



Campaign 2000

Media Reality ✓ Check

Expert Documentation of the Latest Liberal Media Bias ✪ Tuesday, October 3, 2000

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Vol. 4, No. 61
www.mrc.org

Debate Moderator Is Not Bryant Gumbel, But His Journalism Has Historically Followed the Liberal Pack

Stop the Church of Saint James Lehrer

Jim Lehrer's regular post as moderator of presidential debates is spurring a round of hosannas over his objectivity. "I really don't have any politics...I never take a stand," Lehrer claimed to the *Boston Globe*. This morning on *Today*, NBC's Bob Kur cooed: "Low-key, but above all, considered fair and impartial, his style since he started at a Dallas public TV station more than 30 years ago." Lehrer does have a "quiet, self-effacing style," as NBC reported. He is not Bryant Gumbel. But his journalism has historically followed the liberal pack.

■ **Watergate**, for PBS, was a war against Richard Nixon, who threatened their funding. As Robert MacNeil explained, "It reached a point where I felt obliged to throw off my own objectivity and resist. It became my personal corner of Watergate." PBS aired the Watergate hearings during the day, and then repeated them at night. Lehrer later rejoiced in how the hearings were "a terrific hit" for PBS, and "as justice, it was pure delicious. We were being bailed out by the sins of a President who was trying to do us in. He and his minions were so distracted with the crumbling of his presidency that the plan to crumble us was abandoned and forgotten."

Lehrer thanked Watergate for leading to the *MacNeil-Lehrer Report*, later the *NewsHour*: "Thank you, Nixon. Thank you, Liddy and Hunt, Dean and Colson, Haldeman and Ehrlichman. We could not have done it without you."

■ **Monica Madness**. On January 29, 1998, Lehrer devoted most of his *NewsHour* to the media's "rush to judgment" on the Lewinsky story. Anchor Elizabeth Farnsworth asked a focus group, "Have the media gone overboard or have they done a fairly good job?" Most said overdone. Then anchor Phil Ponce talked to media insiders: *Newsweek*'s Richard Smith, CNN's Frank Sesno, former CBS reporter Marvin Kalb, and academic Kathleen Hall Jamieson. All agreed with Kalb that "This is a very sorry chapter in American journalism." That didn't mean journalists were sorry they had never cared about Clinton's

lying; it meant they were sorry this story arrived.

■ **Anita vs. Juanita**. On October 7, 1991, just hours after NPR's Nina Totenberg leaked Anita Hill's unsubstantiated charges against Clarence Thomas, Lehrer began without a hint of distaste or revulsion: "Our lead story is the sexual harassment charges against Clarence Thomas. We have excerpts from the press conference by his accuser, Anita Hill." In case giving that unedited platform to Hill wasn't enough, Lehrer's show also aired two debate segments.

But on February 19, 1999, Lehrer announced he would touch the allegations of Juanita Broaddrick that she'd been raped by Bill Clinton, but only as a media story: "We are part of this process, we made the very clean editorial decision not to do this story, but we are talking about it tonight in a media context, because it is media

news."

At a March 19, 1999 press conference, ABC's Sam Donaldson and reporter Jan Smith asked Clinton about Broaddrick and his tendency to lie. Lehrer complained: "Most of those questions, we were just listening to them again in our excerpt, they all began with a lecture before they got to the question. And that seems to be, you have to do it, right?" Reporter Terence Smith agreed: "Jan Smith even citing George Washington and swearing to tell the truth. Sure, reporters show off in situations like this." Despite his boasts, Lehrer (and by extension, PBS) are not the very definition of objectivity, and neither are Lehrer's media promoters. — *Tim Graham*

Jim Lehrer's Not a Political Monk

Lehrer claimed he hasn't voted since 1964. But on November 30, 1989, Lehrer joined CBS's Ed Bradley, NBC's Jane Pauley, and NPR's Susan Stamberg at a \$300-a-ticket fundraiser for the liberal Children's Defense Fund, chaired at the time by Hillary Rodham Clinton.

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