

cal organization and effective leadership. In the context of such fundamental supply-side changes, it would be possible to pursue a consistently expansionary demand-side policy to promote full employment with little fear of inflation. In the absence of such changes, inflationary pressures will plague each cyclical recovery and will continue to be fought with periodic economic downturns.

It is a sad commentary on the state of our political system that talk of basic economic change

now appears wildly utopian. For all their differences on other matters of concern, the Democrats do not seem to be offering an economic strategy that is fundamentally distinct from that of the Republicans in its approach to the underlying problems of the U.S. economy.

Economic events will no doubt have a significant impact on the elections this year. Regrettably, it seems unlikely that the outcome of the elections will have much impact on our economy. □

Todd Gitlin

Campaign Images: Mirrors Within Mirrors

It is an appalling visitation. You turn on the television and watch the president of the United States. He delivers his right-thinking homilies, fudges his ignorance, composes his chuckles, strains to summon a fact or two from failing memory banks stuffed a few hours earlier in a quick cram course. Announcers, reporters, pundits take all this seriously. With few exceptions, they sonorously take at face value the claims of this man whose sense of the real is so fundamentally damaged. Collaborating with the machinery of image-making, as he has done all his adult life, the president “sounds good” and “looks good,” so we say. His sheltered, cramped view of the world is no longer the point.

The point, it seems, is that Reagan embodies that dreamland America perpetually on its way onward and upward, radiating assurance and the upbeat, mirroring back to America its glorious founding premise—that the power of the will is going to conquer the unruly tangle of the wilderness. “Americans live in the future,” he said once, expressing an important half-truth about the cocky archetypal American, ever ready to blunder into the swamps of war because (unless the politicians get in the generals’ way) We Can’t Lose.

It has been pointed out (by Steven R. Weisman in the *New York Times Magazine* and the anonymous chroniclers of the *New Yorker’s* “Talk of the Town”) that Reagan’s genius, if that is the right

word, has been his capacity to sidestep responsibility. He is Mr. Teflon, the man to whom blame does not stick. He does not control, his manner would have us believe; he presides. The *New Yorker* ingeniously traced Reagan’s practical sidestep to his origins as a radio announcer. Whether calling plays on the field or, later on, introducing the *General Electric Theater* on television, Reagan was host. The announcer or host isn’t in charge; he’s just pointing out what’s going on out there, somewhere else. Ronald Reagan Presents the United States of America; Ronald Reagan takes note that the Marines were killed in Lebanon. But there is more to it than that. Reagan does seem to be as perfect a television president as Jimmy Carter was a hapless one. Even gestures like the cock of his head are just the right size for the close-up; on the lecture platform, they’d be lost.

It seems perfectly obvious that a candidate has to “look good,” whatever that means, on television, to win either the nomination or the presidency. Image *is* real when voters make real choices on the basis of little knowledge *besides* image. The candidates cater: this is their defining work in a mass society that is formally democratic, with parties that aren’t organized ideologically. The media of the time create the screen on which the image has to be projected; nothing new about that. To be a silver-tongued orator was sufficient and appropriate in 1896, when William Jennings Bryan swept

the Democratic convention. To project a comforting radio presence was excellent in 1932, 1936, 1940, and 1944, when TV cameras might have caught FDR constantly on crutches or in a wheelchair and hurt him severely. All seems image, which is the mass democratic equivalent of vanity.

And so Reagan as host is perfectly perched to exploit television, the medium that magnifies the telling gesture, the composed demeanor, the small witticism. But this match between technology and talent is only the beginning of his mastery of the medium. Since his days in the California State House Reagan has been adept at glad-handing the press and giving them what they want: quotable lines, good profiles, "photo opportunities" (the secular equivalents of papal audiences *en masse*), and the feeling of being taken seriously, let in on glamor, ease, uplift, and camaraderie. If television is more easily conned than the print media, the difference is one of degree, not kind. The press likes to be taken for a ride because prefabricated excitement is its bread and butter.

TECHNOLOGY ASIDE, there are several reasons why Reagan got off relatively easy in the 1980 campaign. First, a small but salient matter of personality: many reporters hated Carter, who froze them out, preached at them, and didn't make them feel like honored guests in the entourage. Second, the more or less liberal Democrats among them were bending over backward to be kind—"fair"—to Reagan. After he announced that trees cause pollution, and this along with other such remarks went around the world, Reagan's staff decided to keep him away from reporters. On at least one occasion, his press secretary, Lyn Nofziger, resorted to holding a clipboard in front of a TV camera to keep it from intruding where it wasn't wanted. Shut out, most TV reporters let the insurgent candidate off the hook. Newspaper reporters did no better. Never mind that for several previous years Reagan had blared forth his homespun rightism in hundreds of columns and broadcasts. Daily journalism, a memory hole, paid no attention. Old news is a position the candidate wants us to forget about, and the reporters were glad to comply.

The hapless Carter tried to make an issue of Reagan's militarist proclivities, only to get labeled as "strident." Perhaps he was, although I suppose another observer might have called him "passionate." But Carter's vehemence played badly, like his too huge, too strained grin. (Carter didn't know what soap opera actors learn: the gesture that projects well to the far balcony on Broadway looks garish on the small screen.) Reporters defined his

"warmonger" charges as extreme, and Mr. Nice Guy cried foul and let the nasty words slide right off. (Little old me send Marines to Lebanon and Grenada? Me blow up oil tanks and fishing boats in Nicaragua?)

There is yet another reason for the supine acceptance of Ronald Reagan by the press. Once his geniality was established, reporters and their editors were fearful of seeming (image, again!) too harsh toward him. The members of the fourth estate are keenly aware that Reagan is more popular, as the polls show, than they are. In the delicate legitimacy game that the top American institutions are playing, even the image movers, shakers, and breakers are image-conscious. This, partly, is run-of-the-mill image management and partly, perhaps, a fear that if the networks incur too much presidential wrath they'll suffer in the giveaway sweepstakes now taking place in Washington under the heading "deregulation."

For all these reasons, once in office Reagan has been able to capitalize on the same fine image that gave him the appearance of a landslide with 51 percent of the 1980 popular vote. True—and left-wing paranoia misses this point—there has been sufficient media criticism to draw administration annoyance. The White House is not delighted when an occasional network piece undercuts official claims with a strong fact. (I happened to catch one such NBC piece last spring: Reagan gave a speech reciting what he had presumably done for women. Following footage of Reagan setting forth each of his claims, NBC reporter Carl Stern juxtaposed a hard fact that refuted it. Reagan claimed wonders for the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission, for example, and Stern showed that enforcement funds had been slashed.)

But it is also true that, once having observed that Reagan slides away from hard questioning, reporters usually give up easily. The pointless massacre of the Marines in Lebanon faded fast; Debategate was a dead issue until a judge resurrected it; flaws in the official story about Korean Air Lines 007 surfaced only piecemeal and slowly; and so on. Why? Again, the normal memory hole, the press of later-breaking news, the media's normal reliance on official sources. But more: the media know that, for example, many more people supported Reagan's military censorship in Grenada than their own First Amendment rights. They fear shaking public confidence in their own credentials.

The upshot is that since Ronald Reagan is president of the United States, the media assume he is entitled to a kind of respect that borders on tribute. Under these conditions, tribute is not necessarily

agreement; it may take the curious form of singling out the president's manner for more comment than his matter. TV patter in politics sounds like, and draws its model from, sports talk. "Color commentary," as they call it during the ball game, is the better part of tribute. In other words, the media's obsequiousness follows from their sensitivity to what they think is their role.

Respect for the White House view of the situation is not simply utilitarian; it is an article of belief. If the media question policies at all, they are likely to do so on the ground of efficacy, not of objective. They are far more likely to ask, "Does it work?" than "Who benefits?" and "Is this a fit goal?" And, above all, they feel bound to revere the office of The Presidency. The sitting president—the only president we have, as Lyndon B. Johnson used to say—gets the benefit of the doubt. Commentary about his skill as a "communicator" or his tactics is in order. And if the Great Communicator is threadbare? It would be mean-spirited to say so. And more, or worse: The press believes in the essential political order. It wants stability. It does not want to remind the Republic that it has delivered itself over to a demagogic true believer whose occasional self-deprecation is his only saving grace—and his greatest realism.

IF THE PRESIDENT has come off brightly, the Democratic candidates for the nomination have come off as lesser lights. The primary campaign lasted long enough to show each of them to disadvantage. If the media must keep a president spotlight, their task vis-à-vis challengers is, above all, to maintain a sense of the excitement of the race. They aim to keep the audience entertained, and attention spans are short. A study of TV campaign coverage in 1980 showed that roughly two-thirds of the nightly network news stories emphasized the horse race: who was ahead, who behind, who thought to be gaining; about one-sixth emphasized the positions taken by candidates.

I doubt that this year's figures will turn out differently. Dan Rather has defended this preoccupation with standings by claiming that people are "interested" in the horse race. One of the top political TV reporters in San Francisco gave me exactly the same argument. Those who argue from audience "likings" may, of course, be right, or wrong, or the point may be simply self-fulfilling. How does Dan Rather *know* what people are "interested" in, or what they might be "interested" in if it were presented to them coherently and engagingly enough? In any event, this pseudo-democratic defense of the status quo amounts to an entertain-

ment view of the world: "give 'em what they want," as if it's always clear "what they want"—as if the sheer weight of what's available didn't shape people's sense of what it's possible to want, as if people weren't ambivalent.

Ideas of civic virtue are submerged in the interest of the ideology of consumer choice. Treat people as connoisseurs of the standings in the horse race, and they become consumers of politics; treat them as citizens, needing to come to informed judgments, and they might just act that way. But the news media, with television in the lead, treat us as observers of our own political fate, not as makers of it. The implied objects of all this hoopla are the seat-warmers at the spectacle, flattered as sovereigns only to be patronized as consumers.

The media's attitude is not quite cynicism, which requires a base line of standards capable of being deformed or neglected. The very standards are dissolving, since the media's residual sense of responsibility to flush out the candidates' views is drowned out by their need for a "story" that dramatizes conflict and characters. The curious career of Gary Hart's image illustrates the point. For a year before the primaries, Hart was talking up positions. The media weren't much interested, because the "story" then was that Mondale was way ahead of the pack. A little later John Glenn had his moment of glory, partly because *The Right Stuff* was good media fodder. Glenn's star faded, Hart did well in Iowa and New Hampshire, and presto, the "story" was now that Hart had "defied expectations." Having gotten nowhere with actual positions, Hart decided to project the image of "new ideas," and he got good copy with it.

Some in the media, having helped elevate Hart to a close second, now decided to show who was boss. On so-called Super Tuesday (politics again as a sporting event), Roger Mudd bashed Hart around on NBC—"Will you show us your Teddy Kennedy imitation?"—and although some other reporters thought Mudd had gone too far, Hart was quickly stripped of the mantle of innocence he'd so recently acquired. Hart, overconfident, seems to have started believing his press notices, and his "gaffes," amplified by the media, helped slow his momentum in Illinois. The media, uninterested in analyzing dull "positions," focused on the aura of "new ideas," and set him up for Mondale's much-repeated query, "Where's the beef?"

"You know me," was Mondale's refrain against his less experienced opponents. "What you see is what you get." (As if this were a self-evident recommendation!) But, of course, the Mondale that the electorate knows is a canned Mondale, and

what we see is what we are permitted to see by the collaboration of candidates and media. At a certain point, the difference between candidate and concocted image becomes purely formal. (It has to be added, in Mondale's behalf, that he got more media mileage out of his one-liners than his more complicated statements—sentences too long for TV news clips.) In this situation, candidates do not so much take positions as “position themselves,” and mirrors flash into mirrors. Knowing reporters are matched by knowing citizens, handicappers all, whose involvement is vicarious.

IN THE END, however dizzying and distracting this process of image-making, the media, like magnifying glasses in the sun, concentrate but do not invent. The candidates make their own images, to paraphrase Marx, but not in conditions of their own making. The images they flash can get out of their control. The meaning of this situation is not to be found in the old vocabulary of manipulation, demagoguery, charisma, because it is not altogether clear who, if anyone, is in charge. Thus the irony: candidates like Ronald Reagan and Jesse Jackson, whose careers are inconceivable but for their command of the media, come to feel hurt by the scrutiny of those self-same channels of exposure. Those who live by the spotlight can die by it. Gary Hart's crack about New Jersey as an inferior place to campaign, uttered in Los Angeles in late May, was instantly relayed to Newark. Mondale's attack on Hart in Chicago for being, in effect, soft on

communism was instantly relayed everywhere else, discrediting him with the left wing of the Democratic electorate.

The major beneficiary of all this is probably cynicism: the knowing audience—clued in to the candidates' off-screen maneuvers, made privy to the candidates' stratagems and ratings—becomes adept at following the great shell game. Everyone can become an armchair tactician. Thus, unintendedly, the media's exercises in demystification contribute to a higher-order mystification. Positions do not get clarified for substantial debate. The pageantry serves the interest of evasion. The candidates' televised debates are a partial exception but even here, the format is generally so slick that a clever tactic—like Reagan's 1980 “There you go again” to Carter—can prove enormously influential. Phrase-making and face-making are rewarded when the candidates think they can get mileage out of them. To the extent that the parties are weak, the candidates' personal aura takes on an unwarranted importance. And then, of course, the candidates' capacity to mobilize national followings helps keep the party structures weak.

In the end, the striking thing is the discrepancy, the bad fit, between the campaign—its glitter, gloss, and slapdash quality—and the awesome magnitude of presidential power. When so much hangs on the electorate's choice, you might think that the media could find a higher responsibility. But their smugness complements the candidates' own, and so no easy rectification is in sight. □

Harold Meyerson

At the Democratic Convention . . .

San Francisco, July 23

“It's been a good convention,” said Machinist President William Winpisinger, who four years earlier had walked out on the last night of the Democratic National Convention rather than support the Carter ticket. “The Democrats have had their spirit restored. They've had their party redefined.”

No one surveying the sea of flag-waving delegates—and no one who witnessed the emotions unleashed by Jesse Jackson's address or Geraldine Ferraro's nomination—could doubt that the Democrats' spirit has been restored. But how, or even whether, the party has been redefined remains open to question.