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In the Loop, Outside the Beltway: When the national press wants perspective and insight, it turns to Colby’s political pundits

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It was the opening night of the Democratic Convention and Anthony Corrado, headphones in place, was seated in a soundproof cubbyhole on the fourth floor of the Eustis Building at Colby awaiting a call from National Public Radio's Scott Simon. The NPR host was at the convention in Los Angeles. The interview was to be broadcast live. Corrado had been told he would be discussing President Clinton's fund-raising legacy. When Simon came on the line, his first question was whether the entertainment industry is more likely to give to the Democratic Party than to Republicans. "They certainly are," Corrado said, without missing a beat. "In fact, one of the groups that the Clinton administration has brought into the Democratic fund raising over the past eight years is the so-called Hollywood money. He had roots there with the Thomasons back in his first bid in 1992 . . . ."

Corrado's face was turned to a bank of dials, his words beamed from the dimly lit room to listeners across the country. "With experience, one gets used to the surreal character of live broadcasts," he said later.

And like fellow Colby political scientists G. Calvin Mackenzie and L. Sandy Maisel, Corrado has had plenty of experience.
All three are affiliated with prestigious Washington think tanks. All three are authors whose works are prerequisite to understanding the American political system. All three are equally at home in the classroom, in front of a microphone or mulling politics with the press. “I think it’s wholly unusual,” Corrado said. “I don’t think there’s another government department at a four-year institution that matches us in terms of the amount of research work that’s done here, the depth and quality of the faculty and in terms of the public profile.”

One of the leading congressional scholars, one of the leading campaign finance scholars and one of the leading scholars of the presidency can be found not at a major research institution but at one small college 600 miles outside the Beltway. In fact, they can be found in the same corridor in Miller Library, which Maisel points out when he gets a press query better suited to one of his colleagues. “I say, ‘Look. You’ve got one of the country’s leading experts on my campus two doors away from me. Why are you talking to me?’”

For the nation’s political writers, Corrado, Mackenzie and Maisel are go-to guys on Rolodexes that hold names and numbers of literally thousands of sources. Some sources are political staffers or consultants. Others are academics, used to add perspective and weight to news stories. “When you’re covering the White House or politics, you skip from issue to issue, whether it be tobacco legislation or defense policy or education and health care,” said Warren P. Strobel, former White House correspondent for The Washington Times, who now covers national security issues for U.S. News & World Report. “You don’t have the chance, oftentimes, to be very deep. It’s really good to have somebody who you can go to very quickly who can help explain things.”

For Strobel, it was Mackenzie explaining the intricacies of presidential appointments. For Jonathan Salant, correspondent for The Associated Press in Washington, it was a question relating to a story in September. “[Republican National Committee] transferred millions of dollars to various state parties,” Salant said, the day he was writing the story. “I’m guessing they’re earmarking it for the fall election. They’re getting prepared early for stuff... Am I right? Am I wrong? Is there some other possible explanation? I don’t know. You like to step back and have somebody take a look, some objective source.”

Whom did he call? Corrado.

“I just left a message for him,” Salant said. He first learned of Corrado several years ago at Congressional
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Quarterly, where the Colby College professor was on a list of good academic sources. Salam has been calling Waterville ever since. "Some people have a national reputation," Salam said. "Whenever there's a group of academicians, they're there. They're doing this campaign finance institute in Washington now. Corrado's on the board. There's a study on financing the elections; he's part of that group. . . . He's up at Colby, which is in the corner of the country, but if there's a group of campaign finance scholars involved, he's in the middle of it."

But there's more to being a good source than being a plugged-in academician. Asked if there are knowledgeable academics who don't cut it on the air, NPR reporter Peter Overby said, "Yes. Am I going to name any of them? No."

Some would-be sources ramble, said Overby, who covers the "power, money and influence in politics" beat for NPR. Some sources digress. And Corrado: "He's known around NPR as someone you can go to for clear-eyed, objective commentary," Overby said.

The need is for commentary that is succinct but informative. Pointed but objective. "Our editors in New York and Washington want more of this," said Glenn Adams, who covers Maine for the AP. "There is a place for horse-race stories . . . . But there's also a need to supplement that kind of thing with more perspective and more analysis."

And the one-liner. Mackenzie, who lands frequently in the quips columns in The Wall Street Journal and Christian Science Monitor, recollects a call he received before the 1996 election from a political reporter for The Boston Globe. "He called me and he didn't say it explicitly but I could tell he just needed one more quote," Mackenzie said. "I said, 'It's a Seinfeld election; it's an election about nothing.' That was all I needed to say. It was going to be quoted exactly like that. You get a sense of the words you use."

If that qualifies as a sound bite, so be it. "There's nothing wrong with that," said Mark Barabak, a political reporter for The Los Angeles Times. "People tend to disparage sound bites but if a sound bite is taking a complex subject, breaking it down and making it accessible and understandable to a nonexpert in the field, then there's nothing wrong with that. That's something that Tony can do very well."

If you're good, word gets around.

Barabak, who has used Corrado several times on campaign finance, also had spoken with Maisel on congressional issues. But in the course of the interview for this story he was told of Maisel's editing of a forthcoming book on the roles of Jews in American politics. There was a pause. Barabak, in Chicago to do a story on the place of the Midwest in the 2000 presidential race, was punching Maisel's name into a Palm Pilot under the category Jews in Politics.

Cal Mackenzie, a leading presidential scholar, now immersed in a bipartisan study of the presidential appointment process.
Sandy Maisel in his Miller Library office, where reporters call seeking comment or counsel on state and national political issues.

Another source had been added to the list. "I'll hear about them in conversation, or I'll see someone quoted somewhere. I'll call them up," Barabak said.

If the call is to Colby, he'll likely get a call back.

The Colby threesome takes its role as de facto advisors to the national and state press seriously. They spend hours educating reporters, after spending hours educating students. They don't mind. In fact, Corrado said the press isn't given enough credit for its crucial role in informing the electorate with academics' assistance. "I've always seen it as part of the process of helping, in a way, to try to promote civic education, to try to provide more information to the public," he said.

Most of that process never makes it into print. While he puts Corrado on the air five or six times a year, Overby said he calls him more frequently than that. At The Boston Globe, Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist and editor David Shribman said he calls Maisel all the time.

"I talked to Sandy only twice yesterday," Shribman said.

"About Lieberman?" he was asked.

"About everything," he said.

There are occasions when the press queries are outside of the academics' particular areas of expertise. Maisel said he gets calls about everything from foreign policy to obscure state legislative races. Corrado said he once was chatting with a reporter about a movie, presumably off the record, and found himself quoted in the newspaper's arts section the next day. "You're trying to be helpful," he said. "And I can expound intelligently for 30 seconds on just about anything."

In most of those cases, they decline comment. Corrado says he can't return all the press queries and sometimes has to limit himself to the biggest national outlets and Maine newspapers and radio. But one quote leads to more queries. Make the front page of The Washington Post or The New York Times and suddenly calls pour in from reporters at regional dailies around the country. A few just want a quote to fill out a story. Most of the reporters are sincerely interested in better knowing the issues about which they're writing, the professors say.

In fact, Colby's political pundits spend a substantial amount of time briefing and brainstorming with reporters. It is no exaggeration to say that many of the political stories and commentary in the nation's most influential newspapers began with a conversation with a professor in an office in Miller Library. Consider a chat Maisel had a few weeks back with a Globe staffer who was posted outside the recent Mideast peace talks at Camp David, during which the participants were not talking to the press. "She'd been there seven days with no news," Maisel said. "What she's doing is trying to find something to write about. Something new to write about every day."

They talked about what Clinton had been doing over the summer, in Maisel's view, to appear presidential. He said Clinton

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"How will the country react to an Orthodox Jew? My answer has probably been that there are four different sets of people in this country you need to deal with. One is Jews... I think the biggest beneficiary of all this is Hillary Rodham Clinton. I think New York may go big for Gore-Lieberman and that may draw her in. The second group, average Americans, will like his values, will love anti-violence on TV, respect the Sabbath. The third group is the evangelicals, which I said in these interviews I just don’t know. I said I could argue it either way—with the philo-Semitic movement, rediscovering Israel, [they might support him]. On the other hand, some of those people are going to vote for Gore in any case." —L. Sandy Maisel

One of the things that doesn’t work in American politics right now is that people are bored to death, and one of the reasons is that it just comes at them too much, too often. I remember as a kid, even as a college student, that the conventions were just the peak of excitement because you hadn’t heard much about the elections before that. And the vice presidential nominees were always selected late at night at the conventions and you’d see Mike Wallace. He’s down on the floor with Dan Rather and they’re saying, ‘I’ve got a story over here in Pennsylvania: You sat there and it was really fun. Now, it’s beaten to death before it’s actually news.” —G. Calvin Mackenzie

One of the things that has amazed me in my work on Capitol Hill is the knowledge individual members of Congress have on where their own money comes from. No matter what reform option you put forth, they can immediately assess how that would affect them. Or how that might affect a potential opponent. And by any definition, any reform will make it easier for challengers to run against current members of Congress... It’s kind of a Sisyphean task.”

—Anthony Corrado

"I doubt that George W. Bush has spent one second saying, ‘I wonder who our Supreme Court nominees should be?’ That’s something, if there’s a slow day at the White House, he might say to the Attorney General: ‘You know, we should probably think about putting together a list.’” —G. Calvin Mackenzie

The primary barrier to campaign finance reform is that the public hasn’t shown a willingness to broadly vote on this issue. Every opinion poll you read says that 90 percent of the public thinks the current system doesn’t work. The problem is that there are very few examples of members of Congress or the Senate who are defeated because they’re against campaign finance reforms. It’s a mantra on Capitol Hill that nobody ever lost a race because of their stance on campaign finance reform.”

—Anthony Corrado

"We’re at this very interesting crossroads, where the technology is developing that will make it easier to participate in politics than ever before. [The new generation of voters] can make a contribution over the Internet. They will be able to vote online soon. They can get any piece of information they want. They can read newspapers from all over the world. Yet at the same time we have a group that’s less and less interested in pursuing the information opportunities that are out there.” —Anthony Corrado

probably was doing it for his own reputation but it played very well for Al Gore, too, as the convention loomed. “Clinton gives this uplifting speech that everybody thinks of as presidential and then he disappears and passes the mantle on,” Maisel said. “She thought he was only playing to the history. I said, ‘It’s got political implications.’"

“We’ll see if it leads to a story. If it does, it does; if it doesn’t, well, I saw things from a way I hadn’t. She was asking good, probing questions. There’s a gain.”

The relationship the Colby political scientists have with the press is symbiotic, with benefits that extend from the newsroom to the classroom. For the professors, information gleaned from conversations with reporters is fodder for scholarship, for in-class discussion, for students’ independent study. Corrado said he often takes notes during his conversations with the press. “You’re calling him with information that he may not have access to,” said Salant, at the AP bureau in Washington. “You’re doing the studies. You’re doing the interviews... I say, ‘Look what I got.’ He says, ‘Oh, that’s very interesting.”

And then they talk, the professor in his office, the reporter in a newsroom. The jobs are different but the objectives—analysis of political trends and events, education of the public—are not. Reporters like Strobel, who has written a book on the numbing effect of the electronic news barrage on the public, respect the expertise academics have gained through years of careful study. Professors like Corrado respect how much the press accomplishes with limited space and time. “These guys talk our language,” said Shribman, the Globe columnist. “They understand our needs.”

With a deadline often hours or minutes away, those needs are simple enough, said Corrado. “The first step is to return the phone call,” he said. “The second step is to have something valuable to say.”