Notes and Debates

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Politics as Commodity From Eisenhower to Bush Jr.

Half a Century of Commercial Communication and Election Campaigns in the United States

"You sell your candidates and your programs the way a business sells its products" (Hall, *Presidency* 88). Uttered in 1952 by the chairman of the Republican election committee, this remark will sound familiar to anyone who has followed the 2004 presidential election campaign. In 2004 experts and observers have explicitly framed the differences between candidates in terms of competitive brands. In a prophetic anticipation of the outcome, in such evaluations Bush fared more favorably because he looked "like Mercedes or Honda — you know what the brand stands for," while Kerry lagged behind "like Mazda, a brand that's had a terrible time because they've kept trying different messages" (Tierney). However, in spite of a growing literature dealing with the so-called political marketing — and increasing commodification of politics — from a political science standpoint (Patterson 45-49; Crenson and Ginsberg 200-202), what has happened in the relationship between commercial and political communication in America over the last half-century is still largely uncharted territory even in the United States. This article aims to give all overall picture of this relationship from a perspective that remains unfamiliar to historiography. Historical research has, in fact, tended to focus mainly on politicians and political parties when addressing these subjects (Westbrook; McGerr). What we shall seek

to do is to trace these processes from another angle, offering a critical re-examination of U.S. political life through the filter of professional publicists and admen.

Choosing 1952 as a starting point sits well with the unanimity with which scholars consider that campaign a turning-point in the relations between advertising and politics. Given the crucial role that television came to play for the first time on that occasion, admen, who managed relations with television channels, were accorded an unprecedented centrality, that seemed to safeguard them against all the frustrations and difficulties that they had experienced until then at the hands of politicians (Fasce). In 1952, Batten, Barton, Durstine & Osborn (BBDO) — the leading advertising firm that, like all the other major agencies, had long been associated with the Republican party — took centerstage in the context of an intricate communication strategy which at some point, on the initiative of Eisenhower's personal election committee and of the oilmen who financed it, called in another advertising agency, Ted Bates. Less successful than BBDO in terms of turnover, Ted Bates had recently, however, made a name for itself with some bold and striking TV commercials that lasted only a few seconds and which had marked the success of the M&Ms, with the slogan "Melts in your mouth, not in your hands." Equally short commercials (twenty seconds) — again made by Rosser Reeves, a go-getting adman with aggressive promotional convictions who was also a rabid anti-communist — were made for the ex-general; they consisted of a series of telegraphic questions and answers between an off-screen voice and Eisenhower, who calmly and in a "common sense" manner came up with a quick answer to the most difficult question: '"Can you cut taxes, Mr. Eisenhower?' — 'We can and we will … we will put the lid on government spending" (Wood 265-66).

It would be difficult to underestimate the role played by TV in making commercial communication and admen acceptable in

politics. As the first means of mass communication invented and developed for exclusively market purposes, television had certain peculiar characteristics (technological, expressive, and budget) which reduced the presence of publicists and other traditional figures of propaganda organization who were active in the parties, radio debates, rallies and in what remained of the exhausting marathon tours of the country that Truman, for example, was still undertaking even as late as 1948. However, it would also be mistaken to forget the resistance and difficulty faced by the new forms of publicizing candidates. In the early days, Eisenhower voiced his disapproval and perplexity and once during the recording of a commercial was apparently unable to stop himself from making the far from enthusiastic comment, "To think that an old soldier should come to this." There were also protests from the Democrats when a leak put into their hands the scripts of Republican commercials, triggering their condemnation of the "high-powered hucksters of Madison Avenue" and their "cornflake campaigns" (Samuel 36-37; Diamond-Bates 44-63).

It is especially important not to forget the other factors which combined to heighten and complement the role of television and to shape the novelty of this campaign. Contributing to this was a general atmosphere favorable to business (public opinion gave it an approval rating of 76 percent according to surveys carried out in the early 1950s), such as had not been the case for the last twenty years (Fox 173; Tedlow 149). This, in turn, was the result of an ideological offensive mounted by the business world and the political establishment which made the question of a better standard of living (in the strictly consumer sense) a stark choice of sides, both international and patriotic, against the background of the Korean War (Fones-Wolf). Another reinforcing factor was the crisis of the parties and the incipient personalization of politics, exemplified at

the Republican convention by Eisenhower's victory. Eisenhower was not a professional politician, nor was he the party's official candidate, but he was a war hero who could count on an independent election committee financed by the large corporations, a figure who was well suited to the personalization required by the new medium.

Finally, one cannot forget the growing presence of a crucial vehicle of the hybridization of market surveys and the political dimension, namely opinion polls. Although proved spectacularly wrong at the 1948 elections, polls, thanks to the role of thermometer of democracy attributed to them by the "clash of civilizations" of the cold war (Hogan), preserved and indeed re-iterated the promise, formulated by George Gallup in the previous decade, to "count the voices" and sound, through the rational-emotional mix of "attitudes," the opaque depths of the interest groups into which the population seemed to have dispersed. Indeed, when it came to deciding on spots, the Republicans made ample use of such surveys to test the practicability of the new instrument of communication.

The first presidential race where there was television coverage of the party conventions, thanks to sponsorship from the two main television producers (Westinghouse for the Republicans and Philco for the Democrats), the 1952 election saw advertising, both political and commercial, flood the television screens and the 39 per cent of houses which had a TV set. The ad with which Westinghouse sponsored the Republican assembly made it look as if commercial and advertising culture had taken revenge on politics. It presented two overlapping images: a contemporary print of the historic Lincoln convention in 1860 and a shot of an unidentified candidate leaning out of a television. Suggesting at one and the same time the reduction of the true citizen to a spectator and the adoption of TV as the vehicle of a new and higher form of democracy, the caption

read: "TODAY YOU GET A CLEARER PICTURE. Only those inside Convention Hall in Chicago were able to see the nomination of Abraham Lincoln in 1860. Now millions can see the convention on television." Indeed what television viewers tuned in to the convention coverage saw more often were not candidates or debates but Betty Furness, a former film actress recycled for TV to endorse Westinghouse products. By the end of the convention, anyone who had had the patience to watch her 158 appearances between one political message and another would have discovered that Furness had been on screen for a total of four and a half hours, during which time she had opened 49 refrigerators, looked inside 12 gas cookers, switched on 29 washing-machines and dish-washers and turned on 42 television sets *(Saturday Evening Post;* Samuel 36-37).

The fact that the 1952 elections marked a turning-point is confirmed by the significant consequences they had within both parties. Among the Democrats, despite the accusations against their adversaries, the apparent success of Eisenhower's spots spurred them to follow suit. Consequently, at the next elections, they too tried to secure a nationally important advertising agency to replace the modest, medium-sized company hired in 1952 to develop a series of live television programs which were marked above all by their failure to meet the commercial demands of the medium (in one of them their candidate, Adlai Stevenson, was still talking when the presenter interrupted him because time had run out and they had to make way for commercials). In 1956 they managed to hire an agency, although one which was inferior to their opponents (in 25th position on turnover, while BBDO was 3rd), and noted especially for a lucrative advertising campaign for a make of bras. The result was a series of television spots, lasting one minute, modeled on the Republican spots from four years earlier. They recalled the promises made by Eisenhower and went on to criticize the president's failure

to deliver on individual questions. Although definitely less awkward than the tortuous efforts of the previous elections, the 1956 Democratic spots, from which their candidate was missing (again it was Stevenson, who refused to participate directly), failed to deliver victory to the challenger over the incumbent, who this time relied solely on the consultancy of BBDO.

The second important consequence of 1952 was the confirmation of the hiring of BBDO by the Republicans. Especially the way in which this happened suggested an unprecedented rooting in the political entourage. For the first time BBDO moved from one to the other campaign without interruption, and in fact was also given a consultancy during Eisenhower's first term of office, when the president had to present some domestic policy plans on TV in 1953-54. (Hall, *Presidency* 118-119; Reichert 28; Fox 310)

The fortunes of BBDO started to decline, however, in 1960, when, the Eisenhower era over, the wheel started to turn in favor of the Democrats. The fact that the person who spread make up on Nixon's face so badly (a circumstance that was to contribute to the disastrous outcome of his famous first television debate with John Fitzgerald Kennedy), happened to be a BBDO man may even point to the reversal of a trend, suggesting that admen were defeated by the natural brilliance and charisma of a candidate whose style was reminiscent of the later Roosevelt. The impression is reinforced when we look at Kennedy's election committee and find that the man officially at its center was not an adman or PR man but a politician, Jack's brother Bob, and a publicist, Ted Sorensen. Sorensen, together with a former radio consultant to Roosevelt, prepared Kennedy for the television debates whose introduction was greeted (in theory, rightly) as proof that the media and "especially television" offered the possibility of a path of dialogue, of a "large-scale debate."

And yet, looked at more closely, even Kennedy's election

confirmed that a point of no return had been reached in the communication modalities of the campaigns. This was the observation made in the heat of the moment by the historian Daniel Boorstin, who compared the debates to quizzes, calling them a "clinical example of a pseudo-event, of how it is made, why it appeals, and of its consequences for democracy" (Boorstin 41). More recently other scholars have come back to the centrality of "image" as opposed to content in what still remain the most complex presidential debates held so far. Secondly, the paid spots with which the Kennedy campaign followed up the first debate with Nixon significantly reinforced the visual effect of the debate. Repeated incessantly and shown everywhere, they took a lucid and merciless selection of the only shots from the face-to-face debate which showed the Republican rival particularly ill at ease, in terms of expression and mood, despite the validity of his answers. The cost of these short clips, produced by the advertising agency Guild, Bascom and Bonfigli, catapulted Kennedy's television budget one fifth above Nixon's.

Thirdly, and most importantly, by using the consultancy of a marketing company, JFK was the first candidate to systematically transpose the idea of market segmentation into politics and to specifically address the various segments of the electorate, identified on ethnic or religious grounds, rather than appealing to the undifferentiated mass of the "public" (Cohen, Lizabeth 336). If we add to this the consultancy that Chester Bowles, advertiser converted to Democratic politics, gave Kennedy on running the convention and the fact that Kennedy used not one but two advertising agencies, preferring in some cases to employ the services not only of Guild, Bascom and Bonfigli, the agency provided by the party, but also of Jack Denove Productions, a company he had worked with independently during the primaries, one cannot but

agree with those who have seen the 1960 elections as a deepening of the process of personalization and commercialization of campaigning (Chester Bowles Papers, b. 260, ff. 968-972; Westbrook 156).

The two following elections, in 1964 and 1968, introduced, albeit as yet only to an embryonic degree, three further innovations that signaled the crucial transition toward the communication forms that dominate today's political scene. The first of these innovations took place among the Democrats in 1964, and was marked by the first appearance under the Democratic symbol of an important advertising agency, the up-and-coming Doyle Dane Bernbach (DDB), which stood out for an ironic, anticonformist style that reflected and exploited the counter-cultural mood of the time. Running the risk of earning itself "the possible resentment of some of our giant Republican clients," the agency agreed to work with Lyndon B. Johnson. But it was not the image of Johnson that set the tone for the campaign. DDB took another direction, making a series of television spots aimed at highlighting the danger of nuclear conflict in the event of the Republican candidate, the warmonger Barry Goldwater, winning the election. The most dramatic and controversial of these spots went down in history. It went on air officially only once and was then withdrawn in the wake of Republican protests with the Fair Campaign Practices Commission, the federal body whose job it was to supervise the regular running of the campaign. The ensuing outrage, however, produced the opposite effect to what the Republicans hoped for: the spot was repeated an infinite number of times on countless television programs about the case and in the end was seen by everybody. In a superimposed shot it showed a small girl in a field of daisies under the dark shadow of a nuclear explosion. This spot inaugurated the trend to make "negative advertising" that centered on the "demonization" of the adversary and which was to become the key to political propaganda

(Hall, *Presidency* 172-177; Jackall and Hirota 125-126).

To appreciate the second innovation it is necessary to move forward another four years and to transfer to the Republican camp. In 1968 Nixon won the election, reversing the negative reputation that had dogged him ever since his clash with Kennedy. He was helped by a lavish and very inventive targeted campaign, financed by the party election committee. It was run by Roger Ailes, an independent adman and media specialist who had perfected the "segmented" Kennedy approach, which he now transferred onto the visual plane, using television spots of high technical quality that were differentiated according to the sections of the potential Republican electorate it was targeted at. But the real novelty came when Nixon took office. Ever concerned about his image, obsessed by the potential risk of news leaks, anxious to keep a tight control on communications within the restricted circle of the so-called personal presidency and sheltered from the parties and professional politicians, Nixon created the White House Office of Communications to take care of relations between the presidency and the media (and in particular TV) and even nominated as his chief of staff H. R. Haldeman, a former manager with J. Walter Thompson, the agency which had repeatedly advised him since the 1960 campaign. So for the first time a commercial communicator finished up in the holy of holies of the executive. The consequences of this move were, however, anything but edifying, given the major role played by Haldeman in Watergate (Maltese; Cohen, Lizabeth 339). Certainly less deleterious, but even then not effective enough to retrieve the then compromised fortunes of his client, was Jimmy Carter's appointment of the Georgian adman who had run his successful election campaign in 1976 as head of the Office of Communications in the final phase of his White House adventure (American Association of Advertising Agencies).

Regardless of results, however, the cases of Nixon and Carter show how, in the period between the 1960s and 1970s, the fact "that a president should include advertising and public relations people in his inner circle was not ... by now an aberration" (Fox 313). But if we turn back to 1968 and look at that year's Democratic campaign, a third and decisive novelty emerges which has to do with the formation, extraction and professional profile of political communicators. That year, the man in charge of the Democratic election committee dismissed DDB and decided to give the job to a personal friend, a former businessman and occasional Democratic media consultant from the 1950s, Joseph Napolitan. Napolitan was the first example of what would shortly be called political consultants, in other words communication and media experts trained in the typical principles of advertising and market surveys, but applied directly to politics. Compared to admen on loan, as' it were, to politics, people they worked together with and to a large extent replaced, political consultants had the triple advantage of having a better knowledge of political life, a consequently higher degree of specialization (which allowed them to move in a complex and fragmented market, working with more ease on the individual segments of a campaign) and freedom from the typical concerns that beset admen about the possible negative consequences that the temporary shift to politics might have on their main task of working for companies (Hall, *Presidency* 1992 35-6,236-37).

There had, in fact, been some precedents for this new figure: from the 1930s through the 1950s, Whitaker and Baxter, a PR agency active in California, had concentrated its activities exclusively on political campaigns. Complementing the use of radio with the experimental application of the most sophisticated and unscrupulous techniques borrowed from company advertising and public relations (surveys, blanket mail shots, the use of a negative personal tone

against one's adversary, pseudo-editorials in newspapers), in the 1930s Whitaker and Baxter had successfully run all the main Republican campaigns which involved the California business world. An example was the crusade in the business world against the candidature for state Governor of popular radical author Upton Sinclair in 1934, and later against some courageous proposals for pension reform advanced by progressive and left-wing forces which were regularly thrown out by referenda orchestrated by Whitaker and Baxter (Walker and Sklar 84-88; Mitchell; Goebel 181-189). This agency was, however, for a long time an exception, the product of the particular conditions in California, namely the chronic weakness of the parties, excessive suburbanization (which put the stress on virtual as opposed to direct and widespread mobilization) and the influence of Hollywood's "entertainment society." In the 1970s, political consultants started to adopt and refine the Whitaker and Baxter model, extending it to the rest of the country, just as the whole of the public sphere in America was beginning to resemble California.

To understand the change brought about by the rise of political consultants we need to focus on three aspects of the new electoral communication panorama. The first is the success of the already mentioned "negative campaigns." Strictly speaking these were no novelty and in fact controversy and debate, even of a personalized nature, which has been seen on a large scale in North American public life since the colonial age, has rightly been considered a sign of political vitality and health. According to a recent research, "in every year from 1952 to 2000, there have been more policy specifics in contrast ads than in so-called' positive ads" (Hall, "Shooting"). It is a very different question, however, when personal attacks are used almost as weapons — a phenomenon reported several times in the last twenty years — exploiting the number of occasions for manipulation provided by media instruments such as TV, as against the

opportunities for monitoring and debate that existed in the period of face-to-face relations. This situation is then made worse by the absence, in today's world, of adequate public spaces and opportunities for the direct collective discussion of what is conveyed by the media. In this context, and in the hands of political communication operatives whose aim is to obtain a result at all costs, "negative" campaigns, on the one hand, lend themselves to particularly serious forms of the distortion of facts, and, on the other, can become an easy substitute for the discussion of substantive questions. The effect is to produce so-called "strategic manipulation," which concerns not so much the substance of things as what scandal-mongering chit-chat prevents people from saying and seeing, which in turn defines the political agenda. A glaring example of both the dangers inherent in negative advertising can be seen in the celebrated TV ad offensive launched by George Bush sr. during the 1988 elections against his rival, the Governor of Massachusetts, Michael Dukakis, In explicit and emotionally forceful ads, Dukakis was given responsibility for the violence committed by a Black prisoner in Massachusetts during a weekend furlough, on the grounds that granting such furloughs were one of the measures introduced in Massachusetts prisons under the governorship of the Democratic candidate (West 177-181; Hall, *Presidency* 32-33,391-393).

The definition of the agenda and the relationship with a public "constructed" as an audience point to the second key element in the electoral panorama to have emerged in the last thirty years, the now utter centrality of surveys and marketing tools. This gives rise to serious effects of volatility and distortion of the political dynamic, with candidates tending to respond to the most immediate and unthinking moods of sections of the electorate considered to be significant by giving these voters emotional and misleading fragments of these moods in the form of media-created "personalities" that have been

carefully constructed on paper rather than offering political strategies foullded on real issues and collective interests (Westbrook 166).

These effects are then transferred from the electoral arena to government itself. In recent years we have seen the extension of the use of public opinion polls and surveys as tools in the formulation of policies. Already present especially under Nixon (Jacobs and Shapiro), this practice has gone through good times and bad and even experienced a leap forward during the Clinton presidency. Indeed it is still far from clear whether "presidents use polls to tailor agendas and market policies, " or "to reverse their policy preferences, or to preserve them regardless of citizens' views" (Eisinger 185). Unquestionably, though, we have entered an era of "permanent campaigning," with policies inspired in many ways by the ever changing trends of the polls (Towle) and founded on the blurring of the distinction between elections and government. A parallel crossover has taken place between politics and entertainment, Already present in the past, this phenomenon has now taken on ever more widespread and almost imperceptible forms and has been practiced (Clinton is particularly accomplished at it) using media like talk shows. This dual blurring of distinctions represents the third constitutive factor of present-day political marketing.

On the threshold of the 2000 election, unbridled negative advertising, permanent campaigning, and confusion between different areas of discourse forced leading historians such as David M. Kennedy to point a finger at "political consultants." Kennedy accused consultants of "turn[ing] politics into a bad joke" and of "having suggested to candidates such as Governor George W. Bush ... not to say anything concrete and meaningful about a single public issue." Only a few months later Kennedy's words found ample confirmation in the way the campaign actually unfolded. With the acquiescence of television and the press, the campaign heightened, as in previous

years but even more so, relational and personal elements and reinforced the idea of the contest as a "horse-race" (with the consequence that, during the TV debates, support gradually grew for Bush jr., seen as a "ugly duckling" and outsider compared to the "know-all" and "rigid" Gore), at the expense of any discussion about real issues (Alsina, Davies and Gronbeck; Pflau; Rodgers). Although it is still too early to draw a comprehensive picture of the 2004 elections, a cursory look at such a campaign seems to confirm the trend towards commodification rather than deliberation as the main feature of today's politics. Once more, for example, the worst forms of negative advertising and unfounded personal attacks took center stage for most of the electoral marathon, prompting observers to notice that "all that's necessary is to make the other side look even less acceptable" (Cohen, Adam). By contrast, much less decisive proved to be the impact of the debates, that provided the only occasion in which at least some of the actual issues were publicly discussed but ultimately failed to frame public discourse in the last crucial stages of the campaign. All this cries out for the historian's further probing of the actual effects of election campaigns on voter behavior in a longitudinal perspective (Thurber & Nelson), as well as of the nature of political marketing as a powerful industry and above all as a pervasive and potentially manipulative alternative to mass democracy (Heclo; Sussman and Galizio).

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