Cable talking heads accuse broadcast networks of liberal bias,” the Los Angeles Times reported on July 27, 2008. Not so, according to the Center for Media and Public Affairs at George Mason University, which claims the networks have been rougher on Barack Obama than on John McCain during the first six weeks of the campaign.

And so it goes in newspapers, on TV, in chat rooms, dormitories, and offices across the country - it's another election year and that means rancor and rage about political partisanship in the media.

Since the fall of 1969, when Spiro Agnew went after the "liberal" press corps, media discourse has been dominated by debates about the news as a spin zone. But we think this argument over bias has obscured a far more fundamental reality: In an Age of Infotainment, where personality trumps policy and the lines between politics and show biz are blurred, the mass media has helped foster a public culture in which Americans have lost confidence in elected officials and the federal government. Consciously or unconsciously, the media may be doing the bidding of small government Republicans. But at bottom, it is not a "red" or "blue' issue; it's a "green" issue. Not green as in "the environment", green as in "money".

Here's how it's happened:

First, the forces of Infotainment have abetted the slow destruction of our trust in public servants.

Joe McGinnis’s 1969, The Selling of the President, and the 1972 film, The Candidate, exposed campaign "packaging." Elections are all about tactics, personality, and images, they suggested, and not public policy. All of the candidates’ men behind the scenes pull the strings.

By the 1990s, Cable television’s insatiable need for content - and profits-- made political consultants like Democratic strategist James Carville into rock stars. Before then pollsters Bob Teeter or Pat Caddell, political strategists Hamilton Jordan and Lee Atwater, or media Consultant Michael Deaver were occasionally in the media but not "of" the media. But over the last two decades, political magicians have taken viewers back stage to see how the tricks are done.

Carville led the way. He is everywhere, from Meet the Press to The Situation Room, appearing often with his wife, Mary Matalin, a Republican "fixer." Carville’s former partner, Paul Begala, has climbed on the gravy train. So have Ed Rollins, Donna Brazille, Bob Shrum, Michael Murphy - the list goes on. There is a fresh "farm system" of bloviators on Cable TV and talk radio - tune into any episode of Hardball or O’Reilly and you will see bush leaguers auditioning for the big show.

These days, on the network news and on Cable, it’s all about the horse race, all the time. Pundits, pontificators, and pollsters opine about the tactical considerations that convinced Obama to flip on off shore drilling or prompted McCain to flop on the Bush tax cuts. The message couldn't be clearer: politics is not about principles or the public good. It's Powerball. It's about ambition. Winning is everything -- and the only thing.
Discussions of tactics and strategy are followed by dissections of strategy and tactics. And in showmanship comparable to the World Wrestling Federation, on election nights CNN rolls out multi-tiered, multi-paneled groups of former campaign consultants - the Battle Royale of Pundity.

We have been taken into the sausage factory and shown how the sausage is made. Should we be surprised that more than three decades after Watergate public approval of politicians has reached historic lows?

Next, and equally important, media infotainers have reinforced the notion that the government is incompetent, wasteful, and fraudulent.

For years, network news broadcasts have run two kinds of features. The first is typified by *ABC World News*’ “Your Money.” Introduced on its web site as “a chronicle of excessive government expenditures,” the segment always ends with the phrase “It's your money.” The NBC version is “The Fleecing of America.” *Fox News*, as we speak, is pushing a special entitled “Porked: Earmarks for Profit.” The message is hard to miss: public officials are in bed with profiteers, and they’re having a ball with your tax dollars.

“Your Money,” “The Fleecing of America,” and “Follow the Money” never show government programs that work. It’s big, bad digs, not an inter-state highway system that is the envy of the world. Salmonella scares, not ever-safer food, drugs, water, and workplaces. Mike Espy’s Super Bowl tickets, not a political system less tainted by corruption and bribery than most other nations on earth. Nothing about how many lives have been saved by weather forecasting. Or about the role of the federal government in developing the Internet. Or how Social Security provides a safety net for tens of millions of elderly Americans, once the poorest cohort of the population.

The other long-running feature on the network news puts an exclamation point on the “red meat” rhetoric that government is the problem and not the solution. *ABC’s “Person of the Week”* and *NBC’s “Making a Difference”* profile remarkable individuals who help others. While government wastes your money, these private citizens overcome the odds (and, often, opposition from bureaucrats) and get something done.

These messages have had a corrosive impact on American politics. They have reinforced our cynicism about our elected representatives and about virtually every government initiative. As a result, we don't muster sufficient outrage over Brownie's bumbles, Halliburton's no-bid contracts, or the out-sourcing of prisons and public schools to private corporations. We are “conditioned” to expect it - after all, we've seen it all before. Every night on the news.

We live in an era dominated by Infotainment and Celebrification. The fault, of course, rests not in our stars but in ourselves. We cannot reverse these meta and mega trends. But we can at least step back from the cynicism of political professionals who are fed to us the way *Access Hollywood* serves up Paris and Brittany and think about the nutritional value of the “McNuggets” of news we are ingesting. Then we might have a chance, as Anthony Lewis once wrote, to re-awaken faith in an America “that struggles with itself and conquers corrupting habit.”

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