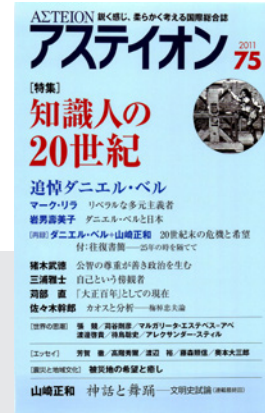


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## On "The Selling of the President"

by Alexander Stille

Joe McGinness's "The Selling of the President," was a smash bestseller when it appeared in 1969. It captured something new and strange in American politics: the massive and highly conscious use of television and the techniques of Madison Avenue advertising to direct and orchestrate the presidential campaign of Richard M. Nixon in 1968. By now the use of television in politics is so universal and ubiquitous that the idea of the "selling of the president" is no longer a shocking idea - it is a given of political life - and so one might think that McGinness's book might seem badly dated and superfluous in today's media-saturated world in which television is supplement and to some degree supplanted by a host of new digital media made possible by the Internet. Actually, the opposite is true: it is highly instructive to go back to the origins of one of the first media-driven campaigns to see the mechanisms more clearly and, to a surprising degree, they apply very well to the new digital media that are coming to the fore: political websites, blogs, Facebook and Twitter. In many ways, the parallels between Nixon's situation in 1968 and those of politicians today are remarkably close.

Nixon, like many Republican politicians today, felt, with some good reason, that the dominant media of his time - the print press - was against him. Nixon, an

outsider from a small town in California, had always felt excluded by the Northeastern elite that dominated both American politics and the American media in the formative years of his career. He was particularly hated because he had built his political career, in part, by jumping on the anti-Communist bandwagon of Senator Joseph McCarthy, who led the big anti-Communist witch-hunt of the 1950s. Nixon had helped prosecute Alger Hiss, a high-level State Department official believed by some to have been a Communist spy and thought by most East Coast liberals to have been wrongly persecuted. Nixon, who became known as "Tricky Dick," had a dark, angry side to his personality which didn't resonate well with voters. And while he was widely considered smart and tough, he didn't immediately warm to the medium of on television. Many Nixon supporters felt that he had lost the 1960 election to John F. Kennedy because of the televised debates in which the handsome and affable Kennedy appeared to come across better on the small screen than the tense and cerebral Nixon, who sweated profusely under the lights of the TV cameras and whose naturally thick black beard gave him a dark and sinister appearance.

And so, as he contemplated a new run at the presidency in 1968, Nixon's advisers contemplated a bold new strategy, based almost entirely on television. "He could not do it through the press," McGinness writes, "He knew what to expect from them, which was the same as he had always gotten. He would have to circumvent them ... Television was the only answer, despite its sins against him in the past. But not just any kind of television. An uncommitted camera could do irreparable harm. His television would have to be controlled. He would need experts. They would have to find the proper settings for him, or if they could not be found, manufacture them."

In this sense, Nixon's stance toward print media is very much like the attitude of many Republican politicians today toward what has come to be known as the Main Stream Media or which Sarah Palin likes to refer to as the "Lame Stream Media." Sarah Palin in 2008 found herself on unfamiliar and unfriendly ground when she conducted interviews with the press. Forced to answer questions for which she appeared poorly prepared, she made numerous gaffes and mistakes and simply stopped granting interviews entirely, except under entirely controlled

circumstances. Her charisma and political talents appeared to much better effect when she appeared in highly-controlled circumstances in front of friendly audiences. Not good at answering, but was terrific at delivering speeches, which were then widely televised. After 2008, she became a host on Fox News which created the appearance of someone who was constantly available and answering questions - but in the completely controlled environment of a network entirely dedicated to the promotion of her career. Similarly, Palin has made use of new social media such as Facebook and Twitter, which, like Nixon on television in 1968, allow her to communicate directly with her followers without passing through the critical censors of traditional media. They allow her, like her appearances on Fox News, to appear as a likeable individual, a friend and mother, with whom her fans identify as if they were equals or even "friends" (the designation of Facebook), while receiving what seem like personal messages from her on Twitter, which create the feeling of a genuine personal relationship even though they are received simultaneously by hundreds of thousands, if not millions of users.

Because "The Selling of the President" was the first of its kind, McGinness had a degree of access to the campaign and its internal memoranda that is unlikely to occur in today's world, in which campaign work very hard to control almost all information about them, even after the campaign is over. McGinness was allowed to sit in on the tapings of commercials, the strategy sessions of the media consultants and given copies of the main memoranda in which the Nixon campaign laid out its thinking with great clarity. As Raymond K. Price, one of Nixon's media advisers, (who later wrote much of Nixon's inaugural address) spelled out very clearly that television required campaigns to think differently. "We can't win the election of 1968 with the techniques of 1952. We're not only in a television age, but in a television-conditioned age." Television, Price argued, was a great medium for conveying emotion rather than rational arguments. "The natural human use of reason is to support prejudice, to arrive at opinions," If the print media was good for conveying facts and arguments and appealing to reason, television depends on establishing a personal, emotional relationship with the viewer. "It can only be effective if we can get the people to make the

emotional leap, or what theologians call the 'leap of faith.' ... These tend to be more a gut reaction, unarticulated, non-analytical, a product of the particular chemistry between the voter and the image of the candidate. We have to be very clear on this point: that the response is to the image, not to the man ... It's not what's there that count, it's what's projected - and carrying it on step further, it's now he projects but rather what the voter receives. It's not the man we have to change, but rather the received impression. And this impression often depends more on the medium and its use than it does on the candidate himself."

"Voters are basically lazy, basically uninterested in making an effort to understand what we're talking about," Price continued. "Reason requires a high degree of discipline, of concentration: impression is easier. Reason pushes the viewer back, it assaults him, it demands that he agree or disagree; impression can envelop him, invite him in, without making an intellectual demand ... The emotions are more easily roused, closer to the surface, more malleable ... Nixon has to come across as a person larger than life, the stuff of legend. People are stirred by the legend, including the living legend, not by the man himself. It's the aura that surrounds the charismatic figure more than it is the figure itself, that draws the followers. Our task is to build that aura ... So let's not be afraid of television gimmicks ... get the voters to like the guy and the battle's two-thirds won."

Getting people to like Nixon, however, was not a small challenge. The ad-men running the Nixon election campaign conducted among the first "focus groups" to test what voters thought of various candidates. While television may be a good instrument for manipulation in some ways television doesn't lie. People felt instinctively watching Nixon that he was a tense, difficult, and angry man, uncomfortable in his skin, not someone who was easy to get to know or personable. In all their testing, his campaign found a "personality gap" between Nixon and his chief opponent, Vice President Hubert Humphrey, who, while having many defects, was a happier, more extroverted man whom voters instinctively liked better. So much of the efforts of the media campaign was, as Price put, "get the voters to like the guy."

One of the great innovations of the 1968 was that the Nixon campaign would

essentially produce a series of television shows built around and for their candidate. They hired Roger Ailes, then only 28-years-old, who is now the head of Fox News, which does continuously and on a national basis for conservative causes, what Ailes did for Nixon in 1968: provide a friendly, favorable showcase for conservative candidates and causes and a vicious attack machine for candidates or organizations that oppose them. Ailes idea for the 1968 was to produce a series of TV programs which would look like spontaneous live events but would, in fact, be carefully orchestrated. They organized a series of public debates in different parts of the country showing Nixon answering tough questions from ordinary citizens, but both the panel of questioners and the audience itself were carefully chosen. In order to create the atmosphere of a genuinely free exchange with different points of view, Ailes was careful to chose at least one liberal for each panel and one black voter, but they were careful to avoid people with law degrees or sufficient preparation to put Nixon in a difficult spot. The audience, however, would be composed entirely of Nixon supporters screened the Republican Party. As Ailes explained: "The audience is part of the show. And that's the whole point. It's a television show. Our television show. And the press has no business on the set ... ..this is an electronic election. The first there's ever been. TV has the power now." The audience was instructed to clap whenever Nixon gave an answer and they mobbed him with enthusiasm when the debate ended. This created the impression that, no matter what the question or Nixon's answer, the television audience at home would feel that Nixon had prevailed.

Interestingly, Ailes felt strongly that the traditional press should be excluded from these Nixon television shows. "You let them in and they see the warmup. They see Jack Rourke out there telling the audience to applaud and to mob Nixon at the end and that's all they'd write about."

Interestingly, Ailes' clever insight that the "audience is part of the show," has been confirmed subsequently by much social science research. One study examined the impact of audience applause during the 1984 debate between Ronald Reagan and Walter Mondale. Reagan made a couple of quite clever jokes at Mondale's expense which drew a large audience response. Groups of television

viewers who watched the debate with the applause concluded that Reagan had won the debate and was the better-prepared candidate. However, when control groups were shown the same debate but without the audience response they concluded that Mondale had won the debate and was the stronger candidate. The only difference was the sound of the audience. (As a result of this, the public is now forbidden to applaud during presidential debates.)

The format that Nixon chose - a seemingly open public debate that is in fact almost entirely controlled - is precisely the format that George W. Bush chose to communicate during the last years of his presidency. Bush called extremely few press conferences - where he would have to answer real questions from professional journalists and at one point it emerged that some of the media called on in the press conference were actually political operatives paid to ask friendly questions rather than real journalists. Instead, he spoke mainly to town hall meetings, composed mainly of ordinary citizens, but carefully screened to weed out possible protestors or Democrats so that the images seen on television that evening would never reflect the growing discontent about the war in Iraq or the Bush administration in general.

The world has changed greatly since the election of 1968 but it has changed in the direction indicated in "The Selling of the President." In 1968, the average soundbite on the U.S. television coverage of politics was 43 seconds, meaning that the candidates were heard speaking uninterrupted for an average of 43 seconds. By the 1980's it was fourteen seconds and in the last ten or fifteen years it averages less than eight seconds. This has meant that much of modern politics is conducted by image and by quick memorable sound-bites into political speech: Walter Mondale's "Where's the Beef?" George H.W. Bush's "Read my lips: no new taxes" George W. Bush's "Bring it on!" or "We're going to smoke 'em out!" Arnold Schwarzenegger's "Don't be economic girlie men!" Or Sarah Palin's: "What's the difference between a pitbull and a hockey mom? Lipstick." In the 20th century, we moved from the long prepared speech to the eight-second sound bite and on this road, the 1968 campaign was an important milestone. Ailes: "Let's face it, a lot of people think Nixon is dull. Think he's a bore, a pain in the ass. They look at him as the kind of kid who always carried a bookbag.

Who was forty-two years old the day he was born."

That's why these shows are important. To make them forget all that."

"The Selling of the President," Joe McGinniss, pp. 253, (published 1969 and 1988)

