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CREDIBILITY OF THE MEDIA

The matter of the credibility of the media has risen from the status of carping conservative complaints to a controversial issue of public importance. CBS's paranoid reaction to takeover attempts has resulted in "media fairness" being talked about everywhere.

CBS's TV spots praising Dan Rather for his "fairness" are not just run-of-the-mill "promos." They are "issue advocacy" spots arguing the now-controversial proposition that the CBS Evening News is "fair" (as opposed to unfair and biased). To echo the Bard, "He doth protest too much, methinks."

Meanwhile, the New York Times has provided an object lesson of liberal advocacy masquerading as news. Such bias would have been striking on the editorial page, but it appeared in the regular news section.

The "news" of the article, "Policy Role of Attorney General Raises Questions," was that "some legal scholars and former Attorneys General question the wisdom of President Reagan's recent decision to use Attorney General Edwin Meese III as a top policy-maker, a role that some say they fear could draw the nation's top lawyer deeper into politics."

According to the Times, some of Mr. Meese's predecessors at the Justice Department said that "they knew of no precedent for an attorney general to be given such a formal policy-making role." Nixon's Attorney General, Elliott Richardson, said he couldn't recall "an attorney general who served on a Cabinet Council with such a broad policy sweep."

Such media concern about the Attorney General's role in politics is really a concern about Reagan's conservative Attorney General in politics. The media manifested no such fears when President John F. Kennedy's liberal Attorney General, Robert F. Kennedy, was up to his ears in White House decision-making.

Nobody could have been more into politics and policy-making than was Bobby Kennedy. He was his brother's campaign manager and principal adviser on everything from winning the

primaries to handling the Cuban Missile Crisis. When asked how he justified his appointment of Bobby Kennedy as the nation's top law-enforcement official, Jack Kennedy is reported to have said, "My brother needs experience."

So how does the Times explain away the historical fact that Bobby Kennedy was much more deeply into politics and policy than is Edwin Meese? The Times says, "Legal historians, looking back, say his [Bobby Kennedy's] influence was more that of a brother than of an Attorney General."

Who these "legal historians" are, the Times doesn't reveal. Maybe they were just part of the Camelot claque. Their rule seems to be that it's OK for the Attorney General to have a preeminent position in White House politics and policy-making just so long as he is the President's brother (like Bobby Kennedy), but not if he is the President's longtime friend (like Ed Meese).

Griffin Bell, President Jimmy Carter's longtime friend who served as his Attorney General and confident, was quoted in the article as being "not certain" about Meese's role. That was probably a safe remark, since anything he said would invite comparisons with his own role as a Carter intimate.

The Times invoked support for its argument from Philip Kurland, noted law professor at the University of Chicago. He said that Reagan's use of Edwin Meese appears to be another step by the White House "to centralize power in fewer and fewer hands."

Now, wait a minute. The usual complaint is that Ronald Reagan conducts the Presidency as a chairman of the board who delegates responsibilities. The Reagan modus operandi is in sharp contrast to Jimmy Carter's, who kept all decision-making in his own hands, even down to who played on the White House tennis court.

Professor Kurland added, "I don't think a corporation would be likely to join the general counsel's function with that of its executive committee." On the contrary, it is not at all uncommon for a corporation's general counsel to be on the executive committee or in policy-making.

The media tried hard to block Edwin Meese's appointment and failed, but it looks like the stream of attacks will continue. The consistency of the media is mostly in their persistence.