WHAT WILL FOLLOW

In 1978 I surveyed 450 journalists who were in Washington to cover national government for American commercial news organizations: half completed an elaborate sixteen-page questionnaire; half were interviewed by telephone. The findings identified the press corps by sex, race, education, types of media, and experience and (through the telephone interviews) revealed a good deal about the reporters' views on such matters as political bias and disagreements with their home office. That was considerably more information than had ever been gathered before.

Twenty-seven years later, when I became a professor at George Washington University, I recruited my students and my interns at Brookings to help me search for the 450. We tracked them down in France, England, Italy, Australia, and nineteen U.S. states in addition to the Washington, D.C., area. In the end we located 90 percent of the original subjects and interviewed 283 of them (interviewers are identified in the endnotes). Eighty-seven of the original subjects had died before we found them, and we relied on their obituaries for information.

This is not a "Class of '78" in the sense of identifying a group of individuals entering college together. Our respondents had an age spread of more than a half-century: Richard Strout became a Washington reporter when Warren G. Harding was president and retired when the president was Ronald Reagan; Charlotte Moulton became a Washington reporter when the president was Franklin D. Roosevelt and retired when Jimmy Carter was president; others were still working journalists when we closed the book in 2012, during the presidency of Barack Obama.

What they have in common is that at a certain moment in time they all were working in Washington. By the next day, they may have returned to the home office in Omaha or been reassigned to Jerusalem—or left journalism. Actually, eighty-one of our subjects remained journalists after leaving Washington, suggesting that our findings may help explain career patterns beyond the capital. Our group includes some prominent journalists. From television there were Ted Koppel, Sam Donaldson, Brit Hume, Marvin Kalb, and Judy Woodruff; among print journalists, there were Bill Keller, Jack Fuller, John Curley, Tom Fiedler, and Karen Elliott House, who would go from Washington to become editor or publisher of the *New York Times,* the *Chicago Tribune, USA Today,* the *Miami Herald,* and the *Wall Street Journal* respectively. Most, however, would never be known beyond their circle of colleagues or specialized audiences.

While there is rich scholarship on the basic characteristics of U.S. journalists, there is no major study of career patterns in journalism and, as we shall see, a great deal of misinformation.

Whatever happened to . . . ? We now have enough information to answer that question. How many of these 450 men and women stayed in journalism? Did they rise in their organizations? Change jobs? Move from reporter to editor? Jump from one type of medium to another—for example, print to TV? Did they remain in Washington or go somewhere else? Did they leave journalism? Why? Where did they go?

This book is designed as a series of discrete essays, relatively self-contained, each concentrating on some characteristic, such as age, sex, race, or place of employment, while the concluding chapter classifies career patterns.

1. "The Greatest Generation"

These veteran Washington journalists were fifty years old or older in 1978. Most of them grew up in the 1930s during the Great Depression, went off to defend the country in World War II, and returned home to complete their education, start a family, and figure out how to earn a living. They constituted 16 percent of the press corps; 90 percent were men, 1 percent nonwhite. They were entering the business of

journalism—whether print or electronic—during a period in which it took incompetence for an organization not to be profitable. Nearly 40 percent of them worked for newspapers, 10 percent for television networks. Their career patterns were remarkably alike and very different from those of the journalists who came after them.

2. "The Boomers"

Ranging from twenty-one to thirty-two years of age, members of the huge baby boom generation already made up a third of the Washington press corps by 1978. With their careers in journalism, or elsewhere, still largely in front of them, they would break with the dominant career patterns set by the World War II veterans. The immediate tensions were between the mainstream culture of journalism in Washington, which was unfriendly to change, and the culture of young people raised in a time of affluence who expected more occupational freedom than their elders had.

3. The Women

Women constituted 20 percent of the Washington press corps in 1978. Confronted by bias in the industry and rough-edged behavior in its newsrooms, they went to court to challenge their employers for advancement, and they succeeded. As their numbers doubled over time, the focus of our interviews moved from discrimination to ways to balance their professional and personal lives.

4. Diversity

African Americans made up 4 percent of the Washington press corps in 1978. They tended to be young, strongly motivated, well educated, and more apt than their white colleagues to have majored in journalism, with nearly a third holding graduate degrees. They also would get some help from some employers' "affirmative action programs" along the way. A few would rise into the firmament of the national media, yet the percentage of black journalists was not rising. Why were so few talented African Americans climbing the career ladder in Washington journalism?

5. The *New York Times*

A newspaper is a pyramid-shaped organization that needs a lot of foot soldiers at the base and has room for only a few generals at the top. The climb is very steep; steepest, it is written, at the *New York Times*. While Washington is an important way station for talented and ambitious journalists on their upward trek back to New York, reporting from the Washington bureau is highly prized in its own right and sometimes leads journalists in unexpected directions. What happened to the reporters from 1978 who reached this height? If they left the *Times,* why did they leave? Where did they go?

6. The Networks

While the networks provided a few sweet spots on the morning shows, the Sunday shows, and the news magazines—notably *60 Minutes*—the livelihood of Washington correspondents at ABC, CBS, and NBC in the late seventies rested on the success of the half-hour weekday evening news programs that most Americans still watched to get the national and world news. Around the corner would come cable and the Internet, the combination of technology and economics that rearranged the television news industry. Some journalists were near retirement, but for most the pressing question would be how to adjust to the new environment.

7. In the Right or Wrong Place

Life was going to be very different if your employer in 1978 happened to be the *Washington Star* rather than the *Washington Post,* United Press International rather than the Associated Press. While it is possible to be in the right place at the right time, it is also possible to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. The role of fortuity, the degree of accident and chance in the life of a journalist, is worthy of a chapter of its own.

8. In the Niche

Nearly 19 percent of the journalists surveyed in 1978 worked for highly specialized publications of limited circulation. Just as their products

differed from mainstream publications, so too did their job expectations and satisfactions. But with the infusion of prominent media companies entering the Washington niche business in 2011 and offering a more popular style of reporting and editing, past career patterns are subject to change.

9. The Gridiron Club

Every year in March they move into a downtown hotel ballroom, don outrageous costumes, add their own words—"soft-core satire"—to popular songs, and then ask the president of the United States to show up and be a good sport. This has been an annual event since 1885, when the president was Benjamin Harrison, twenty-seven years before cherry trees were planted around the Tidal Basin. Other reporters come and go, but Gridiron members, if they have a choice, choose to spend their lives in Washington; their careers, therefore, increasingly reflect changes in Washington journalism.

10. Whatever Happened to the Washington Reporters?

Here we assess the careers of the 450 reporters that we surveyed in 1978, one by one. We tally the number of those who left journalism sooner rather than later (journalism's dropouts), those who left in mid-career, and those who are lifetime journalists. Why do some leave and others stay? The results differed markedly from what sociologists and journalists themselves led us to expect.