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The Selling of the President 1968



by Joe McGinniss

“Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never harm me.” Well, maybe. But I don’t think Richard Nixon will ever be the same.

Joe McGinniss is a young man who has just written his first book, *The Selling of The President, 1968*. It may well be the most important book written about the last election. If you haven’t yet read it, I urge you to do so.

The Selling of the President is about the role of television in Mr. Nixon’s run for the Presidency. McGinniss’ thesis is that the men on Mr. Nixon’s advertising staff used the same techniques to sell Mr. Nixon to the public that they use to sell certain brands of cigarettes or toothpaste. As one of Nixon’s ad men put it during the campaign, “Without television he wouldn’t have a chance. With it, he cannot lose.”

First, Nixon’s advertising staff found out what the public did not like about Nixon (his coldness, his supposed ruthlessness, etc.). Then, they proceeded to change his image to make him appear to be what the people wanted. If the voter wanted to elect a “friendly” President, Mr. Nixon (although not by nature a friendly or warm man) could be made to *seem* friendly: he could be cued to smile here, tell a joke there. Did the voter want an emotional

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candidate? All right. Richard Nixon would be reminded to make an occasional reference to the starving children of Biafra in his speeches.

McGinniss concludes that, "On television, it matters less that he (the candidate)" does not have ideas. His personality is what the viewers want to share. . . ."

Roger Ailes, one of the key men in the Nixon ad campaign, perhaps sums up the thesis of the book: "This (TV packaging) is the beginning of a whole new concept. This is the way they'll be elected forevermore. The next guys up will have to be performers. . . . The interesting question is, how sincere is a TV set? If you take a cold guy and stage him warm, can you get away with it?"

This question, of course, is the crux of the matter. We are going to be electing people for a long time. Will we choose only men who look good? Must they have the style of a Johnny Carson to win? Will we defeat the ugly man or the overintense man because he bothers us in some way—even though he may be the most decent human being?

Read Mr. McGinniss' book. Not only is his stuff fascinating, but he can write. And his sense of irony will keep you laughing (or crying) all the way to the poll booth.

—*Victoria Pellegrino*