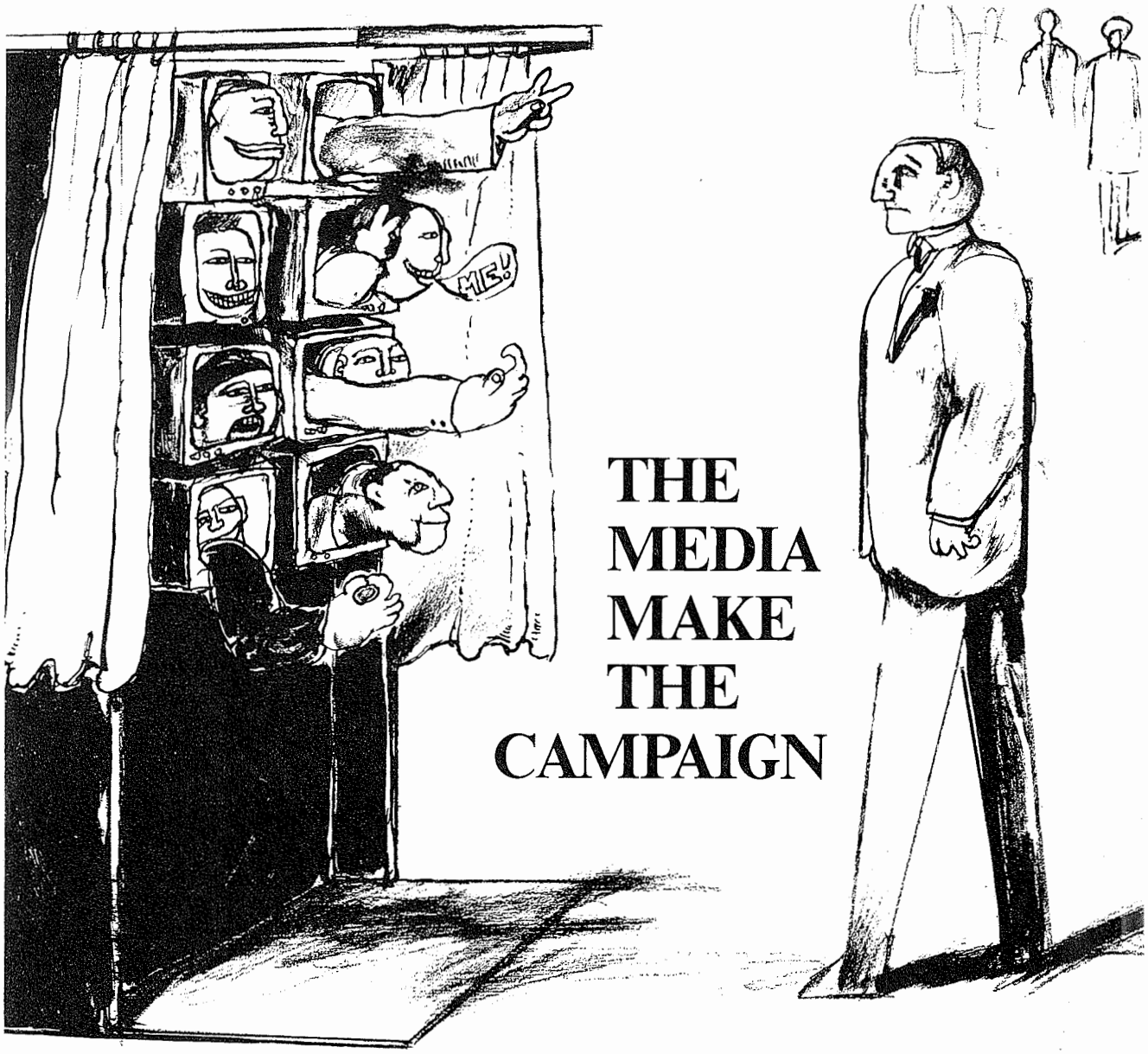


THE MEDIA MAKE THE CAMPAIGN

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

As 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.

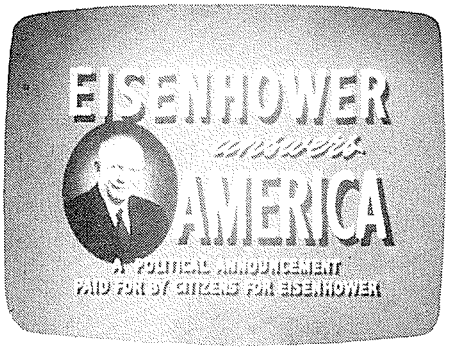
McDowell was in Chicago in 1952 as a member of his newspaper's convention bureau covering the fight between General Dwight D. Eisenhower and Senator Robert A. Taft of Ohio for the Republican nomination. Although it seemed unlikely that the Republicans would reject a war hero of Eisenhower's stature, 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, Eisenhower's staff succeeded.

Narrator: *Eisenhower Answers America.*



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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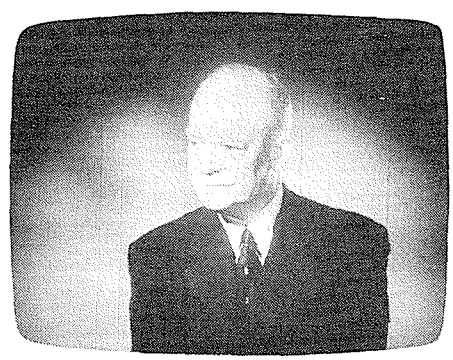
"What was happening," McDowell explained, "was that people back home, following the debate on television, were telephoning and telegraphing their delegates to say that Taft's case was coming through as weak. Republicans of consequence were saying that a steamroller approach would look bad on television 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 deal from the Republican Old Guard.

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

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.

When 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.

The 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.

The 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.

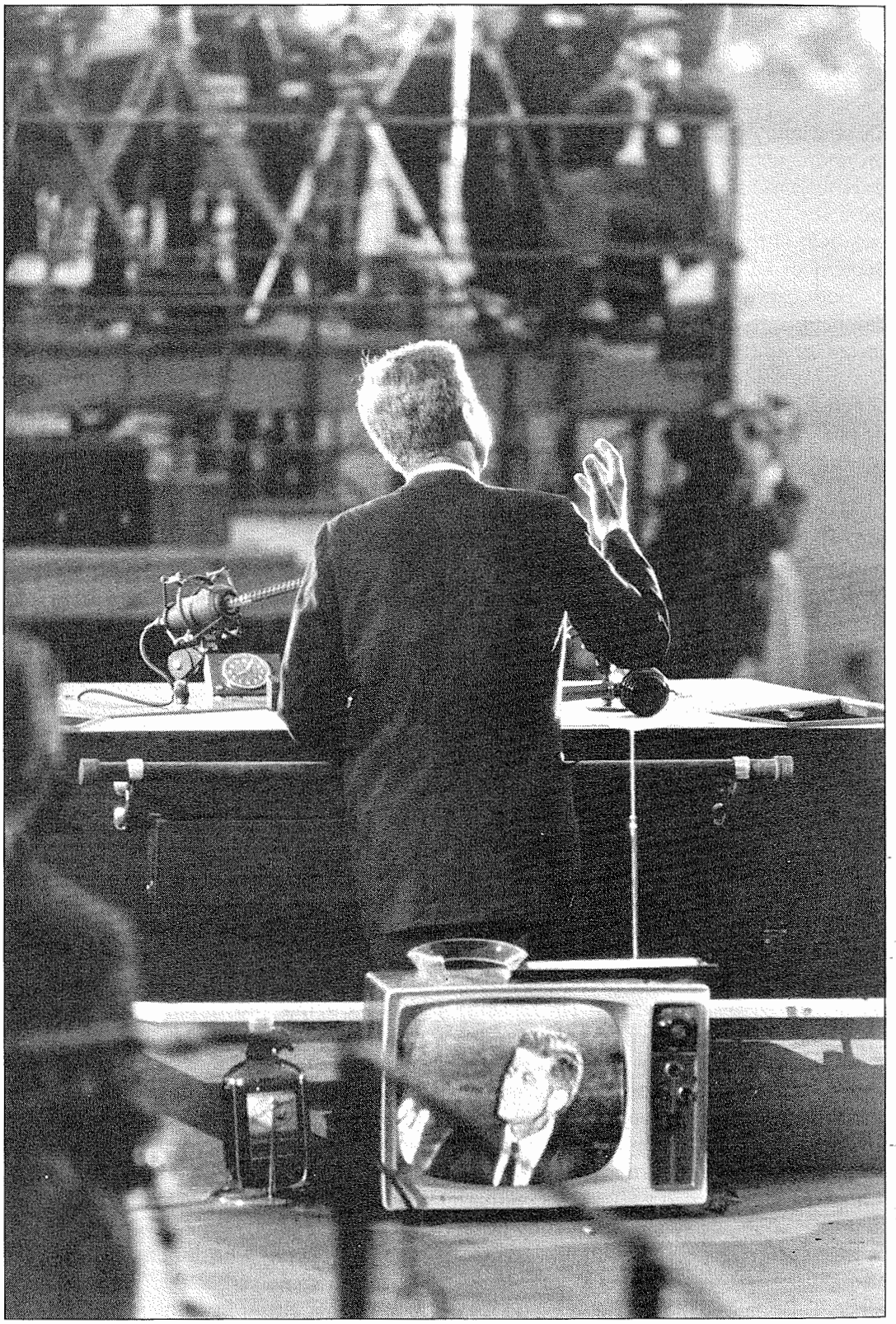
Instead of being eyewash, primaries determined the outcome of the nominating process. Once decisive, national conventions were reduced to gaudy gatherings that ratified decisions already made. When the selection of delegates to the conventions was largely in the hands of state party bosses, television 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 sloshed 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 director. 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.

Nixon 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. Furiously, 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.

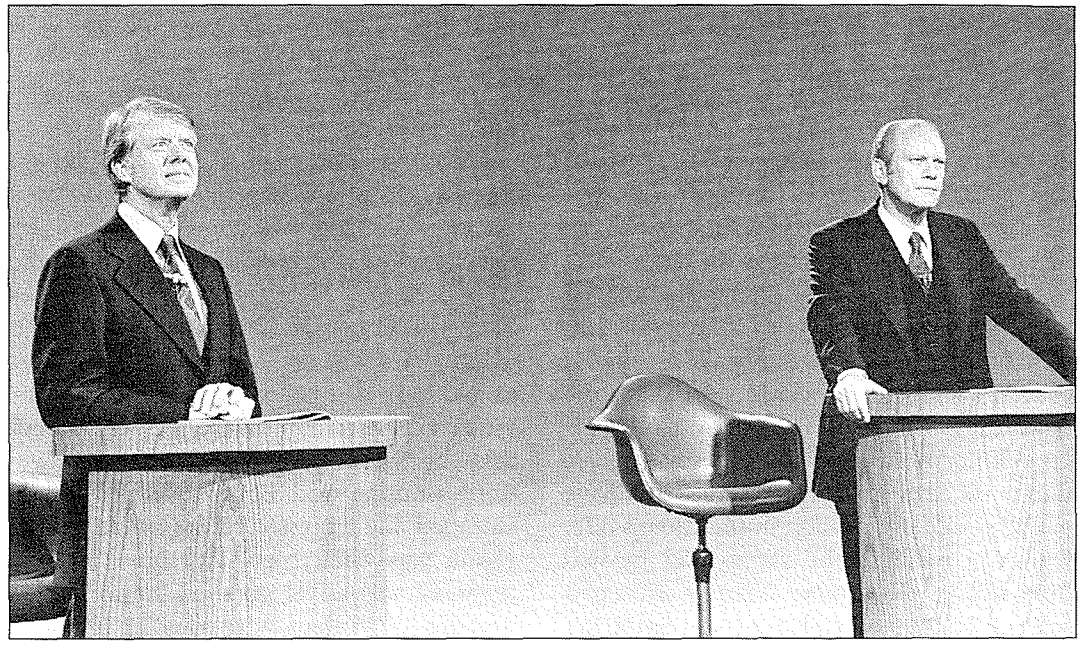
Because no overriding issues defined the 1960 campaign, the importance of the Nixon-Kennedy debates lay largely in the images projected on television. Whether these images determined the election outcome is hard to say. The margin of Kennedy's victory—112,881 votes—was so narrow that it is impossible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

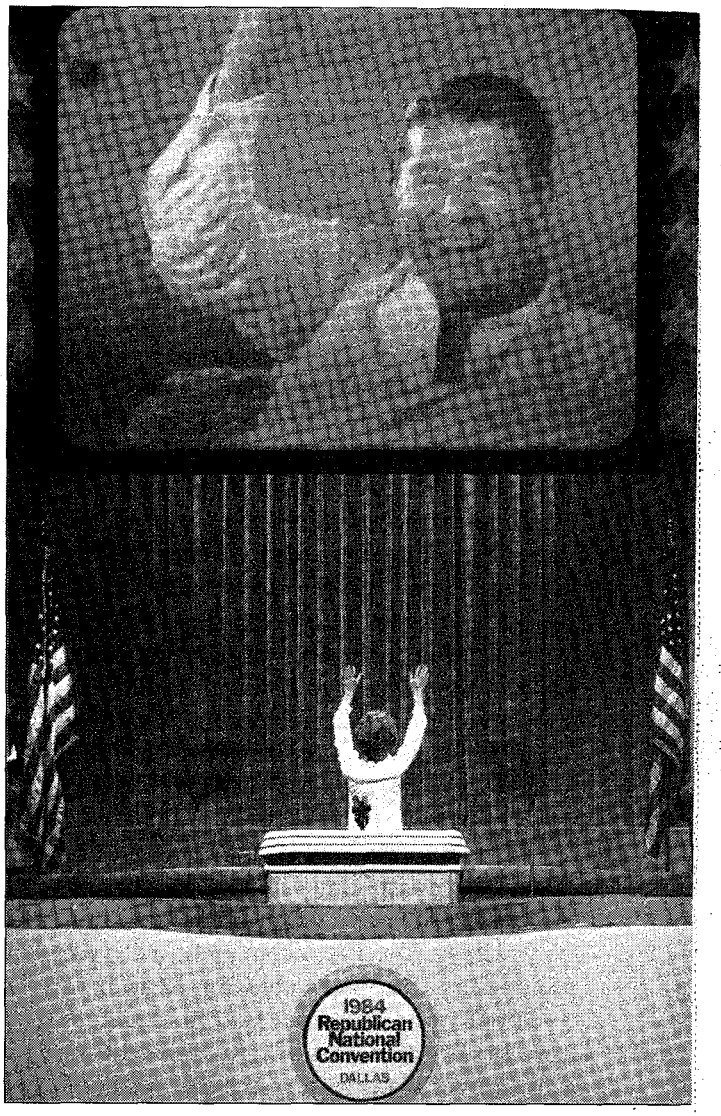
By the time of the second debate on October 22 in Kansas City, the drama centered on Reagan's appearance and the state of his alertness. Beforehand, his technicians went to the studio and changed lighting angles and candlepower to give him more of a glow. When the two contenders appeared, the president 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.



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

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 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."

In 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 pocketbooks. 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."