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# EMINENTOES

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## SAM MISSILE

by Fred Barnes

Once upon a time I thought I had Sam Donaldson nailed. I've known him for years, going back to the time he covered Jimmy Carter's presidential campaign in 1976. Yes, he was obstreperous then, maybe even more than now because he was still struggling to the top rung of TV journalism. Anyway, I'd never dealt with him on television, live, until the evening before President Reagan's press conference last March. Sam, eager to push his new book,<sup>1</sup> had agreed to appear on "Crossfire," the nightly political show on Cable News Network. I was one of the hosts, and my job was to make things hot for Donaldson.

I figured I could set the perfect trap. Like any Washington journalist, Sam was certain to be against the practice, attributed to White House staffs from time to time, of planting softball questions with reporters for their boss. Fine. I agree you shouldn't plant questions. Sam was in the midst of a book tour, and I'd come across an interesting document that his publisher was sending around to radio and TV interviewers. It was a list of suggested questions that might be popped to Sam, questions about his White House coverage, his journalistic reputation, his wife, and so on. Sam, I concluded from this, was planting questions, or at least his publisher was and he was a co-conspirator.

My plan was to catch him in an act of high hypocrisy. I got off to a good start when he dutifully denounced planted questions at presidential press conferences, noting that to his knowledge the practice didn't happen much. Then, I brandished the document from his publisher. I waved it in front of the TV camera. Well, Sam, what about it? How can you criticize planted questions and then plant them yourself? Sam didn't miss a beat. There was no stunned look on his face. Nonplused,

he wasn't. I don't remember exactly what his answer was, but the point is he just kept talking. If I'd nailed him, he surely didn't act nailed. Worse, later that night, I called a few people who might have seen the show. As we chatted, not one of them mentioned how I'd gotten Sam. And worst of all, when I asked specifically about the episode, one of them said, "Oh, Sam had a pretty good answer." Sadly, I concluded that Sam had slipped my trap, and had done so rather effortlessly.

It's not by accident that Sam Donaldson, the senior White House correspondent for ABC News, is the most well-known journalist in Washington (columnist Robert Novak is a close second). Sam is very clever and very loud. If he's in the same room with you, you'll hear him. Once while covering the Carter campaign in 1976, I went to dinner with some reporters in Cleveland. Sam was at the same restaurant. I know because I heard the ruckus when he fell over backwards in his chair. Even out of doors, you hear him. Sam has perfected the question that is shouted to a President over noise and other distractions. And I don't for a

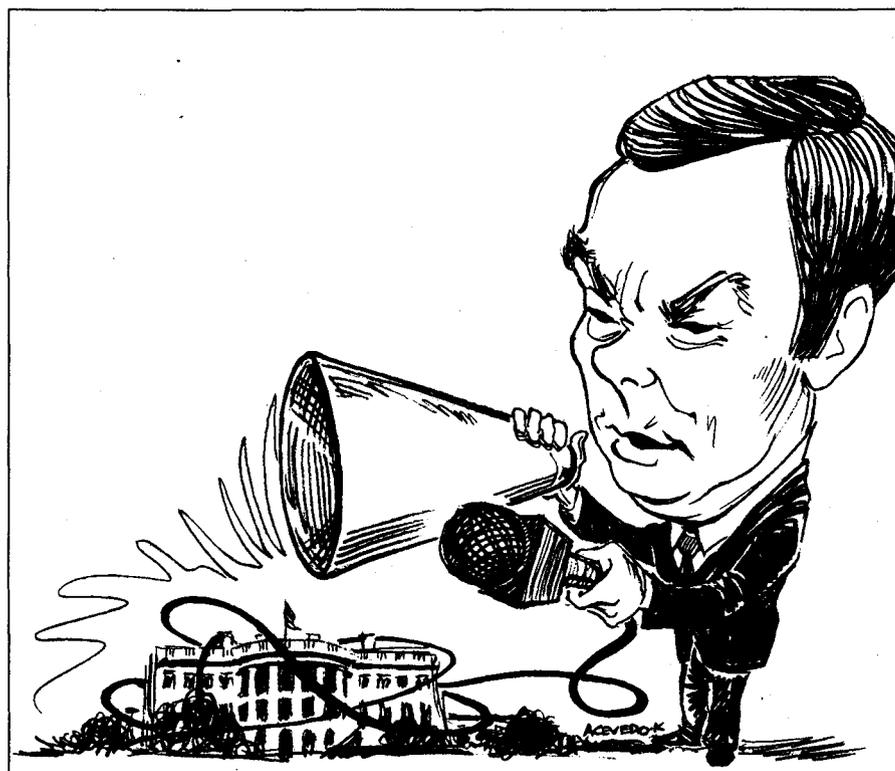
moment blame Sam for shouting questions. During a Carter trip to Mexico in 1979, I was in an early morning press pool with Sam when the President went to a fancy palace for a meeting. The night before, Carter had remarked as part of a formal toast about having suffered from Montezuma's Revenge the last time he'd come to Mexico. That morning, Sam bellowed some question—how's your plumbing today, Mr. President, or something like that—to Carter. Good question. You should have seen the look on Carter's face. But the real reason I don't fault Sam for shouting questions is that Presidents often answer them. If Ronald Reagan doesn't want Sam to ask him questions at "photo opportunities" or when he's walking to his helicopter on the South Lawn, then he ought to stop answering them. After a bit, Sam and other reporters will stop yelling. Trust me.

Sam is a very good reporter. Lots of conservatives consider him an anti-Reagan zealot because the questions he asks Reagan are impolite, mean, or insulting. But Sam wasn't much nicer to

Carter, and I don't remember any conservatives complaining then. Sam, in fact, is in one sense an old-fashioned reporter. He likes hard news, not squishy features or mood pieces that often get on the network news shows now. In his book, every word of which he appears to have written himself, Sam is highly critical of "a sort of Gresham's law of the airways, soft news driving out hard." In his view, a White House reporter should stick with the President wherever he goes, listening to every word of every speech, watching every fleeting walk between Air Force One and limousine, and tossing a question the President's way at every opportunity. Sam has resisted the notion that he should skip presidential events and work on long analytical pieces instead of spot news. He's right. Besides, many of his questions are good.

My problem with Sam is twofold. First, his concept of a reporter's role in this world is inflated and wrong. Second, he's not quite the unbiased reporter he (honestly) thinks he is. Jody Powell, in his book *The Other Side of the Story*, points out what's wrong with the attitude of the press in Washington: it frequently takes on the role of the opposition party. "The job of the press, it seems to me, is to accurately report the arguments of both sides and to try to keep them reasonably honest," Powell says. "It is most decidedly not the job of reporters to make the arguments for either side." Sam and many of his colleagues act toward a President the way that partisans of the out-of-power party act toward the prime minister in a parliamentary system.

Sam comes pretty close to admitting as much. He talks favorably about the "adversarial" relationship between press and President. "Our job is to challenge the president, challenge him to explain policy, justify decisions, reveal intentions for the future, and comment on a host of matters about which his views are of general concern," he writes. Since Presidents don't willingly confess their faults, Sam says it's his job to stress them. "I'm a reporter trying to find out who did



<sup>1</sup>*Hold On, Mr. President!* Random House, \$17.95.

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botch what, where, when, why, and how and what's on the front burner for possible botching tomorrow." At another point, Sam describes himself as a "district attorney." At still another, he praises a veteran White House reporter for "taking dead aim" at Presidents.

Reporters ought not be skills for Presidents, but this adversarial business has gotten out of hand. Sam and others

think it's their job to try to knock down whatever rationale a President offers for a policy. It's hard running a country with a press corps like that. Ask Jimmy Carter what factor played the biggest part in destroying his presidency and driving him from office in 1980. He'll tell you the press. Sam also thinks reporters should make political campaigns conform to a particular mode. The 1984 Reagan campaign didn't, in

his view, since the President wouldn't answer enough "tough" questions. "Even though reporters made certain the public understood the nature of the Reagan campaign, that didn't help smoke the candidate himself out of hiding and into the public debate," Sam moans. But so long as the press accurately characterized the Reagan campaign and reported what the President said or didn't say, what more

needed to be done? It isn't the proper job of reporters to do any more than this. Maybe I'm being old-fashioned. On this, Sam isn't.

Sam describes himself as something of a centrist, largely apolitical, and certainly no partisan. He says he voted for Barry Goldwater in 1964 and has voted for Republican and Democratic candidates alike since then. In truth, Sam is a perfect example of the predominant type of reporter in Washington. He is not an ideological person, but he usually operates off the liberal agenda. When his opinions pop up in *Hold On, Mr. President!* they usually turn out to be liberal. They are also shallow, and he is extraordinarily unreflective about them. By 1966 or 1967, he says, he was "already convinced we were fighting the wrong war" in Vietnam. Nothing seems to have caused him to reconsider that opinion, not the boat people, not the Cambodian holocaust, not the clear evidence that the American press misrepresented the pivotal military engagement of the war, the Tet offensive. Sam has the usual knee-jerk thoughts on Richard Nixon. It was "a thrilling moment" when the House Judiciary Committee adopted an impeachment article against Nixon, he recalls. Sam says Carter's record on foreign policy is "quite good." He likes the SALT II treaty with the Soviets, calling it "a step forward in imposing limits on the arms race." The best he can say about the Reagan presidency *before* the Iran arms scandal broke is that "the country as a whole wasn't doing badly on the surface." And so on. Sam's book supplies ample evidence of the kind of political tilt—neither unswerving nor deeply rooted but by and large liberal—that typifies the Washington press corps and shapes coverage. Of course, Sam doesn't see any tilt at all. He has a blind spot. Like so many other reporters, he assumes his views are smack at the center and don't affect his coverage in any event. Wrong on both counts.

Sam may be a blowhard, but he is reasonably self-effacing. Perhaps he learned the trait from Reagan, who knows how to handle Sam. Unlike me, the President once managed to nail him. Sam, a militant non-smoker, approached Reagan one day and asked if people puffed smoke in his face in the Cabinet Room. No way, Reagan said. Then, Sam declared, you'll want to stop people from blowing smoke on me in the press room. Reagan rose to the occasion. "You can always carry around one of those little portable fans to blow it away, like Larry Hagman," the President said. Good line. Wish I'd thought of it. □



# THE TALKIES



## RAISING COEN

by Bruce Bawer

**H**. I. "Hi" McDunnough (Nicolas Cage), the goofball protagonist of the hilarious offbeat comedy *Raising Arizona*, is not only a crook: he's a hapless, pathetic small-time crook, a crook with no imagination at all who keeps getting caught for holding up convenience stores—and who keeps getting paroled, after a few months in the slammer, because he never uses live ammo. About his recidivism, Hi (who narrates the first ten minutes or so of the film) tells us, "I tried to stand up and fly right, but it wasn't easy with that sumbitch Reagan in the White House. I don't know, he seems like a nice man. Maybe he has bad advisors."

This refusal to take responsibility for his own actions is characteristic not only of Hi but of everyone around him. The world of this film—which was produced by Ethan Coen, directed by Joel Coen, and written by both of the celebrated young brothers, who were previously responsible for the stunning *Blood Simple*—is a world whose denizens, amoral, selfish, stupid, and tacky though they be, are nonetheless highly conversant with the current clichés and jargon of pop politics, pop psychology, and pop sociology; they've been educated not to behave virtuously but to transfer blame, to get in touch with their feelings, to "like themselves." At the Tempe, Arizona, "maximum security facility" to which he keeps returning, for instance, Hi is part of an encounter group at which a huge, evil-looking con articulates his feeling that he is a woman trapped inside a man's body. So it goes.

The third and last time that he gets paroled, Hi marries Edwina, a.k.a. Ed (Holly Hunter), a corrections officer, and they move into a "starter home in suburban Tempe"—i.e., a mobile home in the middle of the desert. Hi takes a factory job drilling holes in metal. "These were the happy days," Hi tells us, while we watch him and Ed eat

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dinner from TV trays in an awful little paneled room filled with black velvet paintings, "the salad days, as they say." But one horrible circumstance threatens their perfect bliss. They want a baby, but Ed is barren, and the adoption agencies won't give them a child because of Hi's prison record. (As Hi puts it, "Biology and the prejudices of others conspired to make us childless.") A despondent Ed loses "all interest in both criminal justice and housekeeping."

It is at about this time that Nathan Arizona (Trey Wilson), the smarmy owner of Unpainted Arizona, a heavily advertised store that sells unpainted furniture, becomes the father of five babies—the "Arizona quintts," Harry, Barry, Garry, Larry, and Nathan, Jr. Hi, watching the news reports of the infants' birth, decides that it's unfair for Nathan Arizona to have five babies when he and Ed cannot even have one—so, urged on by Ed, who has quit her corrections job, he sneaks into the nursery of the Arizona house and purloins Nathan, Jr. (though neither he nor the baby's father is ever really certain that this one is Nathan, Jr.). They take the baby back to their mobile home, where Hi has strung up a banner reading WELCOME HOME SON, and Hi sets up a camera to take a portrait of his new family (or, as he puts it, "family unit").

But the kidnapping of Nathan, Jr.—whom both Hi and Ed, characteristically, continue to refer to by that name—doesn't restore their bliss. On the contrary. Hi is racked with guilt, troubled by nightmares of a vengeful, monstrous, death-dealing "Lone Biker of the Apocalypse." Moreover, complications ensue almost immediately in the form of the arrival, at Hi and Ed's home, of two pals of Hi's, Gale and Neville, who have escaped from the Tempe prison and want shelter—and who are puzzled as to why Ed isn't breast-feeding her baby. ("Ma'am," Gale explains gently, "if you don't breast-feed him he'll hate you for it. That's why we ended up in prison.") Then there's Hi's awful Polish-joke-

telling boss, Glenn, who recognizes Hi and Ed's baby from the TV news and threatens to turn them in unless they give the baby to him and his wife, Dot, who have been wanting another youngster (they already have half a dozen or so). And finally there's that death-dealing biker, who turns out not to be a figment of Hi's guilty imagination after all, but rather a professional manhunter named Leonard Smalls, who's out to find Nathan, Jr., and sell him to the highest bidder. Though all of these characters eventually find out, then, that Hi and Ed are kidnappers,

it never occurs to any of them to do the right thing and return the baby to his parents. Everybody's got an angle, and before the film is over, Nathan, Jr., has been kidnapped and re-kidnapped five times over.

Though *Blood Simple* was a murder drama and *Raising Arizona* is a farce, the two films have a great deal in common. Both are set in the Southwest, whose dry climate and open spaces reflect the moral aridity and intellectual vacuity of the films' charac-

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