

## THE MEDIA MAKE THE CAMPAIGN

If this year's presidential campaign is any measure, Americans are becoming a media-savvy people. They are critical of news media "feeding frenzies." They know "spin control" when they see it. They do not fall for every sound bite that comes along. But is this what politics is supposed to be about? Our contributors think not. Exploring the evolution of television's influence since 1952, the odd history of the sound bite, and the formulas that govern today's political reporting, they show how far the media have taken us from the real business of democratic politics—and what it will take to get us back.

# POLITICS TRANSFORMED

*by Robert J. Donovan and Ray Scherer*

**A**s a young reporter for the Richmond *Times-Dispatch*, Charles McDowell was one of the first inside witnesses to television's impact on politics. By sheer chance he observed at the Republican National Convention in Chicago in 1952 how people's reaction to what they saw on television influenced political decisions—a phenomenon that would profoundly change the workings of the political system.

The Republican convention in 1952 was the first at which television news had the technical resources and the large audience to enable it to exert significant political impact. In 1940, NBC had broadcast scenes of the Republican convention in Philadelphia to a few stations. That year the network also made newsreels of the Democratic convention in Chicago and sent them to New York

for broadcast the next day on a small scale. Although the Democratic and Republican conventions of 1948 in Philadelphia were fully covered by television, few people around the country had sets, and the networks' reach from Philadelphia was limited mainly to the East.

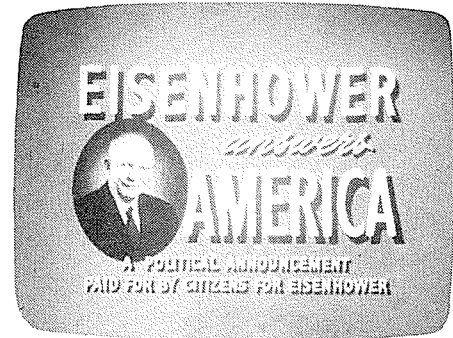
McDowell was in Chicago in 1952 as a member of his newspaper's convention bureau covering the fight between General Dwight D. Eisenhower and Senator Robert A. Taft of Ohio for the Republican nomination. Although it seemed unlikely that the Republicans would reject a war hero of Eisenhower's stature, the Taft forces nominally controlled the party machinery. Before the convention Taft had more delegates committed to him, on paper at least, than did Eisenhower. Sentimentally, most delegates probably preferred Taft, "Mr. Republican," as he was called. A critical issue at the convention was whether

pro-Eisenhower or pro-Taft delegations from Texas, Louisiana, and Georgia should be seated. In these three states pro-Eisenhower delegates had been chosen by precinct conventions. The respective Republican state committees, however, had brushed these actions aside, alleging that Democrats were allowed to vote. The committees selected alternative slates of delegates favorable to the Ohioan and demanded that they be seated at the convention. The whole nominating process thereupon descended into a labyrinth of charges, countercharges, negotiations, and proposed compromises.

Much in need of a decisive issue, the Eisenhower camp seized the moral high ground in the delegate dispute. Shrewdly, Eisenhower's people used television to tell the whole nation that the general was the victim of those who would spurn fair play. On the eve of the convention Eisenhower said that the dispute over southern delegates was "a straight-out issue of right and wrong." He accused the Taft campaign of "chicanery."

According to Edward R. Murrow, one of the CBS staff covering the proceedings, the Taft people wanted to keep the whole convention off television. This would have included a hearing in which the credentials committee was taking up the question of the disputed delegates. In a news broadcast from Chicago, Murrow reported that Eisenhower's staff sided with broadcasters in favor of having television cameras at the credentials committee hearing, and in the end, despite the resistance of the Taft forces, Ei-

**Narrator:** *Eisenhower Answers America.*



senhower's staff succeeded.

When the hearing opened in the Gold Room of the Congress Hotel, McDowell came to listen. Well known in later years as a stalwart on the PBS television program "Washington Week in Review," he was then a junior member of the *Times-Dispatch* convention staff. Lacking the proper credential for this particular event, he slipped unnoticed into a kitchen just off the main room in the hope of being able to hear what went on. Soon strategists for the Taft side ducked into the kitchen to assess the progress of the hearing. If the politicians noticed McDowell, they evidently assumed he was one of the hotel employees and made no effort to keep their voices low. McDowell's listening post proved to be a good one. He learned, as he later wrote, that "the Taft managers were talking about conceding the Louisiana delegates to Eisenhower." From what the Taft managers were saying, McDowell also learned that the television coverage of the hearing was affecting viewers' opinions of the two candidates.

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“What was happening,” McDowell explained, “was that people back home, following the debate on television, were telephoning and telegraphing their delegates to say that Taft’s case was coming through as weak. Republicans of consequence were saying that a steamroller approach would look bad on television and hurt Taft more than yielding the delegates.”

The credentials committee awarded the Louisiana delegates to Eisenhower. Taft’s position crumbled. Eisenhower was nominated on the first ballot. Television contributed to the outcome. Over a period of days, it had conveyed the impression that the conqueror of Normandy was getting a raw



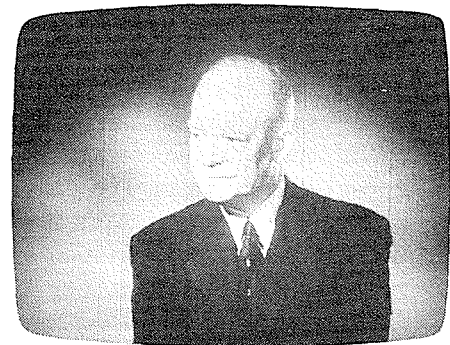
**Citizen.** *General, how would you clean up the mess in Washington?*

deal from the Republican Old Guard.

Beginning in 1952, television caused structural as well as superficial changes in American politics. That year, delegates of both parties were warned that the probing television lenses could capture every movement they made in their chairs. They were admonished to be careful about what they said to one another lest lip readers pick up the conversation from the television screen. Women delegates were cautioned against affronting blue-collar viewers by wearing showy jewelry. Another change was so startling that CBS put out a news

release on it: The bald, gruff Sam Rayburn, chairman of the 1952 Democratic convention in Chicago, had agreed to wear makeup from gavel to gavel.

Memories of the 1948 convention had convinced broadcasters to change convention coverage. The traditional style—with the endless nominating speeches, the proliferation of seconding speeches, and hours of parades and whoopee in the aisles—was boring for television viewers. At the disorderly Democratic convention in 1948, the nominee, Harry S. Truman, did not begin his acceptance speech until 2:00 A.M. In 1952, when events on the rostrum grew dull, the networks diverted their cameras to cover interviews or meetings in downtown hotels. For the first time, television producers, not party officials, decided what aspect of the convention would be shown throughout the nation at any given time. Advances in electronics enabled NBC anchors to converse with their reporters and cameramen, who were roving the aisles with hand-held portable cameras, then called “creepie-peepies.” This gave coverage a new range and mobility. Any delegate or other politician trying to strike a deal on the convention floor was fair



**Eisenhower.** *My answer? It's not a one agency mess, or even a one department mess, it's a top to bottom mess. And I promise we will clean it up from top to bottom.*

game for an interview. The television audience was provided a broader look at how the politics of conventions worked. The unfavorable side was that in future years roving reporters and camera crews began to clog the aisles in their search for pundits, charlatans, and celebrities of all kinds, as well as delegates. Unfortunately, this generated competition among the networks for often meaningless, not to say misleading, scoops on the floor, sometimes blurring the true picture of the convention proceedings.

**W**hen the Democratic convention opened in Chicago in 1952, the party cooperated with the networks. The Democrats limited nominating speeches to 15 minutes and individual seconding speeches to five minutes. Floor demonstrations were limited to 20 minutes for each candidate placed in nomination. At the start, five candidates were in the running for the party's nomination. Almost before the rap of the opening gavel had faded away, however, the field narrowed. It was customary for the governor of the state to give an opening speech on the first day, and the governor of Illinois was then Adlai Stevenson. Truman had once favored Stevenson for the nomination, but the president later backed away. The governor had not tossed his hat into the ring, and he had no pledged delegates. His welcoming speech, however, was so exciting, so filled with music and good sense, that the convention was over almost before it began. The delegates were thrilled. Television viewers around the country sent telegrams. Truman again threw his support to Stevenson.

Before the week was out Stevenson was on his way to a hopeless campaign. The Democrats had been in power for 20 years. The Korean War had shredded Truman's popularity. The electorate was hungry for change, and the voices of the people said, unmistakably, "I like Ike." Stevenson never

succeeded in recapturing the magic of the welcoming speech, and it was the Eisenhower campaign that grasped the new techniques of the television age. Indeed, in their desperation for a winning issue, the Democrats charged that Madison Avenue had taken over Eisenhower. Stevenson said: "I don't think the American people want politics and the presidency to become the plaything of the high-pressure men . . . . [T]his isn't Ivory Soap versus Palmolive." Stevenson stood aloof. One of his leading advisers, George Ball, lamented that Stevenson "obstinately refused to learn the skills of the effective television performer."

Eisenhower, however, did learn them. In fact, his campaign used the first spot television commercials in the history of presidential politics. When Eisenhower was president of Columbia University after the war, he became friends with Bruce Barton and Ben Duffy. During the 1952 campaign, Eisenhower trusted Duffy, president of the large advertising agency Batten, Barton, Durstine, and Osborn, and followed his advice and that of professional Republican politicians. They told Eisenhower that the formal set speech of earlier campaigns could not convey the warmth of his public personality. Of course, some such speeches would have to be made, but the new emphasis should be on informal television productions in which the candidate appeared to be talking to Americans individually. Where a set speech was necessary, it should be part of a large drama, a rally staged for paid political television and glittering with all the hoopla of a Hollywood premiere.

In city after city the Eisenhower campaign rolled into auditoriums bathed in spotlights. Arms overhead in his famous V-for-victory sign, he stepped out of the wings as a band was blaring. Mrs. Eisenhower beamed from a box, the crowd roared, and the television cameras caught it all.

Television speeches were held to 20

minutes, with frequent pauses for applause. On the road Eisenhower cut a handsome figure in a double-breasted camel's hair coat and brown fedora. At airport rallies or on the rear platform of a campaign train, he would often pull an egg from his pocket and ask the crowd, "Do you know how many taxes there are on one single egg?" If no one answered, he would reel off a list of levies that would make any good Republican shudder.

**T**he men behind Eisenhower's television commercials were Rosser Reeves, Jr., of Ted Bates and Company advertising, and Michael Levin, a former Bates associate. In the early days of television, Bates had pioneered the clustering of spot advertisements before and after entertainment programs. Reeves was confident that television could market a politician as well as it marketed toothpaste. When he started to work on the campaign, Reeves first watched an Eisenhower political speech in Philadelphia on television. Reeves counted 32 separate points Eisenhower made and then dispatched a research team the next morning to ask people at random what Eisenhower had said. None of those questioned could say. Reeves then read all of Eisenhower's speeches and extracted a dozen important issues, but found them too diverse for sharp focus. From George Gallup he learned that the issues that most bothered Americans were the Korean War, corruption in Washington, and rising taxes and inflation. Thereupon, Reeves drafted 22 scripts and, in mid-September, joined Eisenhower in a Manhattan studio to have him read them from cue cards. What Eisenhower was reading were ostensibly his own answers to questions that had been written by Reeves. Reeves later insisted the answers were framed in words from various Eisenhower speeches. But who would ask the questions? They

would be asked by randomly chosen citizens, reading in front of a camera from the same cue cards. The respective questions and the respective answers would be spliced together. The questioners would never see Eisenhower. On the television screen, however, it would appear that they were face to face. "To think that an old soldier should come to this," Eisenhower commented in the studio as his brother, Milton S. Eisenhower, cleared the scripts.

Executives of NBC and CBS at first hesitated to run such simplistic material, arguing that the commercials were not up to the standards of a presidential campaign. Under pressure from Batten, Barton, Durstine, and Osborn, however, they yielded. Beginning in mid-October, 28 of the commercials were broadcast in 40 states. Commercials faking conversations between a candidate and citizens would be unacceptable today. Yet compared with the ugly commercials of later campaigns, the Eisenhower spots were mild fare. Overall, the campaign was a moderate one. Eisenhower never attacked Adlai Stevenson or Harry Truman. He surely did not need to rely on theatrics to defeat the Democrats in 1952. Unquestionably, the stagings and the commercials enlivened his campaign. More than that, they were harbingers of a style of politics that Eisenhower could not have foreseen and would not have liked.

**T**he year 1952 was also pivotal in another way. Television networks for the first time covered state primaries. The coverage attracted national audiences. In January 1952, President Truman, a product of an era of political bosses and machines, had told a news conference, "All these primaries are just eyewash when the conventions meet." But he was wrong. The victory of the Eisenhower forces over Taft in New Hampshire, the first primary of the year, provided strong impetus for the gener-

al's drive at the Chicago convention. In the years that followed, primaries and caucuses multiplied as a result of democratizing reforms and the decline of party organizations. And to an extent Truman would not have believed, television coverage turned the primaries into crucial stepping-stones for candidates.

Instead of being eyewash, primaries determined the outcome of the nominating process. Once decisive, national conventions were reduced to gaudy gatherings that ratified decisions already made. When the selection of delegates to the conventions was largely in the hands of state party bosses, television had little to cover. But in 1952 the presidential aspirants began to campaign openly for delegates, and television moved in and covered the events for the public to see.

As primaries increased in number, the costs of running for office soared. With incalculable effect on the health of the political system, television advertising required candidates to raise vastly more money than ever before. In 1948, Truman's supporters had to pass the hat to collect enough cash to move his campaign train out of the station in Oklahoma City. By 1990 the amount of money spent just on political advertising was \$227.9 million. "In Washington today," Richard L. Berke wrote in the *New York Times* in 1989, "raising money takes nearly as much time as legislative work."

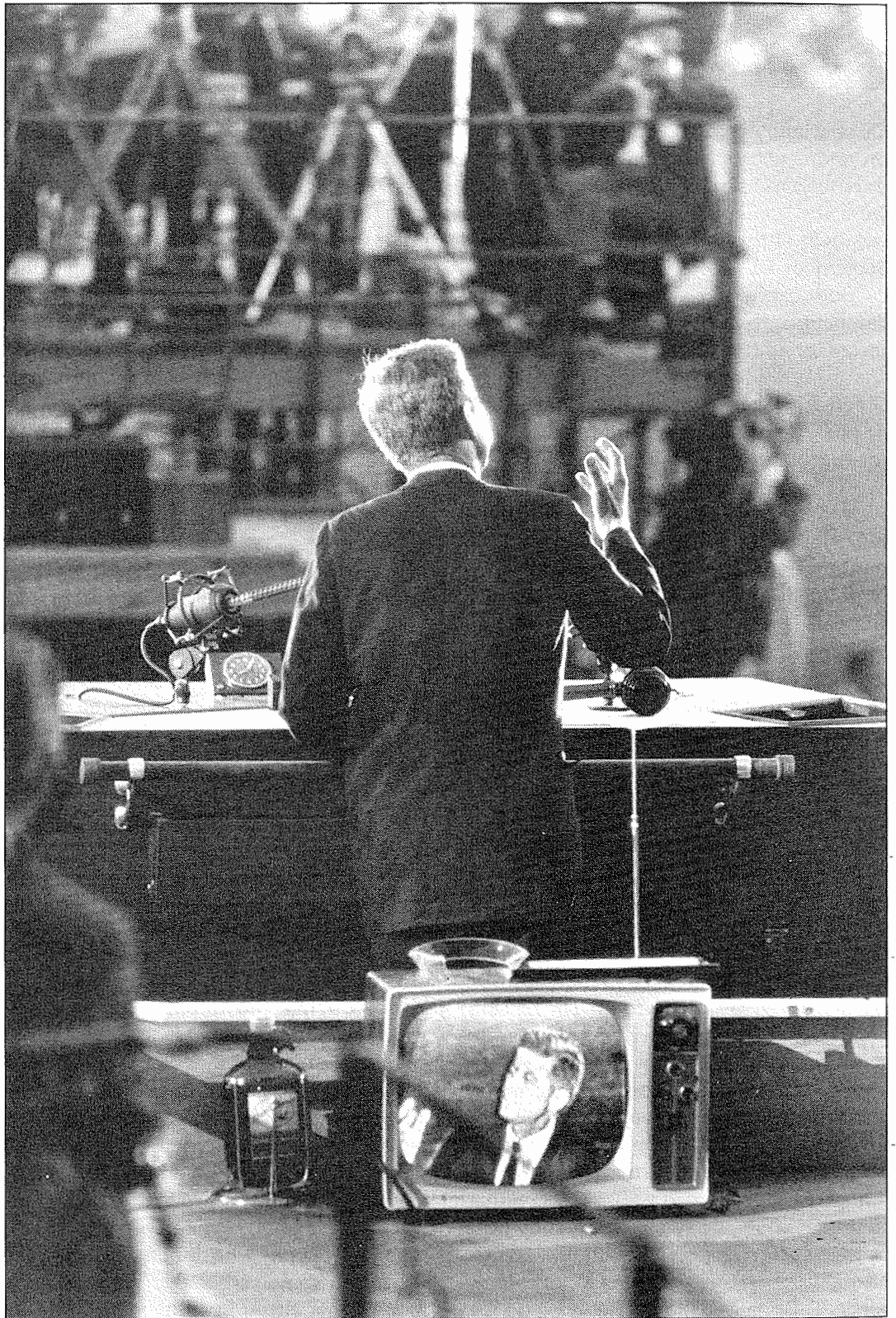


After 1952 the next stage in the magnification of television's role in elective politics came with the televised debates between John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon in 1960. The networks that year were striving to improve

their image and reassure viewers of their dedication to the public interest. Television had just slogged through an embarrassing ordeal resulting from the fixing of weekly quiz programs. Cheating on two highly popular shows—"Twenty-One" and "The \$64,000 Question"—genuinely shocked the American public. Network executives, eager to demonstrate their civic-mindedness, conceived of the idea of televised debates between the Democratic and Republican nominees. In addition to huge audiences, the debates promised another benefit to the networks: a change in the Communications Act of 1934. Section 315 had long rankled broadcasting executives. It required that candidates for the same office be given equal treatment on the air. Long-shot presidential contenders from every party, not just the Democratic and Republican nominees, would have to be included, making the debates, in the networks' eyes, an impractical multilateral affair.

The networks invited Kennedy and Nixon to debate, subject to congressional action on the Communications Act. Kennedy immediately accepted. The debates would give him a great deal of national exposure, which he then lacked and might not readily get otherwise. Although he had less to gain and more to lose, Nixon, proud of his debating skills, agreed to face Kennedy, and Congress suspended Section 315.

Four debates were held at staggered intervals during the campaign. They covered different issues. "Since there was no precedent for this kind of televised debate," Nixon later wrote of the 1960 encounters, "we could only guess which program would have the larger audience. Foreign affairs was my strong suit, and I wanted the larger audience for that debate. I thought more people would watch the first one, and that interest would diminish as the novelty of the confrontation wore off." He was right. Nixon, however, heeded his advisers,



*By 1960, when Senator John F. Kennedy addressed the Democratic convention, such gatherings had been largely reduced to elaborate stage sets for addressing a national audience.*



all of whom were convinced that the last program, nearest election day, would attract the biggest audience. Domestic issues were the focus of the first debate, which was held at the CBS studio in Chicago on September 26.

Both candidates arrived in Chicago the day before. Kennedy was much the more rested of the two. Ill luck had befallen Nixon at the start of his campaign. In Greensboro, North Carolina, on August 17, he had bumped his knee getting into a car. An infection that set in forced him to stay in the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington from August 29 to September 9. He lost eight pounds—and looked it. As soon as he was discharged, he began campaigning furiously to make up for lost time and caught a cold.

Nixon did not arrive in Chicago on September 25 until 10:30 P.M., and even at that hour he visited some street rallies that kept him up until well after midnight. On the morning of the 26th he had to address a meeting of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America. Meanwhile Kennedy rose early and spent four hours with members of his staff preparing for the debate. After lunch he, too, made a brief speech to the same union and then took a nap, while Nixon spent practically the entire afternoon reading in preparation for the debate. Nixon later wrote: "The tension continued to rise all afternoon. My entire staff obviously felt it just as I did. As we rode to the television studio, conversation was at a minimum as I continued to study my notes up to the last minute." When he got out of the car at the studio he painfully bumped his sore knee again. On greeting Kennedy inside, he was impressed by how fit the senator looked. "We could see that Nixon was nervous," Kennedy aide Lawrence O'Brien recalled. "He tried to be hearty, but it didn't come off."

CBS's Don Hewitt was the program's di-

rector. Ted Rogers was present, as Nixon's adviser, as was Kennedy's adviser, Bill Wilson. The vice president's pallor disturbed both Hewitt and Rogers. Aware that Nixon's skin needed makeup under bright studio lights, Rogers had requested that the vice president's makeup artist be brought to Chicago, but the campaign staff declined. Hewitt asked Nixon if he would like to be made up. "No," Nixon replied. Kennedy, well suntanned, did not need makeup. And, according to Hewitt, Nixon did not want to run the risk of having it reported that he was made up (an unmanly advantage) and Kennedy was not. In the end Nixon did use "Lazy Shave," a powder meant to cover his five o'clock shadow, but Hewitt did not think it was satisfactory.

**N**ixon used poor judgment in wearing a gray suit against the gray backdrop. He did not stand out on television screens nearly as sharply as Kennedy, who was handsomely dressed in a dark suit, blue shirt, and dark tie. Kennedy's manner throughout the debate was serious. By contrast, Nixon smiled often and somewhat nervously. Perhaps because of his sore knee, he sat awkwardly when he was not speaking. His tendency to perspire under studio lights quickly became noticeable, and it caused a quarrel in the control booth during the debate. Rogers was shocked when, without warning, Hewitt called for a reaction shot that caught Nixon apparently off guard. The shot showed Nixon wiping his brow and upper lip. Furi-ously, Rogers maintained that reaction shots had been disallowed by the rules and that Nixon had been brought into the picture unfairly in an undignified pose.

Many people who tuned into the first debate on radio rather than on television thought that Nixon had the better of it. He was careful about making effective debating points. But, as Theodore H. White, the

shrewd chronicler of presidential elections in the 1960s and '70s, observed, Nixon "was debating with Mr. Kennedy as if a board of judges were scoring points; he rebutted and refuted, as he went . . . Nixon was addressing himself to Kennedy—but Kennedy was addressing himself to the audience that was the nation."

In retrospect, Nixon characterized the first debate as a setback for him. He was in much better health for the last three and at the very least held his own. But those debates did not engage the public to the degree the first one had. Even the first debate failed to cause anything like a decisive swing in either direction in the Gallup poll. Kennedy retained the slight lead he had held through September. Nixon's sense of a setback contrasted with renewed optimism around Kennedy. His staff was ecstatic because when Kennedy resumed campaigning after Chicago, he suddenly seemed to attract more excited crowds, as though people were flocking toward a winner. Certainly, the concerns of Eisenhower and other Republicans had been realized: Kennedy, the younger and supposedly less experienced candidate, had looked more presidential on television than Nixon.

Because no overriding issues defined the 1960 campaign, the importance of the Nixon-Kennedy debates lay largely in the images projected on television. Whether these images determined the election outcome is hard to say. The margin of Kennedy's victory—112,881 votes—was so narrow that it is impossible to single out as decisive any one factor, even one as important as the debates.

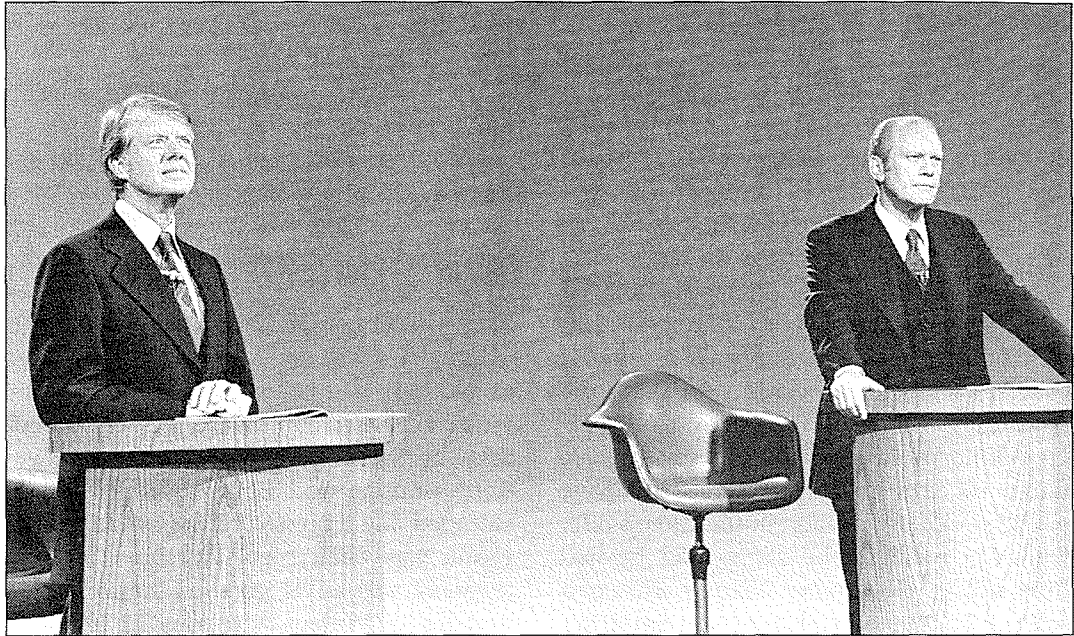
Nixon learned his lesson, though. His campaign against Hubert Humphrey in 1968 marked a radical turn toward reliance on television. From his disastrous debate with Kennedy in 1960, Nixon concluded that "I had concentrated too much on substance and not enough on appearance. I

should have remembered that 'a picture is worth a thousand words.'"

Surrounded by advertising men, consultants, lawyers, and speechwriters, Nixon centered his campaign in 1968 not just on television but on controlled, manipulated television. In this way his election strategy foreshadowed those of Ronald Reagan and George Bush. Nixon's daily appearances were carefully staged to project a certain image of himself and his programs. Vestiges of old-style campaigning, still pursued by Hubert Humphrey, were largely swept aside by Nixon. Only four years earlier Lyndon Johnson and Barry Goldwater had stumped the country tirelessly. As far as Nixon was concerned, that kind of campaigning was as far gone as the torchlight parades for William McKinley in 1896.

Nixon's campaign staff read excerpts from Marshall McLuhan's book *Understanding Media* (1964). "The success of any TV performer," one of the excerpts said, "depends on his achieving a low-pressure style of presentation." Lowering the intensity of Nixon's earlier political behavior was a crucial part of the strategy for Nixon in the 1968 campaign. Reliance on controlled appearances on television facilitated this. He would not debate Humphrey. He avoided reporters. A memorandum to Nixon on November 16, 1967, by Leonard Garment, one of the bright and reputable persons on his staff, said that Nixon must try to get "above the battle, moving *away* from politics and *toward* statesmanship." To this end Garment advocated "a fundamentally philosophical orientation, consistently executed, rather than a program-oriented, issues-oriented, or down-in-the-streets campaign."

The availability and lure of television completely transformed Nixon's customary manner of running for office. This strategy was followed even more rigidly four years later in his reelection campaign. Likening



*Power failure: When a short circuit cut off TV coverage of their 1976 debate, President Gerald Ford and Governor Jimmy Carter spoke not a word to each other for 27 minutes.*

Nixon to “a touring emperor” rather than a candidate for president, the *Washington Post*’s David Broder declared that the “Nixon entourage seems to be systematically stifling the kind of dialogue that has in the past been thought to be the heart of a presidential campaign.” The age of the “handled” candidate had fully arrived.

The arts of handling were not lost on the Democrats. Well before the presidential election of 1976, Jimmy Carter received a memorandum from his assistant, Hamilton Jordan. Recently retired as governor of Georgia, Carter was thinking about running for president. Jordan gave him this advice: “We would do well to understand the very special and powerful role the press plays in interpreting the primary results for the rest of the nation. What is actually accomplished in the New Hampshire primary is less important than how the press interprets it for the rest of the nation.”

If recognition of that kind was impor-

tant to Dwight Eisenhower and John Kennedy, both nationally known figures when they ran for president, it was surely essential to Carter, unknown to most of the country in the mid-1970s. Grasping this reality, he made a shrewd decision to focus first on the Iowa Democratic caucuses of 1976, which would precede the New Hampshire primary. It was a testing ground that had been largely ignored by presidential aspirants in previous years.

Carter began cultivating Iowa Democrats in 1975. His strategy clicked. On October 27, the Iowa Democrats held a Jefferson–Jackson Day fundraising dinner at Iowa State University in Ames, at which a straw vote was to be taken. Jimmy Carter and his wife Rosalynn were on hand. Carter’s staff, especially pleased that R. W. Apple, Jr., of the *New York Times* was covering the affair, did their best to pack the place with Carter supporters. When Carter won a definite victory—23 percent of the 1,094 re-

spondents, the largest individual share—Apple filed a story about the Georgian’s “dramatic progress.” Carter, he reported, “appears to have taken a surprising but solid lead” in the race for Iowa delegates.

On January 19, 1976, the day of the caucuses, Carter flew not to Iowa but to New York City, where he talked about his victory on the late-night television specials and the next morning’s network news shows. At one point Roger Mudd said on CBS: “No amount of badmouthing by others can lessen the importance of Jimmy Carter’s finish. He was a clear winner in this psychologically important test.” This was exactly what Hamilton Jordan had had in mind. Carter went on to win the New Hampshire, Florida, and Ohio primaries and was nominated at the Democratic National Convention in New York in July.

Seldom had there been a better time for a Democrat to run. In the previous four years, Vice President Spiro Agnew had resigned in disgrace, Nixon had resigned to avoid impeachment, and Watergate had horrified the country. In 1976 the Republican nominee was Gerald Ford, who had succeeded Agnew as vice president and then Nixon as president. As chief executive he had soothed the nation’s shock over Nixon and Agnew. Yet he had damaged himself with a sudden, surprising, and ill-prepared announcement that he had granted Nixon a presidential pardon. On top of that, in a televised campaign debate with Carter, Ford blundered by asserting, “There is no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe.” Run and run again on the networks, in the familiar way television magnifies an incident, it caused people to say, in effect, what Ford himself was to say 13 years later: “I blew it.” Carter won the election.

Ford was an exception among Republicans. Beginning with Eisenhower in 1952,

the Republicans—Nixon (except in 1960), Ronald Reagan, and George Bush—have gotten the better of their opposition on television. These Republican candidates were not necessarily better or more honest than their Democratic opponents, but their appeal to television audiences was somehow more compelling. In experts such as Michael Deaver, Roger Ailes, and Lee Atwater, the Republicans enlisted more skillful tacticians than the Democrats employed. Certainly, the Republican edge was clear in the 1984 campaign between Reagan and former Vice President Walter Mondale. In his book on the campaign, journalist Martin Schram wrote that President Reagan had “skillfully mastered the ability to step through the television tubes and join Americans in their living rooms.” Schram called Reagan and Deaver “pols who understand TV better than TV people themselves.”

Indeed, by 1984 television news executives were striving to keep their news programs from being manipulated by political image-makers. In a picture medium, however, this was not always easy to do. “If Ronald Reagan makes a speech in front of the Statue of Liberty, and the speech has news in it,” Joseph Angotti, then an NBC political director, said, “there is no way we can show Reagan without showing the statue behind him.”

On July 4, 1984, the best shot Walter Mondale could offer television evening news was of himself at home in Minnesota, talking with Mayor Henry Cisneros of San Antonio, a potential vice-presidential nominee. Reagan, aboard Air Force One, was on his way to the annual Daytona 500 stock car race and a picnic with 1,200 of the fans. As the plane, equipped with television cameras inside the cabin to catch the president, swooped down, he picked up a radio-telephone, sang out the traditional “Gentlemen, start your

engines," and then sent the cars thundering down the track. Furthermore, after he arrived at the stands, packed with 80,000 spectators, he sat in for a while as guest commentator on the racing circuit radio network. It was all lively fare on the network evening news.

By October 7, 1984, the date of the first televised debate in Louisville between the candidates, Mondale was trailing so badly in the polls that practically his only hope lay in this confrontation with Reagan. So much aware of it was Mondale that he practiced in the dining room of his house in Washington, which, for the purpose, had been converted into a mock television studio with two podiums. Under bright lights members of his staff fired questions at him before a camera. His answers were played back until he had memorized them. Then, to almost universal surprise, he went to Louisville and so unmistakably carried the day that the polls indicated an incipient turnabout in the campaign. It was not the dining room rehearsals that changed things. Rather, for the first time the Gipper, at the age of 73, blew it on television. He hardly seemed the telegenic master campaigner who had ousted the incumbent Carter four years earlier. He was worn out. He was confused. He was not himself. "Reagan is really old," Mondale told an aide after the debate. "I don't know if he could have gone another 15 minutes."

What had been seen on television suddenly changed the overriding issue of the presidential campaign. Two days later a headline in the *Wall Street Journal* read: "New Question in Race: Is Oldest U.S. President Now Showing His Age? Reagan Debate Performance Invites Open Speculation on His Ability to Serve."

Other newspapers and the networks took up the question. Some television news programs spliced scenes from the debate with shots of the president dozing during

an audience with Pope John Paul XXIII.

By the time of the second debate on October 22 in Kansas City, the drama centered on Reagan's appearance and the state of his alertness. Beforehand, his technicians went to the studio and changed lighting angles and candlepower to give him more of a glow. When the two contenders appeared, the president was poised and wide awake. He seemed more rested than before. His self-confidence was palpable. "They pumped him up with sausage and he looked okay," Mondale recalled long afterward. Reagan knew what pitch was coming. His eye was on the center field stands when, sure enough, a reporter on the panel reminded him of the youthful John Kennedy's ordeal over the Cuban missile crisis and asked Reagan if he himself was "too old to handle a nuclear crisis." Crack went the bat. "I am not," the president replied, "going to exploit, for political purposes, my opponent's youth and inexperience." The whole country watched the ball sail over the fence. "When I walked out of there," Mondale said, "I knew it was all over."



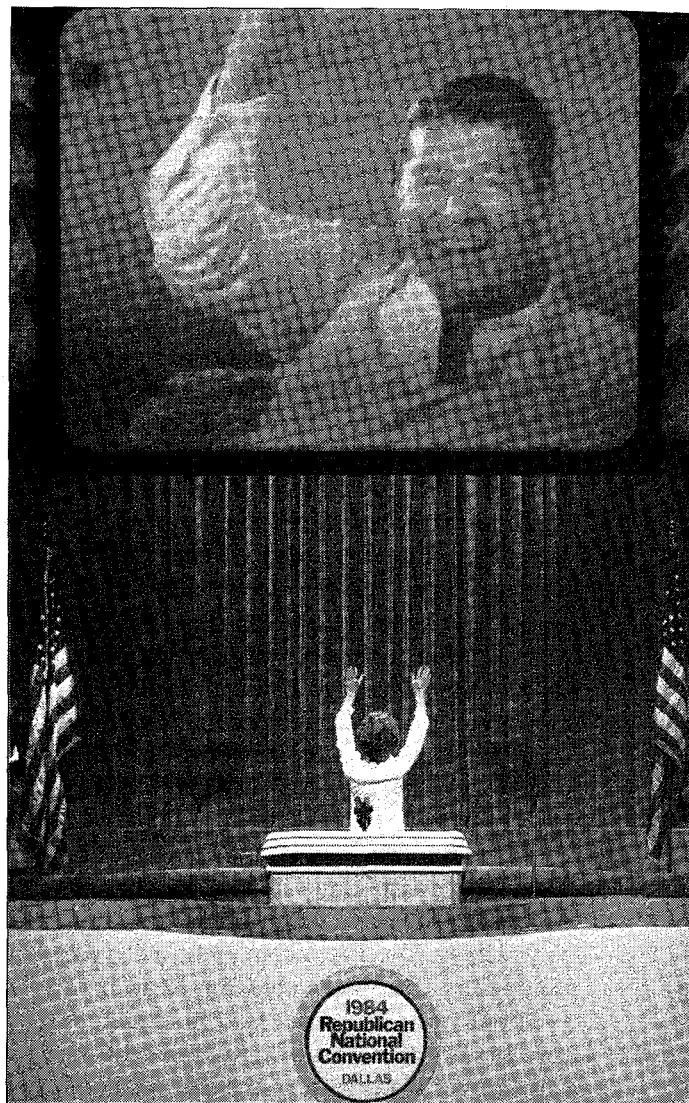
The 1988 campaign was the culmination, in many ways the nadir, of practices, strategies, manipulations, and distortions that had been multiplying in elections almost since the advent of television news. Television spots, or commercials, were more numerous and, on the whole, more unpleasant than in any previous campaign. Discussion of issues was more than ever reduced to sound bites measured in seconds. Mostly, the blame for the tone fell not on the loser, Governor Michael S. Dukakis, but on the winner, George Bush, whose campaign, neverthe-

less, was the more effective.

Bush advocated, among other measures, a day-care program for children. He promised a vigorous attack on the drug scourge. But after he was inaugurated on January 20, 1989, it was evident that the more conspicuous issues with which he had saturated the campaign—which candidate liked the flag better, which disliked murders more—had little to do with governing the country.

The previous June, Michael Dukakis, the Democratic frontrunner, had swept four states, including California and New Jersey, on the last primary day. A *Wall Street Journal*-NBC News survey taken June 9-12 showed Dukakis leading Bush for the presidency, 49 to 34. A Gallup poll of June 10-12 indicated that Dukakis enjoyed a lead of 52 to 38. Then the lead sagged. Dukakis did not do much to sustain it. Bush managed to make more news. Dukakis was nominated in Atlanta in mid-July by a well-unified party. As best he could, he finessed the ambition of Jesse Jackson and, hoping the choice would help him in the South, selected Senator Lloyd Bentsen of Texas as the vice-presidential nominee. As a climax, Dukakis delivered a good acceptance speech.

For the Democrats it was an uphill struggle after Atlanta. Probably the elements made it a Republican year, willy-nilly. Bush was riding a tide of peace, prosperity, conservatism, and enduring resentment in some regions of the country against the civil-rights reforms of past Democratic administrations. A sharp Republican team knew the rough way to play, and the Democrats did not know how to fight back. Republican veterans created television commercials and photo opportunities on emotional subjects such as blue-collar crime, prisons, patriotism, and the welfare



*The master of the medium: President Ronald Reagan greets the 1984 Republican convention in Dallas via television.*

cans effectively branded Dukakis a 1960s-style liberal and, *ipso facto*, soft on crime, committed to heavy civilian public spending, and niggardly on defense appropriations. For all the vulnerabilities of the Reagan administration, Dukakis failed to frame a winning issue.

The Bush team had no such trouble. Well before the conventions, Lee Atwater asked Jim Pinkerton, the chief researcher, to make a list of issues that might help bring Dukakis down. Pinkerton returned with a three-by-five card on which he had noted Dukakis's positions on taxes and national defense, his veto of a Massachusetts bill requiring the Pledge of Allegiance in

the classroom, the state of pollution in Boston Harbor, and Dukakis's opposition to the death penalty. The list also contained something Pinkerton had discovered in the text of a debate among Democratic contenders before the April presidential primaries in New York. Senator Albert Gore, Jr., of Tennessee had questioned Dukakis about a Massachusetts prisoner-furlough program. Pinkerton went on to discover that an imprisoned murderer named William (Willie) Horton, Jr., an African American, had received a weekend pass and then raped a woman. After this atrocity Governor Dukakis had the procedure changed to bar furloughs for convicted murderers. Nevertheless, the Bush campaign seized on this tragedy as a way to accuse Dukakis of being soft on crime.

To make, in effect, a market test of issues, Bush consultants had two so-called focus groups of voters organized in Paramus, New Jersey. The participants chosen were Democrats who had voted for Reagan in 1984 but who, four years later, intended to vote for Dukakis. Out of sight behind two-way mirrors, the Bush experts watched with increasing jubilation the reactions of these voters as moderators in each group introduced them to the issues on Pinkerton's card. According to later reports, 40 percent of one group and 60 percent of the other said they would switch to Bush. "I realized right there," Atwater was reported to have said, "that we had the wherewithal to win . . . and that the sky was the limit on Dukakis's negatives."

A conference was held the following weekend at the Bush home in Kennebunkport. According to a report in *Time*, Bush was hesitant about a negative campaign of attacks on Dukakis, but then yielded. Most states had a prisoner-furlough program. The one in Massachusetts had been enacted under former Governor Frank Sargent. The fact that Sargent was a Republican did not

bother Roger Ailes, who proceeded with work on a commercial showing prisoners exiting jail through a revolving gate. A voice said, "[Dukakis's] revolving-door prison policy gave weekend furloughs to first-degree murderers not eligible for parole. While out, many committed other crimes like kidnapping and rape and many are still at large. Now Michael Dukakis says he wants to do for America what he has done for Massachusetts. Americans can't afford that risk." This first commercial did not use a photograph of Horton.

It was a second prison-furlough commercial, sponsored by the National Security Political Action Committee, that used a photograph of a glowering Horton. "Bush and Dukakis on crime," an announcer said. Then a photograph of Bush and the comment, "Bush supports the death penalty." Next a photograph of Dukakis and the observation, "Dukakis not only opposes the death penalty, he allows first-degree murderers to have weekend passes from prison." Finally, a mugshot of Horton. The ad appeared throughout the country on cable television for 28 days. The *New York Times* assigned three reporters to get the story of its production. According to the investigation, the National Security Political Action Committee claimed the quiet support of the Bush staff. Lloyd Bentsen was among the first to label the commercial racist. The Bush people earnestly retorted that Horton was not chosen because of his color. Yet, as a symbol of white fear of African American criminals, his menacing visage could scarcely have been improved upon. At an early point Pinkerton told Atwater, "The more people who know who Willie Horton is, the better off we'll be."

**I**n the history of the republic, political campaigns have at times been so full of strife, libel, nastiness, and brawling that the Willie Horton ad does not stand alone

on the horizon by any means. The resonance and impact of political attack, however, have been magnified beyond measure by the technology that brought the menacing image of Horton into millions of American homes simultaneously. Reaction to people and events can be massive and immediate nowadays. In their book on the 1988 campaign, Peter Goldman and Tom Mathews likened television "in the hands of the new managers" to what napalm might have been in General Sherman's hands. "You could scorch a lot more earth with a lot less wasted time and effort."

After Bush's victory at the polls, NBC called in its campaign reporters and producers for a critical reassessment of the problems of covering the campaign for television. The names of the participants were not disclosed, but here is what one Washington-based reporter said: "The great ugly secret of campaigns is this: Not much happens. The candidates give the same speech over and over again to different audiences. Because we won't report the same speeches over and over again, we are left to do the photo-ops and the inner workings of the campaign." Another reporter complained about the problems of logistics. "[Airplane] coverage involves so much shlepping around from baggage call to staged events and then a frantic race to the television feed-point [that] there is little time and less energy for the kind of research and reporting that shapes a thoughtful report, and that's when it's very easy to accept balloons and sound-bite candy."

The tendency toward an ever more pivotal role for television in presidential campaigns reached new and troubling heights in 1988. The candidates' so-called media managers had become masters of getting

their messages across in television commercials and in events staged for television. For the television industry this produced the deep dilemma of how to use the pictures without becoming entrapped in stagecraft. Television techniques all but displaced old-time political campaigning as the focus of coverage. Reporters began to sound like drama critics.

The waves of changes that began with the televising of the national conventions in 1948 had, by 1988, transformed the mode, mechanics, and theater of elective politics. To be sure, television has not eliminated ethnic, religious, and racial preferences among voters, or the ancient division between Left and Right, or people's tendency to vote their pocket-books. The effect of television is secondary to what ABC's Jeff Greenfield has called "the shaping influences of American political life . . . embodied in political realities." Politicians, more than political scientists and journalists, have exalted the importance of television. They have done so not only in words but in actions. For more than 40 years they have not been able to stay away from television. It is the thing that matters most to them. By listening to their own words it is possible to judge where the dividing line lay between what politics was before 1948, when television news was born, and what politics has been since. The day after his dramatic victory over Dewey in 1948, Truman articulated the essence of the "old politics" when he said, "Labor did it." A mere 12 years later, after defeating Nixon in 1960, Kennedy's comment went to the heart of the "new politics." "It was TV more than anything else," he said, "that turned the tide."



# SOUND BITE DEMOCRACY

by Daniel C. Hallin

**T**he tyranny of the sound bite has been universally denounced as a leading cause of the low state of America's political discourse. "If you couldn't say it in less than 10 seconds," former governor Michael Dukakis declared after the 1988 presidential campaign, "it wasn't heard because it wasn't aired." Somewhat chastened, the nation's television networks now are suggesting that they will be more generous in covering the 1992 campaign, and some candidates have already been allowed as much as a minute on the evening news. However, a far more radical change would be needed to return even to the kind of coverage that prevailed in 1968.

During the Nixon-Humphrey contest that year, nearly one-quarter of all sound bites were a minute or longer, and occasionally a major political figure would speak for more than two minutes. Segments of that length do not guarantee eloquent argument, but they do at least allow viewers to grasp the sense of an argument, to glimpse the logic and character of a candidate. By 1988, however, only *four percent of all sound bites were as long as 20 seconds*. The average was a mere 8.9 seconds, barely long enough to spit out, "Read my lips: No new taxes."

The shrinking sound bite is actually the tip of a very large iceberg: It reflects a fundamental change in the structure of news

stories and the role of the journalist in putting them together. Today, TV news is much more "mediated" by journalists than it was during the 1960s and early '70s. Anchors and reporters who once played a relatively passive role, frequently doing little more than setting the scene for the candidate or other newsmaker whose speech would dominate the report, now more actively "package" the news. This new style of reporting is not so much a product of journalistic *hubris* as the result of several converging forces—technological, political, and economic—that have altered the imperatives of TV news.

To appreciate the magnitude of this extraordinary change, it helps to look at specific examples. On October 8, 1968, Walter Cronkite anchored a CBS story on the campaigns of Richard Nixon and Hubert Humphrey that had five sound bites averaging 60 seconds. Twenty years later, on October 4, Peter Jennings presided over ABC's coverage of the contest between George Bush and Michael Dukakis that featured 10 sound bites averaging 8.5 seconds.

Today's television journalist displays a much different attitude toward the words of candidates and other newsmakers from that of his predecessor. Now such words, rather than simply being reproduced and transmitted to the audience, are treated as raw material to be taken apart, combined with other sounds and images, and woven into a new narrative. Greater use is made of

outside material, such as “expert” opinion intended to put the candidates’ statements and actions into perspective, and “visuals,” including both film and graphics. Unlike their predecessors, today’s TV journalists generally impose on all of these elements the unity of a clear story line. The 1988 ABC report on the Dukakis campaign has a single organizing theme that runs from beginning to end: Dukakis’s three-part “game plan.” By contrast, on the Cronkite broadcast Bill Plante offers some interpretation of Nixon’s strategy, but his report does not have a consistent unifying theme. It simply ends with Nixon speaking. The modern “wrap-up” is another contemporary convention that has put the journalist at center stage, allowing him to package the story in a way that earlier reports normally were not. As a result of these changes, sound bites filled only 5.7 percent of election coverage during Campaign ’88, down from 17.6 percent 20 years earlier.

**T**he transformation of television’s campaign coverage is part of a broader change in television journalism. One reason for that change is the technical evolution of the medium, not only in the narrow technological sense—graphics generators, electronic editing units, and satellites—but in the evolution of television “know-how” and an emerging television aesthetic. It simply took television people—often, until recent times, trained in radio or print—a long time to develop a sense of how to communicate through this new medium. Much of the television news of the 1960s and early ’70s, a period lionized today as the golden age of the medium, seems in hindsight not only technically primitive compared to today’s but less competent—dull, disorganized, and difficult to follow.

Yet technological explanations for political and cultural changes rarely stand by



*The Gettysburg Address rendered in the standard of the 1988 campaign: an 8.9-second sound bite.*

themselves. They do not explain, for example, why sound bites shrank much more radically for certain types of people than for others. In 1968 the average sound bite for candidates and other “elites” was 48.9 seconds; for ordinary voters it was 13.6 seconds. By 1988 the elites were allowed only 8.9 seconds, voters 4.2 seconds. Film editors in 1968 knew *how* to produce short sound bites, but they did not consider them appropriate or necessary when covering major political figures.

A second reason for these changes has to do with the political upheavals of Vietnam and Watergate, as well as the evolution of election campaigning, which pushed all of American journalism in the direction of more active, critical reporting. Of course it was not only journalism that changed. After hearing some of my conclusions about sound bites and packaging in 1990, NBC’s John Chancellor responded by saying, “Well, the politicians started it.” And there is much truth to this. In 1968 the Nixon campaign hired Roger Ailes, formerly a producer of the *Mike Douglas Show*, to create a series of one-hour television shows in which Nixon would be questioned by “ordinary” citizens. These shows

were built around "production values" of a sort that television journalists had barely begun to consider. According to the memos reproduced in Joe McGinniss's *The Selling of the President, 1968*, Ailes even carefully measured the length of Nixon's answers to questions and coached him to shape and shorten them to the medium's needs.

Responding to alarms about the threat of media manipulation by political image-makers, journalists soon began taking a more adversarial stance toward the candidates, dissecting their statements and describing their image-making strategies. This has made campaign reporting more analytical—and also more negative. Suddenly campaign aides were called "handlers," and by 1988 TV journalists were broadcasting stories of unprecedented toughness, such as this one by Bruce Morton on September 13, 1988:

"Biff! Bang! Powie! It's not a bird; it's not a plane; it's presidential candidate Michael Dukakis in an M1 tank as staff and reporters whoop it up. In the trade of politics it's called a visual.... If your candidate is seen in the polls as weak on defense, put him in a tank."

Still, the turn toward analytical and sometimes more adversarial reporting did not dictate the more staccato pace of news reporting. The third factor behind the change was a major shift in the economics of the broadcasting industry. Until the 1970s, the networks viewed news as a prestige "loss leader." CBS and NBC had expanded their evening news broadcasts from 15 to 30 minutes in 1963 not to make money but to make a show of serious public service in response to criticism by Congress, the Federal Communications Com-

mission, and the public, particularly since the quiz show scandals of 1959. By the early 1970s, however, individual station owners were discovering that local news shows could make a great deal of money; indeed, by the end of the decade, it was common for a station to derive 60 percent of its profit from local news. As competition intensified, stations hired consultants to recommend ways of holding viewers' attention, and the advice often pointed in the direction of more tightly structured and fast-paced news presentations.

Similar competitive pressures began to build at the network level after 1977, when ABC began its successful drive to make its news division equal to those of CBS and NBC. The rise of cable and independent stations in the 1980s crowded the field still more, and the Reagan administration's substantial deregulation of broadcasting reduced the political impetus to insulate the news divisions from ratings criteria. The barriers between network news and the rest of commercial television began to fall. Network TV journalists have since felt increasing pressure to incorporate the same kind of "production values" as local newscasters and the rest of television.

It should be said that TV news is now much better in many ways than it was two decades ago. It is, first of all, often more interesting to watch. It is also more serious journalism. Media critics pressed the networks to be less passive, to tell the public more about the candidates' image-making strategies, and the networks have responded. This is surely an advance. Some of today's more analytical stories also involve a kind of coverage of serious issues that was uncommon years ago, including

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"truth squad" stories that examine candidates' claims about their records and those of their opponents.

While all of this is to the good, there is still a great deal about recent trends in campaign coverage that should unsettle citizens and journalists. It is disturbing that the public rarely has a chance to hear a candidate—or anyone else—speak for more than about 20 seconds. Showing humans speaking is something television can do very effectively. To be sure, some of the long sound bites in early television news were unenlightening. It is hard to see what viewers gained in 1968 by hearing Richard Nixon ramble on for 43 seconds about his Aunt Olive. But often it was extremely interesting to hear a politician, or occasionally a community leader or ordinary voter, utter an entire paragraph. One gained an understanding of the person's character and beliefs that a 10-second sound bite simply cannot provide. One also had the opportunity to judge matters for oneself, something that the modern "wrap-up" denies.

It seems likely, moreover, that whoever may have "started it," the modern form of TV news encourages exactly the kind of campaigning—based on one-liners and symbolic "visuals"—that journalists love to hate. What greater irony is there than a TV journalist complaining about the candidates' one-liners in a report that makes its points with 8.9-second sound bites? The reality is that one-liners and symbolic visuals are what TV producers put on the air; it is not surprising that the candidates' "handlers" gravitate toward them.

The rise of mediated TV news has bred a preoccupation with campaign technique and a kind of "inside dopester" perspective that puts the image-making and horse-race metaphors at the center of politics and

pushes real discourse to the margins. It has also allowed political insiders to dominate discussion on the airwaves. (Ordinary voters, featured in more than 20 percent of sound bites in 1972 and '76, claimed only three-four percent in 1984 and '88.) Voters now appear in the news essentially to illustrate poll results and almost never to contribute ideas or arguments to campaign coverage. Here again the position of TV news is ironic. Just as TV folk decry "photo-opportunity" and "sound-bite" campaigning even while building the news around them, so they decry the vision of the campaign consultant, with its emphasis on technique over substance, while adopting that culture as their own. There are times, indeed, when it is hard to tell the journalists from the political technicians, as when Dan Rather, in live coverage following the first Bush-Dukakis debate in 1988, asked a series of pollsters and campaign aides questions such as, "You're making a George Bush commercial and you're looking for a sound bite . . . What's his best shot?"

All of this gives television coverage of political campaigns, as sociologist Todd Gitlin has pointed out, a kind of knowing, postmodern cynicism that debunks the image and the image-maker and yet in the end seems to accept them as the only reality citizens have left. There is no reason to wax nostalgic over the politics or the passive television journalism of 1968. But television then did give viewers the notion that the presidential campaign was at its core important, that it was essentially a public debate about the future of the nation. Sophisticated and technically brilliant as it may be, modern television news no longer conveys that sense of seriousness about campaign politics and its place in American democracy.

# HOW TO READ THE CAMPAIGN

by Michael Cornfield

**A**n autumn episode of America's most consistently intelligent and fiercely realistic prime-time television series opened with Homer Simpson watching the news. "And, to conclude this Halloween newscast on a scary note," said the anchorman, "remember, the presidential primaries are only a few months away. Heh-heh-heh."

There is no escaping now. Since mid-January, the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* have allocated at least one full inside page to the 1992 campaign every day. CNN has been airing at a minimum a half-hour program every weekday. The newsmagazines and the other broadcast networks have cut back their campaign coverage budgets but not, it seems, on column inches and minutes. "Coverage" seems too mild a word to describe the reports, round tables, polls, predictions, analyses, profiles, rumors, shoptalk, advertisements, call-in shows, and comedy routines geared to the presidential campaigns. This is super-coverage, a Niagara of coverage—or, in the vernacular of television, "our continuing coverage."

Increasingly, this coverage continues by covering itself. Expressions of concern about the power of the media to distort campaign results and to sour the electorate on national politics have become part of the usual campaign clamor. (Such media

self-criticism reached a crescendo, for example, during the controversy over Governor Bill Clinton's alleged adultery.) In the universities and think tanks, critical reports have proliferated; Harvard University alone published three by the end of 1991. Many reform proposals have merit, but their oft-repeated condemnations of the "vicious cycle" of trivialized discourse, as it is frequently called, only serve the literary function of absolving all parties of guilt. To gather journalists, politicians, and scholars around a conference table and emerge with lists of recommendations on improving the process is also to give the screw another downward turn.

The "vicious cycle" also refers to a second problem: the irresistibility of the version of events that media coverage generates. The source of this irresistibility has less to do with the conduct and motives of individual politicians and journalists than with the dynamics of the whole subculture to which they (and thousands in the audience) belong.

Members of this subculture—the self-proclaimed "junkies" of presidential politics—share a language, perspective, and set of priorities. They are the audience for the daily *Presidential Campaign Hotline*, a kind of campaign tip sheet that is sent by fax or computer feed to subscribers. It is a safe bet that many *Hotline* clients grew up reading the books of Theodore H. White, beginning with *The Making of the President, 1960*.

White's great discovery was that the news swapped among campaign insiders could be consolidated into the classic story form of a melodramatic contest. Journalists have long since learned how to weave the foreground events of a campaign (speeches, debates, elections) together with the daily mass of background talk and memoranda to generate White-like narratives on a daily basis. This form of storytelling, however, is a source of the irresistibility that afflicts campaign journalism.

What is it that cannot be resisted? Call it Topic A. At any moment during the campaign, one topic dominates the subculture buzz: the David Duke phenomenon, Mario Cuomo's indecision, the president's bout of stomach flu in Japan, the Clintons' marriage, Patrick Buchanan's surprise showing in the primaries. Topic A is often symbolized by a segment of videotape on which a "defining moment" has been recorded. Whenever the topic comes up thereafter, images and dialogue from the videotape will spring to mind.

Ah, but what meanings will be associated with the defining moment? For the few days a story topic is Topic A, elite members of the subculture rush to shape its most widely accepted connotation. To many people inside the subculture, the identity of the next president seems to hinge on the battles for authority that each Topic A sets off and that each defining moment seems to resolve. There lies the devil's lure. Most journalists do not want to be manipulated; most politicians want to (and do) stake out serious positions on issues; and most academics want to compose scholarly accounts of the election. But each party to the vicious cycle gets yanked along the way-

ward story line that the string of Topic A's constructs. Wherever coverage continues, there all eyes and ears are drawn.

The "vicious cycle" and "defining moment" are recent examples of storytelling conventions that have emerged from this subcultural vortex—alas, with consequences that are not always helpful to the public's understanding. Such conventions enable junkies to quickly encode the latest topic A into a readable account of presidential campaigns.

Sometimes reliance on these conventions—and I shall examine four of them: the "road," "momentum," the "professionals," and "tests of character"—makes for apt descriptions of what is going on in presidential campaigns. Too often, however, an almost unconscious reliance on these stock formulas causes the subculture to miss the real story. And what we get instead, as "The Simpsons" joke suggests, too often resembles a shaggy dog story.

### 'The Road'

TV reporters who cover the day-to-day workings of government can do stand-ups in front of the Capitol or the State Department, but those who cover campaigns have a problem: Their story may



take them to many places and settings. To make sense of all this, they collectively draw a chronological line through all of the moves of the top candidates and call it the "road to the White House." This enables them to tell a story of a journey with a clear destination.

On the campaign road the race is run, the motorcade passes through, the bandwagon rolls, and the press bus follows. This is where losers come back after a period in the wilderness (Nixon '68), and unknowns come from out of nowhere (Carter '76). Democratic candidates travel the road low to high, carrying the historically marginal groups they personify (e.g., Irish Catholics, southerners, women, Greek immigrants) into the capital city of national respectability. Republicans head down to Washington alone, reluctantly, on leave from the private sector, to right a capital sunk in corruption and mismanagement. The road warriors of both parties are outsiders with new ideas who lead grass-roots movements against entrenched interest groups. It is a simple matter to drop each of this year's contenders into one of these categories; indeed, many have tried to shape their image to fill a particular role.

Journalists hope for a close race to sustain audience interest, and their reports can subtly influence perceptions. In 1979 political scientist C. Anthony Broh noted several ways that reporters stoke the feeling of suspense. They highlight "quotes" from representatives of undecided segments of the populace, adjust the length of the time period in which "recent" results are displayed (to emphasize the narrowing gap between candidates), and provide technical information about the range of error in opinion polls to intimate the unpredictability of the impending election.

Long before it became a journalistic convention, "the road" for Americans was a mythic place where individuals escaped conformity, oppression, and deprivation, where the romance or friendship of a lifetime might be forged, and where pilgrims searched for a higher ground. But the reality of contemporary politics makes it difficult to maintain such a convention. Campaign information from one stop on the road is instantaneously dispatched through an electronic grid to every other potential stop. Primaries and caucuses that occur simultaneously in states—notably "Super Tuesday," which came on March 10 this year—also fracture the sense of a journey. And the political nominating convention, that crucial way station on roads past, now seems as superfluous an institution as the Electoral College. The outcome has already been networked.

In order to reconstruct the road, the campaign story has been stretched back to the weeks and months prior to the first official events, the Iowa caucus and the New Hampshire primary. This change, in conjunction with the rise of primaries as the preferred method of delegate selection (from 17 Democratic and 16 Republican primaries in 1968 to 37 and 39, respectively, in 1992), has led to a "front-loading" of the campaign process.

Front-loading has stirred concern that the news media (and the citizens of Iowa and New Hampshire) exercise undue influence over the nomination process and the election. (To Broh's list of suspense-building techniques, for example, may now be added the quite familiar phenomenon of journalistic swarming around an early front-runner to expose his debilities and perhaps bring about a fall.) Thanks to the long buildup, Chapter One—or even the

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Preface—of the official Campaign Story sometimes delivers the climax.

More generally, front-loading has detracted from the campaign's inherent interest and truncated political debate. The greater story potential of the early stages of the race helps explain why William C. Adams of George Washington University found that Iowa and New Hampshire provided the setting for 32 percent of the coverage that ABC, CBS, NBC, and the *New York Times* devoted to the first six months of the 1984 presidential campaign. In another study, Syracuse University's Thomas Patterson found that voter interest peaked early in 1976 despite dramatic developments during the conventions and fall debates: the hard-fought contest for the GOP nomination and the close race between Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter. There is no reason to doubt that these findings have been duplicated in the years since.

**T**he Democratic Party has attempted to avoid an early wrap-up of its 1992 nomination. It mandated proportional, Congressional district-by-district selection of delegates rather than winner-take-all primaries and increased the percentage of appointed "superdelegates," who would presumably not commit to a candidate until late in the primary season. Even if this stratagem delays the emergence of a victor, even if the convention in New York City proves exciting (to say nothing of what happens in the GOP race), much of the story of Campaign '92 will still be resolved too soon. This is because, apart from the potential for a quick resolution of the main conflict, the first sections of the road have most of the fascinating bumps and turns. Early in the campaign the candidates are new faces, with untold biographies and undiscovered characteristics. Interest-group and voter allegiances are up for grabs. The possibility of victories by

ideologically "pure" candidates is greater. There are more shifts in candidates' positions. And there is a real score to update each week (the delegate count), not just media-made opinion poll standings.

In the general election, a tight race is one of the few major story attractions campaign coverage can offer. But the excitement is muted by the fact that the two major party nominees seem by then to be few voters' first choice—a sentiment that spreads whenever "also-rans" or "never-rans" (such as Mario Cuomo) make great speeches at the conventions. And since media scrutiny of the finalists has been going on for months, there is little left to learn about them except how they interact in each other's presence. That inflates the significance of the presidential debates.

The problems with the "road" convention, then, are that it goes "downhill" too early and that it has few stopping places that seem to matter any longer. This makes for misshapen stories. Not least, it often leads to citizen disaffection.

### The Fairy Dust of 'Momentum'

**I**n campaign coverage, interpretation ("This is what I think just happened"); explanation ("This is why"), and speculation ("This is what I think will happen next") usually blur together into road race commentary. "Momentum" has become the byword of choice for the commentators. It can be divined from poll results, debate performances, crowd size, Federal Election Commission reports on fund raising, and virtually any news event that catches a commentator's eye (including, of course, the incidents that touch off and define a Topic A). But the beauty of the concept of "momentum" is that it need not be tied to anything whatsoever. Momentum may be conferred upon a candidate on a





hunch—and simply saying that a candidate has momentum sometimes is enough to make it so.

Since 1976, when Jimmy Carter benefited from the momentum of the Iowa caucus results and the exclamations of commentators over his victory, candidates and their teams have been poised to interpret, in the most self-serving way, the momentum-ability of upcoming campaign occurrences. The politicians' entry into this expectations game provides commentators with yet another category of interpretable events: "Momentum" may be awarded to a candidate on the basis of his persuasive publicity. In the world of narrative, every announced shift of momentum whets reader interest whether it correctly foreshadows the action or not. Thus there is a perennial incentive to say the magic word.

Even when "momentum" accurately refers to a campaign that is gathering (or losing) strength, it is a poor explanatory term. It leaves out too many crucial determinants of electoral results. Off-road events—diplomatic breakthroughs, economic upswings, and other "surprises"—may have more impact. Some of these off-road events do get reported in other sections of the newscast or paper, but even the sharpest observers

tend to slight electoral forces that change too slowly to qualify as news under any category, such as the simple partisan predisposition to vote as one has in the past. And while Theodore H. White thought enough of demographic changes to devote a chapter or two of his campaign chronicles to the latest findings of the U.S. Census Bureau, few of his literary progeny maintain that tradition.

### Those Cunning 'Professionals'

**T**he constant invocation of the momentum cliché makes voting appear more volatile and random than most retrospective studies reveal it to be. This, in turn, enhances the mystique surrounding campaign consultants. Continuing coverage endows those who advise winners with shamanistic, momentum-creating powers.

Many stories improve with bad guys on the scene. Campaign stories have few prospects for the role. That leaves campaign advisers, especially paid consultants. These "professionals" are portrayed as shadowy figures, often evil geniuses, who rely on their expertise in campaign law, finance,



organizing, and communications technology to make money off the democratic process. Some professionals have become celebrity Svengalis (Roger Ailes, Pat Caddell), lending their candidates credible deniability for dirty politics. In 1988, James Baker and John Sasso appeared on a *Time* cover proclaiming the election a "Battle of the Handlers." The latest star is James Carville, Bill Clinton's adviser. No doubt some consultants resent the stereotyping. Others relish it, on the assumption that, for client-building purposes, negative publicity is better than no publicity at all.

Campaign professionals, like the "pols" and "bosses" of yesteryear, are conventionally portrayed as meeting in secret. Huddled behind one-way mirrors and airplane curtains, they map out how they can run interference between the press and their candidate, control the flow of information, and thereby hoodwink the electorate. In a front-page Sunday story after the 1988 election, for example, David Hoffman and Ann Devroy of the *Washington Post* attributed George Bush's victory to "an immensely complex, largely hidden machine" maintained by an army of supporters. The lead sentence implied that electoral triumphs are properly won through "a crusade of

ideas." But the only idea advanced by the Bush campaign was "to leave nothing to chance":

Almost everything that could be controlled, influenced, or bargained in favor of Bush was attempted. For example, when he was being photographed outside his home in Kennebunkport, Maine, for the covers of news magazines just before the Republican convention, his aides insisted that photographers aim their lenses above the horizon, and not capture the craggy rocks of the shoreline. Rocks, the photographers were told, would be "elitist." Nearly all the photographers obeyed the rule—no rocks.

In this passage the identities of the consultants were obscured by the passive voice and collective nouns. Vagueness fosters the illusion that professionals have more power than they do. It also cloaks the reality that the consultants are often the primary sources for the very articles that castigate them. Hoffman and Devroy convincingly described the hiddenness and thoroughness of the Bush campaign's stagecraft. But how crucial was it to his election?

The professionals' techniques also come in for narrative mystification and criticism. The black magic roster is now familiar: Spin control. Focus groups. Photo opportu-

nities. Sound bites. Attack ads. Exit polls. Tracking polls. PACs. Such innovations *are* news. Like most instruments, they have been used to confuse, distort, and lie. Even when used honestly, they can make citizens (and candidates) feel like meat. But the usual condemnation of professionalized politics rests on several fallacies. First, campaign stories sometimes imply that if the consultants who vend their mastery of these techniques were replaced by party officials, or regulated by nonpartisan boards, the techniques would be used strictly for good. Second, news stories imply that if the techniques disappeared altogether, candidates and constituents would engage in Platonic dialogues. A third notion, echoing the sentiment distilled into fiction by Edwin O'Connor in his novel *The Last Hurrah* (1956), holds up the previous era of campaigning as a more humane brand of trickery. A fourth fallacy confuses pithiness and effectiveness with evasiveness—as if “Read my lips: No new taxes” belongs in the gutter with the Willie Horton television spot. Finally, many of the same “sinister” techniques the professionals are said to foist upon press and public—such as the sound bite and the focus group—are used by the news media as a matter of course in their own productions.

### Tests of ‘Leadership’

The media employ many gauges of campaign strength: endorsements, facility with travel logistics, matching funds won, cleverness at “spin control,” poll numbers. Of these, the indicator with the greatest narrative appeal is the performance of the candidate in a well-publicized—and often well-advertised—stressful situation: the character test. Those who pass such tests are often said to have demonstrated “leadership.”

The rise of the character test is in part a response to the role of consultants, the idea being that character cannot be contrived. The character test also has narrative advantages. Literary theorists teach that the ideal road hero (Ulysses) is a goal-directed person who nevertheless remains open to change and growth. But presidential character-testing makes good political as well as literary sense. After all, character does matter. And while party leaders once monopolized the power to screen presidential aspirants, today, the press presides.

At any time in the process, of course, a campaign crisis may pose a character test. Before and during the primaries, however, the conventional test is for candidate “weight,” or simple viability as a campaigner on a national level.

At the conventions, the criteria shift to how well the nominee controls the show and to the quality of his vice-presidential selection. In the general campaign, stamina moves to the story fore (the road is now the long and winding road), along with broadening of appeal (including the ability to attract the best people from the campaigns of vanquished primary opponents) and a



comparative advantage over the other nominee. Whenever feasible, the press fits character-testing information into the sequence found in a thousand American success stories: "early failure," "learning the lesson," "gathering resolve," "better preparation," and "eventual triumph." In *Newsweek's* special edition on the 1988 campaign, both Michael Dukakis and George Bush gritted their teeth and grew tougher in order to defeat Richard Gephardt and Robert Dole, respectively. Then, Dukakis turned moody (as he had in the past, always a bad sign) and lost his 17-point lead over Bush.

Televised presidential debates loom large as character tests because they are the only occasions on which candidates do battle directly. The "big game" treatment given to the fall debates has overwhelmed some nominees. One can understand why Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford did not move a millimeter for 27 minutes when the power went out in one of their 1976 debates. By contrast, a seasoned Ronald Reagan used the test of his second debate with Walter Mondale in 1984 to recover from his poor performance in the first.

Until 1972, most tests of character hinged on political skills, that is, on the candidate's ability to form and maintain a majority coalition. But the Eagleton affair of that year marks the point when the private side of (vice-) presidential character became legitimate story material. Since then, it has increasingly seemed that testing for how well the candidate keeps together his stable of supporting groups matters less than how well he or she keeps the self together against the onslaught of press exposés and national chatter. Bill Clinton won almost as many plaudits for keeping a smile on his face during his early travails as he did for keeping voters on his side.

The cruelty such personal tests can entail, especially toward a candidate's family,

has produced a backlash against the media, which it has acknowledged through self-coverage and, at times, a moderation of tone. But campaign narrators have shown no signs of pulling away from developments of this ilk. Who can resist a scandal? (Scandals, it should be pointed out, sometimes allow the nation to work out important conflicts over values, such as the fundamentalist and feminist challenges to the Establishment code of conduct.) Excess and tawdriness are not the worst consequences of such "feeding frenzies." The larger civic defect lies in the failure of the media to get beyond Topic A.

**T**here is nothing wrong with the basic news conception of the presidential campaign as a nationwide search for leadership. While it cuts corners somewhat to explain campaign events through stories in which the winning team prevails because leadership suddenly emerged in an incident along a road, attracting followers and creating momentum for the next incident, such tales do serve as adequate summaries of and introductions to political history. The big problem is that continuing coverage induces queasiness. Too much of it no longer rests on a foundation of observational reporting. It now takes skilled effort for a reader or viewer to find authentic political journalism about Campaign '92. Many are employed by the news media to monitor the campaign, but few record what they see and hear of it.

On October 16, 1988, the *New York Times* carried a piece by Andrew Rosenthal entitled "After Third TV Debate, Networks' Policy Shifts." This article announced the television networks' decision to declare George Bush the winner in his third debate with Michael Dukakis, even though they had not picked a winner in the previous two. Rosenthal quoted network personalities who, along with one professor, com-

mented on their own previously televised commentary. He also brought in the results of an ABC poll conducted instantly after the debate. There was not a single reference to anything said in, or about, the debate itself.

This is a shame, and members of the subculture do not even fully understand why. A campaign event may constitute a defining moment. It may involve an eventual winner. But it is, regardless, a living instance of the precious American commitment to democratic governance. The presidential campaign consists, at bottom, of forums in which powerful people must ask for things from less powerful people. When such solicitations occur (and when they do not), that is campaign news. Unfortunately, the political subculture's preoccupations have drawn journalists away from the literal commemoration of such campaign discussions. The emphasis is on sampling the legitimate crosstalk as quickly as possible so that it can be converted into fodder for "Crosstalk" and other insider forums.

Reformers' various efforts to promote campaign discourse have been largely self-defeating. After 1988 the *Washington Post's* David Broder and others called for more newspaper analyses of campaign ads. This has been widely implemented. Yet these "truth squad" boxes are twice removed from political reality. Journalists wind up analyzing the campaigns by watching television. ABC's "Town Meeting" shows, perhaps the best of several pseudo-discourse formats intended to raise the level of debate, tend to sink into speechmaking because of a surfeit of name-brand guests on stage with Ted Koppel. To the degree that covering talk among the people has become fashionable, the people have been

squirreled away in focus groups or reached through pollsters' phone banks and asked to talk about, not with, the politicians.

The irony of American campaign coverage today is that the solution to the problem is so simple. Campaign journalism ought to describe what politicians and people say to each other, and how they look as they talk. (Reporters should also chronicle discussions between voters and the candidates' surrogates—it would have been useful, for example, to have more records of John Sununu's appearances in New Hampshire on behalf of George Bush in 1988.) Perhaps coverage of such encounters seems superfluous to the media. Candidates already make efforts to speak to the people clearly, directly, and as often as possible. But covering these exchanges is also difficult. While less translation is necessary, much campaign conversation needs to be edited out, and the remaining dialogue often requires expository context. Exposition, in turn, often necessitates investigation. (Reporters who accept the duty to check the veracity of candidate claims can never get enough praise.) In short, good campaign journalism may be as simple to describe as it is hard to produce.

Talking with citizens is the best kind of campaign activity that journalists can encourage candidates to do. For no one talks *with* a president. The campaign is the last best chance to talk with the individuals who become president. Americans do not need to elect a great president every time out; they have learned to cope with mediocrity. But year in and year out they need to sense that they can tell the two apart. The narrative conventions of campaign journalism have dulled this sense.

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## BACKGROUND BOOKS

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# THE MEDIA MAKE THE CAMPAIGN

Milton Berle once said that criticizing television was like describing an auto accident to the victims. With all due respect to Berle, one might argue that the journalistic and scholarly media analysis spawned by the vast expansion of TV coverage of politics since 1960 is more like preventive medicine.

The news media have been objects of almost constant controversy since the late 1960s, when they were accused of turning the American public against the Vietnam War. In 1969 Vice President Spiro Agnew blasted the networks as a monopoly controlled by "a tiny, enclosed fraternity of privileged men elected by no one." But it was Edith Efron's *The News Twisters* (Nash, 1971) that focused serious attention on TV's presentation of the nation's presidential candidates. Efron argued that all three networks were "strongly biased in favor of the Democratic-liberal-left axis of opinion," and that during the 1968 campaign they had depicted Hubert Humphrey as a "quasi-saint" and Richard Nixon "as corruption incarnate." Several journalism scholars carefully rebutted her analysis. After the Nixon-McGovern campaign of 1972, more than 10 studies of TV's coverage appeared. Their conclusion: Neither Democrats nor Republicans were favored.

Abetted by changing technology, content analysis of TV news has developed into a cottage industry. One Republican in Tennessee, upset at the networks' coverage of the 1968 GOP convention, induced Vanderbilt University to begin regularly taping the network evening news. As a result, researchers now have at their disposal tapes (which may be rented) and the *Television News Index and Abstracts*, which offers monthly outlines of news broadcasts. Indeed, the same videotape technology that enabled the networks to use shorter and shorter sound bites now allows researchers to compile their own inexpensive videotape records for analysis. In addition, two monthly newsletters, *Media Monitor* (published by the Center for Media and Public Affairs in Washington, D.C.) and *Tyndall Report* (published by ADT Research in New York), now chart the ebb and flow of topics in the network news.

Just as every campaign now yields several journalistic chronicles in the mold of Theodore H. White's famous *Making of the President* series, so it also produces several analyses of the media's performance. Typical of those for 1988 are detailed studies such as S. Robert Lichter, Daniel Amundson, and Richard Noyes's *The Video Campaign: Network Coverage of the 1988 Primaries* (Am. Enterprise Inst., 1988) and *The Media in the 1984 and 1988 Presidential Campaigns* (Greenwood, 1991) edited by Guido H. Stempel III and John W. Windhauser. Comparing the campaign coverage of 1984 and 1988 on TV, in 17 newspapers, and in three newsmagazines, Stempel and Windhauser conclude that "nine-second images dominated not only television coverage but newspaper coverage as well." They add:

Our results leave no doubt that the coverage of issues was minimal. Two-thirds of the stories in newspapers and newsmagazines and on television newscasts dealt with politics and government, candidate strength, and poll results. We believe that the lack of coverage of the economy, education, and science largely reflect what the candidates did with these issues. They didn't get coverage because the candidates did not address them in any significant fashion.

In *Feeding Frenzy* (Free Press, 1991), University of Virginia political scientist Larry J. Sabato argues that the deluge of coverage and the intensifying competition among news organizations have led to more reports about the candidates' personal, and especially sexual, lives. "This trivialization of the public discourse," he warns, "is warping the democratic process." It influences everything, from "the kinds of issues discussed in campaigns to . . . the sorts of people attracted to the electoral arena."

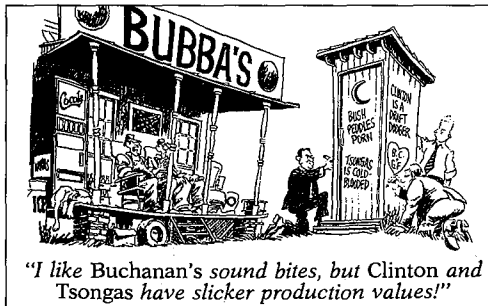
Advertising is another form of TV influence on the campaigns. Although broadcast advertising has been the biggest budget item in presidential campaigns since 1928, only since the Bush campaign's Willie Horton ads in 1988

has the daily press taken a keen interest in the subject. A good history is Kathleen Hall Jamieson's **Packaging the Presidency: A History and Criticism of Presidential Campaign Advertising** (Oxford, 1984).

Today, many newspapers provide detailed accounts of candidate spending for airtime, as well as analysis of the candidates' claims. Spots are also regularly reviewed on the evening news—NBC superimposes "FALSE" for claims it says are unsubstantiated. But all the high technology and big dollars, Edwin Diamond and Stephen Bates warn in **The Spot: The Rise of Political Advertising on Television** (MIT, 3rd edition, 1992), "may be turning campaigns and elections into a kind of spectator sport . . . to watch and enjoy but not necessarily to participate in by voting."

A bit of perspective on all of this is provided by, among other things, the fact that the decline of voter turnout in U.S. presidential elections began a century ago, long before the invention of TV. The "debasement" of presidential campaigning, notes historian Gil Troy in **See How They Ran: The Changing Role of the Presidential Candidate** (Free Press, 1991), is likewise an old story. During most of the 19th century, the nation's republican tradition made it seem undignified for presidential candidates even to speak on their own behalf. But gradually the democratic demand for "the personal touch" drew candidates to campaign, first from their back porches and later on the hustings. Increasingly, voters were interested not only in the character and ideas of the candidates but in their personality and in details of their personal life. Yet it was not until 1908 that both major party candidates took to the campaign trail.

In **The Reasoning Voter: Communication**



and **Persuasion in Presidential Campaigns** (Univ. of Chicago, 1991), political scientist Samuel Popkin argues that Americans are not bamboozled by today's media barrage. "Voters know how to read the media and the politicians better than most

media critics acknowledge," he writes. Studies since the 1940 election have regularly reminded researchers that voters get much of their information through personal communication with friends, neighbors, and local "opinion leaders." In **The Main Source: Learning from Television News** (Sage, 1986) John P. Robinson and Mark R. Levy conclude that "the good news is . . . the public is far better informed" than "previous studies have suggested," but the "bad news" is that citizens know far less about public affairs "than most news workers" assume.

**The Future of News: Television, Newspapers, Wire Services, Newsmagazines** (Woodrow Wilson Center & John Hopkins, 1992), edited by Philip S. Cook, Douglas Gomery, and Lawrence W. Lichty, holds out little hope for help from the media. The percentage of the population that reads newspapers is dwindling: Television coverage of day-to-day government, already scant, is likely to suffer as shrinking network market shares force cuts in news budgets. Whatever its defects, TV's coverage of campaigns today is at least plentiful.

The impact is difficult to pin down. Yet with all this coverage it seems safe to say that we will never see any candidate confessing, as Vice President William Howard Taft did at the outset of an 18,000-mile, 400-speech campaign trip for the presidency in 1908, "I am from time to time oppressed with the sense that I am not the man who ought to have been selected."

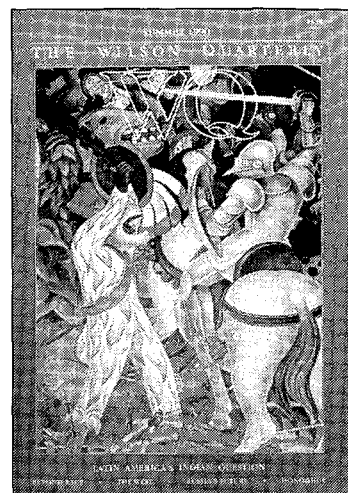
—Lawrence W. Lichty

*Lawrence W. Lichty is director of the Wilson Center's Media Studies Project. He is the author most recently (with James G. Webster) of Ratings Analysis: Theory and Practice (1991).*

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