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TV and the Transformation of American Politics

*Roger D. Masters*¹

Television has obviously changed American politics. For critics, the media have become a Fourth Branch of Government whose immense power is not controlled by our constitutional checks and balances. Even those who claim TV makes leaders more accessible agree that the Founding Fathers did not plan on the world of sound bites, negative ads, and CNN.

Exactly what has happened? And why have these changes taken place? Before we can understand the political implications of TV -- and, if need be, counteract any negative effects -- we need perspective on how our public life has changed. Yet the media themselves have been very poor at understanding what is going on. For journalists themselves, it may be difficult to see the forces that shape journalism.

A simple example was described recently by Professor Katherine Jamieson of the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School of Communications. Before the 1988 Presidential campaign, a man named William Horton Jr. was involved in a prison furlough program. The famous anti-Dukakis TV ad referred to him as "Willie," a name he had never used and is not found in court records. Shaped by the force of this Bush campaign tactic, journalists, politicians,

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and scholars started referring routinely to "Willie Horton" rather than William Horton Jr.

The image projected by the flickering tube became the reality of our public discourse. Even newspaper commentators and Democrats critical of the Bush TV ad nonetheless adopted its way of packaging information. People still talk about "Willie Horton." Once again television, with its omnipresent images, unconsciously formed the way we think and feel.

It is easy but misleading to blame TV anchormen or network policies. Television has had similar effects in other countries. The focus on visual symbols, the personalization of politics, and the resulting decline of party organizations can be observed in the democracies of Western Europe. In fact, the same trends can be seen as a factor in the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Although TV has similar consequences elsewhere, however, its effects are probably greater and more dangerous in the U.S.

McLuhan spoke of the creation of a "global village." After scenes of the Persian Gulf war and Yeltsin braving the hard-liners' coup, it is hard to deny the truth of his prediction. Such television coverage has an immediacy and emotional power that goes far beyond the conscious intentions of broadcasters and network executives. What is this global village like -- and, above all, how does it affect our traditions of constitutional government?

Recent scientific research shows that visual images can have direct and highly evocative effects on the human brain. For over a decade, I have been engaged in experimental studies of viewers' emotional and cognitive responses when watching leaders on television. The findings demonstrate that politics is not just a question of whose speechwriter

has the most felicitous prose or which party the platform in tune with public opinion. And the results help to explain what appears to be a serious decline in the quality of our political decision-making and leadership.

To understand contemporary politics, we need to reconsider the history of Western democracy in the light of what is now known about verbal and nonverbal communication. Marx thought that social institutions, ideas and laws were ultimately determined by the mode of *production*. Now, it looks as though it is the mode of *communication* that counts.

Newspapers and the Rise of Democracy

In the eighteenth century, two great revolutions transformed the political life of the West. In the American colonies of 1776, as in the France of 1789, monarchical power was destroyed once it became possible to mobilize public support and activity on a broad scale. Earlier political institutions depended on what happened at the Royal Court or in face-to-face situations. More than is generally realized, it was the newspaper that destroyed the old regime.

Ironically, it was Richelieu who in 1631 instituted the first major political newspaper, the *Gazette de France*. He saw the need for informing a broader national elite about events at the Court. While the strategy of bringing the nobility to Versailles had been a means to extend royal power, the modern state required better and more regular communication. The printing press provided the means.

From the outset, therefore, journalism has had a political dimension. Even the King himself wrote anonymously in Richelieu's *Gazette*. Before long, of course, critics found they could use printing presses too. French *philosophes* like Diderot used books, pamphlets, and the

great *Encyclopedia* to spread radically new ideas to the regional nobility and clergy, thereby paving the way for the events of 1789. Broadsides and popular newspapers followed, both on the continent and in the new world.

Constitutional democracy was thus, to a great extent, the creature of the printing press and the newspaper. It is no accident that the classic statement of American political principles, *The Federalist Papers*, is a series of newspaper articles. To secure ratification of the American constitution, Hamilton, Madison and Jay needed to convince the voters of New York -- and newsprint was the most effective means to this end.

These seemingly elementary facts have some not-so-evident implications. As the basis of political communication, print media focus on ideas that can be communicated to literate readers. In the eighteenth century, this meant a bias of social class. More important, print media until recently were focused on words. And a politics of written communication has at least three important consequences.

First, reliance on the printed word was a departure from the means of communication that had dominated human society and politics for millenia. From the early hunter-gatherer band to the princely courts or urban assemblies, leaders engaged in face-to-face dialogue with each other or gave speeches to selected audiences. Spoken language was the medium of politics.

To be sure, writing had from its very beginnings a political role. Denise Schmandt-Bessarat has shown that what is probably the earliest known written record is ... a tax receipt! Early Kings used writing to record their victories

on monuments or to register their edicts on parchment. But political dialogue and debate occurred by word of mouth.

The printing press, and its use to produce newspapers for mass distribution, thus represented a vast change in the scale of what we today call the public. As recently as the eighteenth century, a serious^{cu} thinker like Rousseau could assume that a democratic government was only possible in a community small enough to hear its leaders speak. Representative government in the nation-state -- a mass society based on an informed citizen body -- is a modern invention dependent on the novelty of printed news.

Second, a politics based on newspapers led to the institution of the political party. The press by its nature focuses on verbal descriptions, proposals, and analysis. A political point of view requires a language or discourse that is understood by leaders and followers in the same way. And when deep disagreements arise, the resulting ways of talking about issues produce political parties.

As is well-known, the American constitution does not provide for political parties. Although our Founders understood the importance of passionate disagreements based on self-interest, they apparently did not see the link between the press and partisanship. But even though they did not deliberate about this connection at Philadelphia, supporters of the new American republic discovered it quickly enough: the battle for ratification became a controversy between "Federalists" and "anti-Federalists" -- and the American party system was born.

Constitutional government based on newspapers thus became an arena for party politics. Nominating conventions, platforms, the emergence of national leadership, big-city machines, reform crusades from the abolition of slavery to

civil service reform and prohibition: the life-blood of American politics throughout the 19th and into the 20th centuries reflected a competition between political parties based on print journalism.

This points to the third implication of the printing as the principal mode of political communication. A mass politics based on writing involves what has been called the "two-step" flow of information. Leaders speak or write messages to an elite. The elite then reads and interprets events, spreading the word to the less-informed members of society.

Specific political events like the Lincoln-Douglas debates had their impact through this two-stage flow. Newspapers provided detailed and complex arguments to a well-informed partisans. At the local level, civic and party leaders used these arguments to mobilize broad-based support. Democracy did not mean that everyone had equal access to information. Party politics was the politics of smoke-filled rooms.

This explains why, a hundred years ago, newspapers were so highly partisan yet American politics was so competitive. It also explains why conspiratorial leaders like Lenin also formed organized political parties and used them to disseminate a two-step flow of information. The totalitarian systems of Hitler and Stalin rejected our tradition of the free competition of ideas, but their ideology and propaganda machines used the same mode of communication found in Western democracies.

Almost everything we have said and thought about politics thus takes the primacy of printing for granted. Like water for the fish, print media have been the invisible but omnipresent world of the political life of democracies.

So much so, that we don't realize how unusual this mode of communication actually is. In fact, printing represents a radical break with the social processes that characterized millions of years of hominid evolution.

To understand the impact of television, we need to realize that ~~the apparent invention of~~^{its} visual images and emotionally arousing mass appeals involve a return to modes of communication that humans used in the Stone Age. Politics in McLuhan's "global village" may be more like the prehistoric hunter-gathering band than the governments of the last two centuries.

What Has Happened?

The leadership of Jefferson, Lincoln, or Teddy Roosevelt seems a world apart from the Reagan-Mondale debate of 1984. For over a decade, Republican Presidents elected by wide margins have confronted a Congress controlled by the Democrats. And Carter, the last Democrat to hold the White House, could hardly be said to have led his party.

Why are incumbant members of Congress almost impossible to defeat? Once upon a time, Presidents had "coat-tails"; now they seem to wear T-shirts. Political parties and their programs, once the life-blood of politics, are clearly secondary to personalities and their images.

The so-called "Reagan revolution" is a good illustration. Many voters said they agreed with Mondale but voted against him. While Reagan claimed a mandate to change many public policies, his landslide victories had little effect on voters' behavior in Congressional or State election campaigns. Reagan's personal popularity seems to have been

associated with a decline in party identification as much as ^{with} an increase in support for the GOP.

In 1988, Bush's triumph involved a complete reversal of popular images. We have forgotten that when Dukakis was nominated in July of that year, he led Bush in the opinion polls -- among men by 46% to 43%, among women by a whopping 56% to 26%. Over the next month, image-manipulation transformed a "wimp" into the tough exponent of a "kinder, gentler" nation, associating the images of the flag and the "Willie Horton" ad with the verbal rhetoric of "a thousand lights" of concern for the unfortunate.

Much of the last election campaign focused on abortion and the death penalty. The ensuing years have been dominated by war in the Gulf, the demise of communism, and domestic issues that have never been the focus of coherent partisan dialogue. Cities like Bridgeport, Connecticut or Chelsea, Massachusetts face bankruptcy, state governments furlough workers and close offices -- yet the richest nation in the world is also the one with the lowest total tax burden.

Politics has become a sequence of "media opportunities." The "sound bite" replaces the speech. TV ads have taken on a new role, as Kathleen Jamieson points out, often setting the agenda for journalistic commentary. The continuous coverage available on CNN transforms the statements of political leaders and candidates into rival forms of "packaging." Since image manipulation counts more than party platform or programs, we have entered an age of personalized politics.

Nowhere are these changes more evident than in the way we nominate Presidential candidates. In the heyday of party politics, the national conventions brought together local elites for days of party-making in the literal as well as figurative sense. Leaders drank together, smoked cigars

together, trading stories and favors while deciding who would run for the White House.

Since the 1960's the nomination process has been reformed, ostensibly to increase public control and party responsiveness. Actually, the spread of primary elections and the insistence on open conventions may just reflect the power of TV. Deals in smoke-filled rooms make for bad visual images. The result: interminable campaigns dominated by stock speeches, media opportunities, and negative advertisements.

Hence, in 1988, the basic issues confronting the country were barely discussed. Consider our energy policy. American pay less than half as much per gallon of gasoline as Europeans and use over twice as much per capita. Recently, when confronted with budget deficits due to reunification, the German government instituted a surtax of 35¢ per gallon on gasoline. When Senator Albert Gore mentioned such a solution to our mounting deficits in 1988, the suggestion was treated with derision or completely ignored -- and his Presidential candidacy doomed.

After elections, our political process shows the same tendency^{to} substitute symbols for real issues or policies. We bailed out the S & L's (at 100% of all deposits, ignoring the FDIC insurance ceiling of \$100,000 per depositor) and went to war in the Gulf without anything approaching a national debate. We are the only industrialized society with wealth insurance but no health insurance. The media has focused more intensively on John Sununu's travel arrangements than on the needs of our highways, our merchant marine, or our airports.

In 1990, after a budget compromise between the President and Congress seemed to be settled, Newt Gingrich -- the

Republican minority leader of the House -- promptly scuttled it. This defection by a member of the President's own party was made easier by the way TV had covered the results of the "budget summit." Nightly newscasts showed citizens who would be adversely affected by each budget cut, coverage which of course generated public opposition. Positive effects of reducing the deficit, such as long term improvements in investment or international trade, are harder to visualize than elderly voters who fear cuts in Medicaid or social security.

Let it not be thought that the situation is unique to America. Similar trends are visible in Europe. Everywhere, party organizations and programs seem to have been reduced in importance. Everywhere, television has led to a politics of image, of symbols, and of superficiality. Germans complain that Chancellor Kohl never had to explain the costs of reunification. The French Socialist Party seems to have little to do with socialism and everything to do with its role as the basis for François Mitterand's Presidency. Scandals in Japan succeed each other without producing basic political change.

Although television has similar effects everywhere, nowhere is the trivialization of politics as advanced as in the United States. Although there are doubtless many reasons for this, one factor is an unanticipated effect of our constitution. In Europe, the head of government typically must address and answer questions from the political leaders of the opposition party. When BCCI failed and Prime Minister John Major disclaimed prior knowledge of the bank's criminal dealings, Noel Kinnock challenged him to his face in parliament.

The American President doesn't have to confront the head of the opposition in this manner. The closest we come are

one or two highly stylized campaign debates that are made for TV and refereed by journalists. We therefore rarely see our leaders in dialogue with each other under meaningful circumstances. And this means that we rarely get to judge our leaders in situations where they are not scripted.

Why should this matter? In contrast to Western Europe, politics in the United States is more easily manipulated to produce images and symbols. It is not the same thing to see party leaders debate each other on the floor of Parliament rather than having them interviewed in the studio by journalists. The explanation depends both on the nature of television and on the particular way TV is used in the United States.

Why TV Changed Politics

Can it really be said that TV led to the changes described above? It seems far-fetched to claim that television is responsible for an extensive transformation of our political life. Is the medium really the message? If not, how has this electronic messenger changed the way people think and behave?

More and more, events are designed for television. Whereas newspapers tried to record what happened in the world, now the world and its leaders pose for the TV camera. As a Greek friend noted, the signs carried in mass demonstrations from Vilnius and Zagreb to the West Bank are often in English because the real audience is now CNN, not the protestors' compatriots.

The efforts devoted to creating TV images reflect their power to move us. The human brain responds to visual cues more strongly than to complex combinations of sound and

picture. These responses are often highly emotional. And since emotional arousal is the basis of learning and attitude change, visual information is both easy to process and highly effective.

Neuroscientists are discovering the reasons for this. The brain is not a blank slate, but a complex structure of "modules" which process information independently. Some groups of neurons perceive line and shape, others color or motion, yet others three-dimensional space. Similarly, the sounds of words and their visual representation in writing are processed by different places in the brain.

Several pathways connect the perceptual and motor cortex (the grey matter making possible conscious thought and speech) to the emotional centers of the brain (the "limbic system"). If these pathways are severed, Mortimer Mishkin showed, new learning is impossible. Until a memory is weeks old, it cannot be recovered without these neuronal links to the limbic system, the brain structures governing emotion. Learning and memory are therefore intimately connected to our feelings.

Each of our sensory pathways processes new information separately. Visual input can produce direct emotional responses and memories without reference to verbal information stored in the left hemisphere. And as Stephen Kosslyn of Harvard has shown with ingenious experiments, once mental images are coded, they become actual events in the brain. By studying so-called split brain patients, moreover, Michael Gazzaniga discovered what he calls the "interpreter module" -- a nonverbal processing unit in the left hemisphere that makes sense out of conflicting perceptions and images.

In the age of print media, it was understandable that politics was often equated with the written word. Such a

view made it easy to think of political dialogue as a matter of ideas and thoughts in which emotion is secondary (unless dangerous demagogues have been at work). Even today, it is hard for newspaper journalists to admit the primacy of visual images and emotional responses as determinants of voting behavior and public opinion.

A simple measure of the misunderstanding is the ubiquitous use of public opinion polls. Little matter that, in 1988, a Roper poll showed a five point difference depending on whether people were asked if they preferred Dukakis to Bush or if they preferred Bush to Dukakis. It is easy to forget that respondents often try to please the pollster, and in any event are reacting to something very artificial when presented with an abstract verbal question.

Polls are, of course, supposed to measure likely behavior. But the rapid changes in poll results should give us pause. The candidate that people say they support today may not receive their vote on election day. In the 1988 campaign, between July 28 and August 23 support for Bush rose from 43% to 46% among men -- and from 26% to 44% among women. Why do such changes occur -- and how do they relate to the immense power of television?

In experiments over the last decade in both Europe and the U.S., it has become clear that emotional responses play a principal role in the way citizens respond to the information presented to them. TV has immense power in this respect because it is so easily understandable and highly evocative. Pictures not only make it easier to process abstract verbal information; they are more likely to be remembered as images or symbols that organize our thinking.

Recall the 1988 campaign. Can you see Bush's "Willie Horton" ad or remember the position he took in the debates?

Do you recall the image of Dukakis looking like Snoopy in a tank -- or the text of his acceptance speech? And when something a candidate said does come to mind, isn't it often associated with an image, such as Dukakis' emotionless response to a question about the death penalty for someone who had attacked his wife?

Images of leaders are of particular importance on television. A study I am conducting with Siegfried Frey and Gary Bente of the University of Duisburg in Germany reveals that the face of a political leader is shown on the screen during 14% of newscasts in France, 17% of the time in the U.S., and 30% in Germany. When we see the news, pictures of our leaders are often used to give meaning to the story.

These "visual quotes" are typically quite short. The average image of a leader is on the screen for less than six seconds, the minimal time usually thought necessary to process a verbal message. TV doesn't show leaders so that we can hear them. If anything, we hear leaders so that we can see them, identify them, and thus agree or disagree with the principles or positions they symbolize.

This omnipresence of leaders is particularly evocative because our brains have specialized structures for observing the faces of other people. In one key portion of our brain, called the temporal lobes, Edmond Rolls of Oxford found that 10% of the neurons only fire on the sight of a human face. Moreover, he has shown that some cells are specialized to react to very specific nonverbal cues, such as the upward movement of the head that signals threat and dominance.

In short, TV exploits our brain's capacity to respond emotionally to images, and especially to the sight of others. It gives us the impression of being face-to-face with national leaders. In addition to hearing their words --

and, often, *instead* of hearing them -- we see facial expressions and other symbols or images that trigger strong emotional responses. And these emotions in turn organize what we remember and how we remember it.

Consider again the two-stage information flow that characterized the political era dominated by print media. Before TV, leaders were usually only seen by a few. If their body language influenced anyone, it was the reporter whose story might reflect the feelings at the time. But in Peoria or Albuquerque, it was the story (at most accompanied by a still photo or a cartoon) that was read. For a large part of the electorate, information came by word of mouth from a friend or neighbor who read it in the newspaper or, by the 1930s, heard it on the radio.

TV creates the appearance of a direct link between the leader and every citizen. What it took Hitler massive theatrical preparations to stage at Nuremburg is achieved routinely on the nightly news of every country in the world. But instead of being massed in one place, visibly choreographed by flags and bands, contemporary citizens watch television at home. And instead of seeing leaders live but at a distance, we typically see ~~videotaped or pre-recorded~~ ^{video} close up images of their faces.

Two things follow. First, a leader can no longer show the anger and high arousal that "work" when speakers address huge crowds. When we see a leader on TV, it is as though he were in our living room. One doesn't shout and flail one's arms while sitting on a friend's couch. Politics now requires the reassuring behavior of face-to-face interaction even when a leader is addressing millions of citizens all around the world. To see the difference, you need only look at old newsreels of politicians in the 1930's.

Second, watching TV can elicit very strong emotions in viewers, emotions that lead to lasting changes in attitudes. Our experimental studies confirm that the emotional responses triggered by seeing a leader, while dependent on many factors, are extremely important. A candidate's facial expression can, by itself, have a big impact on whether voters support him (or her).

In one study conducted with my colleagues Denis Sullivan and John Lanzetta of Dartmouth, we found that some viewers' attitudes could be changed merely by inserting silent images of President Reagan in the background of routine news stories. In a follow-up, one day after the study, men with little previous opinion who often saw a smiling Reagan in the background were more favorable to him than those who had seen stories accompanied by angry or neutral images of the President. Since different viewers heard and saw otherwise identical newscasts, the only factor producing these changes seems to have been silent nonverbal behavior accompanying the story.

Other images and symbols obviously have similar effects. The revolving turnstile of the "Willie Horton" ad was easy to decode and to remember. That Ronald Reagan as Governor of California had supported a furlough program similar to the one in Massachusetts was not visible. Such information, like statistical evidence of the effectiveness of various forms of parole, is harder to process than a picture of a revolving turnstile.

Studies of the political effects of television show that what the journalist says is often (but not always) secondary. As Shanto Iyengar of UCLA and Donald Kinder of the University of Michigan demonstrated in an elegant series of experiments, TV news sets the agenda of politics. What is covered is what

we think about. Increasingly, issues that are not covered on television do not penetrate to the public's awareness.

In part, this is due to the role of emotions in learning and memory. Politics is about gut reactions. Because TV can elicit such strong feelings, it is highly effective in producing lasting memories. And because the human brain processes positive and negative emotions separately before bringing them together, television can generate either positive feelings of comfort and support, or negative ones of hostility toward the images we see.

The unexpected of course attracts our attention. Negative information can often get attention quickly, particularly if directed toward a candidate or policy about which little is known or attitudes are unstable. Hence the increasing importance of negative appeals, not only in political campaigns but also in commercial advertising. Even when positive images predominate, they are processed quickly as symbols and color our judgments of more complex verbal images.

For example, in one study we measured the physical correlates of emotion, such as the muscle responses that produce a smile or a frown. When viewers saw and heard leaders, the kind of facial display on the screen produced a corresponding physical reaction in the viewer. When there was no sound, moreover, the effect was much stronger. Is it surprising that the increased role of visual images has led to a politics that is less dependent on verbal information?

Scientific research thus helps us to understand the way television has transformed contemporary politics. In particular, experimental studies of what happens when viewers watch TV explain why this experience is so important. Today, anyone who watches the nightly news has the impression of

being directly in contact with national and international events and leaders.

The feelings and judgments elicited by TV images are so strong that leaders who are highly effective on television can overcome the opposition of traditional party organizations. The professional insiders who dominated politics in the age of print have everywhere been challenged by individuals skilled in manipulating the media. Oddly enough, this explains not only the success of Ronald Reagan, but ^{the} rise to power of Mikhael Gorbachev and, more recently, of his erstwhile challenger Boris Yeltsin.

Television has thus produced the politics of personality and image-making. The decline of political parties has coincided with the triumph of visual over printed information. Direct appeals to the mass of society are now possible, and they tend to reduce the difference between the well-informed elite and the public at large. We all watched coverage of the first air raid on Bagdhad at the same moment.

Such a profound change in the means of communication cannot fail to have extensive results. Some might question whether every disagreeable feature of contemporary politics can be attributed to TV. Probably not. But we have been far too reluctant to consider how much television has changed contemporary politics.

Because the televised image has properties that differ from newspapers or radio, the intentions of TV journalists and producers are doubtless less important than the medium itself. But while the medium has something to do with the message, it isn't always used in the same way. Television coverage of politics in the United States differs from that in other countries in Western Europe, and the difference is related to particular problems we seem to face.

How is TV Used in America?

The most obvious difference between television in the United States and in Europe is the primacy of our private, commercial networks. The principal effect is probably not, however, merely the existence of state-owned television channels: given the technology of distributing video coverage, the images of major international events were often the same in every country even before the development of CNN.

For the viewer, perhaps the most obvious difference between public television news programming in Europe and the American networks is advertising. Even with the introduction of publicity and private channels in Europe, TV in the U.S. has more time devoted to commercials and these ads often interrupt network news (which doesn't happen in Germany or France). It would be interesting to know if this difference has the subtle but important effect of encouraging the viewer to perceive candidates as salesmen rather than as public leaders.

Many differences in the way TV news is produced have been studied in an extensive comparison of Germany, France, and the U.S. undertaken with my colleague Siegfried Frey of Duisburg University. Although some of these differences concern rhythms of speech, others are matters of what is shown. In a France, for instance, the leading subjects of news coverage are culture and sport, whereas in Germany most attention was given to politics and the weather; in the U.S., in contrast, attention tends to be paid to economics or business and to human interest stories.

Within the domain of political news coverage, American TV news is more likely to show leaders in close-up images outside the places where they work or act (be it the

legislative assembly or an administrative office); American political figures are less likely to be shown on the screen with each other than are Europeans. In Germany, as in many other countries, the anchor or announcer often visibly reads a text (unlike their American counterparts, who appear to be looking directly at the viewer as they read from an unseen teleprompter).

The result of such production techniques is that Americans have the illusion that the political leader or TV journalist speaks directly to each individual viewer. This feature of production, ~~the~~ however, ^{is} not "real": the networks have artfully generated an impression of directness that is suited to American culture. A number of features reinforce this deceptive sense of a democratic relationship between viewers and leaders.

In the three countries we studied, the frequency with which different leaders are shown on television news mirrored the power structure: that is, the most powerful individuals were always seen most often. But beyond this, American television showed more different people than TV in France or Germany, creating an impression of "democracy" that evaporated when total amounts of coverage were analyzed. At least in this study, American Presidents dominate our TV to a degree not found in either Germany or France.

Combined with the more frequent use of close-ups of the leader's face (a shot revealing called "*l'américaine*" by the French), such production techniques mean that the viewer is less likely to see American leaders in their "natural" political environment. Settings, especially in the studio, are contrived. Or a normal activity is transformed into a predictable pseudo-event, as when journalists shout questions at the American president as he goes to his helicopter en route to Camp David.

To put it another way, the extent to which TV news has been *manufactured* is often less visible to the American viewer. By comparison, European television production, especially in Germany, Italy, or Switzerland, sometimes seems more "primitive" or more "naive." As a result, the European viewer is less likely to be manipulated by the choice of shots and the verbal coverage than an American who is lulled into ignoring the fact that "media opportunities" have been produced with as much care as TV ads. Little wonder that, in our campaigns, the TV ads become the reality.

The system has staggering financial effects on politicians and candidates. To run for office, you need to buy "time" and produce ads. Effective television campaigning is very expensive. Enter PACS, special interest groups, and foreign businessmen, not to mention shady bankers or drug money. As Pat Choate has documented in *Agents of Influence*, the Japanese alone invest \$400 million a year for national and local lobbyists -- and with money like that available, running for office becomes a form of investment.

These features exaggerate the universal tendency of television to personalize politics. Political parties, already weaker in the United States than in Europe, have probably been further reduced in importance by the way American TV generates the images on our screens. Whatever the dangers of the "global village" elsewhere, it should therefore not be surprising that superficiality and shallowness of political debate are particularly serious problems in the United States.

What Can Be Done?

Many of the complaints catalogued above have been made by political scientists for generations. Long before the advent of television, leading American political scientists wrote of our need for "A More Responsible Two-Party System," assuming the English were a model we should follow. Couldn't the tradition of weakly organized, "catch-all" parties in the U.S. be a cause not a consequence of the way we use TV? And even if not, doesn't the persistence of complaints about American politics indicate that things are working pretty much as expected?

Complacency is easy: haven't we just won a war in the Persian Gulf and watched communism crumble? But the outcome of a combat of the industrialized world against Saddam Hussein and a population of 17 million could never have been in doubt. And, if we really believe the principles of our own Declaration of Independence, we can hardly be surprised by the disintegration of the Soviet Empire. In any event, it is time to look ahead, not backward.

Even if it is assumed that television had only a tenth of the negative effects described here, it would be worth wondering if we can improve our political process. Occasionally, political scientists and pundits propose basic constitutional reforms in order to produce something like the Parliamentary systems of Western Europe. Such projects are utopian. We need to consider practical, simple changes that are in the self-interest of everyone.

I propose three such changes that might reduce the negative effects of television on the American political process.

- First, the party that does not win the White House should nominate its next Presidential candidate in the off-year, as part of the next Congressional campaign; in this

way, during the last two years of a President's term there would be a Leader of the Opposition. The President's party would, as at present, nominate (or renominate) its candidate in the summer before the Presidential election.

- Second, after Leader of the Opposition has been nominated, the President and the future rival candidate would meet once every three months for an hour-long unstructured dialogue on television. Unlike the current campaign debates, it would be desirable to use a format that minimizes the role of journalists. Thus, during the two years before a Presidential election, the public would have periodic opportunities to see an unscripted dialogue between the leaders of the two major parties.

- Third, the Presidential campaign itself should be limited to three weeks, during which each TV station or cable outlet would be required to devote two hours a night of free prime time to political candidates. Under the general notion of equal time, individual stations would allocate time as they see fit between candidates of each party for offices at all levels of government. This amount of the free coverage would increase the likelihood that voters would see candidates in situations where mistakes can be made and real intentions become evident. And by providing candidates with many opportunities for free air time, the advantages of purchasing expensive advertisements would be reduced.

A word on each of the three proposals. There is nothing in the U.S. Constitution that establishes when nominating conventions take place. The party trying to capture the White House would have every advantage in naming its candidate two years in advance, so that the following two years could be devoted to defining issues and organizing the party's campaign. Whichever party loses in 1992 will

obviously have a self-interest in determining its next nominee in the summer of 1994.

In most European countries, there is an identifiable Leader of the Opposition (or "shadow" Prime Minister). This makes it possible for voters to see the alternatives more clearly. An early nomination of the Presidential challenger would provide an American equivalent that would clarify our political process. Even more important, this step does not require legislation of any kind and would be clearly in the self-interest of the first party to adopt the practice.

The President's party, of course, would not want to nominate its standard-bearer two years before the next election. A first term President would not need -- and probably not benefit by -- such an early renomination. A second term President would not want to accentuate his lame duck status. Indeed, the same process could also benefit the party controlling the White House by increasing the President's influence over his own Congressional partisans.

The second proposal follows easily enough. If the challenger for the White House in the 1996 election has been nominated in 1994, it would then be reasonable and prudent for the incumbent President to confront him or her periodically. For the incumbent, this would be a way of articulating and strengthening the President's own party and its program in the perennial contest between the White House and Congress. For the rival candidate, these dialogues would hold the Administration responsible for its actions and formulate issues to be set before the country. Citizens would clearly gain from a process that is neither conducted in 30 second spot advertisements nor dominated by unelected journalists.

Finally, but most important of all, the interminable campaigns which now spread over almost a full year would be replaced by a focused period of intense public exposure. There is no reason for the corruption of our political process because our political candidates need to purchase time on the air. *We own the air-waves.* Why not establish a reasonable amount of free access to the media as the condition of the license to broadcast or transmit a television signal? Extend this time to candidates at all levels, and we will reduce the market for expensive TV campaigning, thereby freeing our leaders from dependence on the big givers.

Only the third of these provisions would require some form of legal regulation, though probably the FCC could promulgate the necessary rules. The question is the will, not the means. Surely some of our politicians should see their self-interest in being freed from the need to raise a huge campaign fund.

It is true, of course, that a vast increase in free television time devoted to political dialogue creates opportunities for elected officials to make mistakes. The carefully crafted ad seems safe to incumbents who can afford to produce and test them. Perhaps that is one reason why over 90% of our Congressional incumbants are reelected today.

Fortunately, for each incumbant there is usually a challenger. Instead of seeking term-limits on Members of Congress, wouldn't it be easier to level the playing field by reducing the advantages of money? Instead of un^{en}forceable attempts to regulate campaign spending, wouldn't it be preferable to make the air-waves -- which belong to the community, not to private corporations -- freely available to those who seek to govern us?

These proposals are both consistent with the self-interest of the political parties and useful for the citizenry. They would, of course, produce a glut of political information in the three weeks of election campaigns. Some people would doubtless turn off their TV sets or watch their VCR's rather than tune in to the mayoral candidates who are filling the requisite campaign time on local stations. Given the low voter turnouts in American elections, particularly as contrasted with Europe, however, it is hard to argue that a three-week long campaign with increased political coverage would produce more public apathy.

A short election contest with large blocks of free TV time is not a panacea. It is merely an attempt to answer the pernicious excesses of politics conducted in 30 second sound-bites. Why might the changes help? The advantages of paid ads diminish radically when a candidate can undo their effects in unscripted appearances. Even speeches have the advantage of combining verbal messages with images, providing greater substantive content to the viewer. The chances of discussing the issues could only go up.

With the Presidential election campaign itself shortened, public interest would be more focused. With candidates appearing on TV more often and at greater length, a negative advertising campaign could easily backfire. And, if the result lowered costs of running for office, both the curse of campaign finance and the excessive advantages of incumbancy might be counterbalanced. Given the nature of our recent campaigns, something is needed.

Western Europe is in the process of forming a new economic -- and probably political -- superpower. In a post-cold war world, we can expect tough competition as our former NATO allies increasingly insist on formulating

policies in their own interests. In the U.S., a decade of deficit spending, corporate mergers, and self-congratulatory consumption has not prepared the American people for the choices which a free society must make.

In seeking to improve the political process, we must not aim at utopian constitutional reform. Attempts to control campaign spending are bound to fail as long as there are huge benefits to be gained from purchasing effective TV exposure. Proposals to regulate negative campaigning violate the spirit and letter of the First Amendment.

If we seek a remedy for a politics of sound-bites and superficiality, it will be necessary to understand the nature of the media and to propose changes in the self-interest of our two major parties. We have tried many things without success. Why not create a Leader of the Opposition by nominating the Presidential challenger during the off-year election campaign, let him talk with the President over the last two years of each term, and then provide extensive free TV time during a short but intensive Presidential campaign? Could that be worse than the politics symbolized by "Willie Horton"?

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