

# Ink Stained

*How Romney came to hate the press.*

ANDREW GOLDMAN

IT WASN'T ALWAYS like this between Mitt Romney and the press. His aides didn't always tell reporters to "kiss my ass"; they didn't always hole him up in a Mittness Protection Program, the not-so-affectionate name campaign journalists have given to the candidate's extreme lack of availability. And they sure didn't drive sympathetic journalists—in this case, Fox News's Greta van Susteren—to suggest that the experience of covering him is like being a member of a "petting zoo." It's hard to imagine now, but there was a time, nearly 20 years ago, when Romney's electoral strategy largely hinged on wooing the press, on proving to them that he was a less adversarial kind of Republican candidate. That he wasn't able to has shaped his political life ever since.

In the winter of 1993, Romney invited Frank Phillips, head of the statehouse bureau of *The Boston Globe*, and Scot Lehigh, his frequent collaborator, to lunch. To Phillips, who'd been covering local races for decades and knew every local pol, the name didn't ring a bell. He'd heard of George Romney, of course, and chuckled at the idea that somebody would even be named "Mitt." But Romney, poised to confront Ted Kennedy in the next year's Senate election, was bringing a fourth person to lunch: Charley Manning, a white-haired, well-liked Republican consultant in town. Manning's hire signaled to Phillips that Romney was serious. He accepted the invitation.

At the Parker House, a creaky old institution where the Boston cream pie had been invented, Phillips got his first look at the 46-year-old Romney, a slighter version of the 2012 model, but with the same stiff helmet of hair. Phillips was immediately impressed. "He was loose and unscripted," Phillips says. "He actually seemed a little nervous. I got the sense that maybe he saw us as the gatekeepers of his political future."

Matt Storin, who had been named editor of the *Globe* in 1993, was another recipient of Romney's charm offensive. Over lunch at The Palm in the Back Bay, Storin came to believe that, unlike the typical Massachusetts Republican who loved to bash the paper, Romney saw it as a potential asset in his race against Kennedy. "I've been studying the data," Romney told Storin. "The *Globe* is important. The people who vote in this state are the people who read the *Globe*." The implication was clear, Storin says: "He wanted to make nice."

On its face, Romney's strategy seemed quixotic. The *Globe* had more than earned its reputation for coddling the Kennedys: The newsroom was once filled with loyalists, some of whom had played beach football with the family or simply used to work for them. But by 1994, big changes were afoot inside the paper. Bill Taylor, its publisher, felt that the *Globe* had veered too far left, so in 1993, he turned to a centrist on staff, H. D. S. Greenway, to run the editorial page. Greenway immediately did the unthinkable: He added a conservative, Jeff Jacoby, to the stable of liberal columnists.

The shift at the paper was happening at a terrible time for Ted Kennedy. Despite the fact that he'd recently settled down and married Vicki Reggie, he was dealing with the aftermath of the William Kennedy Smith trial, in which he was described as

wandering pantsless around strangers in his Palm Beach home, and he was still answering questions about the infamous "waitress sandwich" he constructed with Chris Dodd in Capitol Hill. And the *Globe* was finally willing to take a critical look at him; in July, the paper ran a feature on the 25-year-old Chappaquiddick incident quoting a Boston resident as saying, "It just shows that, if you're a Kennedy, you can get away with murder." Teddy and his team were livid. "My own thought at the time was that they were bending over backwards to prove they weren't the reliably liberal *Globe*," says Jack Corrigan, a longtime Kennedy friend who worked on the 1994 campaign. "The net effect of that was that I felt there was a constant drumbeat of negativity aimed at us."

Romney, a devoted husband and father of five young boys who didn't touch coffee, let alone Teddy's ever-present Chivas,

*"Now, the *Globe* has about as much punch in a general election as the Auto Trader," says Mike Murphy.*

couldn't have looked more virtuous in comparison. Still, people on his campaign weren't sure how voters would react to his Mormonism. They decided to bring it up as little as possible—a strategy very much to Romney's liking—and it came as a huge relief when Teddy, invoking his brother John's speech about Catholicism in front of the Greater Houston Ministerial Association, announced in early 1994 that Romney's Mormonism "is not an issue and it shouldn't be."

Phillips took a different view of Mormonism. He admits that, before the election, he knew almost nothing about the liturgy and would often confuse Mormons with Jehovah's Witnesses. But the more he delved into the religion, and Romney's leadership role in it, the more he began to believe that Romney's private beliefs were in direct contrast to the positions of social tolerance he was espousing.

In July, Phillips and Lehigh reported that the year before, while addressing a group of single Mormons, Romney had referred to homosexuality as both "perverse" and "reprehensible." Romney denied this and subsequently granted the local gay paper, *Bay Windows*, an interview printed with a headline that would haunt him for years to come: "ROMNEY: I'LL BE BETTER THAN TED FOR GAY RIGHTS." *Globe* reporters also leaned heavily on Judy Dushku, a liberal member of Romney's stake (and mother to future TV star Eliza). She was quoted in three stories—one in which she said that Romney, as a bishop, forcefully encouraged a Mormon woman to rethink her decision to have an abortion despite a condition that was potentially dangerous to her and her unborn child. In another piece, Dushku told the paper that Romney shrugged off her campaign advice because, "basically, his attitude was, 'What could you possibly teach me? You're a woman.'"



The candidate in his more press-friendly, darker-haired days.

The campaign felt as if there was real religious bigotry behind the coverage. “I think they wanted to plant a seed in people’s minds, like questioning, ‘Oh, what’s all this Mormon stuff really about?’” says a former Romney aide. “They kind of made him look like he was in this strange, cult-like group.” Manning did what he could. “Charley Manning and I are old friends, but we had shouting matches about it,” explains Phillips. “He’d say, ‘You can’t talk about his religion,’ and I’d say, ‘Fuck you, Charley.’”

There were factions inside the *Globe* that were also unhappy; its ombudsman decried the paper’s coverage in two separate columns, and Greenway wrote an editorial in September deeming the Mormon issue “not fair and . . . not relevant to the Senate race.” A few days later, Jacoby inveighed that “the drip-drip-drip of stories about Romney’s Mormonism aggravates the old Massachusetts prejudice against people who worship differently.” Romney himself began to flash an unfamiliar edge around reporters. “If you replace the word ‘Jews’ for every time the word ‘Mormon’ has been used,” he said, “it would be a most interesting series of articles.”

Around Labor Day, polls showed Kennedy and Romney running close to even, and the incumbent began to panic. In a maneuver the Kennedy campaign tried to play off as a family member going off the reservation, Representative Joe Kennedy, the self-appointed “pitbull” of his uncle’s campaign, was quoted accusing Mormons of excluding blacks from their priesthood. Joe then called Romney

personally to apologize. Though Romney took the apology to be private, Phillips published a story about the call on September 24, which rehashed all of the previous articles on Romney’s Mormonism. “I’d say Joe Kennedy was the sleaziest politician in Massachusetts,” Manning told Phillips, “but, if his uncle approved this stunt, then Joe is only second.”

On September 27, Romney held a press conference in which he blasted Teddy for “trying to take away his brother’s victory” against religious bigotry in politics. As Romney stood at the podium inside his Cambridge headquarters, cameras and microphones all trained upon him, a visitor made himself known at the back of the room. Eighty-seven-year-old George Romney, unbeknownst to his son, had been sufficiently exorcized to hop on a plane from Michigan to offer his commentary. “I think it is absolutely wrong to keep hammering on the religious issues,” George Romney shouted, as all the cameras swung in his direction. “And what Ted is trying to do is bring it into the picture.”

“Dad,” his son pleaded, giggling uncomfortably as he tried to wrest control of the floor. “Dad. Hey guys.”

Once Mitt had everyone’s attention back, Phillips and the rest of the press corps questioned him on the Church’s treatment of women and blacks. He’d had enough. He declared that he wouldn’t say another word about his religion. With a straight face, Teddy’s campaign responded to the press conference: “Invoking the dead president’s name for political purposes is reprehensible.”

Whatever effect the reporting had on Romney’s chances—he was defending his record at Bain Capital at the same time—by early October, it was clear that Kennedy would win. After weeks of requesting access, Daniel Golden, who was working on a feature story about the inner-workings of the campaigns for the *Globe*, found himself alone with Romney. He opened with a tough question, the substance of which he no longer recalls. “I remember him looking at me with a disgusted, beaten-down look and saying something to the effect of, ‘C’mon give me a break. Can’t you see I’ve been pounded to a pulp already? Are we really going to go that route?’” Golden says. He chose an easier question because “I felt bad for the guy.” Later on, he asked Ann Romney if she saw more campaigns in their future. “Never,” she said. “You couldn’t pay me to do this again.”

And so they stayed out of politics, for a while. But after the Salt Lake City Olympics in 2002, Romney returned to Massachusetts transformed. For his governor’s race that year, he hired a new team, led by strategist Mike Murphy, who wasn’t inclined to treat the hometown paper with anything like reverence. In fact, his very explicit goal was to diminish the *Globe*’s power—particularly its control over the debate process—and he thinks he succeeded. “Now, the *Globe* has about as much punch in a general election as the *Auto Trader*,” Murphy told me.

Romney’s own attitude toward the press also grew more confrontational. In 2002, Phillips and his colleagues encountered a candidate who rarely spoke to them and who was kept at a distance by security guards. And when Romney did talk to the press, it was seldomly under happy circumstances; stories circulated about him hectoring reporters and pounding on tables in frustration. “We around the statehouse would say, ‘He was so mad his hair was shaking,’” Phillips remembers. Over the course of Romney’s governorship, *Globe* reporters who tried to buttonhole him as he walked to his car literally got hip-checked out of the way, and his then-press secretary Eric Fehrstrom, who still serves as a senior strategist for him, was famous for unleashing phone tirades that would leave journalists saying, in the words of a former Romney adviser, “What a prick.” Clearly, Romney had learned his lesson from 1994: The press can’t be trusted, and no number of steak lunches at The Palm will ever change that. ♦

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