

2008

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Recommended Citation

Erin Ryan, *Reporting on Palin: Negotiations in Political Theater* *HARV. NEGOT. L. REV. ONLINE* 1 (2008),
Available at: <https://ir.law.fsu.edu/articles/681>

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HARVARD NEGOTIATION LAW REVIEW

Reporting on Palin: Negotiations in Political Theater

By Erin Ryan

(published October 2nd, 2008 at <http://www.hnlr.org/online/?p=17>)

Ever since Sarah Palin's selection as John McCain's vice presidential running mate, the McCain campaign has engaged in a cut-throat, high-stakes negotiation with a uniquely hamstrung counterpart—the news media. Or at least, that's how it would appear to a skilled negotiator, given the unmistakable hard bargaining tactics the campaign has regularly employed. Extreme demands, psychological warfare, bluffing, stonewalling—each day yields another expert recitation of classic bargaining tactics that you might expect to encounter while shopping for a used car, though not so much in an election that should epitomize our civic ideal of consensus-building in the marketplace of ideas. But here we-the-people are, stuck on the seamy sidelines of a used car lot, watching the campaign and the press throw down.

It's not your standard wheeling and dealing, to be sure, but it's a negotiation nonetheless. What are they bargaining over? Like all negotiations, it's about what the parties want from one another. The press wants a good story, of course, within the bounds of maintaining public credibility. The campaign wants favorable press coverage for its candidates, hoping to generate public credibility of its own. So it has been since campaigning began. But in this election, the McCain campaign has perfected a slowly developing twist in the game, pursuing a new bargaining strategy with ruthless message discipline at the expense of credibility for all involved. The campaign would still like favorable press coverage for its vice presidential candidate, of course, but if it can't have that, its secondary aspiration is to undercut the legitimacy of what unfavorable coverage it receives—and with it, the legitimacy of the news media in general. Since Palin's debut, the campaign has chased this second goal with even greater vigor than the first, leaving us to wonder whether it is not the second-best thing at all, but what the campaign really wanted to begin with. (Witness the artistically orchestrated spectacle during the convention, in which the speakers rallied tens of thousands of delegates to boo the members of the media among them covering the event for the tens of millions of viewers watching it all happen on live TV.)

It's easy to forget that the Republicans are actually campaigning against the Democrats, given that their most barbed attacks have been directed at the news media. Like the notorious hard-bargainer most fear facing on the other end of a deal, the campaign has baited the press with personal attacks (accusing reporters of bias and discrimination), trumped up phony issues (insisting that covering Palin's family was sexist even after Palin had made her family role a

centerpiece of her campaign), and land-mined Palin's speeches with demonstrably phony facts (such as hailing Palin as a fiscal reformist despite facts indicating that she supported the Alaskan "Bridge to Nowhere" until it became a political embarrassment).

But the campaign's most successfully exploited trick is the time-honored tactic of "anchoring" the bargaining range at the very outset of the negotiation. The cut-throat bargainer starts with an extreme demand strategically far removed from the true value at stake in the deal. You're selling a used car worth \$1000? You offer it for \$5000 and see how the other side responds. You're looking to buy the same used car? You offer \$250 and wait. The other side will counter, but the psychological pull of that extreme opening figure is hard for most to resist, and they usually respond closer to your opening than they had planned. Even if they counter reasonably, research predicts that after a standard negotiating concession pattern, the deal will close near the midpoint between the two opening offers. Start with an extreme demand, and you can often define where the rest of the negotiation takes place based on nothing more than the self-serving "anchor" you dropped in that fateful opening move.

This is what the McCain campaign did in the first few moments of Palin's candidacy, when it staked out an extreme position in negotiating for the kind of coverage it wanted for the nomination. In response to critical comments posted on a liberal blog about the Governor and her teenage daughter's apparent pregnancy (and despite the distinction between a liberal blogger and the mainstream press), the campaign withdrew Palin from press access and lambasted the news media in general as liberally-biased, sexist, and cruel. It accused reporters of unfairly targeting Palin's family, record, and experience. Campaign Manager Rick Davis announced that Palin would not be available for interviews until the press was prepared to show the proper "respect and deference" that she was due (Fox News Sunday, 9/7/07). To the lay observer, it was an unprecedented expectation in a presidential campaign; to the hard-bargainer, it was a cunning "precondition demand." And in stalling Palin's first interview until several weeks had passed (and moderating the tone of those few that have followed), it worked.

In seizing the initiative this way, the campaign expertly accomplished three hard-bargaining objectives in one opening "offer." First, it successfully anchored the negotiation over Palin's coverage in a range that limited the options of the press to a few unattractive alternatives. With Palin unavailable for interviews, the press could either conduct background research of the sort the campaign would further decry, or cease coverage until she was made available to answer questions. No coverage seemed like an irresponsible option after a relative unknown was nominated for the heartbeat-away position—the second-most powerful job in the world and the presumptive heir of a McCain presidency a few terms down the road (or sooner). But doing almost anything else would set the stage for further accusations by the campaign, which the press would be unable to refute without providing yet more fodder for the trumped-up controversy. If competitive bargaining is an information game, the campaign adroitly arranged to have all the information, for as long as possible.

After the campaign's aggressive opening, the press would have had the next move, but lo—in withdrawing Palin from public reach, the campaign stonewalled, and therein deployed its second tactical bargaining tool: the scarcity effect. A powerful way to influence the perceived balance of

leverage in a negotiation is to create the illusion that what you have to offer is a scarce commodity, driving up the (apparent) value of the deal. When the desired asset seems scarce, a negotiator falling prey to this cognitive bias overestimates the value of what the other side has to offer and devalues her own alternatives. Introducing Sarah Palin as a scarce resource made her seem that much more intriguing, that much more appealing, and that much more tantalizing a news item.

Finally, accusing reporters of political and sexual discrimination (not to mention heartless cruelty to a mother and her young children) denigrated them as individuals and weakened their footing. A hard-bargainer uses personal attacks to unbalance an opponent, psychologically inducing him to devalue the strength of his own negotiating position. By leaving shaken up reporters nothing to cover other than the controversy itself, the campaign decimated what leverage would have been left to the press, all in the first move.

Said controversy succeeded in firing up the Republican base, but in context, the campaign's posture of outrage suggests more bargaining strategy than genuine indignation. However delicate the issues of how to cover a candidate's teenage daughter's unwed pregnancy, its treatment by the press was unlikely motivated by the alleged liberal bias. Anne Kornblut aptly demonstrated this in her *Washington Post* thought-experiment a week into the nomination (9/7/08), in which she asked how things might have been different had similar facts become known about Hillary Clinton during her campaign for the Democratic nomination. Would the press have given her an easier ride? Would Republicans have closed ranks to protect her honor and dignity from a media frenzy? (If you can find someone who believes it so, please let me know—I have a used car I'd like to sell!) Meanwhile, sheltering Palin from questioning reporters gave the campaign needed time to bring her up to speed on issues of national import with which she has little prior experience or knowledge. (As Richard Shell observed in *Bargaining for Advantage*, a shrewd bargainer always has two reasons for a proposal: a good one, and the real one.)

Should the media leave candidates' families alone, categorically? Probably—though it's harder to make that claim when a candidate opens the door by promising to make her family values yours as a matter of law. Would press coverage of either Clinton or Palin in this situation reveal sexist attitudes? Certainly—though the campaign's complaints to this effect rang hollow after McCain had earlier approved a supporter's pet name for Hillary Clinton that rhymed with "witch," and after Palin had called Clinton a "whiner" for objecting to sexist coverage of her own campaign. But was the media's scrutiny of Palin's experience, ethics, dubious stump-speech claims, and even her daughter's pregnancy the result of liberal media bias? No; that was just the press doing its job, in a manner at least as well or as poorly as usual. But now, the press was put on the defensive, and with seemingly few means of self-defense. For the press is uniquely hamstrung in the bargaining venue of political theater.

In ordinary negotiations against hard bargainers, theorists advise a series of de-escalation techniques to defang these tricky tactics. When they make knowingly false statements, you counter by insisting they back up their claims with objective criteria and standards—though in this context, finding them is a job for, well, the press. When they stonewall or deploy pressure tactics to browbeat compliance, you subject the tactics to public scrutiny by taking the story to—

yup, the press. When they apply psychological warfare, attacking your intelligence, ability, or good faith, a technique advocated by Roger Fisher and William Ury in *Getting to Yes* is to disarm them by being simultaneously “soft on the person and hard on the merits,” showing them personal support while holding firm on the merits of the conflict. They will attempt to relieve the cognitive dissonance this creates by disassociating from their bargaining position, opening up better avenues for collaborative resolution. Or, you can simply call them out on the tactic, hoping to extinguish its force under the powerful light of day.

But in a situation like this, the press can't be soft on the person or hard on the merits. It can't cozy up to the campaign without compromising the very neutrality on which it is premised, and it can't simply respond to the campaign's accusations. For one thing, the press is not *supposed* to respond, or to even have counter-positions of the sort a negotiation like this requires. It's just supposed to report the news—to narrate the stories as spun out by the subjects of reporting, and not to become the subject of the news story itself. But even if the press could respond to defend itself, doing so would play directly into the campaign's strategy, fortifying the public image of adversity that the campaign has been projecting. The campaign's claim, in essence, is that the press is against the campaign. If the press defends against this, then it really *is* fighting with the campaign, reifying the very claim it seeks to refute. So much easier to just be gentler in covering the Palin story, extinguishing the campaign's entire grievance... (Score for the campaign.)

What should the press do instead? Perhaps negotiation theory offers good counsel after all, notwithstanding the special challenges faced by the press. When the campaign makes dubious factual statements, such as Palin's stump-speech refrain that she told Congress “thanks, but no thanks for that Bridge to Nowhere,” the press should hold it to the objective criteria revealed by solid reporting, and pair coverage of the speech with an account of those facts. When the campaign alleges media bias, the press should report on the controversy together with objective criteria that refutes or supports the claim. The press may not be “soft on the person and hard on the merits” as Fisher and Ury envisioned it, but it can report on the legitimate subjects of news while showing the respect for candidates that accords good journalistic ethics. If this does not create cognitive dissonance for the campaign strategists, perhaps it will do so in the minds of the third parties who really matter in this negotiation—the public who can then make decisions for themselves about which side seems most credible. In the end, this is the only negotiating outcome of import.

Some in the press have begun to heed this advice, rejecting the 20th century conceit of the invisible reporter to self-identify as needed to respond to out-of-bounds moves at the 21st century bargaining table of political theater. The danger, of course, is that too much self-reference will erode the credibility of the news media as a neutral party in the ongoing negotiation over the demands of public accountability in a political campaign. We don't want a world in which the need for self-defense tips the balance of neutrality that most news providers already struggle to provide. Part of the responsibility for preventing that lies with campaigns and the candidates who approve their questionable tactics, and of course, with the public that elects candidates who handle this responsibility badly.

In the meanwhile, we-the-people remain on the sidelines, watching the Great Negotiation of 2008 play out with ever queasier stomachs. Both sides of the political aisle are doubtlessly guilty of questionable tactics at various times, and neither are they the exclusive province of political campaigns. (For example, did Treasury Secretary Hank Paulson really expect Congress to sign off on that no-oversight \$700 billion blank check, or was that just an anchoring tool to focus legislators' efforts on securing oversight rather than rejecting the intrinsic proposal?) Still, the McCain-Palin campaign's aggressive strategy has moved beyond the threshold of peer political theater, and transgressed the boundaries of good faith. It does so at the expense of public credibility in the press that would keep government itself honest, and at the expense of the marketplace of ideas in which our presidential elections are decided. Without a functioning free press, there is no open marketplace of ideas. Make no mistake; the stakes of this negotiation are high. And for the public, so far it's been looking like a very bad deal.

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