

Controlling the Script:
Nixon's Political Career (1952-1968)

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Richard Nixon's political career illustrates the intersection of political context, image, and television. I will examine how alternative political roles, the insider as opposed to outsider, and different formats of television, unscripted as opposed to staged, shaped the success as well as failure of Nixon's Vice-Presidential and Presidential campaigns. As his 1952, 1960, and 1968 experiences demonstrate respectively, Nixon best thrived as a political outsider and in tightly controlled forms of television. In 1952 and 1968, political circumstances allowed Nixon to portray himself as an outsider, a role he naturally occupied and one which was effective in connecting with voters on an emotional and populist level. Moreover, in both cases, he exercised control over the medium as he made use of staged television. By contrast, in 1960, political circumstances necessitated that Nixon present himself as a political insider. Unscripted head-on debates with Kennedy, especially in light of the superficial bias of television, favoured the more personally popular and attractive Massachusetts Senator. Nixon had the greatest success in the 1968 campaign because he was the political outsider and, with the guidance of shrewd consultants, made effective use of staged television, including ads and panels. Finally, the degree of control Nixon and his staff exercised over television in 1968 ensured that his message was conveyed directly to voters without the filter of the press.

Nixon made his first serious entrée into presidential politics as Eisenhower's Vice-Presidential nominee in 1952. As the junior senator from California, Nixon occupied the role of the political outsider, made even more credible by his humble origins and hardscrabble life. Strongly anti-communist but not an advocate of isolationism, Nixon represented the new wing of the Republican Party. Accordingly, he placated the conservative elements of the Republican Party, who were dissatisfied with the nomination of the moderate, Eisenhower. Besides placating the base, Nixon served a critical role to Dwight Eisenhower's actual campaign as its attack-dog, criticizing the

deeply unpopular Truman administration, thus allowing Eisenhower to maintain his dignified image as a statesman and peacemaker.

Shortly after his nomination, however, the New York Post exposed Nixon's "slush" fund as a California senator, leading Eisenhower to consider dropping him from the ticket, thus threatening Nixon's political livelihood. In 1952, in his famous nationally televised "Checkers" speech, Nixon managed to save his political career by presenting himself essentially as a political outsider. As an outsider, he was able to make a strong emotional and populist appeal to viewers. Further, the staged format of the speech allowed him to control the content of the message.

In the address, Nixon only tacitly acknowledges the fund, while devoting much of the address toward portraying himself as a regular American, deriding the incumbent Democratic administration and his opponents, and pledging that Eisenhower and he can restore the United States to greatness. He appeals to the viewers, insisting that he has more in common with them than with the political establishment. He proclaims, my wife "doesn't have a mink coat" though she has a "respectable Republican cloth coat."¹ Strengthening his connection with average Americans, he contends, if the Republicans should win the election, his daughters will bring their dog, "Checkers," one of the few political gifts he received, to the White House. In addition to portraying himself as a regular American, he attacks the incumbent Democratic administration, and by association, his opponents, Adlai Stevenson and John Sparkman. He criticizes Truman for his inept leadership during the Korean War and for being soft on communism at home, invoking the case of Alger Hiss, the Soviet spy who infiltrated the U.S. government. Moreover, he ties Stevenson to the deeply unpopular policies of Truman, responsible for "six-hundred-million lives lost to the communists."² Further deflecting attention from his own misconduct, Nixon offers his opponents advice should they be under attack for their use of similar funds, suggesting that this type of behaviour is commonplace in politics and

1. Richard M. Nixon, "Checkers Speech." Public Address, September 23, 1952.
<http://www.historyplace.com/speeches/nixon-checkers.htm>. (accessed 19 November 2010).

2. Ibid.

thus the press should not single him out. Finally, he presents Eisenhower, the consummate war hero, and himself, the junior California senator, as outsiders, not indebted to the political establishment. Nixon claims, “Eisenhower...owes nothing to Truman, nothing to the big city bosses – he is the man who can clean up the mess in Washington.”³ Nixon ends by asserting that his fate is now in the hands of the American people and, ultimately, the Republican National Committee. He encourages voters to write the RNC about whether he should stay on the ticket and promises to abide by the Committee’s final decision.⁴ Nixon’s address resonated with Republican voters, leading scores of them to write in,⁵ thereby saving his spot on the ticket and his political career.

By contrast, in 1960, as the incumbent Vice-President, now running for President, Nixon had to present himself as the political insider, touting his credentials and experience over John F. Kennedy, the relative newcomer and outsider. He could not make an effective emotional, populist appeal nor could he attack the present political establishment as he had in 1952. Roles were reversed, as Kennedy, the junior senator from Massachusetts, could attack the Eisenhower administration, while Nixon was forced to defend the establishment. Just as Nixon had attacked the Democrat administration in 1952, Kennedy attacked the Republican one in 1960. Exaggerating the “Missile Gap,” and arguing that the Republican administration had mishandled their relations with the communist government in China, Kennedy exploited American fears of the Soviet threat and communism.

Nixon struggled in the unscripted nationally televised debates against Kennedy. Judged against the high expectations accompanying Nixon’s insider, favourite status, the press deemed Nixon’s actual debate performance unsuccessful.⁶ Moreover, television favoured appearance and

3. Ibid.

4. Nixon, “Checkers Speech.”

5. Gil Troy, *See How They Ran: The Changing Role of the Presidential Candidate*, (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1996), 199.

6. Ibid., 211.

style over substance. The debates “degenerated from policy discussions into makeup contests.”⁷ However, not fully realizing the superficial bias of television, Nixon focused more on substance than style, to his detriment. Furthermore, unlike his 1952 address, in these unscripted debates, Nixon could not control either content or how the audience perceived him. Kennedy’s advisors believed that Nixon’s stiffness and lack of warmth⁸ would be evident in these debates, preventing him from reaching voters on an emotional level. Kennedy, as a relative political outsider and due to his likeable personality and good looks, they anticipated, would connect better with the voters. For the most part, their predictions were correct. As Kennedy admitted after winning, “TV more than anything turned the tide.”⁹ The 1960 election made it abundantly clear that Nixon, as a political insider and in extemporaneous forms of television, did not fare well. Subsequently, Nixon promised if he ever ran again, he would be “shrewder, more careful” and “more scientific.”¹⁰ If he wanted to win, he would present himself as a political outsider and utilize staged forms of television.

Returning to Washington after an eight year hiatus during which he realized the critical role of television in political campaigning, Nixon, in 1968, was primed for another presidential run. Now, he could position himself as a political outsider and attack his Democratic rival, the incumbent Vice-President, Hubert Humphrey. Furthermore, he had realized how to manipulate television to his advantage. As television became more sophisticated, politicians increasingly relied on the expertise of image consultants. Aware of this development, Nixon, a notorious control-freak, surrendered control to a group of able consultants and ad-men. Nixon’s entire 1968 campaign centred on television, specifically staged television. Having learned from the mistakes of 1960, Nixon and his consultants categorically refused all debates with his opponent Humphrey, opting instead for a campaign based on staged forms of television, including ads and panels. This allowed Nixon and his

7. Ibid., 220.

8. Ibid., 210.

9. Troy, *See How They Ran*, 214.

10. Ibid.

advisors to control and convey his desired image, while simultaneously avoiding the filter of the liberal-leaning press.

Nixon ran as a political outsider in 1968, and with the expertise of consultants, constructed sophisticated and powerful ads attacking his rival, Humphrey. Through the imagery of the ads, Nixon argued that the Democrats and the incumbent Vice-President, Humphrey, were responsible for the deterioration of both American foreign policy and society. The Vietnam War, the dissolution of social values, the high rates of city crime, and the race riots were all consequences of the Democratic administration's failed policies. Nixon's ad, "Convention," juxtaposed the violence of the Vietnam War and the 1968 Democratic Convention with a smiling, seemingly oblivious Humphrey,¹¹ while "Failure" criticized the Democratic establishment, in general, for its internal discord and inept leadership.¹² In turn, Nixon implicitly associated himself with a "positive" vision for the nation's future, based on peace, order, and sound leadership.

The ads were particularly powerful because, like advertisements for consumer goods, they resonated with people on an emotional, rather than on a rational level.¹³ Actual issues and statements' truth were relegated to the campaigns' periphery. Less "truth" and more "pragmatism" is what the campaign needed, Harry Treleaven, one of Nixon's consultants, asserted.¹⁴ With television, Neil Postman argues, "the politician does not so much project an image of the product being sold...but rather an image of those the product is being sold to."¹⁵ Accordingly, the ads were "trite" precisely because the target audience, those who might support Nixon in the first place, were trite, his

11. Eugene Jones, *Convention*, Advertisement, 1968.

<http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/1968> (accessed 22 November 2010).

12. Eugene Jones, *Failure*, Advertisement, 1968. <http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/1968> (accessed 22 November 2010).

13. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, 20th Anniversary Edition. (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 128.

14. Joe McGinniss, *The Selling of the Presidency: The Classic Account of the Packaging of a Candidate* (New York: Penguin Books, 1969), 56.

15. Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 128.

consultants privately averred.¹⁶ Joe McGinniss suggests that Nixon's commercials were successful because people could "relate them to their own delightful misconceptions of themselves and their country."¹⁷ One ad, exploiting people's irrational fears, features a woman walking alone on a dark street, as alarming crime statistics provide the voiceover, convincing the viewer of the inevitability of her attack or mugging. Most importantly, these various ads *associated* negative images with the Democrats and, by implication, positive ones with Nixon, yet Nixon himself was often absent. Such a strategy was critical to Nixon's 1968 campaign given the lingering unpopularity of his image from the 1960 election.

Panels were another important fixture of Nixon's 1968 campaign. Panels were staged town-hall style meetings in various states in which Nixon fielded questions from specially selected members of the audience. The format was live, with a cheering audience for both added effect and authenticity. The goal of these panels was to achieve a "conversational style" that would challenge the notion that Nixon was stiff and uncomfortable around people.¹⁸ Nixon's consultants wanted to convey an image of their candidate as "calmer, more thoughtful" and "more compassionate than he was eight years ago."¹⁹ A small group of questioners from a diverse ethnic, social, and economic cross-section²⁰ was intended to help Nixon appeal to a wide range of voters. Nixon's consultants prized emotion and perceived authenticity over actual knowledge and substance. In a memorandum after one of the shows, an advisor applauds Nixon's response to a question about detention camps: "Excellent answer – He didn't know but he was honest and the audience was with him completely,"²¹ suggesting that ignorance on questions of marginal concern to the general population was fine, while honesty about one's ignorance, bordering on apathy, was even better.

16. McGinniss, *The Selling of the Presidency*, 114-115.

17. *Ibid.*, 116.

18. McGinniss, *The Selling of the Presidency*, 62.

19. *Ibid.*, 21.

20. Troy, *See How They Ran*, 223-224.

21. McGinniss, *The Selling of the Presidency*, 74.

Not only was Nixon's campaign able to control his image, the medium of television itself, in effect, could bypass the press. Without television, one of his consultants claimed, he "would not have a chance" simply because "the press would not allow him to get through." While publicly Nixon's ad-men triumphantly declared that television had displaced print journalism, making reporters irrelevant to the campaign,²² privately they still feared the press. The consultants claimed that they barred the press from the panels because they wanted reporters to view the shows as the audience at home would.²³ However, this decision was not so much motivated by the principle of fairness as it was by political calculation. Nixon's advisors worried that journalists would reveal the staged-gimmicks of the panels, leading voters to view Nixon as a fraud. In addition, as a result of the *New York Post* story and journalists' treatment of Nixon during the 1960 campaign, Nixon harboured tremendous resentment toward the press, whom he regarded as bastions of the liberal Eastern elite.²⁴ Accordingly, in 1968, his consultants sought to limit his contact with the press so as to disabuse voters of the notion of Nixon as an intemperate, unrestrained politician, a reputation he had acquired at various points in his career. After his failed 1962 campaign for Governor of California, he famously chided the press, "You won't have Nixon to kick around anymore."²⁵

Nixon won the election in 1968 on a successful campaign, buttressed by his position as a political outsider and his pragmatic use of television. Just eight years earlier, after winning the 1960 nomination, he had sworn that he "never engaged in personalities in campaigns." To demonstrate his virtue, Nixon "exiled his TV people to an office one block *east* of Madison Avenue."²⁶ Nixon, of course, *did* engage in personalities, albeit with varying levels of success. Nixon was *most successful* in 1968 because he ran as a political outsider and abandoned all of his previous reservations about

22. *Ibid.*, 65-66.

23. Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Packaging The Presidency: A History and Criticism of Presidential Campaign Advertising*, 3rd edition. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 30.

24. McGinniss, *The Selling of the Presidency*, 82.

25. The History Place, "The History Place: Presidential Impeachment Proceedings." <http://www.historyplace.com/unitedstates/impeachments/nixon.htm> (accessed 24 November 2010).

26. Troy, *See How They Ran*, 211.

television. Sophisticated and carefully staged forms of television, such as ads and panels, allowed Nixon to attack his opponent, associate himself with a positive vision for the country, and establish an emotional connection with voters. The degree to which his campaign revolved around television further benefited him by limiting the influence of the press over voters. In 1968, all of the elements of winning strategy for Nixon were aligned as he and his consultants *controlled* the script.

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