PS1 for 5/21/87#THE LESSONS OF THE GARY HART SOAP

Did Gary Hart self-destruct, as the media claim? Or was he the victim of a vendetta that transgressed the bounds of responsible journalism and extended to peeping-tomism and personal harassment in a stake-out to destroy his candidacy?

The press was clearly an actor in Hart's five-day soap opera. No one could reasonably claim that the press was ""just an observer reporting the news.''

Some commentators praised the (BF)Miami Herald(end BF) for performing ""a public service.'' Other journalists praised the result but were embarrassed about the way the (BF)Miami Herald(end BF) ""hid in the bushes'' and was ""sloppy'' in its surveillance. They remind us of the limousine liberals who would never soil their hands as street demonstrators, but are glad that someone else is doing the rough stuff.

I am certainly not privy to the innersanctum of either the media elite or the Democratic Party. But the thought has crossed my mind that the following might be a plausible scenario to explain what happened.

One day the financial and media ""powers that be'' in the liberal establishment could have had a secret meeting to make their plans and place their bets for the 1988 presidential election. Perhaps this little gathering of ""movers and shakers'' took place over mint juleps on the estate of one of the leftwing movie stars who are so supportive of liberal candidates.

This group probably started its discussions in despondency. Prospects for electing a liberal Democratic President of the United States in 1988 simply don't look good. Despite Irangate, the voters still seem to like Reagan and his conservatism.

It was even more depressing when these would-be kingmakers

surveyed the Democratic field. The clear front-runner was Gary Hart. The only other candidate boasting a significant percentage in the polls is Jesse Jackson. Nobody else had as much as five percent in the polls, and the horrendous cost of campaigning was freezing out others from committing to trudge through the snows of the Iowa and New Hampshire primaries.

Couldn't these would-be kingmakers go for Gary Hart? After all, he is a liberal with plenty of hair; he has the young, vigorous image that appeals to the yuppies, and many people believe that Hart would have been a better candidate than Walter Mondale in 1984.

But, no, the would-be kingmakers recognized that Hart is unelectable; he's a flake. Certainly he could get the votes of the noisy demonstrators who will attend the Democratic National Convention, but he would simply never carry Middle America.

By this time, the would-be kingmakers are on their second round of juleps. Dismay and frustration at their predicament are giving way to spirited demands that something be done, and fast, to kill off the frontrunner and open up the field so that money and media would have time to build up an electable Democratic candidate. This group wants a candidate who has the ideology of a liberal but the decorum of a conservative.

Hart's weaknesses, of course, were known to this group of powerbrokers. The problem was how to get the whole country to know them, too, considering the way that the media don't consider adultery wrong, important, or anybody's business.

So a plan could be concocted. They could set up a ""Gary Hart watch'' and watch for a chance to catch him in flagrante delicto. They could pass the word among a few newspaper publishers it is now OK to report on Hart's ""character,'' ""judgment,'' and extra-political activities. A few well-placed phone calls to media leaders could

assure them that whoever broke the story would not be left dangling in the wind, but would be joined immediately and redundantly by the full power of the three TV networks. The message needn't be anything so crude as ""get Gary Hart''; it could just say, ""This is a hot story; don't let our competitors scoop us.''

Once the (BF)Miami Herald(end BF) fired the first shot with a page-one National Enquirer-style headline, the media pack pursued their prey with everything from hovering helicopters to questions that had never before been asked of a politician (""have you ever committed adultery?''). The drama unfolded at fever pitch from Monday to Friday, and then the final curtain came down.

If the liberal powerbrokers met again afterwards, they could survey their ambush with smug satisfaction. Gary Hart had been knocked out of the game. There was some damage to media credibility with the public, but it was worth the price.

The power of the media to be a player in the campaign for the U.S. presidency was demonstrated. The race for the Democratic nomination is wide open, and every candidate now knows who wields decisive power.

Who will emerge as the new front-runner for the Democratic nomination? The answer is easy. It will be whoever the media decide.