

HOW TO READ THE CAMPAIGN

by Michael Cornfield

An 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.

The 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'

In 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'

The 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.

There 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.