A. Lewis, the *Times* found that “500,000 Democrats and Independents voted for Republican George Deukmejian for Governor last Tuesday, not so much because they were for him but because they were against Democrat Tom Bradley.” In exploring the very hypothesis advanced by Roberts on an anti-black vote, the *Times* post-election data disclosed that both candidates had received almost identical “straight party-line votes.” Yet, the data reveal that the crossover vote made the difference to Deukmejian. Almost half of the 17 percent Democrats and Independents who voted for Deukmejian stated “they felt the government was doing too much for blacks and minorities.” This compared to only one-third of the 15 percent Republicans and Independents who backed Bradley, because “they felt government was giving too little attention to blacks and minorities.” The *Times* concluded: “That 3% difference, possibly the difference between pro-black voters and anti-black voters, could account for 200,000 votes, more than enough to reverse the winner and loser.”<sup>4</sup>

Analysis

The press Likes to proclaim its devotion to the public interest, but as it goes about *its* daily routine, it is more prosaically concerned with what *interests* the public.

Thomas Griffith, *Time*<sup>42</sup>

There are those who favor an active and critical media to voice ethical abuses in political campaigns. This view is succinctly summed up by *Boston Globe* political writer Martin Nolan: “The press is the cop on the beat.”<sup>43</sup> The press thus fulfills its role as watchdog for the public consciousness. However, concomitant with this public duty is the need for journalistic discretion. An analysis of the impact of the Roberts incident upon the outcome of the 1982 California gubernatorial Contest reveals considerable debate as to whether it was the press or Roberts that focused attention on the race issue. Evidence in this paper demonstrates that the *Los Angeles Times* coverage of the Roberts remarks served only to aggravate and perpetuate the race issue rather than check its destructive potential. Experience in mayoral elections in the cities of Chicago, Denver, and Philadelphia, and *in* state and national contests throughout the nation suggests that responsibility for improving political campaigns requires more than just a vigilant press. What is needed is an aware press, guided by a canon of ethics that accommodates a sensitivity to the special vulnerability of the minority candidate. Some candidates themselves have attempted to take a more active role by proposing ethical codes to be followed by both parties in campaigns.<sup>45</sup> What remains troubling is the difficulty of resolving the divergent views about the role journalistic discretion should play in campaign reporting. *Los Angeles Times* reporter Keith Love describes this journalistic dilemma:

It’s easy to be used in that type of situation. I don’t know if this was the case with Roberts’ anti-black comment, if he expected the press to get the message out. But it was big news. It can sometimes snowball. And, it did in that instance. The general rule of journalism is that

if it's a possibility or a probability, you ask it. If it is going to be raised, you should cover it, but a reporter should not raise it.

Love thus defended the *Times*' reporting of the Roberts incident by characterizing the passive nature of the paper's involvement. According to Love, professional ethics should deter a journalist from initiating discussion of such issues as race. However, regardless of whether the reporter or the subject leads the conversation to an explosive comment, once in the public domain, a responsible journalist's only choice is to inform the voting public. Assessing the election results, *Times* reporter Dick Bergholz saw no connection between his paper's 'reporting and voter sentiment toward Bradley:

You don't mention (race) unless it is pertinent to the story. Throughout the campaign, we rarely referred to the Mayor as black. It's a fact that he is, and here in Los Angeles everyone knows it due to his long term at City Hall. Mentioning race within the context of the story certainly was not detrimental. He didn't run as a black. As a matter of fact there were few events where he was with a black audience.<sup>47</sup>

#### **Coverage of the Race Issue in Other Newspapers**

You mention race once and then you leave it alone.

Susan Jetton, *San Diego Union*

Even though the *Los Angeles Times* more frequently than not rehashed the Roberts incident in its coverage of the last three weeks of the campaign, this approach was not prevalent in other newspapers covering the same campaign. For instance, the *San Diego Union's* coverage of the Roberts incident mentioned the anti-black vote allegation on the day it occurred, but it did not evolve into a dominant characteristic of the paper's subsequent coverage of the campaign. At a time when the state's largest newspaper was giving the issue heightened and repeated significance as a legitimate campaign issue, why did the *San Diego Union* opt to ignore Bradley's race?

Examination of the gubernatorial campaign coverage of the *San Diego Union* reveals that Susan Jetton wrote most of the stories. Jetton recollected that a few days after the June primary, GOP campaign chairman Bill Roberts publicly told reporters that Democratic candidate Tom Bradley's race would not be a campaign issue. "I thought it was newsworthy. You mention race once and then leave it alone," the reporter added. Nonetheless, Jetton's insight on the process and evolution of a story from writer to print reflects appreciation of the media's power in campaign agenda setting and the checks and balances in place at the *San Diego* paper:

Because it was the first time the race issue was publicly raised, I believed it was newsworthy and wrote the story with Roberts' disavowal of race's importance as a lead. The copy editor approached me and asked if I wasn't creating an issue by raising it in the lead. We discussed it, and I changed the story to ensure that *I was* reporting the facts instead of highlighting an issue. It (race) is an issue on the minds of the public, and as a reporter it was my responsibility to report it. I discussed it once in the context of the story. That's all it deserves in campaign coverage.<sup>49</sup>

Keith Love of the *Los Angeles Times* singled out Bradley's excellent chance to become the elected governor of California as one possible reason for his paper's numerous references to the Mayor's race. Love stated: "Journalism deals with ironies and firsts and bests, and the fact that Bradley could have become the first black governor in modern history is newsworthy. <sup>50</sup> Nonetheless, the *Times* reporter advocated the view that the focus in election coverage should "be on the issues, Bradley and Deukmejian's records. It should not get bogged down with issues like ce."<sup>51</sup> Love's colleague at the *Times*, Dick Bergholz, was unable to attach significance to the differing reporting styles of his paper and the *San Diego Union*. In comparing the two, Bergholz stated: "I am not sure why they didn't mention it. In Los Angeles, we know he is black and therefore we aren't telling our readers anything they don't already know."<sup>52</sup> Love suggested that the historic Contest presented an ethical dilemma for: reporters:

You know that the issue is out there, that people are wondering how a black candidate would do in the governor's contest, but *I* personally don't think it is an appropriate topic for discussion. You have to make sure that you are not being used in coverage of an issue like that.<sup>53</sup>

*Was the Los Angeles Times* used? Or did it provoke Roberts' comments and then "scoop" the story? Opinions among the principals involved are bitterly divided. According to Bill Roberts, "the press made it (race) the issue." The press initiated discussion of Bradley's -race and then escalated its significance in subsequent campaign coverage. In his first full discussion of the incident, Roberts reflected:

When *I* responded to a question from a reporter on polls' impact on voting, I made a statement that cost me my job. There are racist voters. It's alive and that vote made the difference in the race. There were eight million votes; if 5% were based on race, that means 400,000 votes. The media raised the issue. Then they jumped on it. The press exacerbated it. They made it the issue. They were constantly looking for any bigotry they could sense. When they saw one they went overboard.<sup>54</sup>

In a sharp retort to Roberts' assertion that his comments were a media artifact created by his candid response to artful questioning, Bergholz of the *Times* upholds the notion of a neutral and detached press: "There is no way that he was baited. He has never said that we blew it out of proportion. I haven't heard anyone in the Deukmejian or Bradley campaign complain that we dwelled on the race issue." Bergholz also believes that the event exerted a substantial but undeterminable influence on the voting public: "It was significant. We'll never know how significant it was to Bradley's loss. But given the closeness of the race, it could have been an important factor. Some of those votes could have been due to racism."<sup>56</sup>

However, the difficult question remains; how does one separate the effect of a statement by a Deukmejian insider from the situation created by an intense and sustained reporting of the events? Defending balance given the issue by the *Times*, Bergholz earmarked the Roberts episode as "a significant event" but maintained that the *Times* did not overemphasize it in campaign coverage.<sup>57</sup> Despite Bergholz observation, the fact remains that the *Times*' frequent mention of Bradley's race

was not essential to its mission of fairly communicating the importance of the gubernatorial race to the California public. Susan Jetton of the *Union* speculates on a possible motive for the *Times*' continuing emphasis on the race issue after the Roberts incident:

It was a *Times* reporter who posed the race question to Roberts that resulted in the "anti-black" allegation. It's possible that the *Times* referred to it in their latter coverage to remind people that they were the paper that scooped the story.<sup>58</sup>

## Summary

The responsibility of the press is to preserve not alter history.

Edwin Diamond<sup>59</sup>

In introducing an unspoken issue that is present in the campaign undercurrent but not publicly addressed in election rhetoric, the journalist has the power to rewrite the campaign agenda. The media's awesome power to communicate with the voting public begs the assumption of journalistic responsibility. In the 1982 California gubernatorial campaign, Bradley's chance to become the nation's first elected black governor was a newsworthy event, and the reference to this fact accordingly was prominent in early campaign coverage. Reporting of this fact is entirely consistent with the journalistic objective of informing the public. Yet, the state's largest newspaper, the *Los Angeles Times*, chose to perpetuate the issues- significance in campaign coverage. At issue, according to veteran journalist and media critic Edwin Diamond, is the responsibility of the media to "preserve and not alter history." The *Times*' persistent interest in Bradley's race deprived the public of its right to an objective frame of reference. Instead, the campaign agenda was skewed and the dialogue on crucial issues forestalled, as the *Times*' reporting resources were diverted to a matter not worthy of its accorded debate and discussion.<sup>60</sup>

The repeated references to Tom Bradley's race in the *Los Angeles Times* during the 1982 gubernatorial election coverage sent a conflicting message to voters in light of the candidate's past performance in public life.<sup>61</sup> Examination of Bradley's long record as a Los Angeles city official reveals that he has never been a public servant of a single constituency.<sup>62</sup> Yet, analysis of the post-election polling indicates that a sizable number of voters, the equivalent of more than four times Deukmejian's margin of victory, voted against Bradley because he was black.<sup>63</sup>

To be sure, the apparent "anti-black" vote was a product of many factors. This essay does not contend that all pernicious voting conduct in the contest can be traced to the discretionary emphasis placed on Bradley's race by the *Los Angeles Times*. Nonetheless, the proclivity of the publication to highlight this volatile issue contributed to Bradley's defeat. The challenge is to learn from experience. The goal is to prevent an unthinking press from doing irreparable harm to the minority candidate seeking to build a heterogeneous constituency.

As a group, reporters are not as vulnerable to the tides of public sentiment as are politicians. As a society, we have decided that public discussion of a candidate's race has no place in a properly waged political tryst. Race is, one might say, a "taboo issue," often causing great political harm to the public figure that even benignly becomes entangled in its tawdry web. Accordingly, an unwritten rule, enforced by the weight of social approbation, limits the responses of a candidate to the ethnic heritage of his rival. However, what a politician dares not whisper can gain notoriety once adopted by news media. Speculative accounts linking race and political effect, off limits to

parties vying for public office, are rarely questioned within the umbrage of media conduct. Recent history has seen an increasing number of hotly contested elections involving minority candidates. At best, the news media has shown itself awkwardly prepared to confront and convey the political message of the multi-ethnic candidate. As women, blacks, Hispanics, the aged, and the handicapped rise to make their mark on the American political scene, the object of the American press must remain one of journalistic presence and not effect.

In light of the findings of this essay, today's journalists could make a significant improvement in the deliberative diet of the voting public by reevaluating the pervasive impact of their routine judgments on the campaign agenda and by adopting specific professional canons that offer guidance in this most important and influential work. The result could be an improvement in the political dialogue and a reaffirmation of Aristotle's view that we are not only political animals, but beings who deliberate in a moral and ethical context.

### **Acknowledgment**

The author would like to express his appreciation to Dr. Scot Ratzan and Dr. Lloyd Bitzer for their assistance in this article. Funding was provided for by a Graduate Research Grant from Emerson College. This project was part of a summer Fellowship on Political Ethics sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities. The author is grateful for the help and assistance of the following research assistants: Jeffrey Kimball and Julie Corwin.

### **Notes**

1. For research in agenda-setting see: D.M. White, "The Gate Keeper- A Case Study in the Selection of News," *Journalism Quarterly* 27 (1950): 383—90; B.R. Benson, P.F. Lagerfeld, P. Williamson, and N. McGhee, *Voting* (Chicago: University Press, 1954); B.C. Cohen, *The Press of Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963); K. Lang and G.E. Lang, "The Mass Media of Voting," in B.B. and M. Janowitz, *Readers in Public Opinion of Communication* (New York Free Press, 1966); M.E. McCombs and D.L. Shaw, "The Agenda Setting Function of Mass Media," *Public Opinion Quarterly* Summer 36 (1972): 36—187; G.R. Funhouse, "Trends in Media Coverage of the Issues of the 60's," *Journalism Quarterly* Autumn 1973: 50; J.M. McLeod, L.B. Becker, and J.E. Byrnes, "Another Look at the Agenda-Setting Function of the Press," *Communication Research* 1, 131 (1974): 166; L.P. Tipton, R.D. Haney, and J.B. Basehart, "Media Agenda-Setting in City and State Election Campaigns," *Journalism Quarterly* 52 (1975): 15—22; S. Kraus and D. Davis, *The Effects of Mass Communication on Political Behavior* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976); B. Westley, "Setting the Political Agenda: What Makes it Change?," *Journal of Communication* 26: (1976) 43—47; M. Benton and P.J. Frazier, "The Agenda-Setting Function of the Mass Media at Three Levels of 'Information Molding,'" *Communication Research* 3 (1976): 261—74; R.D. McClure and T.E. Patterson, "Setting the Political Agenda: Print versus Network News," *Journal of Communication* 26 (1976): 23—28; D.H. Weaver, "Political Issues and Voters' Need for Orientation," in *The Emergence of American Political Issues. The Agenda Setting Function of the Press*; D.L. Shaw and M.E. McCombs, eds. (St. Paul: West Publishing 1977); W. Goldenberg, "Front Page News and Real World Cues: Another Look at Agenda Setting by the Media," *American Journal of Political Science* 24 (1980): 16—49; J.P. Winter. "Contingent Conditions in the Agenda-Setting Process,"

in *Mass Communications Review Yearbook*, Vol. 11 (Beverly Hills: SAGE, 1981); MO. Procaro, T., Press and Chappaquiddick in the 1980 Presidential Campaign: The Development of a Voting Issue.' unpublished Master's thesis, Department of Communication Arts. University of Wisconsin. Madison. 1982; J. Trent and R. Friedenbers, *Political Campaign Communication. Principles and Practices* 'New York: Praeger, 1983).

2. The Bradley field organization's aim was to organize the largest "get out the vote drive since the 1960's." Also see *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 25, 1982.

3. Election-night coverage. Nov. 2, 1982, KNXT and KNBC Los Angeles; also see *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 4, 1982, Field's final pre-election poll: Bradley 49%, Deukmejian 42%.

5. Election-night coverage. Nov. 2, 1982, KNXT and KNBC Los Angeles; also see *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 4, 1982. In total, five major polls—Field Poll, *Los Angeles Times* Poll, Teichner Poll, Schwartz Poll, and Terrance Poll—were incorrect in predicting the gubernatorial results. The GOP polling organization, Decision Making Information (DM1), proved the most reliable polling organization; based on a random telephone survey conducted on Nov. 1, 1982, DM1 forecast a Deukmejian's victory—49.1% to 48.5%. The actual vote was 49.0% to 48.3%. Bradley's pollster, Hugh Schwartz, explained his error as due to the 25% to 33% of the electorate affected by the racial issue, most of whom voted for Deukmejian. Teichner also identified his error as due to the GOP's successful absentee drive, which increased absentee voting in Southern California alone by more than 50% and favored Deukmejian 57% to 36%. Field, who also forecast a win for Jerry Brown, remained insistent on a Bradley victory until 1:15 am., November 3, when he then conceded his sample contained an overrepresentation of minority groups; for related stories see *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 4, 7, and 25, 1982.

6. *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 3, 1982.

7. *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 4, 1982.

8. *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 4, 7, and 25, 1982. Of the 17% independent and Democratic voters who cast their ballot for Deukmejian, "8% said they felt the government was doing too much for blacks and other minorities." In contrast, of the 15% independent and Republican crossover for Bradley, only "5% thought the government was not doing enough for blacks and other minorities." The *Los Angeles Times* analysis concludes that "this 3% difference, probably the difference between pro-black and anti-black voters, could account for 200,000 votes; enough to reverse the winner and 'Loser.'" In the four weeks prior to the election, the *Los Angeles Times* published fifteen stories which mentioned Bradley's race; thirteen of these discussed race as a possible factor in the election. Representation of this factor is in the following stories: *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 5, 8, 9, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18 (in two separate stories), 21, 24, and 31, Nov. 1 and 2, 1982.

9. Material from the stock speech, referred to in the *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 6, Sept. 19, 1982.

10. *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 7, 1982. Additionally, in the September 26th *Los Angeles Times*, Endicott authored another front-page story focusing on the race issue.

11. For race-related articles, see *Los Angeles Times*: "RACE IS THE INVISIBLE—BUT IMPORTANT—ISSUE IN THE RUN FOR GOVERNOR," June 20, 1982; "BRADLEY FEARS SMEAR TACTICS BY DEUKMETIAN," July 8, 1982; "DEUKMEJIAN WANTS BRADLEY TO REVEAL FINANCIAL DATA," July 22, 1982; "BRADLEY'S RACE NOT *ISSUE*, AIDE TO DEUKMEJIAN VOWS," July 24, 1982; "BRADLEY'S TAX RETURNS FOR THREE YEARS RELEASED," July 30, 1982; "*WIDE* DISCONTENT COULD HURT GOP *IN* NOVEMBER, REAGAN AIDE WARNS," Aug. 7, 1982; "BRADLEY TO GIVE SECOND RADIO

TALK," Aug. 13, 1982; "POLITICAL FOES STEP UP INTENSITY OF CAMPAIGNS," Sept. 19, 1982; "COULD HELP, HURT BRADLEY; RACE AN UNKNOWN FACTOR IN CAMPAIGN FOR GOVERNOR," Sept. 26, 1982; "VOTERS WILL EXPRESS HATRED OF REAGEN, HE PREDICTS; DEMOCRATIC POLLSTER SEES HEAVY BLACK TURNOUT,"

Oct. 5, 1982.

12. *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 26, 1982; other poll results in coverage in the *Los Angeles Times* include: Aug. 25, Decision Making Information: Bradley 48%, Deukmejian 35%; Aug. 25, Tarrance: Bradley 43%, Deukmejian 41%; August 25, Teichner: Bradley 48%, Deukmejian 30%; Sept. 9, Field: Bradley 47%, Deukmejian 38%; Sept. 19, *Los Angeles Times* Poll: Bradley 51%, Deukmejian 37%; Sept. 29, Teichner: Bradley 53%, Deukmejian 31%; Oct. 17, *Los Angeles Times* Poll: Bradley 48%, Deukmejian 41%; Oct. 28, *Los Angeles Times* Poll: Bradley 47%, Deukmejian 41%; Nov. 1, *Los Angeles Times* Poll: Bradley 49%, Deukmejian 42%.

13. *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 26, 1982.

14. *Los Angeles Times*, June 20, 1982,

15. *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 26, 1982.

16. *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 19, 1982.

17. *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 5, 1982.

18. *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 26, 1982.

19. *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 8, 1982.

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 9, 1982.

22. *Los Angeles Times*. Oct. 13, 1982.

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*

25. Associated Press Story, Oct. 14, 1982. Field also revealed increased public support for Roberts' allegation of a "hidden anti-black vote." Five percent of the population publicly expressed the viewpoint in October as compared to 2% in a poll taken in June. Field also reported a "bias" by California voters against candidates who were of other racial or ethnic backgrounds: Chinese/Japanese 8%, Hispanic 6%, Jewish 4%. Interestingly, the poll also revealed 12% of those polled would not vote for a candidate of Armenian descent. Even though this last figure was twice the "anti-black vote" percentage, Deukmejian's ethnic background was not a focus of media attention.

26. *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 14, 1982.

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 15, 1982.

29. *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 17, 1982.

30. *Los Angeles Times* Oct. 18, 1982.

31. *Los Angeles Times*, "RACE IS THE INVISIBLE—BUT IMPORTANT—ISSUE IN THE RUN FOR GOVERNOR," June 20, 1982; "BRADLEY'S RACE NOT ISSUE, AIDE TO DEUKMEJIAN VOWS," July 24, 1982; "COULD HELP, HURT BRADLEY; RACE AN UNKNOWN FACTOR IN CAMPAIGN FOR GOVERNOR," Sept. 26, 1982; "VOTERS WILL EXPRESS HATRED OF REAGAN, HE PREDICTS; DEMOCRATIC POLLSTER SEES HEAVY

BLACK TURNOUT," Oct. 5, 1982; "DEUKMEJIAN SIDE: BIAS CLOSES GAP; HIDDEN ANTI-BLACK VOTE 'FACT OF LIFE,' AIDE DECLARES IN CHALLENGING POLLS,"

Oct.

8, 1982; "HEAD OF DEUKMETIAN DRIVE QUILTS AFTER RACIAL REMARK," Oct. 13,

1982; "BRADLEY SEES NO SIGNS OF RACIST CAMPAIGN; MAYOR'S COMMENTS

COME IN WAKE OF REMARKS BY EX-DEUKMEJIAN AIDE," Oct. 15, 1982; "TOM

BRADLEY AS CANDIDATE: 'COLORBLIND' MAN'S BID TO MAKE HISTORY," Oct. 21,

1982; "THE RACE VOTE IS THERE BUT NOT HIDDEN," Oct. 24, 1982.

32. *Ibid.* In addition, from June to the November election, twenty-four articles include direct reference to Bradley's race; fifteen in the last four weeks of the campaign, and thirteen of which openly discussed race as a factor in the election.

33. *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 31, 1982.

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 1, 1982.

36. *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 2, 1982. Field reported his findings in his syndicated column ‘The California Poll’ differently: “These findings indicate that if the turnout among minority groups combined on election day is significantly less than 20 percent of the total, it is possible for the outcome to be quite close, with a Bradley loss possible.” *San Diego Union*, Nov. 1, 1982.

37. *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 2, 1982. Bradley’s opponent in the 1977 mayoral election also stressed his support of the private ownership of handguns in an attempt to highlight the crime issue. See *Los Angeles Times* Dec. 12, 18, 1976, Jan. 11, 1977.

38. *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 2, 1982.

q 39. *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 3, 1982.

40. *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 3, 1982. —

41; *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 7, 1982. A demographic sketch of such a voter was also provided: “More male than the electorate as a whole, much more Anglo. More in the income bracket of 525,000 and above than the whole electorate, more from Los Angeles County and from Northern California, excluding the Bay Area.”

42. *Time*, Nov. 12, 1984: 89.

43. Information in personal interview with Marty Nolan, Cambridge, MA, Oct. 28, 1983.

44. The current Code of Ethics for the Society of Professional Journalists does no more than suggest that the media “should not pander to morbid curiosity about details of vice and crime.” Although the canon attempts to address at length problems of objectivity, conflict of interest, and the ceaseless search for truth, this passage is the only relevant guidance given to the journalist who questions his duty to report facts that might serve more to inflame than to inform.

45. In the 1982 California gubernatorial campaign. Mayor Tom Bradley proposed a “code of ethics,” which, among other areas, included a provision to make all campaign commercials and mailings available to the opponent forty-eight hours prior to their airing or mailing to ensure accuracy of information. This proposal was rejected by Attorney General George Deukmejian, who later proposed his own code. See *Los Angeles Times*, July 4, 8, 31, 1982, for discussion of these codes. In the 1978 election, both candidates, Jerry Brown and Evelle Younger, agreed upon a similar code. See *Los Angeles Times*, March 25, 1977.

46. Information conveyed in a telephone interview with Keith Love, Dec. 12, 1983.

47. Information conveyed in a telephone interview with Dick Bergholz, Sept. 12, 1984.

48. Information conveyed in a telephone interview with Ms. Susan Jetton, March 7, 1984.

49. *Ibid.* In addition to functioning as an agenda setting technique, Roberts’ statement also is an example of the rhetorical technique of *assertive negation*: an agent of the candidate, such as a campaign manager, purposely downplays the significance of a taboo issue before the news media in order to generate public awareness that it actually exists. A paper prepared by the authors at the National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminar, “Political Rhetoric and Public Knowledge,” University of Wisconsin at Madison, Summer 1983, outlines the theoretical concepts of this rhetorical technique.

50. Love interview, Dec. 12, 1983.

51. *Ibid.*

52. Bergholz interview, Sept. 19, 1984.

53. Love interview, Dec. 12, 1983.

54. Information conveyed in a telephone interview with Bill Roberts, Oct. 26, 1983.

55. Bergholz interview, Sept. 19: 1984.

• 56. *Ibid.*

57. *Ibid.*

58. Jetton interview, March 12, 1984.

59. Information conveyed in a personal interview with Edwin Diamond, Sept. 18, 1984.

60. In a joint appearance of Los Angeles’s KNBC’s “Newsmakers,” Bradley and Deukmejian

concluded on the failure of the media to cover speeches adequately and include specific proposals and programs outlined by the candidates in campaign coverage. See *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 23, 1982.

61. The *Los Angeles Times*' awkward description of Bradley's heritage was not new to the 1982 election. In a personal interview, Mayor Bradley indicated that the *Times* had descriptively referred to him as the "black mayor" in coverage after his election to head the city in 1973.

62. In a story in the *Orange County Register*, June 18, 1983, Bradley's media advisor revealed • that the impression of Bradley outside the Los Angeles area was chiefly composed of three characteristics: (1) Bradley was black; (2) he was a mayor of Los Angeles, and (3) he had been mayor for a long time. According to Morris, this limited knowledge led voters to conclude Bradley was an "old fashioned big spending liberal," which meshed well with Deukmejian's strategy of linking Bradley with Governor Brown, portraying Bradley as soft on crime and a proponent of social-welfare programs. Yet, after reviewing information on Bradley's record of balancing experience as a policeman for twenty-one years, Morris' focus group's opinions changed. They then viewed Bradley as a more conservative candidate and more appealing. The major effort of the campaign was to convey this information statewide.

63. *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 7, 1982.