Manson remains the model for villains

By Patt Morrison

If Charles Manson did not exist, we would have had to invent him — or someone just as irresistibly grotesque.

We need a gold-standard bogeyman, a human monster incarnate, against whose misdeeds all others can be measured — and there he is.

We need a man to remind us that celebrity is about quantity, not quality — and so he metastasizes his 15 horrendous minutes into a lifetime as a master of scam.

There have been more prolific serial killers than Charles Manson — the Night Stalker, murderer of 13 and perhaps more. There have been, if possible, more depraved ones — Lawrence Bittaker, who recorded the keening anguish of the women he tortured and killed, to enjoy later at his leisure.

Yet Manson remains the archetype, the nightmare made flesh, invoked as the cautionary tale against drugs, against rock music, against license, against, even, California. Thirty years after the gory August weekend that put him in prison for the final time, three months from reaching the gold-watch age of 65, Charles Manson sits in Corcoran Prison, in special quarters that confirm his singular status to himself and the world.

He inks in his forehead swastika afresh, reads his fan mail — four letters a day on average, more than any other man in stir — and broods over the district attorney who put him there, over Richard Nixon who, from the Oval Office, deigned to pronounce him guilty.

His acolytes freshen his name via Web sites. He has been the subject of an opera. Comedians use the Manson Family to make mock of family values. He is a cash cow for sellers of T-shirts and crime memorabilia. He is Manson Inc.

Here is the length of the shadow he casts: A judge sentencing a Los Angeles area woman to prison for paddling her child to death to expel the devil compared her to Charles Manson, meriting "a special place in hell." A prosecutor of a Ventura County, Calif., man who enlisted his girlfriend to kill his wife referred to him as "the Charles Manson of the whole thing." A friend of mine lives in Benedict Canyon, near Los Angeles, where each August, the tourists come looking for the house where actress Sharon Tate and four other people were killed by The Family. The street number has been changed and the house has been razed; not long thereafter, a Sunset Boulevard business called "You've Got Bad Taste" was selling authentic chunks of wallboard from the leveled house for $3 a pop.

There have been more prolific serial killers, yet none has generated as much attention.

If we remember it so, think of Steven Kay. Fifty-three times now, the deputy D.A. who had a hand in four Manson-related murder trials has trudged to this prison and that one, saying "No, no, absolutely not" when any of the Manson killers comes up for parole.

Persuading the parole board is easy; persuading the kids is not.

In Santa Cruz in June, Kay was walking down a street, and here came teenagers in Manson T-shirts, and all Kay could do was shake his head. "I understand why they're wearing them: they want to show they're anti-establishment. But they don't understand how bad he is. You might as well be wearing a T-shirt with Hitler's face." Over time, true-crime tales became not moral lessons but a titillating trade in the vicarious — Jack the Ripper, Lizzie Borden. The virtues of the hero were hard pressed to compete with the louche allure of the villain. In killing beautiful people, Manson's name became bigger than his victims' ever were.

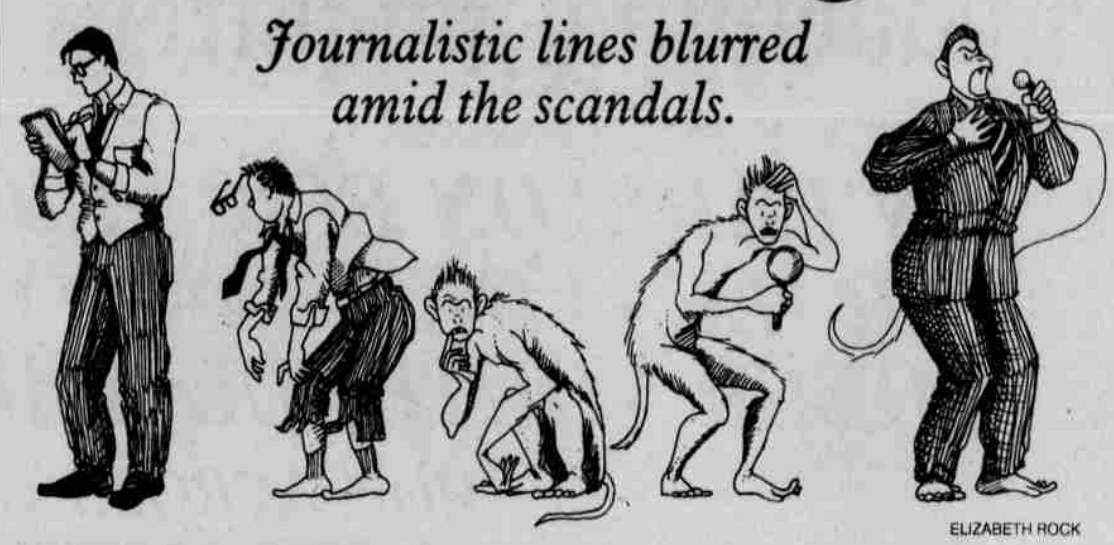
As the Manson anniversary images are aired this weekend, as you go whistling once more through that graveyard, remember that it is not box-office gore we see. It is real. Remember, too, who it was who put the bodies there.

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Tomorrow: Korea and the Korean anxiety; Poor pay for day-care workers; "Couples" looks at Stan and Ollie.

A mixed bag

Journalistic lines blurred amid the scandals.



ELIZABETH ROCK

By Jane R. Eisner
Editor of the Editorial Page

Like ghosts reminding us of a time we'd just as soon forget, they returned.

Linda Tripp, indicted for secretly taping those infamous conversations. Hillary Rodham Clinton, inaugurating a splashy magazine and her questionable Senate bid with an intimate interview that renewed an old, bitter debate.

And Monica Lewinsky, unhurt after her SUV flipped over on a California roadway.

Was it only last winter their names appeared regularly, their images seared onto the screen as symbols of our political fascination and disgust?

What has the public learned since then? What have journalists learned?

Against that backdrop, a read through *Warp Speed* is sobering. The recently-published work by two respected journalists is a withering examination of how media coverage of the Lewinsky scandal epitomizes the dangerous ascension of the journalism of assertion.

The journalism of assertion, write Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, "is less interested in substantiating whether something is true and more interested in getting it into the public discussion." It is fast replacing the journalism of verification, the search for what Walter Lippman once described as "what is so."

Why the journalism of assertion is seductive — and dangerous.

While this transformation reached a dramatic point in the Lewinsky coverage, it was spawned in a post-O.J. media culture, where — for the first time in history — "entertainment, infotainment, argument, analysis, tabloid and mainstream press not only work side by side but intermingle and merge."

It means, the authors note, that Matt Drudge sits next to William Safire on *Meet the Press*, and Ted Koppel talks about oral sex on his highly-respected *Nightline*.

Kovach and Rosenstiel call this the Mixed Media Culture, in which celebrity, spin-doctor and straightforward journalist become almost indistinguishable. Here's the authors' description of the five main characteristics of this new culture, with my interpretation:

• A never-ending news cycle that makes journalism less complete. Stories are reported piecemeal because the competition is a nanosecond away — on the Web, on the air — making time-consuming verification take a back seat to *getting it first, no matter what.*

• Sources are gaining power over journalists. The growing number of news outlets are intensifying the competition for sources, and skillful sources are manipulating that demand to their advantage — not the public's.

• There are no more gatekeepers. In other words, too many journalists are abandoning the ethics and standards of the profession. Even news outlets with their own Ten Commandments are under increasing market pressure to chip away at the tablets.

• Argument is overwhelming reporting. The rise of 24-hours news stations, cable-television talk shows and Internet chat rooms has magnified the number of news outlets engaged in commenting on information rather than reporting it. Chatter is, after all, cheaper to produce than the kind of old-fashioned reporting that wears out the soles of your shoes.

• The "blockbuster mentality." Appealing to a mass news audience these days is like producing *Stars Wars: Episode 12* — and economically-strapped competitors search vigorously for such stories.

We need only look at the wall-to-wall coverage accorded John F. Kennedy Jr.'s death as recent proof of this mentality. But here's the maddening thing: The story sold newspapers.

The journalism of assertion is terribly seductive, not only to the viewing and reading public, but to us journalists, although we may be loath to admit it. It's a kick — the first time or two, at least — to be on television, the place where anything important happens, opining away about something the President has done.

Then the sheer vapidness sinks in. You are placed before a black hole of a camera, to answer questions transmitted by a faceless interviewer cities away who's speaking into a fuzzy contraption in your ear. Be aggressive, or you won't be heard. Take your time answering a question and, *poof*, cut to a commercial break.

They spend twice as long adjusting your make-up as engaging your mind.

Yet this is what passes as high-quality journalism in our argumentative, attention-deficit culture.

Those of us who lull ourselves into thinking that we are different, better, more discerning are nonetheless brushed by this undifferentiation, included in that omnibus phrase *the media* — an amalgam of everything from *Hard Copy* to the International Herald Tribune.

But that should not be a justification for abandoning standards and ethics. Kovach and Rosenstiel write passionately about the need for a recommitment to journalistic standards of sourcing and verification, and to values of accuracy, balance and proportion.

"Decide what you stand for," they write. "Articulate what you stand for. Then practice what you preach."

We must heed their call, before the ghosts of the next scandal are upon us.

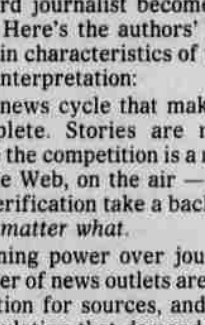
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War set stage for Nixon's undoing

By Alvin S. Felzenberg

Today and tomorrow are somber anniversaries. Twenty-five years ago today, President Richard Nixon made his farewell address to the nation. Next day, he gave an emotional farewell address to his White House staff, tendered his 17-word resignation to Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and boarded the helicopter on which he departed.

A new vocabulary became part of the Nixon legacy: plumbers' units; ethics commission, special prosecutor, independent counsel, financial disclosure, campaign finance reform, secret bombings, wiretap, break-in, hush money.



When he became the first president in American history to resign his office, Nixon hoped he would be remembered for much else. To some extent, he has been.

The irony is that the same brilliant tactics that led to his greatest successes may also have led to the end of his presidency.

Nixon's opening to China remains one of the most significant diplomatic breakthroughs this century. Detente with the Soviet Union, the other bookend of his foreign policy, is but a distant memory. None of Nixon's successors properly credited him with starting the peace process in the Middle East. There, he commands a place of honor he is still denied at home. For Nixon was the one who reduced the Soviet presence in Egypt and aided Israel when Israel needed it most.

It is the memory of Watergate, however, that most colors Nixon's reputation. Public cynicism about government and politicians; expectations that presidents lie routinely and not primarily to protect national security; anomie over "dirty tricks," laundered campaign funds, "inoperative" public statements; the criminalization of politics — all became part of public life and remain so today.

Nixon's greatest success (China) and biggest failure (Watergate) had a common root: Vietnam. Nixon came to the presidency after defeating Vice President Hubert Humphrey, who was too closely tied with President Lyndon Johnson's failed Vietnam policy to persuade voters that he would or could change it. When Nixon became president, 500,000 combat troops were still there. Thirty-eight thousand had been killed.

Rejecting an immediate withdrawal as a stain on American "honor" and an invitation to Soviet and Chinese adventurism, Nixon opted for negotiations. To prod his adversary to make concessions, he decided to use pressure by improving American relations with its two benefactors. He concluded that the way to Hanoi was through Moscow, and that the route to Moscow began in Beijing. As he played for time, he gradually withdrew American troops, replaced them with trained Vietnamese and accelerated the bombing.

His prolonged negotiations with many nations alleviated tensions and furthered American interests. Convinced that secrecy was essential to success, Nixon approved measures to prevent leaks. In the hands of his accomplished White House management team, thus began a spiral of events that ended in Nixon's undoing.

All the while, Hanoi held firm. Twenty thousand more Americans would die before the fighting stopped.

The two greatest national traumas since World War II — Vietnam and Watergate — ended within months of each other.

In retirement, Nixon set a standard for statesmanship among ex-presidents. In his last public address, he made a dramatic appeal for American aid to democratic elements within Russia. He lived to hear erstwhile anti-war demonstrators and former enemies praise his record not only on China, but also on the environment, school desegregation, health care, revenue sharing and the war on cancer.

Yet by persisting in his attempt to find a way to end a war he did not begin, Nixon lost not only his office, but also the title he craved most: peacemaker.

Alvin S. Felzenberg, Visiting Fellow at the Heritage Foundation, writes and lectures on the American presidency.

Limit children's TV time, but don't pull the plug

By Amy Jordan

The American Academy of Pediatrics has published a report that says parents should eliminate television from the lives of their babies and toddlers.

The Academy has some valid concerns. In an ideal world, parents would replace their children's viewing with loving two-way interaction and mind- and body-building activities. But what's best and what's practical do not always mesh.

Rather than make moms and dads feel guilty for not unplugging the TV set, we can encourage them to take less drastic measures that can turn TV viewing into a good resource for the audience in diapers.

The pediatricians know that babies need constant interaction with real, live people to ensure healthy cognitive and psychological development. The doctors worry that television will steal this valuable opportunity for children and their parents or caregivers to get to know one another.

The pediatricians also know that babies and toddlers need to learn ways to distract themselves and explore their environment. Given the potential damage excessive TV viewing can wreak on the life of the developing child — obesity and aggressiveness being two of the more serious consequences — the Academy recommends that parents simply turn off the television. Period.

But is this recommendation realistic for the millions of parents who have jobs that keep them running and chores that must be done — or for older children who enjoy TV?

Baby steps might be a better idea. Cut viewing from three hours a day to one. Switch from *Batman* to *Sesame Street*. Don't always leave the room once children become engrossed in a show, but watch with them occasionally and talk about what they're seeing.

Like most parents, I found television a good way to distract my three children when they were toddling around. Programs like *Sesame Street* were a free, convenient and safe form of entertainment that let me leave the room for a bit to accomplish some task. But I knew the medium could not be abused. I had written a master's thesis and a dissertation on the effects of television on children and families. So I limited their viewing, selected programs carefully and gave them other equally interesting activities: conversation, coloring, playing outside and listening to music.

I let my youngsters watch at an early age because I had read research that showed that moderate television viewing — no more than two hours of television per day, including some enriching fare — can be beneficial for children's cognitive development. (The pediatricians are right, however, in saying that this research is only with older children.) I needed this rationalization because I was overworked, sleep-deprived and needed to get dinner on the table. They liked the programs and videotapes I put on. I liked the fact that the shows had the potential to teach them something about letters, numbers or cooperation.

I have vivid memories of my David role-playing with his fellow 2- and 3-year-old friends in our old Narberth neighborhood. They liked to pretend to be the characters they knew from *Shining Time Station* on PBS.

James (the proud red engine) was played by a child with a little red wagon. Poor James always got into trouble — which generally meant tipping over on the sidewalk. But James always had good friends that would gladly help him. Edward (the really friendly engine) and Thomas (the really useful engine) would rush to his rescue, narrating in the accented voice of Ringo Starr, who played Mr. Conductor on the series ("Toot! Toot! Here comes the breakdown train!")

Important lessons about friendship, cooperation and the emotions of the anthropomorphized trains were assimilated into the play of the children who gathered in front of our house.

David came home from camp the other day with news that he had been nominated as the friendliest kid in his bunk of 10-year-olds. Perhaps Edward, Thomas and the other TV trains may have reinforced the values we tried to instill during those tender preschool years.

Amy Jordan is a senior research investigator at the Annenberg Public Policy Center, University of Pennsylvania.

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