

## ***The Great Media Bailout***

Carol Wilder

Before Joe McGinniss became known in 2010 for the creepy act of renting a house next door to Sarah Palin on Lake Lucille in Wasilla, Alaska, he shot to fame at the age of 26 for his 1968 insider campaign report *The Selling of the President*. 1968 was one of the most turbulent years in American history -- the North Vietnamese Tet Offensive decisively turned U.S. public opinion against the war, Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King were assassinated followed by widespread protests and riots, sex and drugs and rock 'n roll dominated youth culture, and Lyndon Johnson announced "I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your president." And oh yes - Richard M. Nixon was elected President of the United States of America. McGinniss describes the *how* of Nixon's victory in a book that illustrates another often overlooked revolutionary facet of 1968 - the full-on implementation of visually savvy product merchandising techniques designed to sell a political candidate to an impressionable American electorate.

Marshall McLuhan's then-novel idea that "the medium is the message" is front and center in McGinniss' account as he relates the careful crafting of a not-very-attractive or likeable Richard Nixon ("grumpy, cold and aloof") into a saleable commodity. McGinniss stumbled into the Nixon campaign when his request to cover Hubert Humphry was denied. Perhaps because of his youth McGinniss was not taken seriously as a reporter by the Nixon operatives, especially Roger Ailes, and apparently they held little back. At one point Ailes famously commented on Nixon "You put him on television, you've got a problem right away. He's a funny-looking guy. He looks like somebody hung him in a closet overnight and

images except the walking woman, shot on film. The announcer intones in ominous baritone "A violent crime is committed in America every sixty seconds." McGinniss remarks "Watching it, you were sure the woman would not make it to the end of the street, or the end of the commercial, without being mugged. But she did." Gene Jones had a hard time finding an actress once he revealed the ad was for Nixon, and according to McGinniss had to shoot the film sixteen times to get the right look of "controlled anxiety" on the woman's face.

With these attention-grabbing mini-masterpieces of political theatre for a television audience, the McLuhan Age of political media was officially born. Some argue that the shift to social media in the past decade has been transformational in a new key, but I would suggest the recent shift is more a difference in quantity than kind. Once the power of visual media and the exponential power of transmedia were understood, we became permanent residents of Baudrillard's hall of mirrors with "more and more information and less and less meaning." Participatory media, despite the surface sense of connectedness, only amplify the echo.

What *has* changed over the past decade is the scale and sophistication of distribution of political advertising and the lawless landscape brought about by the radical deregulation of campaign advertising. Now more than ever the driving force is money, money, money. Did I mention money? It didn't take the Citizens United decision of the U.S. Supreme Court to convince most Americans that political candidates are bought and sold like mayonnaise or tulips or crack in the corporate oligarchic state. That phenomenon, as McGinniss documents, started over half a century ago. The mystery is that a few manage to retain a shred of integrity and vision.

Several themes surface throughout the presidential campaign ads curated by Muntadas and Reese: the use of the "we" technique, fear appeals (illegal immigrants, drugs, Willie Horton, nuclear terrorism, crime), and last but not least credibility: Who do you trust? Who provides evidence of competence, integrity, and concern about people? These are the very elements of what Aristotle called *ethos*, when he wrote with certainty 2500 years ago that the impact of the speaker's personality comprised of character, intelligence, and good will toward the audience was the most powerful element in persuasion. It is a standard that holds to this day, if only we can listen with our better selves, the selves who don't always take the easy way and fall for the fool's gold.

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