

The Selling of the President, 1968

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In The Selling of the President, 1968, his landmark exposé of how the Nixon campaign used television to win that year's presidential election, Joe McGinniss employs "immersion journalism" – spending large chunks of time with sources to gain an insider's view of a story – to make a basic point: in American politics, style trumps substance.

McGinniss spent five months with Nixon's media aides, telling them he was working on a book but neglecting to mention his career as a journalist. Closely observing their strategy, he watched them work, interact, and fret over how best to refashion the dour image of their candidate. To his credit, McGinniss makes no attempt to disguise his contempt for the political process, Richard Nixon, or, ultimately, the American people. The second chapter (which begins, "Politics, in a sense, has always been a con game") is a treatise on the insidious alliance between advertising and politics. The author's thesis is that image, not reality, is what wins elections, and that television is the crucial vehicle through which this is accomplished:

The TV candidate, then, is measured not against his predecessors – not against a standard of performance established by two centuries of democracy – but against Mike Douglas. How well does he handle himself? Does he mumble, does he twitch, does he make me laugh? Do I feel warm inside?

Television demands gentle wit, irony, understatement; the qualities of Eugene McCarthy. The TV politician cannot make a speech; he must engage in intimate conversation. He must never press. He should suggest, not state;

request, not demand. Nonchalance is the key word. Carefully studied nonchalance.

Warmth and sincerity are desirable, but must be handled with care. Unfiltered, they can be fatal. Television did great harm to Hubert Humphrey. His excesses – talking too long and too fervently, which were merely annoying in an auditorium – became lethal in a television studio. The performer must talk to one person at a time. He is brought into the living room. He is a guest. It is improper for him to shout. Humphrey vomited on the rug. (McGinniss 29-31)

McGinniss inserts proclamations from communications theorist Marshall McLuhan and social critic Daniel Boorstin to buttress his argument, but only incidentally. Unlike other passages in the book, which are supported by quoted material or documentation, it's clear these statements arise principally from the author's perspective.

The same can be said of his depiction of candidate Nixon – the central character of the book but a man McGinniss apparently never bothered to interview – as “grumpy, cold and aloof.” According to McGinniss, the presumptive Republican nominee “had traveled to the darkest places inside himself and come back numbed;” he was “a burnt out case” with “all feeling behind him” who “knew his soul was hard to find.” Nixon was “afraid of television,” McGinniss claims, considered the use of TV for political purposes “a gimmick,” and “half suspected it was an eastern liberal trick: one more way to make him look silly.” (That Nixon held a low opinion of both television and eastern liberals is widely known. That McGinniss conveniently omits mention of the former vice president's successful exploitation of the medium to save his political career in the 1952 presidential campaign, the “Checkers”

speech, and that he presumes knowledge of Nixon's state of mind, is another matter.) Even so, McGinniss explains, the candidate would utilize television in a tightly controlled manner – no debates, no risky news interview programs – to transform his public persona from scowling bulldog into thoughtful, engaging statesman – the New Nixon.

“And,” writes McGinniss, “it worked.” It worked because “the American voter, insisting upon his belief in a higher order, clings to his religion, which promises another, better life; and defends passionately the illusion that the men he chooses to lead him are of finer nature than he. It has been traditional that the successful politician honor this illusion. To succeed today, he must embellish it. Particularly if he wants to be President.” Though cloaked in the camouflage of simple sentences, the author's disdain toward an American public he plainly views as overly credulous and self-deceptive is obvious. One suspects that of all the things McGinniss attempts to communicate in his book – the conniving proclivities of the candidate, the venal machinations of his advisors, the sinister power of television – it is the stupidity of his fellow countryman which distresses him the most. Readers may reject the supposition on its face; yet like many of McGinniss' assertions, it is difficult to read The Selling of the President without concluding he has a point.

The structure of the book is episodic, revolving loosely around the creation of campaign advertisements and a series of live television programs

featuring Nixon taking questions from fastidiously screened audience members. These subplots allow McGinniss to showcase his exceedingly dry, reliably dyspeptic writing style, facility with dialogue, and skill at crafting entertaining narrative. Explaining Nixon “creative director of advertising” Harry Treleaven’s decision to use still photography in the 60 second television spots, McGinniss writes,

Treleaven could use Nixon’s voice to accompany the stills but his face would not be on the screen. Instead there would be the pictures, and hopefully, the pictures would prevent people from paying too much attention to the words.

The words would be the same ones Nixon always used – the words of the acceptance speech. But they would all seem fresh and lively because a series of still pictures would flash on the screen as Nixon spoke. If it were done right, it would permit Treleaven to create a Nixon image that was entirely independent of the words. Nixon would say his same old tiresome things but no one would have to listen. The words would become Muzak. Something pleasant and lulling in the background. The flashing pictures would be carefully selected to create the impression that somehow Nixon represented competence, respect for tradition, serenity, faith that the American people were better than people anywhere else, and that all these problems others shouted about meant nothing in a land blessed with the tallest buildings, strongest armies, biggest factories, cutest children, and rosier sunsets in the world. Even better: through association with the pictures, Richard Nixon could *become* these very things. Obviously, some technical skill would be required. (McGinniss 84-85)

Treleaven and “media and advertising” consultants Frank Shakespeare and Leonard Garment watch a privately commissioned interview of Nixon’s vice presidential running mate, Spiro Agnew, hoping to find footage serviceable enough for an ad:

It had been shot in color, with sailboats in the blue bay as a backdrop. Agnew was squinting in the sun.

“All life,” he said, “is essentially the contributions that come from compromise.” His voice was sleepy, his face without expression.

The questions fit right in.

“It must have really been a thrill to have been picked for Vice President. Were you happy?”

“The ability to be happy is directly proportional to the ability to suffer,” Agnew said. His tone indicated he might doze before finishing the sentence, “and as you grow older you feel everything less.”

He stopped. There was silence on the film. Then the voice of the interviewer: “I see.”

“Jesus Christ,” someone said out loud in the dark little theater.

Spiro Agnew’s face kept moving in and out of focus.

“Is that the projector or the film?” Garment asked.

The man who had made the films disappeared into the projection booth. The technical quality did not improve. ...

“How did you become a Republican?” the interviewer asked.

“I became a Republican out of hero worship.” Then Spiro Agnew went on to tell a long story about an old man in the law office where he had first worked as a clerk, and how the old man had been a Republican and how he had admired the old man so much that he became a Republican, too.

There was more silence on the film. The focus was very bad.

“And... and... you just sort of went on becoming more Republican?”

“That’s right,” Spiro Agnew said. ...

Frank Shakespeare was up now and pacing the back of the theater. “We can’t use any of this,” he said. “That picture quality is awful. And Agnew himself, my God. He says all the wrong things.”

“What we need is a shade less truth and a little more pragmatism,” Treleaven said.

“I think Dexedrine is the answer,” Garment said.

They went to Sardi’s for dinner. (McGinniss 55-56)

At one point Roger Ailes, the producer of the live television programs and future media guru to Ronald Reagan, decided that questioning from a legitimate newsman (actually, a radio talk show host named Jack McKinney) would bring out the best in Nixon. McGinniss devotes an entire chapter to the encounter, converting testy exchanges between hostile inquisitor and wary candidate into a verbal prizefight (“Jack McKinney did not lead with his right but he threw a much stiffer jab than Nixon had been expecting ... Nixon threw up an evasive flurry. But the grin was gone from his face ... Suddenly, Nixon, perhaps sensing a weakness in McKinney where he had feared none existed, perhaps realizing he had no choice, surely buoyed by the cheers, decided to slug it out”). Unlike many journalists who write books, McGinniss knows the difference between mere reporting and telling a story, and his stylistic touch is one of the more satisfying elements of The Selling of the President, 1968.

The deployment of immersion journalism – which in McGinniss’ case might be called “hang out journalism,” both because hanging out was his principal reportorial approach and because this technique inspired a misguided sense of trust in his subjects, who proceeded to lynch themselves with their own words – is the most striking aspect of The Selling of the President. Indeed, the off-hand manner in which Nixon’s media people divulged the chicanery of their methods still shocks today, if only because disclosing such information to a total stranger was unbelievably, ridiculously

foolish. That McGinniss, then a general interest columnist for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* in his mid-'20s, managed to ingratiate himself with a campaign notably lacking in affection for the press without having his cover blown is a minor miracle. What's more astonishing – and what makes *The Selling of the President, 1968* a classic of both political and literary journalism – is the book's inclusion of countless memos and attributed quotes that reveal Nixon's '68 media strategy for the cynically manipulative exercise that it was. William Gavin, a Philadelphia school teacher cum sociologist, joined the Nixon image operation in 1967, informed his colleagues in one missive that

Voters are basically lazy, basically uninterested in making an *effort* to understand what we're talking about. ... 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 envelope him, invite him in, without making an intellectual demand. ... When we argue with him we demand that he make the effort of replying. We seek to engage his intellect, and for most people this is the most difficult work of all. The emotions are more easily roused, closer to the surface, more malleable..." (McGinniss 36)

Ray Price, a former New York *Herald Tribune* editorial writer who would follow Nixon to the White House as a speech writer, suggested in another memo that addressing public dislike of Nixon on the basis of "personal factors" (as opposed to "historical factors") was the way to go:

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 the man* ... It's not what's *there* that counts, it's what's projected – and carrying it one step further, it's not what *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. (McGinniss 37-38)

Equally remarkable is the candor McGinniss elicits from Nixon's media experts during conversation. Frank Shakespeare and Harry Treleaven are jubilant to learn the Soviets have invaded Czechoslovakia. (Treleaven: "Unless we make some really colossal mistake, I don't see how we can lose." Shakespeare: "What a break! This Czech thing is just perfect. It puts the soft-liners in a hell of a box!") When McGinniss (who makes occasional use of the personal "I" when it suits his purposes) suggests the name of a journalist to round out the questioner's panel for one of Nixon's television shows, Roger Ailes is displeased to learn the man is black ("Oh, shit, we can't have two. Even in Philadelphia") because it violates the media team's One Negro to a Show policy. Self-styled "ethnic specialist" Kevin Phillips, credited by some as the architect of Nixon's "Southern strategy" (an attempt to cut into Alabama Governor George Wallace's racist appeal by placement of code phrases like "Law and Order" in ads targeted exclusively to Southern voters) enthused about actor and Nixon supporter John Wayne's appeal below the Mason-Dixon Line. "Wayne might sound bad to people in New York," Phillips told McGinniss, "but he sounds great to the schmucks we're trying to reach through John Wayne. The people down there along the Yahoo Belt. If I had the time I'd check to see in what areas *The Green Berets* (Wayne's hawkish 1968 Vietnam war picture) was held over and I'd play a special series of John Wayne spots wherever it was."

Gene Jones, the fellow responsible for assembling Nixon's television ad's, admitted they were designed "to get the audience's attention in a very obtrusive way. Knock them down. Not give them a chance." His chief assistant, Jim Sage, enjoyed pontificating about the spots and how they affected viewers. Hanging out and shooting the breeze, McGinniss played to this tendency and extracted some of the book's most damning material:

"You know," Sage said, "what we're really seeing here is a genesis. We're moving into a period where a man is going to be merchandized on television more and more. It upsets you and me, maybe, but we're not typical Americans. The public sits home and watches *Gunsmoke* and when they're fed this pap about Nixon they think they're getting something worthwhile.

"Remember," he said, as the rain poured down, "that man's voice you just heard over and over again inside might wind up as President in a few weeks."

"Probably will."

"Probably will. The most powerful man in the world. And he's going to be elected on what he didn't say. He's created an image of himself through cornball sunsets and WASP-y faces, and no one remembers what he says. ... We didn't have to make cheap and vulgar films, you know. We're capable of doing more. ... But those images strike a note of recognition in the kind of people to whom we are trying to appeal. The kind of person who might vote for Nixon in the first place.

"Nixon has not only developed the use of the platitude; he's raised it to an art form. It's mashed potatoes. It appeals to the lowest common denominator of American taste. It's a farce, a delicious farce; self-deception carried to the nth degree.

"We are made of sugar candy after all. We insulate ourselves by these visions from the reality of Vietnam, from the reality of children starving in Biafra. The commercials are successful because people are able to relate them to their own delightful misconceptions of themselves and their country.

"Have you noticed? The same faces reappear in different spots. The same pictures are used again and again. They become symbols, recurring like notes in an orchestrated piece. The Alabama sharecropper

with the vacant stare, the vigorous young steelworker, the grinning soldier...

“And the rosier the sunset, the more wholesome the smiling face, the more it conforms to their false vision of what they are and what their country is.”

“So it really is insidious?”

“... (Y)es: the effect of the stills can be almost subliminal. In less than a minute you can get up to forty images, each with a different time, place and face, so you can create an impression that is altogether different from what is being said. If, for instance, you were to turn off Nixon’s voice and play a Bach fugue, or Vivaldi, you could read anything you wanted into it.” (McGinniss 114-117)

Nixon’s media team would have shown McGinniss the door had they checked his résumé, but that monumental error aside, it’s fair to question the integrity of the author’s approach. There’s nothing wrong with immersion journalism per se, except the possibility of over-identification with one’s subject – a trap McGinniss was scarcely in danger of falling into. And, undeniably, McGinniss mined a rich vein of information that shed needed light on the scheming tactics of the Nixon campaign, information Americans deserved to possess and which he may not have obtained in any other way. Yet for all that, McGinniss’ technique was clearly dishonest and likely agenda-driven, given his evident aversion toward Richard Nixon and the thematic underpinnings of his book. The fact that he didn’t identify himself as a journalist to Nixon’s media men from the very beginning, and failed to do so after gaining their confidence, invites such speculation. Twenty years after the fact, McGinniss blithely admitted to *The New Yorker’s* Janet Malcolm,

“Nixon’s people were almost touchingly naïve. They said, ‘Oh, gosh, really – a book? Yeah, sure.’ These were people who had very little experience of

being written about. But I hardly felt the obligation to say when I arrived at their office every morning, ‘Gentlemen, I must again remind you that I’m a registered Democrat who plans to vote against Mr. Nixon, and that I think what you’re doing – which is trying to fool the American people – is sinister and malevolent, and that I intend to portray you in terms that you are not going to find flattering.’ I felt no obligation to make that statement.” (Malcolm, *The New Yorker*, 40-41, 3/13/89)

Given the furtive character of the reporting, one wonders how McGinniss managed to snag the numerous strategy memos, notes, and correspondence that animate his chapters and fill his appendix. Unlike a witlessly incriminating remark, or a whole series of them, these records constitute a written paper trail. If Ray Price or William Gavin (or Harry Treleaven, or Len Garment, or Pat Buchanan) willingly surrendered such baldly Machiavellian material, they compounded their original error threefold. If McGinniss acquired them surreptitiously, however, his journalistic probity begs serious scrutiny. Even if Nixon’s advisors furnished the documents, they did so absent the knowledge of McGinniss’ true identity and motives.

The result is that while *The Selling of the President, 1968* is a masterful indictment of Nixon’s ’68 media offensive, and one of the first books to tear away the partition between image and reality in contemporary politics, it suffers under the weight of ethical turpitude. Unmasking Richard Nixon as a fraud to make a larger point about the corrupt nature of American political culture is a valid and instructive goal. Yet the author’s deceptive methods suggest indifference to the means of getting his scoop as long as they achieve the desired end. It’s deeply ironic that in chronicling the duplicity of

others, McGinniss had no qualms about engaging in the practice himself. Despite this, some may reasonably assert the information thus gleaned justifies McGinniss' tack. The Selling of the President, after all, provides novel insight into the Nixon PR style; those who read it were hardly surprised by the highly scripted reelection campaign that followed four years later. Indeed, given Watergate, many might compare McGinniss' stealth approach favorably with the likes of Nellie Bly, who feigned insanity 80 years earlier to expose horrific conditions in the nation's insane asylums. Others would say that in journalism certain principles abide, and barring extreme circumstances, one of them is that reporters should identify themselves to sources as a matter of basic fairness. It's too bad Joe McGinniss chose not to honor this dictum, even though the book probably would have gone unwritten. His choice speaks, as all journalism ultimately must, to the issue of credibility. That commodity, as the gatekeepers continue to remind, is the journalist's primary charge in keeping the public faith. Without it, he is one more clever storyteller (or polemicist). Unfortunately, readers are left to wonder which category Joe McGinniss belongs in.