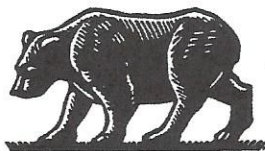


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# CALIFORNIA REPUBLIC

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## Get the Picture?



IT MAY BE THE YEAR OF THE WOMAN FOR POLITICIANS,  
BUT IT'S THE SAME OLD BOYS CLUB THAT COVERS THEM.

BY SIGRID BATHEN



**It may be the 'Year of the Woman' for politicians. But it's mostly the same old boys' club that covers them.**

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**S**USAN SWARD was a 23-year-old reporter with a Stanford B.A. in Psychology, a master's in Journalism from UCLA and a *Los Angeles Times* internship behind her when she became one of the first women ever to cover the California Capitol in 1971. She still vividly recalls that first day when she was assigned by Associated Press to the state Assembly beat: "My first day on the floor, [Assemblyman] Bill Bagley came and kissed my hand and arm, on bended knee in front of my AP seat on the edge of the floor. Willie Brown came over and asked if I would coauthor his consenting adults bill."

More amused than offended, Sward merely went about her business, covering state government and politics, often feeling very young—and very alone. "That was partly a function of being 23 and unsure of myself generally when I arrived in Sacramento," she says. "But it was also a function of the intense maleness of the place. And while I didn't mind Brown's consenting adults joke, for example, I did get sick of the day-in, day-out male bonding aspect of the place—the locker room flavor of jokes and friendships and the way it flavored how the politics got done, too ... Bit by bit, that changed, as more women came into the Legislature, the press corps and on staff."

When Sward came to Sacramento in 1971, she says that among the 60-some accredited reporters, there were, at most, three female reporters covering the Capitol. Minority reporters, male or female,

were nonexistent. In the Legislature itself the state Assembly counted only three female members; there were none in the state Senate and "very few" female legislative staff. "The basic female presence was secretaries," she says. "The women around seemed like ornaments, not real players."

Although the very first woman reporter to cover the California Capitol was Mary Ellen Leary of the old *San Francisco News*—who was sent to Sacramento in 1943 when many male reporters were assigned to World War II—only a handful of women reporters entered the staunchly all-male domain in the intervening years. In the late 1960s and early 1970s—as the women's rights movement gained momentum, and women reporters traditionally consigned to covering so-called women's page news were *allowed* (though not necessarily encouraged) to do general-assignment and cityside reporting—more women began the slow trek toward "prestige" assignments such as covering the state Capitol.

The numbers have increased somewhat since, and most major news organizations with any significant presence in the Capitol now include women reporters. A precious few have shattered the "glass ceiling" and become bureau chiefs or, like the *Sacramento Bee's* Amy Chance, deputy bureau chiefs. And women are showing up on the hustings in increasing numbers. "There are so many women on the campaign trail," said Chance in an interview during the 1990 gubernatorial campaign, which she covered for the *Bee*, "we joke that we don't go drinking, we go shopping."

However, covering the presidential campaign of Bill Clinton in 1992, Chance says politics and political reporting continue to be dominated by "a white male climate."

"Women are still not accepted as a matter of course in politics," she says. "It's a big deal that two women are running for the U.S. Senate."

The Capitol press corps is a powerful, prestigious assignment coveted by California reporters, and it is one of the profession's most intensely competitive, as well as one of its most clannish. Citing its macho, clubby nature, many women political reporters liken the beat to sports reporting. Once a reporter, usually a white male, is admitted to this small but influential fraternity, he often stays for years. And turnover is glacial.

"Opportunities are really limited in this business," says longtime *Los Angeles Times* political reporter and Sacramento bureau chief George Skelton, who heads one of the largest bureaus at the Capitol, with 10 men and one woman. "A lot of it is breaks, and a lot of it is talent. And there are only so many jobs."

Many Sacramento bureaus are one- and two-person operations, where opportunities for new blood are especially slim. But turnover is also slow in the larger bureaus.

"It may just be chance and coincidence," says the AP's Jennifer Kerr, who has covered the Capito

# Time to Rewrite The Women's Page

By Sigrid Bathen





since 1978, "but at the larger bureaus, there appears to be this conscious decision to just have one woman reporter."

Doug Willis, longtime AP Sacramento correspondent and president of the Capitol Correspondents Association, says that among the approximately 72 accredited reporters who regularly cover the state Capitol are 10 women, down from a high of about 17 in the mid-1980s. The largest number of women reporters is at the *Bee*, with four women in the 12-member bureau. Virginia Ellis has been the only woman in the *Times*' 11-member bureau for several years.

As news organizations have scaled back in the recession, Willis says, the size of the Capitol press corps has shrunk slightly. As in the Legislature itself—with 17 women in the 80-member Assembly and five in the 40-member Senate—women remain a distinct minority. And ethnic minorities, male or female, remain largely nonexistent. The *Sacramento Bee*'s Herbert Sample, who is black, and Gannett's Ray Sotero, who is Hispanic, are the only minority reporters in the entire Capitol press corps.

Robert Forsyth, a former *Bee* editor and Capitol reporter who was press secretary to state Senate President pro tem David Roberti, D-Van Nuys, for six years, and recently became press secretary to San Francisco Mayor Frank Jordan, says the news business in California is "still basically a white guys' operation."

"Look at the news organizations in California," he says. "How many decisionmakers are women and minorities? Damn few."

Ginger Rutland, longtime Capitol bureau reporter for San Francisco's KRON-TV who became an editorial writer for the *Bee* when KRON closed its Sacramento bureau in 1988, recalls a gubernatorial news conference when George Deukmejian was first elected in 1982. Reporters were asking a lot of questions about the governor's all-white male Cabinet, says Rutland, who for many years was the only black reporter covering the Capitol. "He [Deukmejian] looked around the governor's press conference room and said, 'All you people asking me questions are pretty male and pretty white.' There were titters around the room. But all of these people who were asking sanctimonious questions about lack of color and lack of diversity in his administration were left with this reality that there was a lack of diversity in their own ranks."

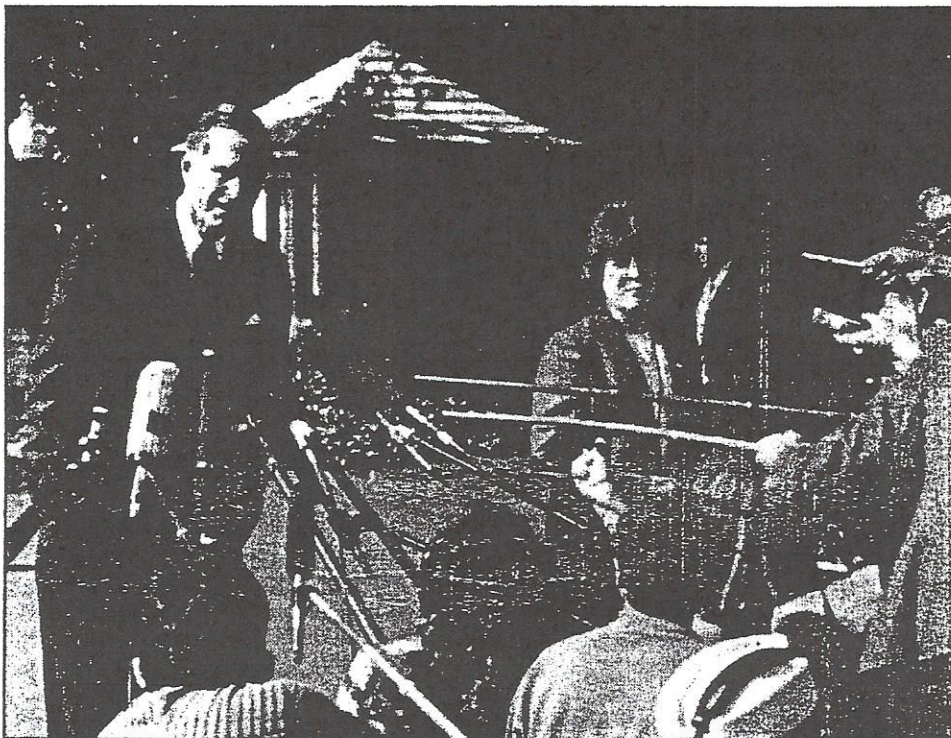
Women reporters covering the state Capitol in the 1970s reported widespread incidents of what today would be regarded as especially egregious sexual harassment—largely tolerated as a fact of life in that milieu. In a 1985 *California Journal* article, former UPI Capitol bureau chief Rebecca La Vally (now an editor with the state Senate Office of Research) recounted how an assemblyman at the time, the late Walter Ingalls, once sent a male reporter "into gales of laughter by saying, in front of me, that another woman reporter looked like she had visited 'a gynecologist with cold fingers.'"

"Some legislators were sexist, some were egalitarian, some were flirtatious," La Vally recalled in a 1990 interview. "Jim Mills [former Senate president pro tem] called me 'the poor man's Brenda Starr.' On the other hand, today, Roberti would never do that. I think today there are more Robertis than Jim Millses. A lot more women lobbyists and legislators have showed up and changed the chemistry. And I've gotten older.... I'm more respected for what I do."

Although women reporters say the treatment of

of good coverage of the Capitol by anybody," she says. "There is a lack of real work. The agencies are largely ignored by the Capitol press corps, which thinks it has to wait and watch those people [legislators] go through their file on the floor when really little or nothing of substance is going on. They do their ritual coverage—a lot of inside stuff."

However, perhaps because they are historic outsiders, women reporters in Sacramento undeniably have been responsible for pioneering coverage of issues previously ignored by their male peers.



women reporters at the Capitol has improved substantially over the years, problems remain. The *Oakland Tribune*'s Kathleen Z. McKenna—who is the paper's Capitol bureau—says there is "definitely some sexism" remaining among Capitol habits. "I don't think it's always overt, but there is an undercurrent that is always there," she says. "Is it a problem, or do you work around it? No, it's not usually a problem. Yes, I work around it."

Deborah Pacyna, Capitol correspondent for Sacramento's KXTV and also, as of this year, the first woman president of the Sacramento Press Club, says the Capitol remains in many ways "a good old boys' network. I go into press conferences, and there is a sea of male faces. Still. There is something about politics. It's like sports. There's kind of a club thing."

Beyond the palpable inequities and occasional outrages lies a potentially deeper distortion that comes with the institutional bias of Capitol staffing. Rutland says the Capitol camaraderie among largely male reporters and the officials they cover often prevents serious coverage of the issues and investigative reporting. "I don't think there is a lot

"Sometimes men get caught up in the politics of something," says the AP's Kerr, "without stopping to think about the people affected—often women and children."

Claire Cooper, the *Bee*'s legal affairs reporter in San Francisco, who became the second woman ever assigned to the Capitol for the *Bee* in 1978, cites abortion as a subject woefully undercovered when she was assigned to the Capitol, because male reporters "did not see it as a significant issue."

"Women tend to have different sources," Cooper says. "There's overlap, but I have a helluva lot of women sources, people who are comfortable with me, female legislators. I didn't deal with the same old boys' club, and I had less willingness to buy into the established pecking order."

Bob Forsyth agrees with part of the critique, but argues it's not unique to men: "Basically, it's pack journalism, and that would be the case even if it were 50 percent or 80 percent women." ♦

*Sigrid Bathen is a former Sacramento Bee reporter who teaches journalism at California State University, Sacramento.*