

A tribute to the 'first lady of the black press'

Biographer **James McGrath Morris** on Ethel Payne and the questions no one else asked

On the morning of July 7, 1954, President Dwight D. Eisenhower entered the Indian Treaty Room in the Executive Office Building, where 165 members of the overwhelmingly white and male press corps were gathered. After briefly congratulating the reporters on the media's efforts to reduce fireworks casualties during the recent Fourth of July celebrations, the president began to take questions.

A UPI reporter asked: Would Eisenhower support the admission of Red China to the United Nations? A New York Times correspondent wanted to know: Did the pending farm bill meet with the administration's approval? One reporter after another plied the president with predictable questions on politics, policy and foreign affairs.

But Ethel L. Payne had a more pressing issue to address. As the Washington correspondent for the Chicago Defender, the nation's leading black newspaper, she had carefully formulated a question, with the assistance of Clarence Mitchell, the chief lobbyist of the NAACP, that reflected the growing hopes of African Americans in the months after the *Brown v. Board* Supreme Court decision to desegregate schools.

Only a few years earlier, Payne, the granddaughter of slaves and the daughter of a Pullman porter, had been working as a clerk in the bowels of a library in Chicago. Now, after a lucky career break and a meteoric rise on the staff of the Chicago Defender, she stood nervously before the president as one of only three accredited African Americans in the White House press corps.

"Mr. President," she began in her deep voice when Eisenhower called on her, "we were very happy last week when the deputy attorney general sent a communication to the House Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee saying that there was a legal basis for passing a law to ban segregation in interstate travel. . . . I would like to know if we could assume that we have administrative support in getting action on this?"

This wasn't the first time she had gotten a crack at the president. Eisenhower began calling on her earlier that spring, a year into her service as a Washington correspondent. Each time, Payne had focused on race, from the exclusion of the Howard University



Ethel Payne, a reporter at the Chicago Defender, began her Washington career as one of three accredited African Americans in the White House press corps.

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chorus at a Republican event to Vice President Richard Nixon's comment that every act of racial discrimination or prejudice in the United States hurts America as much as an espionage agent who turns over a weapon to a foreign enemy.

So far, the president had dispatched her queries with platitudes. Her question on this day, however, hit a nerve. Eisenhower drew himself up into his military posture. "You say that you have to have administrative support," he barked. "The administration is

trying to do what it thinks and believes to be decent and just in this country, and is not in the effort to support any particular or special group of any kind."

The room was startled by this brusque reply. Nor was it lost on the reporters that Eisenhower had suggested that African Americans and their quest for equality were tantamount to a special interest. A UPI reporter switched the subject to the potential for Hawaiian statehood.

At the end of the news conference, Edward T. Follard, a veteran reporter from The Washington Post, came up to Payne. "You asked the right question," he told her. "In fact, we should have asked those questions sooner." The Washington Star's afternoon edition carried a Page One headline: President Annoyed by Query on Travel Race Ban Support.

Eisenhower had learned his lesson. He stopped calling on Payne. In the coming months, White House press secretary James Hagerty explored ways to revoke her accreditation. "Miss Payne had been asking questions on segregation at the White House press conference which seemed to irritate the President," wrote syndicated columnist Drew Pearson. "Certainly," Pearson elaborated, "Hagerty made it clear, they irritated him. For he had done a thorough investigation of Miss Payne, which apparently included her income tax returns."

After her dust-up with Eisenhower, Payne began expanding her reporting to the Southern desegregation battlegrounds, keeping her away from the press room for long stretches, to the relief of the White House.

But even outside Washington, she remained ahead of her white colleagues on what they had begun to call the "seg beat." For example, on the scene of the bus boycott in Montgomery, Ala. — before the name of Martin Luther King Jr. had even appeared in a national newspaper — Payne reported that a new black leadership was emerging, different from the old ranks of the NAACP. "Instead," she told her readers, "this gladiator going into battle wears a reverse collar, a flowing robe, and carries a Bible in his hand."

Her stories from the South and her continued nudging presence in the Washington press corps made her one of the civil rights movement's most visible chroniclers for African Americans — but she was unknown to white readers. Over the next three decades, she became known in Washington as "the first lady of the black press."

As the movement gained traction, Payne went overseas in the belief that international affairs and civil rights were inex-

tricably linked. She made a 10-nation reporting tour that included joining author Richard Wright and politician Adam Clayton Powell Jr. in Bandung, Indonesia, the site of an Asian-African summit. She also accompanied Nixon to Ghana, where she witnessed the first meeting between King and Nixon. She spent three months in Vietnam, covered the Nigerian civil war, and went to China with Susan Sontag and others, one of the first groups of American journalists to tour the nation after Nixon's 1972 visit. In the 1970s, CBS hired Payne, making her the first African American female radio and television commentator on a national network.

Through all of this, Payne remained steadfastly with the Defender for more than 25 years, with the exception of a short hiatus when she worked for the Democratic National Committee and the AFL-CIO. Newsmakers never ceased to complain about her aggressiveness.

Payne saw herself both as an emissary from and a representative of a large group of Americans long neglected by the mainstream media. A few years before her death, she told an interviewer, "I stick to my firm, unshakeable belief that the black press is an advocacy press, and that I, as a part of that press, can't afford the luxury of being unbiased . . . when it come to issues that really affect my people, and I plead guilty, because I think that I am an instrument of change."

Today marks the centenary of Payne's birth. But sadly, only 20 years after her death, she is little remembered, a victim of the very racism she fought as a journalist. "Had Ethel Payne not been black," The Washington Post noted in an editorial on her passing in 1991, "she certainly would have been one of the most recognized journalists in American society."

In 2002, Payne was one of four female journalists honored with a likeness on a U.S. postage stamp. The others were white journalists Ida Tarbell, Marguerite Higgins and Nellie Bly. As with the other three, Payne's story offers a gentle reminder that the great power of a free press rests on a simple notion of rendering those in power accountable.

Payne's journalism invoked none of the angry name-calling fashionable in the news media today. Rather, she brought only one weapon with her when she gained access to the halls of power on behalf of her readers. It was to ask questions that others were not asking. And she got answers.

James McGrath Morris, the author of "Pulitzer: A Life in Politics, Print, and Power," is writing a biography of Ethel Payne.

How the media turns a mistake into a gaffe

Journalist **Paul Waldman** explains how campaign-trail missteps go viral

If you aren't old enough to remember it, you've probably heard the story of the most consequential presidential campaign gaffe of the modern era. In 1972, Maine Sen. Edmund Muskie responded to a series of attacks by the Manchester Union Leader with a news conference outside the paper's offices. Standing in the New Hampshire snow, the candidate for the Democratic nomination condemned the paper for, among other things, attacking his wife. The Washington Post's David Broder began his story about the incident this way: "With tears streaming down his face and his voice choked with emotion . . ."

Though Muskie insisted that his facial wetness came from the snow, the idea that a candidate would cry created a scandal. Muskie, thought until that moment to be his party's inevitable nominee, soon saw his campaign flounder and die.

The less well-known part of this story is that some influential journalists had decided long before that there was something slightly off about Muskie. In his 1977 book "Reporting: An Inside View," legendary journalist Lou Cannon wrote that, after playing poker with Muskie, he concluded that the senator was too temperamental to be president. "What does a political reporter do with this kind of insight?" Cannon asked. "As in this instance, it is rarely written as a hard news story the first time the thought arises. . . . What we reporters tend to do is to store away in our minds such incidents and then use them to interpret — to set a context — for major incidents when they occur."

What makes an incident or gaffe "major" is the interpretation that journalists — and these days, the blogosphere and Twitterverse as well — give it. Some mistakes are largely ignored, while others are portrayed as enormously consequential and haunt the candidate for weeks or months. The difference reveals far more about journalistic biases than it does about the candidates themselves.

In every campaign, candidates' verbal miscues draw plenty of attention, and the GOP primary race this year is no different. At a stop in Iowa on Thursday, Mitt Romney blurted out that "corporations are people" and engaged in a mini-debate on the issue with the crowd. In recent weeks, Newt Gingrich came under heavy criticism for describing Republican Rep. Paul Ryan's Medicare plan as "right-wing social engineering." Tim Pawlenty referred to the Affordable Care Act as "ObamneyCare," then backed down when asked to repeat it to Romney's face in a nationally televised debate. And Michele Bachmann has been caught in a series of factual errors, such as placing the Battles of Lexington and Concord in New Hampshire rather than Massachusetts; claiming her birthplace of Waterloo, Iowa, as the home of John Wayne, when it was actually serial killer John Wayne Gacy who hailed from there; and asserting that the founding fathers "worked tirelessly" to eliminate slavery.

All of these misstatements had something in common: They reinforced what many people — including reporters — already thought about the candidate in question. That's why the incidents became "news."

In Gingrich's case, reporters have long believed him to be undisciplined and erratic. Romney is supposed to be not only a creature of big business but inauthentic as well, awkwardly trying to ingratiate himself with voters. (Sometimes derided as "Romneybot," he'd be the one to see no difference between corporations and human beings.) Pawlenty is thought by some to be unprepared for the hardball of a presidential campaign, while Bachmann is considered an intellectual or policy lightweight — a "flake," as Chris Wallace so ungraciously said to her on "Fox News Sunday."

The politicians' so-called gaffes don't tell us anything new. Instead, they allow reporters to explain how what they've thought all along about a candidate is true.

You know a gaffe has made its mark when it becomes the subject of late-night monologues. Stewart and Colbert offer biting satire of the candidates, while

Leno, Letterman, Fallon and O'Brien deal in broad strokes — but all tend to focus on one or two characteristics of each major political figure, and nearly every joke becomes a variation on that theme. John McCain was a grumpy old man, George W. Bush was dumb, John Kerry was a stiff patrician, Al Gore was dishonest and self-aggrandizing. Every politician is defined by what is allegedly his or her biggest character flaw.

If the candidate's misstep doesn't hew to the stereotype, chances are it'll be soon forgotten. During a 2008 stop in Oregon, then-Sen. Barack Obama noted that he had visited "57 states" during his presidential campaign. Despite the efforts of some GOP partisans, the mainstream media quickly moved on; most journalists assumed Obama knew the right number and had simply misspoken. Today, if Bachmann says something that sounds like an awkward attempt to ingratiate herself with voters, reporters won't speed-dial their editors. If Romney makes a factual error about the founding fathers, it will be greeted with a yawn. He's supposed to be the insincere one without a handle on human interaction, and she's supposed to be the dolt.

The result is profoundly unequal treatment of candidates. Get branded as dishonest, and reporters will pore over your statements to see if you've ever strayed from the truth; if they find that you have, they'll assume it was an intentional deception and not a mistake. (Just ask Gore, who never actually claimed that he invented the Internet.) Get a reputation as a fool, and the same error will be presented as yet more evidence that you lack the intellect for whatever job you're seeking.

There's nothing partisan about it. Think about the 2008 election. When McCain was unable to recall how many houses he owned, the stories about it were as good a mark as any that the character judgment reporters were making about him had shifted. No longer the much-admired "maverick," McCain had become just another rich, out-of-touch Republican. But his opponent got

off no easier: When Obama was secretly recorded saying that white working-class voters in the Rust Belt, in the face of their economic struggles, "cling to guns or religion," it allowed reporters to place him in the stereotype of Democrats as cultural elitists. Both episodes became major stories.

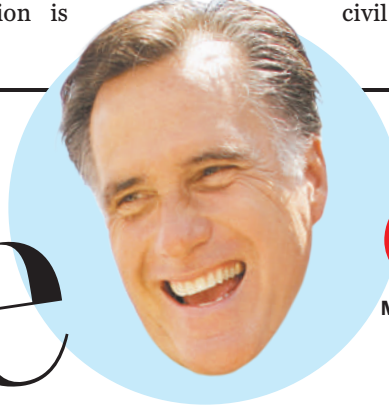
These gaffes rarely concern substantive policy issues — in fact, the less they are about policy, the more likely they are to stick. Mischaracterize your opponent's tax plan and observers will barely bat an eye, but pad your résumé, and your fundamental character will be questioned.

And of course, "character" is the primary theme of all campaign coverage — not what candidates will do once they take office, but who they are deep within. The gaffe is supposed to reveal this inner character, to strip away the carefully crafted veneer and show the real person. And sometimes it can.

But it's hard not to feel for the candidates. Imagine if every day for the next year, you had to deliver five or six extemporaneous speeches and make small talk with hundreds of strangers, all while people followed you around recording every word.

Chances are you'd say a few things you'd like to take back. Those mistakes might reveal who you really are. But more likely, they'd reveal who the person holding the microphone or notebook or camera thinks you are.

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“Corporations are people.”

Mitt Romney, campaigning in Iowa on Thursday



“They cling to guns or religion or antipathy toward people who aren't like them.”

Barack Obama, speaking about small-town voters during the 2008 campaign



“I don't think right-wing social engineering is any more desirable than left-wing social engineering.”

Newt Gingrich, on the House GOP budget plan



“Well what I want them to know is just like John Wayne was from Waterloo, Iowa, that's the kind of spirit that I have, too.”

Michelle Bachmann, on her home town, where killer John Wayne Gacy, not actor John Wayne, was born