Has television taken over the practice of American politics? Have cynically manipulated images and sound bytes mesmerized the American public? Have politicians bypassed the citizen's rational decision-making process with a shortcut to some image center in the brain that values appearance over substance, and flash over philosophy? In American politics today, do the eyes have it?

Anyone listening to political commentary in the weeks before the November elections would surely answer yes. The airwaves teemed with political commercials. The newspapers overflowed with commentary about the broadcast spots, and "truth boxes" monitored the accuracy of the television ad claims and counterclaims. And then new TV spots incorporated the print commentary about the old spots. At times, candidates and voters seemed to be on the sidelines, passively observing media consultants and ad agencies on the playing field.

As soon as the election was over, however, talk about the brilliance or mendacity of 30-second demagoguery faded. On November 5, every politician was a candidate, and took a candidate's obsessive interest in every little bit of good or harm that might come from advertising. On November 7, there were only winning candidates, glad to be in office, and losers, seeking some kind of solace in a bad time. The losers seemed to change quickly from activists to philosophers, from political strategists to political scientists. So Dianne Feinstein's campaign manager, Duane Garrett, was suddenly reminding people that for twenty-five years (with the exception of 1974, the Watergate year) California voted Republican for president and
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governor — so what else could one expect in 1990? In his post-election assessment, the story was not that Feinstein lost but that she came as close as she did.

Did Feinstein’s TV spots make a difference? Did Paul Wellstone’s in Minnesota? Or Jesse Helms’s in North Carolina? The question, Duane Garrett notwithstanding, is still important. But it is notoriously elusive. Despite all the attention that the press had lavished on political commercials, it is no simple task to evaluate their potency, as opposed to observing their ubiquity and decrying their negativity. Even the newspaper “truth box” commentaries, for instance, have been criticized for focusing on the commercials’ explicit claims rather than their visual imagery — for reading television as if it were radio and failing to understand the overwhelming power of the image.

But is the image overpowering? Does the image conquer all in political television? Even that apparently safe assumption can be questioned.

Take, for instance, the story media critic Michael Arlen tells in Thirty Seconds (Penguin, 1980) about the making of an AT&T “Research Out and Touch Someone” commercial. In one version of the commercial, a group of men have gone off to a rural retreat for a weekend of fishing. The weekend is a disaster; it is pouring rain the whole time. We see them huddled in their cabin in the woods, cooking hamburgers, while one of them talks to friends back home, singing the praises of their manly adventure. The man on the phone is staring into a frying pan full of hamburgers while he says into the receiver, “Boy, you should see the great trout we’ve got cooking here.” When test audiences were asked what the men were cooking for dinner, they replied overwhelmingly — trout. Trout. One of the advertising executives in charge of the project comments: “I have to tell you we were very discouraged. Some of our guys were even talking of junking the commercial, which was a good one, with a nice humorous flow to it. Well, we ended up making it, but what we had to do was, when we came to that segment, we put the camera almost inside the frying pan, and in the frying pan we put huge, crude chunks of hamburger that were almost red. I mean, just about all you could see was raw meat. This time, when we took in to the audience, it tested OK. That is, most of the test audience — though, in fact, still not everybody — finally said ‘hamburger’.”

The trout/hamburger story has not made its way into the common culture of media consulting, political journalism, or academic criticism. The ability of verbal cues to trump the visual is forgotten while the contrary lesson, that a picture overrides ten thousand words, is regularly retold.

A current favorite is the story of the Lesley Stahl four and-a-half-minute piece CBS ran during the 1984 presidential campaign. Its subject: how the White House staged events for Ronald Reagan and manipulated the press, especially television. Stahl later said that a White House official called her soon after the piece aired and said he’d loved it. “How could you?” she responded. He said, “Haven’t you figured it out yet? The public doesn’t pay any attention to what you say. They just look at the pictures.” Stahl, on reflection — but not, I think, on very much reflection — came to believe the White House was probably right: all she had done was to
assemble, free of charge, a Republican campaign film, a wonderful montage of Reagan appearing in upbeat scenes.

In the world of media criticism and political consulting, the Stahl story is presented as powerful evidence of the triumph of pictures over words and emotion over rationality in American politics. It is a major piece of evidence for New York Times reporter Hedrick Smith's conclusion that the eye is more powerful than the ear in American politics; it opens journalist Martin Schram's account of television in the 1984 election; Washington Post columnist David Broder and communications scholar Kathleen Jamieson cite it to similar account. But the story's punch depends on our believing that the White House official knew what he was talking about. Did he?

In this case, no one really knows. But in another case we have information that indicates that the Reagan White House did not understand the power of pictures on television. In 1982 the country was in the midst of a recession and the Reagan administration was faring badly in the polls. The networks were making efforts to dramatize the country's economic plight not only by reporting the national unemployment figures, but also by focusing on a particular person or family hurt by hard times. The White House was outraged and criticized the networks for presenting the sad tale of the man in South Succotash and missing the general economic trends that, according to the White House, were more positive. Obviously, the White House assumed that the emotionally compelling, visually powerful vignette had much more impact on the American public than dry statistics. But when political scientists Donald Kinder and Shanto Iyengar conducted a series of careful experiments with television viewing, they found that the captivating vignette on economic affairs did no more than the bare statistics to lead viewers to believe economic affairs were a major problem facing the nation. In fact, the evidence in Kinder and Iyengar's News That Matters (University of Chicago Press, 1984) ran modestly in the other direction — viewers were more impressed by statistics than by down-home stories about the gravity of the economic crisis. This result runs counter to common sense. Isn't it true that a picture is worth all those words? Are the social scientists in this case (and not for the first time) just plain wrong?

I don't think so. There is a way to understand their results, consistent with voting studies that political scientists other than Kinder have undertaken. People do not automatically extrapolate from individual experience, even their own, to the nation as a whole. When American citizens go to the polls, for instance, they distinguish between their own personal economic situation and their sense of how the nation as a whole is doing — and typically they vote according to their sense of how the nation as a whole is doing. They do not cast reflex-like "pocketbook" votes. When people see a television story on the plight of an individual family, they do not automatically generalize to the state of the nation. Indeed, the form of the vignette encourages them to discount the story as unrepresentative. If, say, the vignette pictures a black family, a significant number of whites may routinely discount the story as a special case, not a representative one, because they do not identify with blacks. If the news pictures a farm family,
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an urban family may not identify. In a sense, these viewers are not “visually literate”; they do not follow the visual logic by which one instance of poverty or unemployment is meant to represent the general phenomenon. Viewers find more general significance, then, in Department of Labor statistics than in artfully composed and emotionally compelling photographic essays on the economy.

The Lesley Stahl episode is the latest addition to our telemythology, a set of widely circulated stories about the dangerous powers of television. With respect to politics, there are three key elements of that mythology:

— Kennedy defeated Nixon in 1960 because he presented a more attractive image in the first television debate.

— Television’s graphic portrayal of the war in Vietnam sickened and horrified American viewers, who were led by harsh photographic reality to oppose the war.

— The unprecedented popularity of President Reagan has no rational explanation but can be accounted for only by the power of a skilled actor at manipulating a visual medium.

But look again at each of the episodes. Kennedy just barely defeated Nixon in November 1960, and perhaps did not actually defeat him at all — we will never know just how many ballot boxes were stuffed in Cook County on election day. Many observers of the election, including Kennedy himself, attributed his success to his fine showing in the television debates. The most discussed part of the debates concerns the failure of Nixon’s makeup artists to prepare him properly for the hot lights of the television studio. Where Kennedy seemed cool, Nixon seemed to sweat; where Kennedy was self-assured, Nixon seemed to strain. Kennedy’s appearance on national television galvanized his campaign; crowds instantly seemed larger and more enthusiastic in his campaign appearances. For Nixon, who added to Kennedy’s stature simply by accepting the challenge to debate in the first place, the first debate was deeply unsettling.

Social scientists cite the finding that citizens who listened to the Kennedy-Nixon debate on the radio judged Nixon the winner; those who watched TV found Kennedy the winner. As with the use of the Stahl story, this is presented as conclusive evidence of the distorting lens of television. On radio, it is assumed, one listens to pure argument; on television, one is distracted by the appearance of things, the superficial look of people rather than the cogency of their arguments.

The basis for all this is a study undertaken by a Philadelphia market research firm that found that radio listeners judged Nixon the winner by 43 percent to 20 percent while a majority (53 percent) of television viewers judged the debate a draw or refused to name a winner. Of those willing to name a winner, 28 percent chose Kennedy and 19 percent Nixon.

Even if we accept this study as valid (and it was never reported in a form to make serious analysis possible), there are two problems with the way it has been used. The first problem concerns the presumption that radio is a distortion-free medium. Is the human voice itself not a medium? Is the human voice not a medium, too? Are words conveyed through radio a pure rendering of logical relations? Or does the voice — specifically, the radio-transmitted voice — give special
weight to sonority and to the verbal tics and tricks of an experienced and skilled debater that have no necessary relation to the validity of the arguments themselves? Might radio have exaggerated Kennedy's Boston accent as part of his nature and therefore put people off? The human voice, from the cry of a baby onward, can stir passions. It can as easily be an enemy of reason as its epitome. A medium like radio that separates the human voice from the body is not necessarily a guardian of rationality.

Second, is television imagery so obviously superficial? Was it not important, and truthful, to see that Kennedy, despite his relative youth, was able to handle the most public moment of his life with assurance? Was it not important, and truthful, to see Nixon, despite his vast experience, awkward and insecure? Isn't it possible to argue that the insecurity he showed betrayed his manner and motive in public life?

Let me turn briefly to Vietnam. Here we have been told repeatedly about the power of television to turn the American public against the war. The general argument has been that the horror of war, graphically shown to the viewing public, sickened Americans. Anything that the narration might have said about the legitimacy of the military effort, the pictures stunningly undermined. What is the evidence for this belief? There is, it turns out, almost no evidence at all. The public did, over time, become more and more disenchanted with the war in Vietnam — but, it turns out, at just about the same rate and to just about the same degree as the public became disaffected with the untelevised Korean War. Moreover, contrary to some popular reconstructions of television coverage, Vietnam War television coverage provided very little combat footage in the years during which opposition to the war mounted. It is possible, of course, that isolated instances of combat coverage had great impact; but, as Peter Braestrup points out in his book *Battle Lines* (Priority Press, 1985), the television archives provide no basis for the view that a day-in, day-out television portrait of bloodshed war ever presented to the American public.

The general understanding behind the “TV-turned-us-against-the-war” argument is that TV photography comes to us unmediated — it forces itself upon the viewer, who then recoils from war. In fact, Daniel Hallin argues in *The Uncensored War* (Oxford University Press, 1986), “television’s visual images are extremely ambiguous.” We don’t know very much about how audiences construct the meaning of TV images, but “it seems a reasonable hypothesis that most of the time the audience sees what it is told it is seeing.” Trout, in short, not ground beef.

The final piece of telemythology I want to examine is the view that Ronald Reagan’s mastery of television led to his mastery of the American public. This is another curious story. Reagan’s extraordinary popularity was heralded by the news media months before he took office. The sense in Washington of his popularity was so powerful that on March 18, 1981, not yet two months into Reagan’s first term, James Reston reported the Congress to be very reluctant to vote against the budget of so popular a chief executive. Reston’s column appeared prominently on the *New York Times* op-ed page the same day that, in a three inch story at the bottom of page 22, a report on the latest Gallup poll coolly stated that Reagan’s public approval ratings were the lowest in polling history for a newly elected president.
As it turned out, Reagan’s average approval rating for his first year in office was, according to the Gallup survey, 58 percent compared to Carter’s 62 percent, Nixon’s 61 percent, Kennedy’s 75 percent. His second-year average was 44 percent compared with Carter’s 47 percent, Nixon’s 57 percent, Kennedy’s 72 percent. Polls that tried to separate Reagan’s personal appeal from the appeal of his policies found the President to be notably more popular than his program; however, this has been the case with every president, and the margin of difference was smaller for Reagan than for other presidents. Later in his first term and in much of his second term, Reagan had unusually high public approval ratings. Still, the public impression and the media consensus about his general popularity was firmly established before there was any national polling evidence to corroborate it. How did this happen?

There are a number of explanations. The most important, I think, is that the Washington establishment liked Reagan. That establishment, Republican and Democrat, politician and journalist, had had enough of Jimmy Carter’s puritanical style of socializing and humorless style of leadership. “For the first time in years, Washington has a President that it really likes.” Washington Post political analyst Haynes Johnson concluded by the fall of 1981. Reagan was very likable, yes. He brought with him the allure and glamour of Hollywood. More than this, he turned out to be a first rate politician in the most old-fashioned sense: he could count votes, he knew who to invite to breakfast or dinner and when, and he employed expert staff to deal with the Congress. When his aides asked him to make a phone call here or a public appearance there, he obliged. And if this direct courtship from the White House were not enough, Reagan succeeded in mobilizing a small but highly vocal right-wing constituency that, with just a whisper from the White House staff, would deluge congressional offices with telegrams and letters.

That is probably the heart of it, but I think there is something more — the strong belief of Washington elites that the general public can be mesmerized by television images. Many journalists shared a kind of “gee whiz” awe at the media skills of the White House, according to Laurence Barrett, senior White House correspondent for Time. According to Barrett, this “fairy tale” of White House media omnipotence was particularly strong because of the contrast between Reagan’s smooth administrative machinery and the ineffective Carter White House. Consider the view of Barrett’s colleague at Time, Thomas Griffith, who wrote that the “people in Peoria” are more receptive to Reagan’s message than people who follow public affairs closely. The Reagan administration, he felt, aimed its message at the television audience, not the close readers of print. Reagan’s was a “TV presidency.”

What is a TV presidency? Reagan’s was scarcely the first to be declared one. There was Kennedy’s, of course. Even Nixon gets a vote: “Nixon is a television creation, a sort of gesturing phantom, uncomfortable in the old-fashioned world of printer’s type, where assertions can be checked and verified.” That unlikely judgment comes from former theater critic Mary McCarthy. Carter was regularly declared a master of symbolism and images in his first year in office. In 1976, Carter flew into office hailed as a genius at media manipulation. His own media adviser, perhaps not surprisingly, called him “the biggest television star of all time. He is the first
television president.” The comic strip *Doonesbury* added a new cabinet officer, the secretary of symbolism, early in the Carter administration. The *New York Times* television critic reported in 1977 that Carter is “a master of controlled images.” David Halberstam wrote in 1976 that Carter more than any other candidate this year has sensed and adapted to modern communications and national mood... Watching him again and again on television I was impressed by his sense of pacing, his sense of control, very low-key, soft, a low decibel count, all this in sharp contrast to the other candidates. “Note, however, that as is so often the case with discussions of Reagan, Halberstam attributes Carter’s television power to sound, not look. A case could be made that Reagan’s presence on television has to do most of all with his voice. People thought of Carter in his first years as a master of images — the president walking, rather than riding, in his inaugural procession; the informal, downhome Jimmy wearing a cardigan sweater. Reagan riding his horse on the ranch never gained the same kind of power. I suspect that we will one day recall Reagan as one of the least visual but most auditory of our presidents. What is memorable is the Reagan with the slight choke in his voice when he told a melodramatic story about a G.I. or read a letter from a little girl, his quick intelligence with a joke or a quip, the comfort, calm, and sincerity is his voice. It was not even his look. It was not his words, as such, but this way with them. Reagan knew, if his critics did not, that it was his voice, his long-lived radio asset, that made his television appearance so effective.

The power of television is perhaps more firmly an article of faith in Washington than anywhere else in the country. There is an odd sense inside the beltway that the rest of the nation is not so much concerned with freeway traffic, paying bills at the end of the month, waiting for the plumber, getting the kids off to school, and finding a nursing home for Grandma as it is with watching Washington, especially in an election year. Otherwise it seems inexplicable that George Will, for instance, should have judged Robert Dole’s relatively high poll ratings among Democrats early in the Republican primary season as “an effect of the televised Senate — he’s had a chance to be seen in what is manifestly his home turf, where he is very comfortable.” Who, George, is watching the televised Senate? C-SPAN is just not much competition for “Wheel of Fortune,” “General Hospital,” “Roseanne,” or, I’m afraid, even “Sesame Street.” How could anyone be so hopelessly out of touch? But so as not to pick on a Republican unfairly, I call to mind Walter Mondale’s mournful plaint after his landslide loss to Reagan that television never warmed up to him nor did he warm up to television. Did Hoover lose to Roosevelt because he didn’t warm up to radio? Could a Depression have had something to do with it? And might Mondale have lost because 1984 was a time of peace, apparent prosperity, and a likable incumbent Republican?

The phenomenon of people believing that only others are influenced by the mass media is what W. Phillips Davison calls the “third-person effect” in communication. The assumption that gullible others, but not one’s own canny self, are slaves to the media is so widespread that the actions based on it may be one of the mass media’s most powerful creations. The powers of the media resides in the perception of experts and decision makers that the general public is
influenced by the mass media, not in the direct influence of the mass media on the general public. That is to say, the media's political appeal lies less in its ability to bend minds than in its ability to convince elites that the popular mind can be bent.

If experts overestimate the direct power of the visual, they underrate their own power to reinterpret the visual. In 1976, Gerald Ford said in his debate with Carter that "there is no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe." Although recent events suggest his misstatement was truer than he knew, that gaffe was reputed to be a major break for Carter and the beginning of the Ford campaign's unraveling. Again, it appears, television demonstrated its enormous power in American politics.

Television archives provide no basis for the view that a day-in-day-out television portrait of Vietnam War bloodshed was ever presented to the American public

But few television viewers noticed or cared about Ford's remark. A poll conducted by a market research organization employed by the President Ford Committee found that people judged Ford to have done a better job than Carter by 44 percent to 35 percent in the two hours immediately after the debate on the evening of October 6. By noon on October 7, Carter was judged the winner 44 percent to 31 percent, and by that evening Carter was judged the winner by 61 percent to 19 percent. On the evening of October 6, not a single person interviewed mentioned the Eastern Europe statement as one of the "main things" the candidate had done "well" or "not well" during the debate. But the next morning 12 percent of respondents mentioned it and the next evening 20 percent of respondents mentioned it. By that time it was the most frequently mentioned criticism of Ford's performance.

What happened in the interim, of course, is that the news media intervened. Journalists, print and broadcast, told viewers what they had seen and heard. Viewers did not take their hint from the cathode ray tube but from the lessons the journalists taught them after the fact. Trout or hamburger? People did not know until they were told.

In 1984, in Mondale's first debate with Reagan, there was widespread agreement that Mondale was impressive and Reagan surprisingly ill at ease and defensive. Polls conducted during the debate, however, showed that people felt, by a slight margin, that Reagan was winning. An hour after the debate, Mondale had a 1 percent edge in a poll on who won. A day later his advantage was 37 percent and two days later 49 percent. Again, the evidence compellingly shows that even when people "see for themselves," they take as cues for their own thinking suggestions from experts that come after the fact.

In this respect, Reagan's administration did understand television very well. Reagan's aides
did not expect television to implant in Americans a love of Reagan or his policies by itself, and they did not treat a television appearance as simply a matter of finding an appropriate stage set and working on the president’s makeup. They did all they could to assure the success of a television appearance by preparing the audience for it in rather old fashioned ways. Before each public address, the administration’s public liaison office arranged for Reagan to meet personally with groups of allies, several hundred at a time, and brief them on what he would say on television so that they could alert their comrades at home. According to media analyst Stephan Wayne, these briefings helped unleash the flood of responses the White House and Congress received on the budget and tax proposals of Reagan’s first year in office. This is not to say the television appearance was without effect on the public — although recent analysis by political scientists indicates that the influence of staged television appearances was very slight in the Reagan years. It is to suggest that even here Reagan was more successful at manipulating congressional opinion than general public opinion — but the manipulation came through encouraging the Congress to believe that the public at large was aroused by television. Since this so readily coincided with a view that Washington elites already held as gospel, it was a relatively easy trick to manage.

If the belief in television power is a large part of what makes television powerful, it may be not television but our beliefs about it that help undo a vital politics. The fascination of critics with devil television, in any event, takes political discourse off track. We — American citizens, cultural critics, social scientists — seek some kind of reckoning with television, the culture it presents and the culture it represents. But despite the growing abundance of media critics, I don’t think we have found the language for that reckoning yet. The object of our attention keeps shifting, for one thing; we've gone from an era of the sponsor to an era of the network to the present (still undefined) era of the proliferation of cable and the declining network-share of the television audience. The kinds of television experience also seem too varied to be easily encapsulated — from the live coverage of the Kennedy funeral, the Olympics, a presidential debate, or a natural disaster to the evening news, daytime soap operas, old movies, or reruns of old sitcoms. The judgment we make of one of these genres is not likely to stick when applied to the next.

Beyond the difficulties in keeping the object of our attention steadily in view, there is the complicated problem of the mixed motives of our own curiosity. There are professional career-making ambitions, an inevitable product of the proliferation of the study of communication in the universities; there is the resentment of intellectuals who feel unfairly overlooked in an era of celebrity; there is the anger, seeking an object, that arises in the general population from a sense of impotence in dealing with the wider world that both print and television news brings to our homes daily. There is also a sense, one I certainly share, that the people who bring us television, live in time-and-space capsules closely linked to research reports on market trends but very far from deeper currents of experience in the contemporary world. And since they do not yet know this, may never know this, may not want to know this, they may never tell us the stories about ourselves from which we could genuinely learn.

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