

Campaign Politics

Herbert J. Teison

1969-10-18

**THE SELLING OF
THE PRESIDENT 1968**

by Joe McGinniss

Trident. 253 pp., \$5.95

IN THE SPRING of 1968 Joe McGinniss, a twenty-six-year-old former sports writer and columnist for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, learned through an account-executive friend that the Doyle Dane Bernbach advertising agency intended "to turn Hubert H. Humphrey into Abraham Lincoln" by election time. McGinniss thought he would like to document this ambitious feat in a book. But apparently DDB had other thoughts; it wouldn't let McGinniss get close.

Undaunted, the author put a dime into a pay-station phone and called Harry Treleaven, previously a vice president at J. Waller Thompson and at the time of the call in charge of advertising for the Nixon campaign. Certainly, they would be willing to talk to him about covering the Nixon side of the campaign. Could he come over? The result is *The Selling of the President 1968*.

From it the reader gathers that the Nixon campaign managers not only accepted Mr. McGinniss's presence; they enthusiastically expressed to him their innermost thoughts and apparently showered him with confidential memos. Although they must have tacitly assumed that Mr. McGinniss's book would offer a sympathetic view and that their self-compromising remarks would be omitted, they were wrong on both counts. Mr. McGinniss quotes paragraph after paragraph of obviously embarrassing statements, and includes the confidential memos *in toto*.

What must be equally unsettling to those who were involved in Mr. Nixon's bid for the Presidency is the book's detailed reportage of the theatrical machinery that led to victory. With wit, insight and a low-key sense of irony, McGinniss takes the reader backstage at a Nixon TV "special" in Chicago on the first day of the campaign. The press had been excluded because a top strategist of the Nixon campaign, Frank Shakespeare, formerly of CBS and now director of the U.S. Information Agency, wanted them kept out.

"It's a television show," McGinniss quotes Shakespeare as saying. "Our television show. And the press has no business on the set. And goddam... the problem is that this is an electronic election. The first there's ever been. TV has the power now. Some of the guys get arrogant and rub the reporters' faces in it and then the reporters get pissed and go out of their way to rap anything they consider staged for TV... You let them in with the regular audience and they see the warmup. They see Jack Rourke [a production assistant] out there telling the audience to applaud and to mob Nixon at the end, and that's all they'd write about..."

McGinniss, who was, of course, accepted as part of the scene, describes in great detail and with a fresh and compelling style what the newspapermen were not allowed even to see.



“Mmm—wonderful! Or is it your after-shave?”

The Chicago “special” was actually the first of ten one-hour panel shows that would be produced individually and go on the air live around the country. A small panel would put questions to the candidate, and a studio audience would, according to McGinniss, be invited in “to cheer Nixon’s answers and make it seem to home viewers that enthusiasm for his candidacy was all but uncontrollable.”

The strategy behind the series, he says, was that each show would only be seen by the people who lived in a particular area. “This meant it made no difference if Nixon’s statements— for they were not really answers— were exactly the same, phrase for phrase, gesture for gesture from state to state. Only the press would be bored, and the press had been written off already. So Nixon could get through the campaign with a dozen or so carefully worded responses that would cover all the problems of America in 1968.”

The person responsible for the panel series and virtually all the rest of Richard Nixon’s commercial TV appearances was Roger Ailes, who had been executive producer of *The Mike Douglas Show*. McGinniss shows Ailes —at that time twenty-eight—as an irreverent highly competent technician whose primary interest was to produce shows that would not only make the candidate look good but would keep the TV audience awake. Ailes’s biggest problem, McGinniss says, was with the panel. Shakespeare, Treleaven and Leonard Garment, who was a partner in Nixon’s law’ firm and is now Special Assistant to the President, had felt it essential to have a “balanced” group. “First, this meant a Negro. One Negro. Not two. Two would be offensive to whites, perhaps to Negroes as well. Two would be trying too hard... Texas would be tricky, though. Do you have a Negro *and* a Mexican- American... ?

“Besides the Negro, the panel for the first show included a Jewish attorney, the president of a Polish-Hungarian group, a suburban housewife, a businessman, a representative of the white lower middle class, and, for authenticity. two newsmen...

“But then someone had called from New York and insisted that he add a farmer. A farmer for Christ’s sake. Roger Ailes had been born in Ohio, but even so he knew you did not want a farmer on a television show. All they did was ask complicated questions about things like parities, which no- body else understood or cared about. Including Richard Nixon...”

The Selling of the President 1968 shows the master strategists, the cool-eyed businessmen, laying out the parameters of the candidate’s image, and the creative people—TV producers and directors along with writers and set designers—shaping the image and projecting it to the electorate. And then there were the pollsters measuring the temperature of public opinion to find out how well the image had registered.

Most significantly, the book displays the candidate himself being directed through it all—half unaware that he, too, is being manipulated. An example of this occurs when Nixon, standing in front of the camera at the end of a taping session, spontaneously decide; to do one more commercial on his own. He makes an extemporaneous, hard-line law-and-order statement about the New York City teachers’ strike then in progress. But the message is sharply out of keeping with the soft, friendly Nixon image, and

Garment in the control room is upset. Treleven, however, reassures him. "That's all right, Len," he says, "it'll never gel on the air."

More than an expose, *The Selling of the President 1968* is an indication of where it's all in American politics at the end of the Sixties. McGinniss is quite aware of this as indicated by his many asides on the philosophy of image-making and projection. He concludes that the goal of the politician today is to become a TV celebrity, to achieve a status jump that will allow him to be "measured not against his predecessors—not against a standard of performance established by two centuries of democracy—but against Mike Douglas... Style becomes substance. The medium is the message and the masseur gets the votes."

Actually, Joe McGinniss is not quite accurate in suggesting that American candidates over the past 200 years ran and were elected on the basis of how they measured up to their predecessors' "standards of performance." Race, religion, marital status or lack of same, hair style, and smile are only the more obvious among the extraneous factors that have gotten American candidates into political office.

There is even the story that George Washington failed to make it into the House of Burgesses the first time around because his opponent awarded every "aye" voter a lot of rum for his support. At the next election the future father of our country had a whole hogshead of rum stationed at the polling place, and all comers had as much as they wished before going into the voting booth.

As the country grew older and more sophisticated, out-and-out bribery was replaced by somewhat subtler means of currying favor. Baby kissing, torch light parades, party-sponsored picnics, candidates driving locomotives and wearing Indian bonnets were among them.

With the advent of radio and television they were able for the first time to expose their personalities to citizens all over the country simultaneously and yet on a one-to-one basis. Even better, because of the flexibility of the electronic media, the personality they displayed could be more pleasing than the one they actually had. The two didn't even have to have too much in common.

FDR was among the first to realize this. His fireside chats were not just a series of speeches but, rather, because of the versatility—or as McLuhan might put it, "coolness"—of radio and Roosevelt's use of it they became visits with a warm, friendly neighbor in the intimacy of his home. Their effectiveness is probably best attested to by the fact that though in all there were only three or four actual Hyde Park "chats," anyone who was around at the time will swear they heard many more.

The BBDO advertising agency did some experimentation with image manipulation during the Eisenhower campaign. Flight after flight of spot TV commercials projected a "take charge" image for the General who was going to "clean up the mess in Washington." In another set of commercials, during a campaign against an opponent whose divorce was a major political liability, Eisenhower talked about "my wife Mamie." Almost pathetically in retrospect, Stevenson countered this "happy home" image with a film



Joe McGinniss — “more than an expose.”

showing him with Adlai, Jr., and his daughter-in-law in their “happy home.” But these were only the feeble beginnings.

The effectiveness of electronic image projection was never more dramatically demonstrated than by the Nixon- Kennedy debates of 1960. Virtually no one will deny that JFK “won” though few, then or now, could tell you the questions debated. What people are really saying is that Kennedy’s image—young, vibrant, self-assured—triumphed over that of Nixon, which seemed gray, tense and tired. There was no debate in the classic sense, only an electronic contest of images.

The lessons of these encounters were not lost on Nixon. In a post-graduate course of eight years Richard Nixon and his team learned that it is not what the candidate is but what he can be made to appear to be that will pay off at the polls. Obviously, it was a course worth taking, and McGinniss daringly documents the final exam.

But what of the future? Will candidates be sold more and more like packaged goods? Will campaigns end up entirely in the hands of the professional image manipulators? And will the public be casting ballots in proportion to the talent of one or the other group of image makers or the financial ability of the partisans to buy air time? Probably.

At a two-day conference of the American Association of Campaign Consultants late in September, at which, incidentally, Joe McGinniss was keynote speaker, much talk was devoted to the morality of image manipulation. Some felt that TV commercials were okay only if the candidate appeared in them, others that image development was all right provided the image resembled the “real” candidate. But in the end the participants—campaign managers, candidates and advertising men—were all there for one purpose: to learn the newest and most effective techniques to insure victory. And the products of these techniques are what we, as voters, can look to in the future.

If there are any counterbalances to this movement they will come through legislation and education.

Legislation guaranteeing equitable distribution of air time regardless of budgets would give each candidate similar access to the electorate. (The present “equal-time” provision of the broadcast law affords equal time only to the extent that the candidate can afford to pay for it.) A bill currently in Congress would assure Congressional candidates a basic block of air time at a 70 per cent discount. It is essentially a weak bill, but because Congress is made up of potentially incumbent candidates who are reluctant to make access to broadcast time easy for challengers, only a weak bill stands a chance of passage.

On the other side of the TV screen is voter education. Every secondary school in the United States has history courses that teach how democracy in America came about. Civics courses describe how democracy works. But few, if any, courses explain how to participate in a democracy. The single, solitary reason for political image-making is that the public can be seduced. Indeed, it often invites seduction as an alternative to hard decision-making. If children can be taught to reach voting conclusions on the

basis of fact rather than emotion, a long step will have been taken in keeping the hidden persuaders from running off with politics.

Herbert J. Teison

Critic Herbert J. Teison, a member of SR's staff, has conducted a course in communications at The New School in New York since 1963. His book on advertising and politics will be published by World early next year.

The Ted K Archive

Herbert J. Teison
Campaign Politics
1969-10-18

Saturday Review, Volume 52, Issue 42.
<www.archive.org/details/sim_saturday-review_1969-10-11_52_42>
Omni Publications International, ISSN 0036-4983,

www.thetedkarchive.com