RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

# Selling Politics

Laurence Rees

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BBC BOOKS

To Jonathan Gili

# Introduction

IN THE SPRING of 1991 I was in the plush Manhattan office of one of America's brightest TV political consultants as he confided his propaganda plan for a forthcoming mayoral election in the Mid-West. After a week spent ploughing through research he had at last found a way his candidate could attack the incumbent Mayor.

'We've really got this incumbent with his pants down,' he boasted. 'The research shows that the voters think he's out of touch. And guess what? On the coldest day last year, when your ordinary Joe in the Mid-West couldn't start his car and was knee-deep in snow, guess where the lousy Mayor was – only on vacation in Florida!'

'And?' I prompted, waiting for the punch line.

'And nothing,' he said. 'Don't you get it? We'll make an ad which will intercut the news footage of the bad weather with glamorous shots of Florida palms and beaches. We say: "Whilst you froze, the Mayor was in Miami!"'

'But how could he have known that it was going to snow?' I asked. 'I mean, it wasn't his fault that he was on vacation, was it?'

'Fault?' echoed the consultant. 'Who said anything about fault?'

Here was one of America's most respected political consultants about to make an ad which purported to show that the incumbent Mayor of a Mid-Western town was out of touch because he had happened to be on holiday in Florida when there was a snowstorm at home. The ad (never made

for lack of campaign funds) would have exploited the propaganda powers of television perfectly. No analysis, no attack based on political issues; just an impressionistic, emotional and unanswerable picture of a politician who was so out of touch that he was basking in the sun whilst everyone else froze.

This book is about the work of such men (and all the leading consultants are men). It seeks to examine the inter-relationship between television and politics, particularly the way in which television is used as a medium for propaganda and political manipulation. It argues that the consultants have managed to learn certain truths about the medium of television which they exploit ruthlessly, often working the considerable trick of producing propaganda (like the proposed 'snow' ad) which is unfair yet unanswerable.

In America today the influence of the 'political consultant' is pervasive. Twenty years ago there were a hundred of them; now there are ten thousand. Raymond Strother, a veteran Democratic consultant, put it simply: 'In America today without good professional help, if you're running against a person who has professional help, you have virtually no chance of being elected.' Strother's use of the term 'professional help' is typical of the euphemisms that almost all the consultants I talked to used for their work. They are chary of being described bluntly as propagandists, though according to the dictionary definition of the word 'propaganda' ('organized scheme for propagation of a doctrine or practice') that is precisely what they are.

*Selling Politics* is concerned primarily with the work of the American political consultants, the men who work at the cutting edge of television propaganda. But it does not follow that a study of their work is only of interest to the American reader. For although first developed in the United States, their propaganda techniques have subsequently appeared in other countries, particularly Britain. Both the Conservative and Labour parties have looked to America for

inspiration. John Profumo visited the United States to study the American Presidential campaign of 1952, Sir Gordon Reece examined the ‘photo-opportunity’ in America in the 1970s, and recently the Labour party employed the American consultants Doak and Schrum. Prior to the 1992 election there was even a secret meeting between Shaun Woodward, the former Conservative Director of Communications, and the notorious American propagandist Roger Ailes, the man behind the infamous furlough ad shown during the 1988 Presidential election (see here). Such is the dominance of the American consultant in the field of propaganda that many of them make a good living working in foreign countries. Significantly British propagandists do not work in the United States. The stream of propaganda influence is one way – from the United States to Britain.

This book asserts that it is the medium of television itself which has allowed the American political consultant to flourish. But there are those, notably Professor Kathleen Jamieson, who argue that television is just another delivery system for political messages – indeed, that the medium merits no unique insight. In her monumental work *Packaging the Presidency* she points out that in the nineteenth century handbills were circulated which falsely accused candidates of nefarious crimes. In the same period the ‘pseudoevent’, so beloved of today’s propagandists, was flourishing. She tells how, in the Presidential campaign of 1840, 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’.

At one level Professor Jamieson is, of course, right. Trivial, negative and emotional campaigns have often been a feature of American (and not only American) politics. But television is influential in a way that handbills and primitive ‘pseudo-events’ were not. Television *of itself* has changed politics. This proposition first emerged in Marshall

McLuhan's seminal work *Understanding Media*, and more recently Professor Neil Postman of New York University came to the same conclusion in his *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. In essence, what both McLuhan and Postman are saying is that we mustn't look on television simply as another medium through which thoughts, opinions and personalities can be transmitted. Television has changed the very way it has become necessary to communicate, and thus the very way it has become necessary to formulate political discourse.

Take the question of the importance of the physical appearance of politicians. Abraham Lincoln could have walked down the main street of almost any town in America without being recognized. Millions voted for him because of the views he had expressed; his physical appearance was irrelevant. But for today's politician, appearance is highly relevant, for the first impression a person makes on television is a visual one. This causes at least one leading American consultant to maintain that Abraham Lincoln would be unelectable today. Lincoln's strengths – his thoughtfulness, his literacy, his political experience – are simply not of major importance today alongside the propagandist's new requirements for a Presidential candidate: physical attractiveness, wealth (or wealthy friends), charm and 'likeability'. This is a clear case – and this book attempts to show that there are other similar cases – where the medium has *changed* the nature of politics. Politically unregulated television of the sort permitted in America naturally leads one to the conclusion that today's ideal candidate is less like Abraham Lincoln and more like Johnnie Carson. If this is the case, then the assertion that television has changed politics fundamentally is self-evidently true.

That being so, we need also to reformulate our own views and promote further, more politically desirable change. This book recognizes the power of television and is a call for a

better understanding of its nature. At no time in the history of political life has such an understanding been more necessary.

*Selling Politics* argues that the influence of television-inspired criteria of judgement on politics has been underestimated – particularly in America. There are obvious reasons why this has happened, not least that it is in the interests neither of the politician nor of his propagandist to stress the importance of TV in case they should each be thought 'trivial'. Yet time and again we see both politicians and their propagandists operating in ways that demonstrate how they *have* altered their behaviour to conform with the demands of TV. Not all TV consultants are as open as Michael Deaver, President Reagan's closest White House aide, who told me that while working for Reagan he decided to become 'a better producer' than the networks themselves, on the basis that if he achieved this aim then the networks would 'buy my product'.

Television has had an impact on American society that is impossible to quantify accurately. But we can be sure that television is the medium through which most people primarily form their view of the world. Only personal experience is a greater influence on opinion-forming than television, and even personal experience is increasingly related in TV terms – witness the American pilots interviewed on TV during the Gulf War who could not recount their experience of combat without reference to the Hollywood film *Top Gun*. We should not be surprised that TV and film values have become the standard of judgement, for as the *Washington Post*'s Paul Taylor says: 'Today there are more TVs than toilets in American homes. The typical household keeps a set on for seven hours and two minutes per day. By the time a baby born when the coaxial cable was laid reaches seventy, he or she will have spent more than seven solid years watching television.'[1]

TV consultants themselves are the first to appreciate how television has changed the political landscape. Roger Ailes states that the purpose of his writing is to show 'how television has changed all the rules of communication and why it affects you more than you think'.[2] Ailes is positive about the benefits of the medium. Indeed he writes, 'I often think television has done so much good for people that I hope they have television in heaven.'

Others disagree. Professor Postman told me: 'What I would object to is their trying to claim that this new kind of politics is good for us. It isn't. It degrades us. It keeps people cynical about and indifferent to the voting process.' This book examines Ailes' claim that TV should be a necessary heavenly appliance, along with the allied view that TV consultants have not of themselves harmed political life.

A common objection to detailed study of the work of today's TV consultants is that, in essence, the effectiveness of propaganda is hardly relevant. Critics say that advertising cannot change firmly held views, and that if a political party has an unpopular policy then no amount of presentational glitz can help the candidate. Political commentators in Britain were quick to point to the skilful Hugh Hudson 'Kinnock' party election broadcast in the 1987 British General Election and to say, in effect, 'Great ad – shame they lost'. To which the answer should be: 'Remember that propaganda skills will give you the edge that *can* make a difference.' Professor Popkin puts it well when he states that voters make up their mind on who to vote for based on a combination of 'past experience, daily life, the media and past campaigns'.[3] All of these elements are susceptible to influence from the propagandist. Presentation *can* influence the selection of individual candidates and thus the content of political policy. If the candidate's television presentational techniques are inadequate, this does not simply mean that he loses an opportunity to put his point across effectively; it means he will be judged an incompetent politician. Most

voters are so steeped in TV and its values that the ability to come across well on television is one of the basic skills that a politician now needs – perhaps the most fundamental, for without good television presentational techniques (certainly in America) it is next to impossible to get elected.

Another common error is to suppose that the powerful have little need of propaganda techniques, since they merely exercise their power regardless. 'What does it matter that Hitler had Goebbels?' such people say. 'Hitler had the political power to *make* people do what he wanted.' Of course, if a dictator holds a gun to your head and asks you to recite a particular slogan then (if survival is more important than principle) you will be best advised to recite it. But any totalitarian who operates in such a way is making a grave communications mistake, for as soon as the gun is removed you will detest him and disbelieve his slogan. The case of Nicolae Ceausescu, discussed in detail in Chapter 7, demonstrates how the Romanian dictator made just such an error. If, instead of showing mind-numbingly dull TV propaganda, Ceausescu had followed the advice of Goebbels – who in a famous speech talked of the necessity of 'winning the hearts' of the people – and transmitted *entertaining* propaganda, then it is possible that the Romanian dictator might not have fallen. A population entranced by propaganda is a population which would, given the opportunity, actually *vote* the dictator back into office. That is how important propaganda skills are. They are the difference between success and failure; in Ceausescu's case, between life and death.

Several of the chapters in this book start with reference to the work of Dr Josef Goebbels, a dead and personally discredited figure. This may seem incongruous in a book which is primarily about the contemporary democratic use of television as a means of political persuasion and manipulation. But the plain fact is that the more the work of contemporary 'communicators' is examined, the more, in

most respects, Goebbels has been there before them. Goebbels was undeniably a nasty piece of work, but he was a genius in his chosen field and one should be prepared to learn from nasty people as well as nice ones. He was a man who anticipated and reflected popular taste, and it was with a growing sense of surprise that I realized, after we had interviewed many of those who knew and worked with Goebbels, that were he alive today he would be influencing people not through news or current affairs programmes, but through game shows, soap operas and comedy.

All achievement is an interaction between ability and opportunity, and it was Goebbels's good fortune to be working at a time when the 'talkies' were beginning. Goebbels subsequently invented many of the rules of visual propaganda – the idea of the 'snow' ad which was to contrasting the icy Mid-West with sunny Miami could have been devised using his guidelines – and the effectiveness of his methods can be seen on our television screens every night.

## *Notes*

1. Taylor, Paul: *See How They Run – Electing the President in an Age of Mediaocracy*
2. Ailes, Roger: *You Are the Message*
3. Popkin, Samuel L.: *The Reasoning Voter*

# Chapter One

# The Great Truth

IN THE SPRING of 1940 Josef Goebbels ordered a special bus to transport the cast of the recently completed film *The Queen's Heart* (a sympathetic portrayal of Mary Queen of Scots) to his country estate in the woods of Lanke, north of Berlin. Amongst the cast was a beautiful dark-haired young actress called Margot Hielscher, whom the Reichsminister had taken a particular fancy to. On her arrival she was entranced by Goebbels. 'He was very charming,' she says. 'I never would have thought that a politician would have such a routine in handling the females.'

After a traditional Rhineland meal of sausages and mash (the Reichsminister apparently mashed the potatoes himself), Goebbels announced that he had prepared a wonderful 'treat' for the cast.

That night they watched one of Goebbels's favourite movies, a film banned to ordinary Germans because of the profound harm he thought it could do. The film was *Gone with the Wind*.

Goebbels adored *Gone with the Wind*: he was almost obsessed with the story of Rhett Butler and Scarlett O'Hara. 'He saw *Gone with the Wind* at least twenty or thirty times,' says Fritz Hippler, one of Goebbels's most trusted film directors, 'and every new crowd of guests was shown this film as an example.'

Goebbels's love of *Gone with the Wind* is the key to understanding the power of his own propaganda methods. He was not only the first man to realize the true persuasive potential of the medium of film, he was the first to develop the 'Great Truth' about the propaganda use of the medium – an insight that can be summarized thus: in order to be effective, film propaganda must first be entertaining. As Fritz Hippler puts it, 'Each film, including the ones demanded by the state, was meant to be entertaining, not boring, because it makes no sense to make propaganda when the one who had to be captured by the propaganda goes to sleep.' It was no use making films which simply trumpeted the glories of Nazism. The people might be made to watch such crude propaganda, but they could never be made to like it.

Goebbels cared deeply about whether the audience enjoyed the films he made, often poring over box office returns to see what the customer reaction was to a particular favourite. Other totalitarian propagandists like Saddam Hussein or President Kim have mostly ignored what their captive audience actually thought of their work. This has been their single biggest communications mistake. A captive audience is not necessarily a receptive one.

It was an insight that seems to have come to Goebbels during a viewing of the earlier film classic *Battleship Potemkin*, Eisenstein's masterpiece. 'This is a marvellous film without equal in the cinema,' he wrote. 'Anyone with no firm political conviction could become a Bolshevik after seeing this film. It shows very clearly that a work of art can be tendentious, and even the worst kind of ideals can be propagated if it is done through the medium of an outstanding work of art.'

The 'Great Truth' recognized by Goebbels, that all film (and by extension television) propaganda must first be entertaining, has been concealed behind the common historical perception of Goebbels as the 'evil genius'

responsible for such works of horror as *Der Ewige Jude (The Eternal Jew* – the notorious film which showed rats intercut with pictures of Jews). The truth is that Goebbels disliked most of the crude anti-Jewish films. His ambition was to make a film as artistically fine as *Battleship Potemkin* or as emotionally powerful as *Gone with the Wind.* 'Goebbels was movie-crazy,' says Arthur Rabenalt, a successful film director of the period. 'He liked to watch pretty women and so he liked exactly the same thing as the audience wanted.' He was the least didactic of men. Other cinema favourites included Garbo in *Ninotchka, Mrs Miniver* and Walt Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.

Goebbels was master of the paradox that propaganda must first be entertaining, but pure entertainment can also be propaganda. Arthur Rabenalt puts it this way: 'The political intention of the unpolitical film was that each unpolitical film had a political purpose – to get the audience off the streets, away from the worries of the household and the family and to entertain them.'

The Reichsminister knew that by providing films that were purely entertaining he *was* providing propaganda – propaganda which showed how much the Reich cared for its people, how much the Nazis were concerned that the people would find some escape from the rigours of war. The need of the masses for escape became especially marked after the German defeat at Stalingrad. In 1943 Goebbels watched long queues form outside cinemas immediately after a series of heavy air raids, and wrote: 'People crave recreation after the gruelling days and nights of the past week. They want solace for their souls.'

Goebbels believed so profoundly in the influence of entertainment-based films that when all else failed, when there was no other way of countering the enemy, after he had tried propagating fear, enmity and hate, he turned once more to entertainment. In 1943 he released one of the most charming and colourful entertainment films of the period –

*The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*. And in early 1945, when he must have known defeat was inevitable, he ordered troops diverted from the front line to act as extras in a historical drama, *Kolberg.* Entertainment was the ultimate propaganda panacea.

Not surprisingly, Goebbels was under pressure from other senior members of the Nazy party to deliver more conventional 'propaganda'. 'They said: "Where is the film about the Labour Service?"' says Rabenalt. '"Where is the film about the Hitler Youth? Where is the film about the German woman? Where are all these films?" And none of them materialized.'

The Reichsminister was so confident in his vision of the purpose of film that he resisted such pressure. Fritz Hippler, who knew him well, believes that Goebbels recognized the power of film in a profound way, that Goebbels knew that 'the articles in the papers or what was said on the radio influenced the brain, the consciousness, the intelligence, the imagination, while the real primary forces of men are moved by the unconscious, that which he doesn't raise into his consciousness, but which drives him on from beyond his consciousness. On these primary sources, the moving picture works in a particularly intensive manner, and this medium he therefore wanted to use in a particularly pointed way.'

Because Goebbels realized that film was working on the 'real primary forces of man' and not on the intellect, he knew that a number of important and far-reaching consequences followed. The first was that a propagandist who strives first to entertain should never try to *tell* anyone anything. Information is rarely entertaining, for it appeals to the intellect. Entertainment, on the other hand, is, because it appeals to the emotions. If a propagandist can find a route through to his audience's emotions, can change how they collectively feel, then he can have a profound influence. Emotions cannot easily be challenged intellectually, so once

a ‘feeling’ is created it is harder to dislodge than an opinion formed by mere reason. This was a profound insight into the propaganda power of film, an insight that was later to be fundamental to the success of the television propagandists who followed Goebbels.

Even when he found it necessary to insert more conventional propaganda content into his entertainment films, he always felt that if the audience registered the propaganda consciously then he had failed. He never wanted viewers to be conscious of watching a work designed to influence them politically. This is one of the main reasons why Goebbels loved film. No other medium before the invention of television could have had such a wide appeal – an appeal based upon an unintellectual approach. Goebbels’s diaries are full of despair at the ‘intellectual’ attempts of directors to influence film propaganda (and bear in mind that Goebbels was himself the most intellectually gifted of the Nazi elite). On 12 January 1940 he writes of Arthur Rabenalt: ‘Check the film *White Lilacs*. Unfortunately a failure from Rabenalt. I am a little depressed by the way our directors start with a success and then always go off the rails and become intellectual.’ In December 1940 he writes (and one can almost hear the irritation): ‘Intellectualism is the worst enemy of propaganda. I am constantly affirming this.’

From the first day Goebbels took office as Reichsminister of Propaganda in 1933, at thirty-five the youngest minister in any government in the world at the time, he made film propaganda his most important priority. In the early years of his control, film-makers often made the misjudgement of Goebbels that much of popular history has made since. They imagined Goebbels to be a charmless, humourless Nazi hard-liner. It is not difficult to see how they might have reasoned: ‘He’s a Nazi, and Nazis like marching. So we’ll give him what he wants – plenty of parades.’ They realized their mistake when they saw Goebbels’s reaction to early

films like *Hitlerjunge Quex*, the story of a heroic boy in the Hitler Youth who, during the film's climax, ascends to a Nazi heaven and finds it peopled by symmetrically marching stormtroopers. The Reichsminister hated such heavy-handed work. 'If I see a film made with conviction,' said Goebbels, 'then I will reward its maker. What I do not want to see are films that begin and end with National Socialist Parades. Leave them to us, we understand them.'

Goebbels exercised ruthless control over the German film industry, especially over the content of the newsreels. Every Sunday evening Fritz Hippler, head of newsreel production, would drive out to Goebbels's house with the rough cut of the proposed films for the following week's cinema newsreel. Then he would take Notes of the changes in picture and script demanded by Goebbels. There would be another viewing with Goebbels late on Monday, for him to give his final approval to the film before it was released to the cinemas.

The Reichsminister would also interfere in every detail of the making of German feature films: scriptwriting, directing and casting – particularly casting. At times his conduct mirrored the excesses of the Hollywood 'casting couch' producers. Goebbels was not simply concerned with which actress was best for a particular film; he was also influenced by which actresses would go to bed with him. As the price of being cast he often insisted that the leading lady slept with him. Many did so willingly. Rabenalt recalls asking one leading actress why she had succumbed, and she replied, 'He just interested me. I wanted to know a man of world history. You don't miss out on that kind of thing.' Goebbels slept with hundreds of young starlets, but without any emotional intimacy – he even insisted that they still call him *Herr Reichsminister* during sex.

Hitler shared neither Goebbels's love of actresses nor his love of Hollywood entertainment films. He wanted propaganda that spoke in obvious terms to the masses. In

*Mein Kampf* he wrote: ‘The receptive powers of the masses are very restricted, and their understanding is feeble. On the other hand, they quickly forget. Such being the case, all effective propaganda must be confined to a few bare essentials and those must be expressed as far as possible in stereotyped formulae.’ Hitler never said it was a precondition of effective propaganda that it should first be entertaining. Despite Goebbels’s professed hero-worship of Hitler, a disagreement on this point between the Führer and his Reichsminister for Propaganda always seemed possible. Just such a disagreement eventually occurred over propaganda against the Jews, a subject always dear to Hitler’s heart.

During 1939 Goebbels told Fritz Hippler that newsreel cameramen in Poland should take film of the Jews of Warsaw. He told Hippler he needed these pictures for the German archive because ‘at some foreseeable time’ all these Jews were going to be ‘transported to the East’. Goebbels wished to have a record of Jewish customs made, just as an anthropologist might make a film of a jungle tribe before their way of life becomes extinct. On 17 October Goebbels records in his diary: ‘Hippler back from Poland with a lot of material for the Ghetto film. . . . Never seen anything like it. Scenes so horrific and brutal in their explicitness that one’s blood runs cold. One shudders at such barbarism. This Jewry must be eliminated.’

He then realized he could create propaganda from this ‘horrific’ material. On 28 October he wrote: ‘In the evening look at films. Rushes for our Jew-film. Shocking. This film will be our biggest hit.’

Hippler recalls how Goebbels saw the rough cut of the ‘Jew-film’ (which came to be known as *Der Ewiger Jude* – *The Eternal Jew*) and said he ‘liked it very much’. But shortly afterwards he ordered the film to be recut. Alterations were constantly demanded, each new version becoming more bloody and aggressive.

On 3 November Goebbels had written, ‘The Jew-film is very good’, but by the 11th he was writing, ‘I work on the Jew-film, the script still needs considerable revision. Discussion with Hippler on the film’s future form.’ On 10 December he wrote, ‘The Poland film (i.e. the Jew-film). Turned out quite excellent. A bull’s eye! I am very happy with it.’ Yet on the 13th he records: ‘Work long hours on films and the newsreel. The Poland film too had to be re-edited yet again at the Führer’s wish.’ So we now suspect that it was Hitler who wanted the changes. It was Hitler who wanted the film to be so horrific. Fritz Hippler says: ‘Hitler wanted to bring the “evidence” so to speak with this film that the Jews are a parasitic race within men, who had to be separated from the rest of men.’ As a result of Hitler’s personal interest in the film, Hippler says, ‘Goebbels demanded rat scenes because rats were portrayed as a symbol for Jews.’

More months passed, and still the ‘Jew-film’ had not been completed to the Führer’s satisfaction. The constant cutting and recutting seems to have wearied even Goebbels. On 12 January he wrote: ‘I shall have to rework the Jew-film again.’ Eventually, in late spring 1940, the film was released. It was a flop. Some scenes depicting the slaughter of animals according to Jewish rites were so disgusting that women fainted. As Hippler now puts it laconically, ‘The demand of the audience was not there. While other films were sold out, the demand for this film at the ticket office was lacking.’

There is no direct criticism of Hitler’s judgement over the ‘Jew-film’ in Goebbels’s diaries – he was, after all, intending them as a posthumous documentary record of the greatness of the Third Reich, the Führer and his own role in it all. But there is an entry in his diary on 5 July 1941 which illustrates their diverging approach to propaganda. Goebbels wrote: ‘A few disagreements over the newsreel. The Führer wants more polemical material in the script. I would rather have the pictures speak for themselves and confine the script to

explaining what the audience would not otherwise understand. I consider this to be more effective, because then the viewer does not see the art in it.'

So the reputation Goebbels received after his death as the master of crude, vicious and evil propaganda is misplaced. On the contrary, he tried his best to provide the German people with entertaining propaganda. In November 1942 he wrote, 'It really seems to me that we should be producing more films, but above all, lighter and more entertaining films which the people are continually requesting.'

Goebbels must have been overburdened with regrets as the war neared its end: regret that the Reich was over, regret that he felt compelled to take his own life, regret that he had never succeeded in making a film as good as *Battleship Potemkin* or *Gone with the Wind*. But had he known the future he would have had yet one more regret: that he did not live to master the medium that would have been even more to his taste than film, a medium born for the intellectual who realizes that the key to its propaganda mastery is its lack of intellectuality. Even more than with film, Goebbels would have exercised mastery over the propaganda power of television. The irony is that many of the propaganda truths he discovered about film were laboriously reinvented by television propagandists a generation later. That rebirth occurred appropriately enough in the New World – specifically in Manhattan in the early sixties.

## A new world of propaganda

In 1980 I was lucky enough to meet the grand-daddy of American commercial TV, the man whom David Halberstam in *The Powers That Be* described as 'the greatest huckster of them all', the founder and chairman of the board of CBS, William S. Paley. In an interview for the BBC, conducted in his penthouse suite at CBS headquarters on West 56th

Street in Manhattan, he sat surrounded by items from his exquisite art collection and expressed polite incomprehension at the notion that there was any criterion for providing an honourable TV service other than simple viewer demand. ‘We give them what they want,’ he told us. ‘It’s called democracy.’ The idea of ‘public service’ broadcasting, of providing programmes which are uneconomic to make but which the broadcasters on behalf of society feel ought to be made, was wholly alien to him. ‘The ordinary guy gets home at night,’ he said. ‘He sits down in front of the TV, he’s had a hard day at work. He opens a can of beer. He doesn’t want to see opera, he wants to see *I Love Lucy*.’

It was under the pressure of the unbridled commercialism created by men like Paley that American politicians lurched into television. The medium as it developed in America was wholly commercial, wholly audience-driven. And what do the audience crave? They crave just what Mr Paley so successfully and profitably gave them for all those years – they crave entertainment. From the first, the American politician would have to compete on TV not just with entertainment-based programmes, but with entertainment-based adverts. It was inevitable that this simple fact would mean politics would have to change – with some politicians facing up to the new reality more quickly than others.

It was poor Adlai Stevenson whom history cast as the dinosaur of the television age, the man who tried to press on as if nothing had happened. Stevenson, a literate and highly intelligent man, challenged Dwight D. Eisenhower for the Presidency of the United States in 1952 and 1956, and lost both times. He belonged squarely to the age of the ‘stump’ speaker, an age that it’s hard for those of us born into the television age to imagine. Professor Postman in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* paints a romantic picture: ‘. . . the tradition of the “stump” speaker was widely practised, especially in the Western States. By the stump of the felled

tree or some equivalent open space, a speaker would gather an audience, and, as the saying had it, “take the stump for two or three hours”.’ Such politics are still practised in the few remaining countries that television has not yet quite colonized. In India, for example, politicians who visit villages are still sometimes expected to speak for several hours as a test of their erudition. They are still expected to convey a message of information rather than entertainment.

Stevenson clearly reasoned that the simple purpose of television was to convey his ‘stump’ speech. One sympathizes with him. On first acquaintance it must have been hard for an intellectual to understand that television was not merely a conveyor of political messages but a changer of messages. Stevenson thought of himself as a ‘writer’. He would be seen constantly altering his speech right up to the moment of the ‘live’ television broadcast. For him the most important aspect of his television performance was the fluency of his words. So spare a thought for his poor producer, who realized that a single, endless shot of Stevenson – not a particularly attractive man – reading his speech to camera was going to have to compete for viewer attention with professional products like *I Love Lucy* and the ads for Ford automobiles.

Stevenson’s TV campaign was doomed to failure, especially since it was pitted against that of General Eisenhower, whose team of TV experts coached him in a format entitled *Eisenhower Answers the Nation* in which the candidate gave short, snappy answers to short, snappy questions posed by various stooges. ‘That an old soldier should come to this,’ Eisenhower is reputed to have murmured in the studio during the recording. But this particular old soldier knew enough to realize that he had to learn new tricks if he wanted to become President. In particular, he knew that he must listen to and trust his television consultant.

Stevenson's conception of the role of his TV consultant is recorded by Professor Jamieson in *Packaging the Presidency*: 'One morning at 1 a.m. during the Democratic convention in 1956, Stevenson summoned William Watson, who had produced his live political broadcasts in the primaries. "I'm having terrible trouble with my television set," said Stevenson, "the reception is very bad, and I wonder if you could drop down and fix it?"'

Why didn't men like Stevenson recognize at once that television was a medium of political persuasion like no other? Perhaps it was because they feared the truth – that television would change political life. In one telling TV advert in 1956 Stevenson announced that TV 'isn't going to stop me campaigning, I'm still going to go out and meet people'. But TV was to change almost everything, campaigning included.

One of the first Presidential candidates to spot the growing influence of television was John F. Kennedy in 1960. Theodore Sorenson, Kennedy's speechwriter, recalls that on a trip through West Virginia Kennedy spotted the 'tiny ramshackle shacks with no plumbing and no newspapers or magazines, but with large television aerials. He had seen surveys showing twice as many Americans citing television as their primary source of campaign information as those citing press and periodicals.'

Just what were the propaganda rules of this powerful new medium? In the fifties and early sixties politicians and their advisers stumbled around searching for the answer. But Dr Goebbels could have told politicians the truth at once. After all, he had already discovered it. Since television, like film, is a medium of entertainment, it follows that politicians must produce entertaining propaganda. One man, more than any other, began to exploit this truth in work which followed, however unconsciously, in the footsteps of Goebbels. His name is Tony Schwartz.