Broadsides to Broadcasts

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Chapter One

Broadsides to Broadcasts

In 1888, Scottish scholar and statesman James Bryce observed that during election campaigns in the U.S. “For three months, processions, usually with brass bands, flags, badges, crowds of cheering spectators, are the order of the day and night from end to end of the country.” Such business, Bryce continued, “pleases the participants by making them believe they are effecting something; it impresses the spectators by showing them that other people are in earnest, it strikes the imagination of those who in country hamlets read of the doings in the great city. In short, it keeps up the ‘boom,’ and an American election is held to be, truly or falsely, largely a matter of booming.”

The “booming” Bryce described is as alien to modern Americans as it was to Bryce. Most of us now experience presidential campaigns in the privacy of our living rooms, and little more than half the population emerges from them on election day to vote. But substitute “political advertising” as the subject of Bryce’s observation, change the idiom to modern English, and David Broder could comfortably open a column with the resulting claims: “For three months political advertising is the order of the day and night from coast to coast. These ads please those who have conceived and produced them by making them believe they are effecting something; they impress the public by showing their candidates to be earnest people; they strike the imagination of those in country towns who vicariously meet the candidates and experience the campaign through the excitement of the advertising. This advertising creates the ‘boom,’ and an American election is held to be, correctly or not, largely a matter of booming.”

This was not the plan of the founders of the Republic, who would have been shocked both by the booming of Bryce’s processions, bands, and banners and by the political advertising campaigns that are their heirs. Additionally, our founders would have been surprised by our almost universal right to vote, the active and insistent role of political
parties in our selection of presidential candidates, the audacity of presidential candidates in taking their case directly to the American people, and especially by technology that enables packaged images of candidates to be presented to mass audiences so effortlessly. Because political advertising* as we know it presupposes a large electorate, contested elections, campaigning candidates, as well as the existence of the mass media, this chapter will chronicle briefly how each came to be.

In the country's infancy, the number of eligible voters was severely restricted by the conviction that sex, race, and property and not nationality or residence qualified a person to vote. Early guardians of the ballot-box also demanded evidence of interest in the community, which often meant evidence of likemindedness. So, for example, an act passed in South Carolina in 1716 imposed a strict property test as well as a religious test on would-be voters and specifically excluded Jews and free Negroes. In Rhode Island voters had to own property carrying a minimal value of forty pounds; Catholics were excluded from the polls.

At the time of the American Revolution, seven of the thirteen original colonies restricted the vote to property owners. In Virginia the prospective voter had to own at least fifty acres of undeveloped land or twenty-five acres of developed land occupied by a house at least twelve feet square. The impact of these restrictions on voting was severe. In the first quarter century of the nation's existence "not more than 6 percent of the adult population was eligible to vote." The tide shifted in the last decade of the eighteenth century when states permitting "full manhood suffrage" began to enter the Union. Vermont, for example, required only a year's residence and "quiet and peaceable behavior." The requirement that voters own property collapsed rapidly. After 1824 only two states, Virginia and Rhode Island, qualified voters by property tests.

Previously disenfranchised persons swelled voter rolls during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when suffrage for Negro males was added to the Constitution, when women were granted the vote, and when those 18 to 21 were enfranchised. Through this period, waves of immigrants continued to expand the size of the electorate, particularly after 1900.†

High voter turnout in presidential elections—between 75 and 85 per-

* I am using the phrase political advertising to mean those messages controlled by candidates who pay to transmit them to large audiences. In this book I focus primarily on advertising appearing in newspapers and on radio and television, including 30 and 60 second spot ads, and 5 minute, half hour, hour, and two hour paid programming.
† The universal enfranchisement of blacks was short-lived. After 1900, poll taxes and literacy tests substantially diminished voting by Southern blacks.
cent throughout the last half of the nineteenth century—also magnified the size of the vote. By contrast, in our most recent national election only 55.1 percent of the eligible voters cast a ballot.6

The creators of our government envisioned the electoral process as a staid, dignified activity—"a few respected electors, state by state, sifting the merits of the worthiest eligibles. Something like a church council naming a new pastor, or a faculty bestowing a professorship."7 Alexander Hamilton argued in the 68th Federalist letter that these men would "be most likely to possess the information and discernment requisite to such complicated investigations." They would, he reasoned, analyze "the qualities adapted to the station," and act "under circumstances favourable to deliberation."

The ideal unraveled rapidly. Only George Washington was chosen in a manner approximating that glorified by Hamilton. The father of the country's Farewell Address precipitated the nation's first contested election, a contest manifest in "newspaper polemics, pamphlets, and political rallies"8 that venerated and vilified the leading candidates. Republican handbills praised Jefferson as a Republican and pilloried Adams as a monarchist. The Federalist press termed Jefferson an atheist, a free-thinker, and an enemy of the Constitution. In Massachusetts "[h]andbills denouncing Adams as an aristocrat and monarchist were nailed to gateposts, doors of houses, and posts . . . and men were hired to ride through the state, their saddlebags stuffed with Anti-Federal broadsides."9 Throughout this free-for-all, Jefferson and Adams remained aloof and silent.

The homage and hostility of the handbills had as their end persuading the voters to select electors favorable to one candidate or the other. A broadside distributed in Pennsylvania listed the slate of Republican electors and urged citizens to vote for the person who had advocated equal rights and against the "panegyrist of the British monarchical form of government."10 Sample ballots listing the names of Republican electors were scattered throughout Pennsylvania.

By the election of 1828, electors favorable to either Jackson or John Quincy Adams were clearly and publicly identified throughout the states. Newspapers and handbills were the prime means of associating specific electors with a specific candidate.

Eighteen twenty-eight is a watershed year in presidential campaigns for the number of participating voters more than tripled that year. This was also the first time most votes cast were for electors committed to particular candidates. So, by 1828, a mass audience of voters existed who were able to determine directly who would win the presidency. Not surprisingly, we see calculated efforts to popularize the legend of "Old Hickory."
Although the enemies of earlier presidents had lampooned them with unflattering nicknames, Jackson was the first identified by an affectionate one. The name “Hickory” was originally bestowed on him by his troops in 1813 “in testimony to his toughness”\(^{11}\) when, after his troops were stranded by his superiors, Jackson gave up his horse, borrowed funds on his own note to procure rations, and escorted his sick and fever-ridden Tennessee militia home from Natchez. Consequently, the name “Old Hickory” implied “not only the sense of fraternity but the suggestion that here was a man who would act for justice untrammeled by forms.”\(^{12}\)

As attested to by Michael Chevalier, a visitor to the U.S. on a mission for the French government, hickory branches and hickory poles were powerful symbols in Jackson’s campaigns: “I stopped involuntarily at the sight of the gigantic hickory poles which made their solemn entry on eight wheels for the purpose of being planted by the democracy on the eve of the election. I remember one of these poles, its top still crowned with green foliage, which came on to the sound of fifes and drums and was preceded by ranks of Democrats, bearing no other badge than a twig of the sacred tree in their hats. . . . Astride the tree itself were a dozen Jackson men of the first water, waving flags with an air of anticipated triumph and shouting, *Hurrah for Jackson!*”\(^{13}\)

Throughout the campaign of 1828, Jackson’s supporters painted him as “The Modern Cincinnatus,” “The Farmer of Tennessee,” “The Second Washington,” and “The Hero of Two Wars.” Portraits of Jackson in general’s uniform astride a horse were carried in processions alongside portraits of him in the clothing of a Tennessee farmer, hickory cane in hand. By contrast, John Quincy Adams was portrayed in one of Jackson’s handbills as “driving off with a horsewhip a crippled old soldier who dared to speak to him, to ask an alms.”\(^{14}\)

The image of Jackson as soldier-farmer was reinforced by the claim that he now farmed the land he had once defended from a foreign foe. These images were underscored in his 1824 campaign biography, the first published in the history of the presidency.

Jackson’s opponents sneered that unlike his two-time opponent, John Quincy Adams, Jackson was unschooled, uncultured, and inexperienced in affairs of state; he was not even the farmer at his own plow as his propagandists proclaimed, but instead a plantation owner and slaveholder who had never worked the land with his own hand. As for Jackson’s service in two wars, Adams’ supporters noted that he was only 13 years old in 1780.

To counter the legend of “Old Hickory” Jackson’s opponents distributed “coffin handbills” indicting him for executing six soldiers, one of them a Baptist minister who deserted after the Battle of New Orleans.
The men had served their three-month tour, noted the handbills, and thought they were entitled to return home. A handbill printed in Boston in July 1828 reduced their “Mournful Tragedy” to verse. “We thought our time of service out/ Thought it our right to go:/ We meant to violate no law:/ Nor wish’d to shun the foe.” But Jackson was obdurate. “He order’d Harris out to die./ And five poor fellows more!/ Young gallant men in prime of life./ To welter in their gore!!” Another handbill, which should give pause to those inclined to see recent political advertising as more negative than that of the past, charged Jackson with ordering other executions, massacring Indians, stabbing a Samuel Jackson in the back, murdering one soldier who disobeyed his commands, and hanging three Indians.

Jackson’s supporters responded with a handbill that mimicked the form of the originals. Six coffins dominate the message which, like that of the originals, is penned by a self-proclaimed “eyewitness.” But this “eye-witness” account reduces the original to absurdity. In the parody, which like the coffin handbills survives in the Library of Congress, the “monster Jackson” not only ordered the soldiers executed but “swallowed them whole, coffins and all, without the slightest attempt at mastication!!!!!!” Make him president, says the handbill, and, should a governor incur his displeasure, Jackson will “muster an army and march to the metropolis of that State, hang up the Governor ‘without trial.’ ” Moreover, should he “happen to have one of his anthropophagian fits on him” he and his army may “devour” the Governor and the legislators before leaving the city.15

The campaign organization created on Jackson’s behalf presaged those that would dominate future campaigns. In addition to planning meetings and devising and distributing campaign materials to newspapers and voters, Jackson’s organizers created a precursor of the Democratic and Republican National Committees by establishing a Washington-based central correspondence committee. These organizers also “collected funds, compiled lists of voters, and made arrangements for printing ballots. They founded newspapers, increasing in number as the campaign progressed; they issued pamphlets, broadsides and biographies.”16

Political Parties

The 1828 election also gave rise to national political parties, a phenomenon portended by the clashes of the Federalists and anti-Federalists of Jefferson’s days. National parties altered the nature of presidential campaigns by limiting the number of serious contenders for the presidency, magnifying the contest among them, and facilitating the expansion of campaign organizations.
Although Jackson had been elected without the backing of a national political party, the electors who had pledged themselves to him set the groundwork for a political party by claiming political appointment as the spoils of victory. Jackson responded in his first presidential message by identifying “rotation,” for which we should read displacement, of past appointees “a first principle in the Republican creed.” Although we tend to view it disapprovingly, and refer to it as the “spoils system,” Jackson’s commitment to rotation-in-office was intended to reform a corrupt bureaucracy. But more important for our purpose was the spoils system’s ability to solidify support for Jackson and his anointed successor and to subvent political parties.17

The existence of a party label not only helped voters to identify candidates but also ensured that certain functions would be performed including “nominating candidates and campaigning in the electoral arena, and readiness to undertake management or the general conduct of public business in the governmental arena.”18 But in a democracy, as political scientist Clinton Rossiter argues, the primary function of political parties is “to control and direct the struggle for power.”19

Despite the prophecies of such founders as Washington who condemned “the demon of party spirit”20 and Jefferson, who noted that “If I could not go to heaven but with a party, I would not go there at all,”21 political parties invigorated the political system. Elections were systematically contested; voter interest and voter participation increased.22 During the transitional stage between conception and birth of national parties, “Where opposing parties had been formed to contest the election, the vote was large, but where no parties, or only one, took the field, the vote was low.”23

National parties did not emerge overnight. By the second Jackson election in 1832, a two party system existed in barely half of the states. Not until 1840 were viable parties organized throughout the states. But, as Bryce observed, by the last decade of the nineteenth century, their influence would be decisive: candidates and candidacies were controlled by parties and electoral victories won by “the cohesion and docility of the troops.”24

The landmark election of 1840 occurred in a climate ripe for political advertising: a mass of voters eager to decide which candidate should lead the country, a contested election in which the incumbent—Martin Van Buren—was supported by the current beneficiaries of Jackson’s spoils and the challenger—William Henry Harrison, who also had been the challenger in ’36 against Van Buren—was advanced by a hungry party out of power that coveted the spoils of victory.

Like Jackson before him, Harrison lay claim to being a military hero.
But unlike Jackson’s decisive Battle of New Orleans, Harrison’s glory rested on an indecisive battle against the Shawnee Indians at Tippecanoe in 1811. After repelling an Indian attack, Harrison’s forces razed the Indian village. Although Harrison subsequently retreated, the power of the Shawnees had been broken. The name of the battle replaced that of the general in the alliterative slogan of 1840, “Tippecanoe and Tyler Too.”

In 1840, the presidency’s first full-blown campaign functioned as a form of national jamboree replete with orchestrated parades, banners, torches, transparencies, and flags, omnipresent log cabins and hard cider, and coonskin caps. William Henry Harrison’s 1840 campaign produced a series of firsts in the history of political advertising, including the first systematic and widespread use of what today would be called image advertising as well as the first songster.

Prior to 1840, campaign artwork evoked the story of the nation. But in 1840, these glorifications of country in the form of the Constitution, Lady Liberty, the ship of state, and the eagle gave way to highly personalized symbols associated with the particular candidate. Commenting on the transformation, Philip Hone, a New York Whig, observed in his diary “on all their banners and transparencies the temple of Liberty is transformed into a hovel of unhewn logs; the military garb of the general into the frock and shirtsleeves of a laboring farmer. The American eagle has taken his flight, which is supplied [supplanted] by a cider barrel, and the long-established emblem of the ship has given place to the plow. ‘Hurrah for Tippecanoe!’ is heard more frequently than ‘Hurrah for the Constitution!’”

Once such symbols were established and linked to the candidates, they seemed to have a life of their own, as Van Buren’s supporters discovered to their chagrin. Disparaging Harrison’s fitness for the White House, The Baltimore Republican contended that he would be content in a log cabin with a jug of cider and a military pension. Harrison’s supporters appropriated the log cabin and cider to transform the wealthy son of a governor into a farmer and backwoodsman. The symbol of the log cabin was a potent one for it identified Harrison with the pioneers who cut the country from the wilderness and with rural voters still residing in log cabins. Hone gleefully concludes that “Never did the friends of Mr. Van Buren make so great a mistake as when, by their sneers, they furnished the Whigs those powerful weapons, ‘log cabin’ and ‘hard cider’; they work as the hickory poles did for Jackson. It makes a personal hurrah for Harrison which cannot in any way be gotten up for Van Buren.”

By describing his lush two thousand acre estate farmed by tenant
1840 lithograph. (Courtesy Library of Congress)
farmers, the Democratic press tried to undercut the crafted rustic image. But the voters would have none of it. Enveloped by propaganda picturing a log-cabin-dwelling farmer, they clung tenaciously to the fabricated image.

The symbol did have some grounding in fact. Although it scarcely resembled the humble cabin depicted in the banners, Harrison did own a log cabin in North Bend Ohio that he had built for his bride near the turn of the century (hence his designation as “the farmer of North Bend”). But Harrison had been born not in a log cabin but in a fine two story brick home at Berkeley on the James River in Virginia and at the time of the campaign owned a palatial Georgian mansion in Vincennes, Indiana.

Still, log cabins were carried in parades; log cabins were pictured on kerchiefs, bandannas, and banners; log cabin pins, songs, and badges served as the outward signs of inward political convictions. Hard cider was dispensed to converts and the curious alike. The cabins, cider, and coonskin caps enabled voters vicariously to experience the supposedly hardy, healthy, heroic life of their candidate.

So while revealing little of his past and less of his future, and while misrepresenting himself as a cider-loving, log-cabin farmer, Tippecanoe
won the election but died soon after the ink reporting his inauguration had dried, thereby winning an almost full term for “Tyler Too.”

In an age of television, the counterfeit image would likely have been exposed by Roger Mudd or Dan Rather live from the Georgian mansion. Doctors’ records mysteriously would have found their way within camera range of investigative journalists. But in 1840 claims about Harrison’s considerable wealth and failing health could be discounted by partisans unwilling and to some extent unable to confirm them.

The Harrison campaign’s visual symbol of the log cabin presages what has come to be called “image” advertising in politics. As Washburn argues, “Its modern-day equivalent would be the 30-second television spot commercial, which ignores issues, ignores party label, and concentrates on some aspect of the candidate’s personality, usually one that links him closely with the ordinary voter.”27 In its contemporary incarnation, such advertising rhapsodizes over candidates reading to their children, fishing in a rushing stream, or pausing to inspect peanuts in a warehouse bin. In its modern visage, Harrison in farmer’s overalls is Jimmy Carter in a work shirt and blue jeans addressing voters from his home in Plains or Ronald Reagan splitting firewood or riding horseback on his ranch.

By 1860 image advertising had become a staple of political campaigns. So, for example, a rail presumably split by Lincoln in his youth was carried into the Republican convention affixed to a banner rich in the raw stuff of which myth is made:

Abraham Lincoln
The Rail Candidate
For President in 1860
Two rails from a lot of 3000 made in 1830 by
John Hanks and Abe Lincoln, whose father
was the first pioneer of Macon County.28

Image advertising reappeared in such forms as the teddy bears of Theodore Roosevelt’s campaigns, and the “hole in the shoe” in Stevenson’s ’52 campaign.

The songster and image advertising are not the only legacies of the 1840 Harrison campaign. That campaign also transformed the role of the candidate from of the contest but not in the contest to both in and of the contest. Only after candidates and the public had abandoned the notion that the office sought the person and not the person the office could direct appeals by the candidate become part of political advertising. By speaking publicly on his own behalf and in his own defense, Harrison in 1840 set the stage for this change in the presidential candidate’s role.

The wave of advertising that washed across the 1840 campaign has obscured the fact that in 1836 Harrison made what would now be called
campaign tours “to counteract the opinion, which has been industriously circulated, that I was an old broken down feeble man.”

During the tour of 1836, Harrison had delivered ostensibly apolitical speeches extolling the country’s past and, in Philadelphia, glorifying the Declaration of Independence, which his father had signed. At each stop on his 1836 trip through Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Maryland, and Ohio, a Harrison committee choreographed “welcoming citizens on horseback, carriage processions, brass bands, bonfires, torchlights, clanging church bells, booming cannon, young ladies with flowers. . . . Old soldiers with tears in their eyes crowded forward. ‘Hurrah for Harrison!’ ‘Hail Columbia’ was played in every village and town.”

Still behind its apolitical veneer, Harrison’s political message had been plain. If elected president, he not only would defend constitutional principles but draw policy from the venerated past. And most important, and most deceptive, Old Tip was healthy enough to faithfully execute the demands of the office he sought.

By the 1840 campaign, both candidates were ready to hit the campaign trail, but it was Harrison who would finally deliver the first overtly partisan presidential campaign speech on his own behalf. Under the pretense of a journey from Washington D.C. to his birthplace in Kinderhook, New York, President Van Buren mounted a comparable though less enthusiastically received tour than the one Harrison had undertaken in 1836. Where Harrison had gone round the circle to silence rumors that he was mentally and physically enfeebled, Van Buren mingled with the crowds to quiet Whig claims that he was a corrupt, venal aristocrat.

But Harrison would go one step further when, in the preliminary jousting of the 1840 campaign, the Democratic press branded him a “superannuated and pitiable dotard” (a suspicion magnified when a committee of correspondence rather than Harrison himself answered Harrison’s political mail). When charges of military incompetence were added to claims that Old Tippecanoe was senile, Harrison could take it no more. Wounded by the personal attack, he took to the stump to avenge his impugned reputation. “I am here,” he told a crowd in Chillicothe, “because . . . I have been slandered by reckless opponents . . . [who claim] that I am devoid of every qualification, physical, mental and moral, for the high place to which at least a respectable portion of my fellow-citizens have nominated me.”

In ringing, forceful speeches, Harrison attempted to refute the charges of infirmity, while defending his military career, decrying the activities of abolitionists, opposing two terms for presidents, objecting to casual uses of the presidential veto, and championing such controversial causes as prudent use of the monies of the treasury and the right of the
people to govern. Although attack had been present in American political rhetoric at least since Washington was charged with monarchical aspirations, Harrison’s apologia demonstrated that a candidate could respond publicly to attack without sacrificing the presidency.

The speeches also provided a forum for Harrison to underscore the image capsulized in the broadsides and songs. So, for example, he interrupted a speech at Fort Meigs to beckon an old soldier from the crowd to stand with him on the platform; elsewhere in the speech he paused to drink hard cider.35

In the rhetoric of the presidency’s first active campaigner we hear the studied humility that will become a stock in trade of political advertising and campaign speaking: “I am not a professional speaker, nor a studied orator, but I am an old soldier and a farmer, and as my sole object is to speak what I think, you will excuse me if I do it in my own way.”34

And like many who would follow, Harrison also fell victim to a desire to please all of the people all of the time, and in the process fooled opposition editors none of the time. “There is not a single question of magnitude,” complained one, “on which his opinions have not been cited by the advocates of contradictory creeds and theories.”35

In a campaign packed with log cabins, cider, and coonskin hats, the pseudo-event flourished. To ally himself with “the new coonskin Whiggery, [Daniel] Webster camped with Green Mountain boys in a pine wood before an open fire, ate meals from shingles, paid tribute to log cabins, and challenged at fisticuffs anyone who dared call him an aristocrat.”36 The pseudo-event then is not the child of television but the stepchild of image making itself.

Beginning with Harrison’s self-defense turned self-advancement, the first break is made in the long-standing taboo against partisan political stumping by presidential candidates. But in the next three presidential elections, only one nonincumbent candidate for president would even address voters directly. In 1852, General Winfield Scott, the Whig candidate, claiming that “I do not intend to speak to you on political topics”37 toured the country selecting sites for homes for infirm soldiers. Scott was defeated by the person whose supporters had chanted “We Polked you in 1844; we shall Pierce you in 1852.” And indeed, Franklin Pierce, who had engaged in no personal campaigning, won in a landslide.

Eight years later, in the famous 1860 campaign, the proscription against active presidential campaigning on one’s own behalf weighed heavily with both Lincoln and Douglas but ultimately was rejected by Douglas. According to Helen Nicolay, the daughter of Lincoln’s secretary, “Being a presidential candidate made astonishingly little difference in Mr. Lincoln’s daily habits. . . . Lincoln wrote no public letters, and
made no set or impromptu speeches, with the exception of speaking a word of greeting once or twice to passing street parades."

Meanwhile, of course, Lincoln's supporters campaigned on his behalf. These efforts included widespread distribution of copies of Matthew Brady's photo of Lincoln at the Cooper Institute, efforts designed to counter the cartoons and caricatures of Lincoln circulated by his opponents. Throughout the campaign, Lincoln tended his law practice in Springfield, ignoring the political campaigning of the man he had debated two years earlier in a sectional contest. Indeed, only under pressure from his supporters did Lincoln even cast a ballot in 1860 and only when persuaded by his law partner that the state candidates might need his vote. Even then Lincoln clipped "the list of presidential electors from the ballot and [voted] for the rest of the Republican ticket."39

That this proscription against campaigning was not a shield for timid
or tiresome orators to hide behind but was instead a tradition rooted in conviction and convention is illustrated by the fact that so great an orator as Lincoln felt bound to observe it. So too, for example, had "Old Man Eloquent," Whig Party founder Henry Clay, who also had remained silent during his own campaigns. Still it is no accident that the three major party candidates to break most decisively with this ivy-encrusted tradition—Douglas, William Jennings Bryan, and Woodrow Wilson—were also eloquent and forceful orators, men whose rhetorical skill had served them well in the past.

While in 1860 Abraham Lincoln referred those who inquired about his views on slavery to his debates with Douglas in the senatorial campaign of 1858, Stephen Douglas took to the stump on behalf of his own candidacy. Douglas predicated his active candidacy on the urgency of the issues of slavery and the impending disunion.

The tradition that restrained Lincoln from campaigning for the presidency on his own behalf applied solely to the presidency and solely to the candidate's own campaign. Lincoln, for example, had no qualms about speaking out in the 1858 senatorial race, expressing himself forcefully on a number of issues in the Lincoln-Douglas debates. Likewise, he had made speeches in 1856 in support of John C. Frémont. Ironically, it was the visibility gained in the Frémont campaign and his unsuccessful 1858 senatorial bid, that influenced the Republican party in 1860 to make him its nominee. The 1896 presidential nominee William McKinley, who rocked on his front porch waiting for votes to come to him, had delivered dozens of speeches in 1892 on behalf of presidential candidate Benjamin Harrison, William Henry Harrison's grandson.

Though the contrast between the presidential campaigns of the mid-nineteenth century—when even discussion of issues in public by a presidential candidate was taboo—and those of the mid-twentieth, when candidates regularly are faulted for failing to discuss issues, is marked, the transformation occurred gradually. Once parties began writing platforms in the mid-nineteenth century, it became acceptable for the party's candidate to indicate publicly his views on the platform. After being notified by a delegation that he was the party's nominee, the candidate typically delivered a speech of thanks and set about drafting a formal letter of acceptance that endorsed the planks of the platform on which the candidate would stand. After releasing the letter to the press, the candidate, with few exceptions, fell silent on political matters until notified of the election results.

In 1892 Cleveland inched from behind the confines of the taboo when before a crowd of 18,000 he publicly accepted the nomination and indicated his opposition to the GOP tariff. Still, Cleveland did not take to the stump to press the issue.
William Jennings Bryan delivering a speech on behalf of his presidential candidacy. Note the glamorized campaign poster. (Courtesy Library of Congress)

But in 1896 William Jennings Bryan did. Having won the nomination with his impassioned Cross of Gold Speech, the “Boy Orator of the Platte” pioneered the modern campaign. Bryan launched that campaign with a speech delivered at his notification ceremony in Madison Square Garden. In the process Bryan learned the hazards of adapting to the media’s audience at the expense of the immediate audience. Because Bryan viewed the newspaper readers as his primary audience, he chained himself to his text. The result was a hobbled speech, the oratorical low point of the campaign. From there Bryan traversed the country speaking with ease and greater effect to huge crowds.

William Jennings Bryan’s campaign of 1896 marked the beginning of the end of torchlight parades and campaign songs. By campaigning vigorously for the presidency, by taking the eloquence that had enthralled the Chautauqua audiences onto the stump on behalf of a political cause, Bryan overshadowed such surrogate message carriers as the banner and the song.
Mark Hanna, William McKinley’s political godfather, responded to the Bryan campaign by enlisting the aid of the GOP-leaning railroad moguls, who offered excursion passes to those journeying to McKinley’s front porch in Canton, Ohio. Once there, a representative delivered a speech to McKinley, providing an opportunity for McKinley to respond. McKinley’s actions further established the right of a candidate for president to respond on his own behalf. But could a candidate leave the front porch, pursue the votes, and win?

In 1912 Woodrow Wilson underscored the affirmative answer provided by Harrison in 1840. This candidate, who conceived of himself as an orator, and who viewed the president as the spokesman for the nation, followed in the footsteps of his two stumping Democratic predecessors, Bryan and Douglas; unlike either, Wilson won the election.

So by 1912 the presidential candidate was accepted as an active campaigner and advocate of his own cause. Once the technology was available, this newly conceived role would make it possible for candidates to speak directly to the mass of voters.

William McKinley making his nomination acceptance speech from the front porch of his Canton, Ohio, home. Immediately behind the candidate, with his hand resting on a cane, is Mark Hanna, McKinley’s campaign manager. (Courtesy Smithsonian Institution, Photo No. 50571, Division of Political History)
Transporting Political Advertising into Living Rooms, Bedrooms, and Theaters: Radio, Film, and Television

In the days in which radio was still a controversial new gadget, Elihu Root, diplomat and Senator from New York, exclaimed to a person setting a microphone before him: “Take that away. I can talk to a Democrat, but I cannot speak into a dead thing.” By 1928 the dead thing had transformed political communication. Radio audiences of a size unimaginable in an era of stump oratory were now available in an instant. In 1924 there were three million radios in America; by 1935 ten times that number existed.

Instead of gathering in town halls or town squares or in open fields, thousands and later millions of radio listeners assembled in twos and threes in parlors and living rooms and later in cars as well. By giving that “vast body to be persuaded” the opportunity to “know its persuaders,” radio bridged the separation between the people and their leaders that Woodrow Wilson had decried. Over the course of 100 days in the campaign of 1896 William Jennings Bryan, by his own account, had made 600
speeches in 27 states and had traveled over 18,000 miles to reach 5,000,000 people. In a single fireside chat delivered while seated in his parlor, Franklin Delano Roosevelt reached twelve times that number.

Its early advocates argued that radio would preserve the presidents' health. After Harding's death, the National Broadcasters' Association reminded his successor, Calvin Coolidge, that Woodrow Wilson's health had been broken by his tour on behalf of the League of Nations and that the strain of a similar trip had contributed to Harding's death!\(^4\)

Radio also transformed the content, audience, and delivery of political messages. No longer did candidates have to travel from town to town to convey their message personally to the voters. At the same time, radio created a national audience. The message delivered in the North was also heard in the South. The message heard by farmers was also heard by city dwellers. As the *New York Times* observed in 1928, "Radio 'hook-up' has destroyed the old-time politicians' game of promising in each locality the things which that locality wishes. They can no longer promise the Western farmer higher prices for wheat without arousing the Eastern factory population against higher bread prices."

In its youth, radio was eulogized for removing the voter from the frenzy of the maddening crowd to the quiet of the living room. "In the olden days," FDR recalled in a radio address on July 30, 1932, "campaigns were conducted amid surroundings of brass bands and red lights. Oratory was an appeal primarily to the emotions and sometimes to the passions. . . . With the spread of education, with the wider reading of newspapers and especially with the advent of the radio, mere oratory and mere emotion are having less to do with the determination of public questions under our representative system of Government. Today, common sense plays the greater part and final opinions are arrived at in the quiet of the home."\(^5\)

But radio did not fulfill a *New York Times* writer's prophecy that cunning politicians would vanish under its influence.\(^6\) Nor did they disappear in the wake of television. After his defeat in 1952 Stevenson complained about the "all-things-to-all-men demogoguery" and the "clamor or political salesmanship" that pervade political campaigns and observed that "the people might be better served if a party purchased a half hour of radio and TV silence during which the audience would be asked to think quietly for themselves."\(^7\)

Radio did change the standards for effective political oratorical style. By shouting into the microphone, for instance, Frank Knox, unsuccessful Republican candidate for vice-president in 1936, violated the intimacy of the parlor, abrating the sensibilities of the audience he was trying to woo.

By 1928, the first year in which the Republicans earmarked the ma-
majority of their publicity monies for radio, critics and audiences had developed expectations about the sort of delivery appropriate to the new medium and politicians were tested by those expectations. “Governor Smith is a success over the radio,” wrote a reporter for the *New York Times*, “in spite of certain faults carried over from a long platform career. He has a tendency to walk up and down and a habit of turning from the audience to address those behind him on the platform.” Critics also chided Smith for giving “first” his own Lower East Side pronunciation “foil” and Hoover for affecting the English pronunciation “speciality.”

Those habituated to the norms of stump oratory foundered in the presence of a medium whose more effective mode was intimate conversation. “The easy conversational tones, with the instinctive sentence accents and cadences, which the radio makes it possible to convey, are quite beyond the conception or practice of many who make use of it” noted the *New York Times* in 1936.

Politicians participated in the process of schooling the electorate in the expectations of the new medium. In his final radio address of the 1928 campaign, for example, Al Smith observed: “Tonight I am not surrounded by thousands of people in a great hall and I am going to take this opportunity to talk intimately to my radio audience alone, as though I were sitting with you in your own home and personally discussing with you the decision that you are to make tomorrow.”

As radio made necessary a new set of skills, so too, in time, did television. The realization that radio listeners and television viewers adjudged the first Kennedy-Nixon debate differently, with listeners giving the debate to Nixon and viewers to Kennedy, reminded us that television is not simply radio made visual but a medium with its own stylistic requirements and communicative facilities. Some politicians, such as FDR and Nixon, were uniquely skilled in communicating with radio’s listeners.

During FDR’s presidency, a talent for intimate communication, temperament, the times, and the technology of radio fused to provide calming reassurance to a country traumatized by depression. Stump oratory, well suited to the delivery of impassioned appeals, is ill suited to conveying quiet reassurance. In his “Fireside Chats,” which at their peak reached upwards of 60 million listeners, Roosevelt capitalized on this previously unappreciated strength of the new medium.

In addition to favoring some messengers and foiling others, radio circumscribed the content and length of the political messages it carried. By transmitting messages from antagonistic candidates and opposing parties, radio broke the partisan hold that party newspapers had on their constituents’ attention. “Tune out of one political speech,” wrote John Calvin Brown for the *New York Times* in 1928, “and you tune into
FDR delivering “Fireside Chat.” (Courtesy Broadcasting magazine)

another one and you finally settle down and listen to the wrangle until
you find yourself getting in a far more independent frame of mind than
was possible in yesterday’s politics. 52 National radio and the national
television that would follow signaled the end of the days in which “Democ-
crats read Democratic papers and went to Democratic meetings and
avoided exposure to Republican influences and arguments.” 53

From the infancy of the presidency, newspapers were identified with
specific causes and politicians. The shift from being organs of a politician
or party to being ostensibly independent of either occurred gradually.
The 1850 census classified a mere 5 percent of the newspapers as “neutral
and independent” rather than political, scientific, or literary. 54 In the
early decades of this century, controversy raged over whether a Demo-
cratic paper should accept Republican advertising and vice versa. By
1940, 48 percent of the newspapers labeled themselves independent with
another 24 percent identifying themselves as Independent Democratic or
Republican and only 28 percent calling themselves either Democratic or
Republican. 55 Newspapers gradually shifted from partisan propagandizing
for one side or the other to nonpartisan reporting of the messages and
moves of both sides. Where in Jefferson’s time newspapers had been a
form of advertising, in our time newspapers both carry political advertis-
ing and report on it.

As late as 1948 a major newspaper refused to carry a candidate’s ad,
and in the process underscored an issue incubating during the campaign.
On the eve of the election the New York World-Telegram refused to print a Truman ad indicting Dewey’s fiscal management of New York as governor. After failing to goad the New York Times into rejecting the ad as well, Democrats responded by distributing 700,000 reprints of the ad under the heading “The ad the World-Telegram refused to print.” Truman used the spurned ad and the networks’ habit of cutting his speeches from the air when they ran overtime as evidence of big Republican-dominated corporations’ hostility toward his cause.

Radio fenced political messages into predictable time boundaries. Those who did not carefully time their speeches found themselves either abruptly severed from their audience or liable for a bill for the next half hour of radio time. This rule was skillfully managed by Truman’s press agents in 1948. When applause absorbed an unexpected amount of Truman’s time and the campaign lacked the funds to pay for the next half hour, Truman’s staff loudly announced within hearing range of reporters that the networks would not let the president finish his speech.

The medium’s rigid time boundaries coupled with the listener’s ability to switch channels or silence the radio receiver entirely tended to replace stylistic embellishment with stylistic economy.

But in one respect the bargain that gave the politician access to millions of voters was a Faustian one, for access to the masses from the silence of the studio sacrificed the inspiration the crowd provides a skilled orator. Gone was the ability to adapt the message to the cheers, scowls, and silences of palpable individuals.

To compensate for the inability to gauge personally the responses of an invisible audience, the politician increasingly relied on audience measures to determine who and how many had listened, and on polls to chart audience predispositions and responses. With polling came the danger that politicians would carve their own identities out of the hopes and fears of the mass audience.

In addition to intuitions audience responses by such indirect means as ratings and polls, politicians offered the electronic audience a new identity as eavesdropper on speeches personally delivered to crowds. In this new role, the audience at home ideally would conceive of itself as an extension of the cheering multitude of partisans and would be cued to comparable levels of enthusiasm. But in the shadows of this new role resided the possibility that instead of being participants in elections, audience members would become mere observers.

Although radio precipitated some important changes in political communication, during its early years it served in many respects as a powerful conserver of campaign forms of the past. In its infancy, for instance, radio simply carried the dominant verbal form of the campaign—the campaign
speech—to a larger audience. The recognition of radio as an advertising medium capable of selling candidates as it had sold soap did not come until later.

Political use of radio escalated rapidly. In 1919 Woodrow Wilson delivered the first broadcast presidential speech to a handful of listeners. His successor’s campaign train was equipped with its own radio transmitter. But Coolidge, who assumed the presidency at Harding’s death, brought about a dramatic change in the political role radio would play. On December 6, 1923, in a conversational but nasalized tone, Coolidge delivered the first broadcast State of the Union address. So clear was the transmission that when a radio station in St. Louis called the Capitol to ask “What’s that grating noise?”, experts responded “That’s the rustling of the paper as he turns the pages of his message.”

Because radio and television have become, like cake mixes and jet planes, presupposed parts of our lives, we have trouble imagining the sensation Coolidge’s broadcast speech created. Groups gathered in the private offices and homes of those owning radios; stores selling receiving sets amplified the speeches for the benefit of those gathered on sidewalks to hear “the words of their President, not as embalmed text, but as living things while he was in the very act of speaking them.” Presidential aspirant Senator Hiram Johnson of California also reportedly sat glued to his receiving set. Recognizing an effective vehicle when he saw it, silent Cal staked out his claim to the nomination of his party in a series of radio broadcasts begun five months before the convention and ending the week before it.

In 1924, political conventions were broadcast for the first time. In the same year the Republicans broadcast from their own stations each day from October 21 to election day.

Use of radio in the campaign of 1924 was limited by the “spotty geographic distribution” of existing stations and the difficulty in linking a national network. Still in that year when a single hour of coast-to-coast broadcast time cost $4,000, the Republican National Committee spent $120,000 on radio and the Democrats $40,000.

Since the Columbia Broadcasting System and the National Broadcasting Company did not yet exist, there was no “regular, systematic network broadcasting, no regularly scheduled programs, and a maze of negotiations to be gone through everytime a hookup was needed.” By 1928 both CBS and NBC had taken their place alongside the Radio Corporation of America, making national radio broadcasts a political fact of life.

Still, because of the extra expense of “leasing the wires of outside service companies,” the cost of a national hookup was expensive. Politi-
cians developed two methods of circumventing this expense: individual speakers at individual stations used their own material or local speakers were supplied with “‘canned’ speeches, so that the same speeches could be delivered throughout the country upon the same day.”  

As the size of radio’s audience multiplied, use of the medium by politicians increased. In 1924, Coolidge spoke an average of 9000 words per month by radio. On March 4, 1925, Coolidge’s inaugural address was transmitted by 27 stations to about 15 million listeners. In Coolidge’s judgment, the existence of radio had eliminated the need for speaking from “reel platforms.” “It is so often that the President is on the air,” he wrote in his autobiography, “that almost anyone who wishes has ample opportunity to hear his voice.” During his tenure in office more Americans heard Coolidge than had heard all of his predecessors combined.

The New York Times summarized the importance of radio in the 1928 campaign in a headline that read: “The New Instrument of Democracy Has Brought the Candidates into the Home, Enabled Them to Reach All of the People, and Radically Changed the Traditional Form of Political Appeal.” Additionally, as broadcasting historian and theorist Samuel Becker has argued persuasively, broadcasting “pushed the President further up the pole of political power, relative to the Congress.” Prior to radio, citizens had ongoing personal contact with their congressional representatives but not with the president. Their congressional representatives could communicate directly to them when they returned to the home district; the president’s words were filtered through the newspapers. Before radio the Congressman or postmaster—not the president—symbolized the government for most citizens. So radio and its offspring television personalized our concept of the presidency and shifted the locus of perceived political power from Congress to the President.

By 1928 political proselytizing guised as entertainment had overflowed from the parades onto the airwaves. The Democrats, for example, created “radio entertainment in its best vein” with their “all-star dramatization of Governor Smith’s life.” The program, which included stage and concert stars, opened and closed with a few bars from “East Side, West Side”—Smith’s signature music. The Republicans adapted radio to the interests of the local communities by scripting five-minute speeches to be delivered by “Minute Men” over 174 stations.

By 1928, politicians were expected to pay for air time. To entice them into using it, the broadcasters aired conventions and acceptance speeches without charge. From the close of that speech to election day, candidates were charged the standard commercial rate, the rate at which department stores or manufacturers were billed. By today’s standards, the cost was low—a coast-to-coast hookup cost no more than $10,000 an hour.
In 1936 FDR circumvented the fee schedule by claiming until the final weeks of the campaign that he was speaking not as a candidate but as president and, as such, he persuasively argued, he was entitled to free coverage. This was a valuable move since only in 1936 had the Democrats paid off their radio debts from the previous campaign and in that four-year interval the networks had decided to demand cash in advance.

In the judgment of Roosevelt’s “political manager” James Farley, “the influence of the radio in determining the outcome of the 1936 election can hardly be overestimated.” Radio enabled Roosevelt to overcome the “false impression created by the tons of written propaganda put out by foes of the New Deal.” “[N]o matter what was written or what was charged, the harmful effect was largely washed away as soon as the reassuring voice of the President of the United States started coming through the ether into the family living-room,” Farley explained.

As the size of the listening audience increased, so too did the cost of air time. At the same time, however, radio’s novelty began to wane. Audiences no longer granted the medium their uncritical attention. Consequently, to minimize cost and magnify audience attention, other means of audience enticement including music, song, and testimony from supporters were added to unadorned speeches. Campaigning politicians also turned from long messages to shorter ones. In 1928 the usual time purchased by candidates was one hour. In 1980 the typical political message was thirty seconds long.

Politicians moved from the unadorned speech to forms characterized by greater variety. So, for example, in 1944 Norman Corwin produced an ad whose use of personal testimony sidestepped CBS and NBC’s faltering ban on dramatization and whose skillful use of music and editing created a sense of urgency about voting for FDR. The ad opened with short statements from “a soldier and a sailor returning from action; a TVA farmer; several union members; a World War I veteran who had sold apples in the Depression; a housewife; an industrialist; a small businessman; a prominent Republican for Roosevelt; an old man who had voted in fourteen elections; a young girl about to vote in her first election—who would introduce the President.” Toward its end, the pace quickened. Musically backed choral sounds simulated the locomotive rhythm of a train as a long list of famous people including Lucille Ball, Tallulah Bankhead, Irving Berlin, Mrs. Berlin, and philosopher John Dewey added their eight-to-ten-word endorsements to the “Roosevelt Special.” Chairman of the Democratic National Committee Paul Porter informed Corwin that some in the party credited his ad with a million votes.

When the comedian Jimmy Durante canceled from the “Roosevelt
Special,” at the last minute, the program was forced to end a few minutes early. Ponderous organ music was substituted for the absent comedian, creating the sense that programming had ended for the evening. Roosevelt’s radio adviser Leonard Reinsch recalls:

I was with Roosevelt at Hyde Park because he appeared at the close of the broadcast. The deadly organ music ran from 10:55 to 11:00. When the Republicans came on, the audience carry-over was practically zero. Roosevelt thought we’d planned it that way. The Republicans said they didn’t want entertainment, they just wanted to talk facts. About then, Fala who was sitting at the president’s feet fell asleep. Roosevelt said, “They’ve even put my dog to sleep.”

Producers of political radio realized both the engaging power of humor and radio’s utility in reaching subsections of the voting population. Consequently, in 1948 Don Gibbs of the Warwick & Legler staff produced a classic series of comedic Democratic programs aimed at a listening audience of women in the middle of the afternoon. Borrowing blatantly from the conventions of hit radio shows of the time, the programs ricocheted with snide one liners. Each program opened and ended with a cut from “The Missouri Waltz,” Truman’s signature music. In one, after a brief introduction, the announcer played Eddie Cantor’s “Now’s the Time to Fall in Love.” In the fashion of a hit show of the time, at the point when Cantor sang “Tomatoes are cheaper, potatoes are cheaper” the announcer shouted “Stop the music!” A litany of prices that had increased under Republican inflation followed. Next a woman blamed inflation on the Republicans who dropped price controls. The telephone rang. A voice asked for the Democratic record. The announcer complied by playing “Every Day I Love You a Little Bit More.” A booby prize was then awarded to the Republican senator who “knocked out” meat controls. The prize: a tour of a butcher shop guided by Senator Taft. Next, listeners were asked to identify a mystery song. It turned out to be “Why Was I Born.” This title, noted the announcer, asked a question formerly asked by those born during the Republican depression. Democratic spokeswoman India Edwards then was introduced to say a few kind words about the Truman family whom “you’d like for next door neighbors.” Following more music, the wailing of a ghost was heard. He couldn’t sleep because of the cries of the hungry and homeless victims of the Republican Congress. Vote Democratic, he urged the audience so that he can sleep peacefully.

Contests varied from program to program. One asked the audience to identify the candidate; the clue was a period of dead silence. The answer? Governor Dewey “who says nothing on any issue.” Local party organizations ran print ads to promote listenership.”
Before they made their debut on the national stage, many influential politicians such as Huey Long and FDR refined their radio style at the state level. In 1924, for instance, Huey Long concluded his unsuccessful campaign for the governorship of Louisiana with a radio speech. In 1935, as a U.S. senator, Long made an unprecedented number of radio speeches over the National Broadcasting Company network—three in a two week period. NBC gave Long free time because he attracted listeners and because the airing of his radical proposals demonstrated that radio was not censored.\textsuperscript{77}

Like Long, FDR carried to the national level lessons he had learned in his state-wide use of radio while governor. Before entering the presidency he wrote: "Time after time, in meeting legislative opposition in my own state . . . I have taken an issue directly to the voters by radio, and invariably I have met a most heartening response."\textsuperscript{78}

As the number of sets and the amount and quality of programming multiplied so too did radio’s audience, a fact dramatically illustrated by the tenfold increase in audience in the six year period 1936 to 1942—from 6,300,000 listeners to FDR’s speech delivered June 10, 1936, to the 61,365,000 who tuned in to the speech of February 23, 1942.\textsuperscript{79}

Once radio was recognized as a powerful political tool and a precedent was set for sale of advertising time to candidates, broadcasters and politicians asked what restrictions, if any, should govern the content and cost of such ads? In the 1924 campaign the Democrats charged that they had enjoyed neither equal access to nor equal charges for radio time. Coolidge’s supporters were more often invited onto the air, they said. Others noted that the Republicans had outspent the Democrats in purchase of radio time three to one in 1924. Weighing into the controversy, Section 18 of the Federal Radio Act of 1927, which became Section 315 of the Communications Act of 1934, forbade the censorship of political broadcasts and noted that although a station had no obligation to permit candidates to use the station’s facilities, equal opportunities must be provided to all bona fide candidates for public office. So censorship was outlawed and favoritism banned. To the alarm of station owners in 1932 the Supreme Court held that although the station could not censor material broadcast by a candidate, it remained liable for defamatory statements broadcast by such candidates. That decision was reversed in 1959.

In 1940 the Hatch Act was amended to limit the spending by any single political committee to $3,000,000. Instead of curbing campaign spending, the law produced a proliferation of political committees, thus decreasing the candidates’ control over the advertising produced on their behalf. In 1952 Section 315 was changed to bar stations from charging more for political broadcasts than for comparable use of the station for other purposes.
In 1936 NBC and CBS made an ill-fated attempt to circumscribe political broadcast content with their decision not to permit dramatized political argument. With that guideline in place, would CBS permit a U.S. senator to debate replayed promises of a presidential candidate?

The controversy spawned by the Republican-National-Committee-sponsored Vandenberg broadcast reveals radio in the process of defining itself. Vandenberg had smuggled into the radio station a recording of segments from speeches by FDR. He planned to play a promise by Roosevelt, such as his pledge to balance the budget, then to demonstrate that the promise had been broken. In short, Vandenberg was going to contrast FDR’s promise and performance. When some of the CBS stations realized what was happening they shut off the broadcast. The CBS network refunded the Republican’s money. The Democrats charged the Republicans with unfair campaign practices. The FCC investigated. Editorials criticized Vandenberg for sneaking the recording into the studio; others castigated the stations for cutting the broadcast.81

The ban on dramatized content had little impact because, first, as in the Vandenberg case, it was not uniformly applied and, second, because stations with unpurchased time eagerly sold it to air such dramatizations as the Republican’s “Liberty at the Crossroads”82 which drew lessons from homey little vignettes. In one, a marriage license clerk asked a young couple what they plan to do about the national debt. They would, he reminded them, “shoulder a debt of $1017.26—and it’s growing every day.” After recalling that they had thought they didn’t “owe anybody in the world,” they reconsidered whether they should get married. The prospective groom concluded “Somebody is giving us a dirty deal.” The Voice of Doom interjected “And the debts, like the sins of the fathers, shall be visited upon the children, aye even unto the third and fourth generations!” Music swelled.82

Newsreels and Film

Side by side with radio, a major type of filmed entertainment developed—newsreels. Introduced into the U.S. in 1911, newsreels at their height reached forty million theater patrons a week. For most of the current century, moviegoers saw a newsreel with every feature movie they attended. In 1927, when sound was added, audiences were able to reexperience sections of speeches they had heard earlier on radio or read in newspapers. So, for example, movie patrons came to applaud or hiss the newsreels of Roosevelt’s Fireside Chats. Finally in 1967 the last surviving newsreel company—Hearst’s News of the Day—went out of business, the victim of the Justice Department’s breakup of the American film monopolies and of television’s ability to transmit more timely visual recaps of the news.
Partisan films distributed through newsreel’s channels and newsreels about political figures presaged televised political advertising. Their use in the campaign against Upton Sinclair, in both the Truman and Dewey campaigns of 1948, and in campaigns for New York Mayor Fiorella LaGuardia and against Louisiana Senator Huey Long is particularly noteworthy, for in all five instances the films are recognizably akin to contemporary televised political ads.

The creative talents of Hollywood and the distribution network in place to dispatch movies were both mobilized against Socialist California gubernatorial candidate Upton Sinclair in 1934. Newsreels attacking Sinclair were distributed to every movie house in the state. In the newsreels, actors playing the parts of ordinary citizens expressed concern, shock, and outrage at the prospect of Sinclair’s election. So fearful of Sinclair were the owners of the motion picture industry that they threatened to relocate their studios in other states should he emerge victorious.

In April 1935, a “March of Time” newsreel, made with the unwary cooperation of Louisiana Senator Huey Long, demonstrated how a candidate and his supporters can become strong indictments of themselves and their cause. By so doing, the attack on Long prefigured attack ads that remind audiences of the opposition’s self-damaging statements or actions. These ads include reminders of the unfulfilled promises of incumbents as did the National Conservative Political Action Committee’s (NCPAC’s) ‘80 replaying of footage from the Ford-Carter debates of ‘76 in which Carter promised lower inflation, lower unemployment, a lower deficit, and a balanced budget; McGovern’s reminders in ‘72 that Nixon had promised in ‘68 to end the war in Vietnam; and Kefauver’s evocations in ‘56 of the televised promise Ike made about lowering inflation when “Answering America” in ‘52. They also include ads that replay an opponent’s gaffes as Ford’s ads did in ‘76 when they recalled Carter’s promise to increase taxes for those above the median income, as Carter’s ads did in ‘80 when they reminded voters that Reagan had blamed most air pollution on trees, as Humphrey’s ads did in ‘68 by repeating Agnew’s statement that “if you’ve seen one slum you’ve seen ’em all.” But in none of these instances did the indicted candidate cooperate in making the damning ad. In 1935 Huey Long made political history by poisoning the arrow that would be used to shoot him.

Unaware that the newsreel would ridicule him, Long permitted “March of Time” to film a reenacted phone call in which he asked the Senate leadership for more space to accommodate the huge quantities of mail he was receiving. To those scenes the “March of Time” added an impersonator’s reenactments of “some of Long’s more obnoxious behavior, including an unbelievably crude affront to the commander of the
visiting German cruiser *Emden*, whom Long received in his hotel room, dressed in pajamas* and a brawl in the men’s room of a private club.* The narration accompanying the incidents in the film was condemnatory: “To run his state, dictator Long puts in O.K. Allen, his good-natured henchman—new puppet governor of Louisiana. To his new friends in Washington, Huey boasts that back in Louisiana he has the best legislature money can buy.”

At the time the newsreel was shown, Long was a politically powerful senator who, as we noted earlier, commanded free network radio time, and who was touted by some as a successor to the man whom he had once supported and then bitterly opposed—FDR. The film’s conclusion can be interpreted as a reminder that Long coveted FDR’s job. In it “several newsreel shots of Huey Long giving a speech appear optically superim-
posed over each other, the very image of a modern demagogue, uttering what emerged on the sound track as gibberish. This, in turn, was followed by a brief but dignified statement by President Roosevelt.85

So incensed was Long at the newsreel that he introduced legislation into the Louisiana legislature authorizing censorship of movies and newsreels. The bill passed. Mysteriously but not surprisingly, although the film was distributed before passage of the censorship provision, it was not aired as scheduled in New Orleans.

Although campaign-sponsored films had been created on behalf of presidential candidates in earlier campaigns (e.g., Landon in 1936), in 1948 a film may have provided Truman with his razor-thin margin of victory.

Documentary films created for Truman and Dewey in the 1948 election and distributed to movie theaters prophesy the form and content of televised political campaign documentaries. Truman’s film opens with his swearing the presidential oath, then telescopes his life and career, from his Missouri birthplace, to his service in World War I, through segments from key presidential speeches on civil rights, foreign affairs, housing, and Taft-Hartley, to enunciation of the Marshall Plan and the Truman Doctrine. The film culminates in footage of the 1948 Democratic convention and closes with the proclamation “‘Soldier . . . statesman . . . farmer . . . humanitarian . . . Harry S. Truman . . . President of the United States!’ As the band played ‘The Star-Spangled Banner,’ the shot of the President faded into the streaming folds of the American flag.”86

Where Truman’s low-budget film was assembled from existing footage, Dewey’s was specially produced. Where Truman’s film stressed his stands on issues, Dewey’s stressed his personality. The support cast in the Truman film included world leaders such as Stalin, Churchill, and Atlee whose presence placed Truman on a footing as an international leader and statesman. By contrast, Dewey marshaled Senator Arthur Vandenberg, whose testimony about Dewey’s character and temperament seemed to have been extracted under duress.

In the newsreels’ outtakes, the Democratic National Committee staff found an exchange between Truman and a March of Dimes poster child that underscored Truman’s humanity and implicitly heightened the contrast between his candidacy and that of the person who Alice Roosevelt Longworth called the man on top of the wedding cake. “The child was looking stilted throughout the picture-taking,” recalls Sam Brightman a Democratic National Committee staff member who worked on the film. “After it was all over, Truman smiles at her. She smiles at him and just reaches out and hugs him. You couldn’t have actors do that. You couldn’t get that kind of reality.”87
Ironically, the Truman film, which would not have existed had the Republican’s not distributed the Dewey film, benefited from its last minute low budget character. The use of existing footage gave the film a documentary, newsreel-like texture consistent with the theatergoers’ experience of newsreels. The assembled footage made effective use of Truman’s incumbency and by so doing heightened voter awareness of Dewey’s comparative inexperience in national and international affairs. Because it was assembled late in the campaign, the Truman film was aired in the campaign’s last week, a more opportune time in a close election than Dewey’s earlier airings. The Director of Public Relations for the Democratic National Committee, Jack Redding, claims that “during the last six days of the campaign no one could go to the movies anywhere in the United States without seeing the story of the President” and concludes: “It was probably the most important and most successful publicity break in the entire campaign.”

Redding reasoned that the weekly audience of the nation’s 20,000 theaters was approximately 65,000,000 people who constituted “a ‘captive’ audience, for they paid to sit in the theatre and were not going to get up and leave when our film came on the screen. Nearly as important was the fact that we’d be reaching people of all political persuasions, not just Democrats.”

As noteworthy as the large captive bipartisan audience is the role the film industry played in producing the Truman film. Under threat that the Senate would investigate the production of the Dewey film and the theaters showing the Dewey film would be picketed, a representative of the film industry, Universal Newsreels, produced the Truman biography. Industry sources then printed and distributed it at no charge, an in-kind contribution worth at least $30,000.

Sam Brightman, who joined the Democratic National Committee’s communications staff in 1947, explains the process by which the film industry came to produce the film this way:

The movie people said “You make the film; we’ll distribute it.” We said, “We don’t have money to make a film. We thought the newsreel industry would want to do a nice film about Truman.” They seemed reluctant. Jack [Redding] remarked that no matter how the election came out the Democrats were sure to control the Senate and he knew some Senators who sure would want to hold hearings. They would be very curious to know how the arrangements were made to show the Dewey film. So the newsreel companies drew lots. The loser handled the hunt for footage and the other handled putting it together.

So in 1948 over 50,000,000 people paid to view a political ad produced and distributed by the film industry at no cost to the Democratic
party or the Truman campaign. “Newsreels were much more important to us than TV,” concludes Brightman.

Television

In 1939 at the World’s Fair in New York, FDR became the first incumbent president to deliver an address to a television audience. Although it reached less than 100,000 viewers, in 1940 television covered its first political conventions. By 1948 politicians were factoring television coverage into their political equations. In that year both conventions were scheduled in Philadelphia on the co-axial cable linking New York and Washington D.C., putting their messages within viewing range of voters who would decide 168 electoral votes.

By 1948 political hopefuls had come to understand the visual nature of this new medium. Truman, for example, delivered his convention speech in a white suit and dark tie, which a reporter for the New York Times termed “the best masculine garb for the video cameras.” Another speaker, India Edwards, dramatized high prices by waving a piece of meat at the cameras. When the Publicity Director of the Democratic National Committee learned that she planned to use such visual aids he insisted that her speech be scheduled for prime time.

The 1948 election was the first in which presidential candidates purchased television time to influence voters. Although Dewey would also purchase television time before the campaign ended, the first paid television appearance by a presidential candidate occurred on October 5, 1948, when Truman delivered a televised speech from Jersey City, New Jersey. In the aftermath of his narrow victory, Truman concluded that “television had been important in the areas where it was available” but regretted that “it did not cover more of the country.”

By the end of Truman’s presidency, coast-to-coast TV was a reality. In September 1951 Truman’s address before the Japanese peace treaty conference in San Francisco inaugurated the new transcontinental microwave video network.

Once radio and television made mass audiences available, it was only

*Whether in 1948 the Truman campaign sponsored the first televised political spot ad remains, for me at least, an open question. A short clip of film in which he delivers a nonpartisan message urging voting does survive in the Schuck Collection at the John F. Kennedy Library. Since none of the Democrats who worked on media for Truman, including Leonard Reisch, Roger Tubby, and Sam Brightman, recall such an ad, it may have been produced and aired locally in New York, may have been produced but not aired, or may have been part of a newsreel. Professor Victoria Schuck, who preserved the material as part of the collection given to her by the Democratic National Committee, does not know whether the material was created as a TV spot or a newsreel or whether it ever aired.
a question of time before a new political powerbroker emerged, the person who would ultimately come to create the candidates' broadcast and print advertising and shape the strategy of the campaign as well. In 1952, the media consultant, for the most part, was a technician who lifted quotes from speeches, as Rosser Reeves did, located citizens to ask questions, filmed both the question and the answer, edited them together, and added an announcer. Essentially, media consultants were technicians who purchased the air time, checked the lighting, supervised the make-up, arranged the set, and timed the speech. They played little role in the planning of the campaign. Often they did no more than produce live televised speeches. In 1952 the one media adviser whose role prefigured that of the media consultant of today was BBD&O's Ben Duffy whose long-standing relationship with the Republican party elevated his status. It was Duffy who determined that Ike should not debate Stevenson in 1952.

The first generation of television advisers learned politics on the job. Some like Nixon's Ted Rogers, Stevenson's Lou Cowan and William Wilson, and Kennedy's Jack Denove were live television producers; others such as Eisenhower's Carroll Newton and Rosser Reeves and the Democrat's Joseph Katz were professional admen; Charles Guggenheim was a film producer.

By 1964 the adteams had come to stand on an equal footing with the political operatives in the campaign. Veto power, however, still resided with what one of the admen called "the political types." In 1964 those responsible for political advertising begin to speak of themselves and the candidate in the intimacy of the royal "we." "What we were saying is . . ." "What we stood for was . . ." "We won a close election."

Although others in the campaign often produced or brought in producers of advertising apart from those retained by the agency, until 1960 a separate agency had never been spawned simply to create a campaign. What had occurred as the Democrats sought and failed to secure a large Madison Avenue agency in 1952, 1956, and 1960 was that the middle-sized agencies the Party retained supplemented their small staffs with sympathizers borrowed from larger agencies. In 1972, however, Nixon asked Carroll Newton to form an ad hoc agency, one independent of any existing ones, that would come together solely for the duration of the campaign. Newton did. That pattern gave rise to Nixon's November Group in 1972 and Reagan's "Campaign 80" in 1980.

In 1968, for the first time, the advertising supervisor managed an almost autonomous operation. Humphrey's campaign manager, Larry O'Brien, turned advertising over to his old friend Joe Napolitan. Napolitan had O'Brien's trust. O'Brien had Humphrey's trust. Napolitan pretty much did what he wanted.
By 1972 the person creating the Democratic advertising had the kind of access to McGovern that O'Brien had had to Humphrey. Charles Guggenheim had worked in McGovern's races for the Senate and created his media in the primaries and most of the general election with a free hand.

In 1976 after a few Ford intimates wrestled control of advertising away from one advertiser, who then resigned, and had three embarrassing ads produced by his replacement, the campaign learned its lesson. In the general election, a newly engaged firm, Bailey/Deardourff, was given wide latitude within which to work.

Carter sought the presidency in 1976 backed by the media created by the person who had produced the advertising for his winning run for the governorship of Georgia. Like Guggenheim in 1972, Gerald Rafshoon was an insider who participated in strategy decisions and produced what he thought would work. For a brief period during the Carter presidency, Rafshoon became the first media adviser to move from advertising in the general election campaign to a position in the White House.

In 1980 Rafshoon again created Carter’s advertising while Reagan formed a group like Nixon’s November Group headed by that group’s former head, Peter Dailey.

The role of media adviser evolved from one of technical adviser unwelcome in the strategy sessions that governed the campaign to campaign insider responsible for the strategy for all the campaign’s advertising and, often, for its communication strategy, as well. In this evolution the power of the media consultant and that person’s autonomy progressively increased. Concurrently, in a story that requires another book, polling and media production moved from a passing acquaintance to an intimate liaison.

Midway through this evolutionary process, political media consulting became a profession. By the sixties, firms specializing in it emerged. Guggenheim opened his own firm as did Humphrey’s live TV producer Robert Squier. The firm now called Bailey/Deardourff was founded in 1967. Humphrey’s media director, Joe Napolitan, who had been a consultant since the late fifties, founded The American Association of Political Consultants (AAPC) in 1969. In 1957 Alexander Heard identified 41 public relations firms that offered campaign services. None focused solely on these services. In 1972, Rosenbloom identified about 60 firms that did the “bulk of their business in political campaigns” and at least 200 others “offering professional campaign management services as part of their business.”

With the publication of Joe McGinniss’ The Selling of the President:
Broad Sides to Broadcasts

1968 in 1969, the focus of press and public on consultants and their product increased. Prior to the late sixties, an ad would garner media coverage only if it had been aired on behalf of a major contender and was controversial as were Goldwater’s “Choice” and Johnson’s “Daisy” ads.

As their presence became publicly known, media advisers stepped out of the shadows to hold press conferences screening their ads in the hopes of obtaining free exposure for their message. Candidates also held press conferences to announce which adviser they had retained. In 1970 CBS’ Mike Wallace devoted a half hour program to political advertising and admen. When a media consultant resigned or was fired, news reporters wrote explanatory stories.

Since the following chapters will view the campaigns through the optic provided by their advertising, one might well ask what factors govern the sorts of ads a media adviser will create. Six seem to play a role of varying importance:

1. The strengths and weaknesses of the candidate and the opponent.
2. What has worked in the past.
3. Finances.
4. Circumstances such as the public’s need for certain types of assurances.
5. The nature of the news coverage of the campaign.
6. The aesthetic inclinations of the media adviser.

In addition to examining the factors shaping the advertising strategies in each of the campaigns from 1952 to 1980, the following chapters will note how advertising was used to define the campaign. Kennedy, for example, wanted the electorate to view the 1960 campaign through the optic of domestic policy and the question who can better get this country moving again. On the other hand, Nixon wanted voters to ask who better understands what peace demands. In the process of seeing the candidate’s preferred definition of the election through his advertising we will observe that advertising reveals well when a campaign is foundering in search of an overarching theme as Humphrey’s was in September 1968 and Carter’s throughout the general election of 1980. We will see candidates impaled on their own definitions as Carter’s “Leadership for a Change” in 1976 confronts Reagan’s “The Time is Now For Leadership” in 1980. We will also observe candidates caught in dilemmas as Ford was when he wanted to base his campaign on “I’m feeling good about America” but by so doing reminded voters that he pardoned Nixon in the name of putting Watergate behind us.
We will observe advertising setting expectations by which the victor’s presidency will be assessed. These expectations are the product both of candidate’s claims about the future and of their opponent’s prophesies about them.

In addition to telling us how the candidates define the election and what expectations will govern the presidency of the victor, the ads reveal the electoral significance of various voting groups, the relevance the candidates attach to various issues, and the extent to which past presidents have lived up to the images they and their opponents have created for them in their campaigns.