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Rick Kaplan, Impresario of Food Lion and Tailwind Disasters, Takes the Reins of ABC Political Coverage

Bill Clinton Lapdog Is Now ABC's Top Dog

If you liked the liberally slanted war coverage on ABC earlier this year, you should love ABC during Campaign 2004. In February, ABC News rehired long-time producer Rick Kaplan on a temporary basis to oversee its live news coverage. Yesterday, ABC placed Kaplan in a seat of great political influence: senior vice president in day-to-day charge of *World News Tonight*, *Nightline*, *This Week with George Stephanopoulos*, and the ABC News Political Unit.

Kaplan has been the prime example of a TV news producer who did not just blur, but demolished the wall between reporting on liberal politicians and openly helping them. Here's a brief summary:

1992: While executive producer of ABC's *Prime Time Live*, Rick Kaplan advised candidate Bill Clinton on how to deal with the media uproar over his affair with Gennifer Flowers. After failing to get him on ABC, he advised Clinton in phone calls on how to handle the *60 Minutes* interview.

Weeks later, when Clinton's campaign struggled in the New York primary, Kaplan rode to the rescue again, getting Clinton booked on the Don Imus radio show. Kaplan not only arranged the interview, he prepared him for it — and ABC cameras taped both ends of the conversation and aired it on *Nightline*. Later, Kaplan did not deny a *Spy* magazine report that he boasted of attending Clinton campaign staff meetings and helped set up the campaign's press office.

1993: While executive producer of ABC's *World News Tonight*, Kaplan stayed overnight in the Lincoln Bedroom at Clinton's behest. He also "played golf with Bill shortly before the inauguration and watched movies with both Clintons at the Governor's mansion," *The New Republic* reported.

1997: In reporting on a two-hour CNN special on campaign finance produced by Kaplan, *U.S. News* found that Kaplan demanded that staffers "limit the use of the word 'scandal' in reporting on Clinton's campaign fundraising woes." The phrase "Clinton scandal" was never uttered.

1998: As the Lewinsky scandal broke, Kaplan leapt into action at CNN with two-hour specials attacking any and all Clinton critics. The programs included "Media Madness," which asked "what the hell are you people doing" probing Bill Clinton's sex life?; and "Investigating the Investigator," which described Ken Starr as "suspect" over his "religious and Republican roots." In May, Kaplan devoted an hour to demonizing Rep. Dan Burton, who was compared by reporter Bruce Morton to English despot Oliver Cromwell.

2000: Kaplan stayed overnight in the White House for a second time. "No, I do not feel embarrassed, ashamed or compromised in any way, shape or form," Kaplan said after President Clinton gave his daughter Alexis, 21, a two-and-a-half hour White House tour.

The November 20, 2000 *Newsweek* reported Kaplan had helped Al Gore prepare for a debate against Bill Bradley. "At a rehearsal for a California debate on March 1, former CNN President Rick Kaplan joked, 'Let's do the debate now.'" He was still CNN president in March.

If Kaplan's campaign machinations aren't enough to raise ethical eyebrows, it should be remembered that Kaplan was at the helm of ABC's *Prime Time Live* in 1991, when they aired an expose against the Food Lion supermarket chain using undercover producers who falsified their resumes and staged events. Food Lion sued, and a jury fined Kaplan \$35,000, which a judge later overturned. As CNN president, Kaplan's idea of creating a program called *NewsStand* began in 1998 with a quickly-retracted "Tailwind" expose charging that U.S. soldiers gassed "dissidents" and children in Laos during the Vietnam War. With a record like this, how does Kaplan keep getting the top jobs? — *Tim Graham*

The Clintons Have Healing Powers?
"If anything, Kaplan was at least as close to Hillary, who shares his Chicago roots; he even hired her to work on coverage of the 1980 Democratic convention....After Kaplan's younger daughter underwent serious surgery in 1994, calls from both Clintons helped a near-miraculous recovery, Kaplan said." — *Vanity Fair's* Kaplan profile, January 1998.

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