

A former aide to Governor Jerry Brown of California tells the following story: One day during the 1974 gubernatorial campaign, he watched Brown review a "law and order" TV commercial he had just filmed. As the ad unfolded, Brown would repeatedly chop the air with his hand and say, "Buzz word . . . buzz word . . . buzz word. . . ." Brown was mightily pleased with himself and what he "said" in the ad. "In fact," he reportedly crowed, "I haven't committed myself to do anything at all." A buzz word, the author goes on to say, is a word or phrase that conjures up associations that are not directly stated but, rather, are implied by the speaker, evoking a positive response to the speaker without his saying anything explicit. "Swift, sure and just" criminal procedure was one such buzz word: "Swift" implied quick punishment, "sure" implied no trivial technicalities, and "just" reassured civil libertarians. The phrase had something for everyone, but the something was symbolic and not tangible.¹

People make myths about politics for a variety of purposes, even sometimes quite unwittingly. In many cases, the creators of popular culture, news communicators, and political scientists make myths, but they do not necessarily intend to do so. However, the first and perhaps most important source of political myth—politicians and their "flacks"—most assuredly do intend to make myths, even though some of them might ardently deny it. Even though a good bit of political mythmaking by politicians and their flacks is explicitly manipulative, as often as not they do not think of it as mythmaking and certainly not as wrong. In many cases, the politician may be caught up in his own private political myth and may accept as necessary the use of persuasive communications for political purposes. Indeed, the media experts he hires

may be equally imbued with his myth and be sincere in what they do. But a sincere man, as Peter Berger has noted, is "the one who believes in his own propaganda."² In other cases, of course, politicians and their flacks create myths quite cynically.

"Flack" is a popular, usually derogatory, term for professionals in modern societies who use their organizational and technological skills to sell whatever there is to be sold—organizations, people, images, programs, policies, politicians. Skill at using mass media for selling a political object has spilled over into American politics to the extent that politicians assiduously study the "flack arts" and put them into practice. Jerry Brown is simply one in a long line of political actors who studied and mastered such communications skills. Whether practiced by politicians or their hirelings, one of the great modern sources of political mythmaking is in the proliferation of political persuasion.

THE PROTOTYPICAL FLACK

Josef Goebbels

The prototype of the flack in modern politics was Dr. Joseph Goebbels, the master of communication who helped to create the Third Reich in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s. Goebbels pioneered modern techniques of propaganda, promotion, and publicity. He made Nazi newspapers in Berlin into popular scandal sheets that poked fun at Jewish officials. His articles and speeches pounded on the theme that the Nazi Party and Adolf Hitler were the hope and destiny of Germany. He exploited the popular myth of the stab in the back, that Germany had lost World War I through betrayal by sinister forces at home. He developed stunning campaign advertising, especially posters. He was clever at promotional activities, even at luring non-Nazis to meetings by publicizing provocative themes. He staged publicity stunts, such as marching through communist areas of Berlin to provoke violence and then casting injured Nazi stormtroopers as freedom fighters and martyrs. He was adroit at squeezing publicity out of trivial events, but he also had a gift for political pageantry, developing a set of Nazi rituals and choreographing the Nazi Nuremberg rallies.

Most importantly, Goebbels was instrumental in the creating of the *Führer* myth. He sold an unknown, emotional Austrian, Adolf Hitler, as the "god of the awakening Germany." He introduced the greeting, "Heil Hitler!" and the medieval title of *Führer*, to which all party members swore personal loyalty. He marketed the *Führer* as the embodiment of the Will of the Nation, a personage of mythical background whose mission was to realize the German destiny. Rarely seen in public, Hitler was photographed only in full regalia addressing a mass meeting, hosting foreign leaders, or at his mountain retreat with children or dogs. The *Führerkult* reached the point of almost Christ-like adoration. Pictures showed the Hitler of the early days addressing an eager audience of disciples with the caption: "In the beginning was the word." Women in childbirth would scream Hitler's name or title as an analgesic reflex.³

Why mention all this? Because the career of Dr. Goebbels illustrates so many things about the power and possibilities of flackdom in politics. Goebbels was both caught up in the Hitler myth and cynically helped to further it for the German nation. He saw what he did as both manipulative and necessary. And the "little doctor," as Goebbels was called, pioneered many of the techniques of political selling we see now in American politics: political advertising, publicity and promotion, and public relations. Flacks today operate much in the tradition of Dr. Goebbels. Their skills, like his, are in the art of political mythmaking through the adroit use of the mass media. Goebbels simply demonstrates the extent to which a flack can make political myths.

THE PERSUASION INDUSTRY

Flacks may be thought of as "new men" or "new engineers" whose ascendancy has been one outcome of the advent of "technomedia" society. "Foxes rather than lions," Andrew Hacker predicted in 1957, ". . . they can meet the imperatives of a time which calls for the sophisticated manipulation of men's attitudes and sensibilities. . . . Values are judged not by their place in the prescriptive scheme of things, but by their current utility. For the new men it would be suicide

to regard individuals as ends in themselves: they must always be viewed as resources to be managed."⁴ (Note that the ranks of the "new men" are not chauvinistic; they include many bright and ambitious "new women," of which the character Diana Christianson, played by Faye Dunaway in the movie *Network*, is a parody.)

In many ways, of course, the skills we associate with modern flacks are old hat to politicians and political pros. Andrew Jackson was no less an "image" candidate than contemporary politicians, building the myth of Old Hickory. Party managers, such as Mark Hanna, were adept at creating mythologies about politicians (McKinley) and political situations (if Bryan were elected President, the country would go to ruin). Politics has always involved persuading people that something is or is not the case, and communicating that is a highly prized skill.

But in the last several decades in advanced technological societies, a persuasion industry has emerged. This industry involves a set of organizations and jobs that are directed at selling just about everything. Advertisers, TV programmers, public relations firms, publicity agents, promoters of various things: All are engaged in the communication of myth. Modern flacks use their sophisticated technical skills in the propagation of some largely mythical message. Their pitch is to associate what they want to sell with some value or desire on the part of an audience. More subtle than P.T. Barnum, they nevertheless belong in the tradition of finding and appealing to suckers.

Modern flacks are thus propagandists. As the student of modern propaganda, Jacques Ellul, points out, they are scientific in their approach. They use the findings of modern psychology and other behavioral sciences; they are trained in the methods of propaganda useful in a particular field (e.g., advertising and marketing) and belong to professional associations; they work for organizations whose purpose is to propagate messages for effect; and they constantly attempt to refine the methods and impact of their propaganda.⁵ They use increasingly precise methods to create and communicate myths.

The major activity of modern flacks is, in the contemporary vernacular, to "hype." Hype is what flacks do: market and sell the myth of some product, person, organization, or whatever. Everything is hyped nowadays: breakfast cereal, rock groups, movie stars, movies, books, religion, universities. The power of hype is central to the flack

arts. They must, and do, convince people that there is a difference between aspirin brands; that fashionability can be expressed through dressing a certain way; that movie stars are glamorous; that corporations are benevolent associations comprised of hard-working, ordinary people like you and me; and that driving a particular car makes one distinctive. The proliferation of hype can be seen by the extent to which outrageous self-publicity can create a celebrity: The careers of Muhammad Ali, Evil Knievel, and Alice Cooper are cases in point. Less spectacularly, marketing new products or developing the image of an institution or person is based on the same premise: Carefully constructed communications designed for a perceived audience can affect how people think about the object. Mythmaking is the intent of hype and, if successful, the result.

Primal Themes

Vance Packard, in his book, *The Hidden Persuaders*, pointed out in the late 1950s the degree of sophistication that the flack arts were acquiring. He noted that the requirements of a consumer economy had bred new forces designed to induce further consumption: Depth psychology, motivational research, brand image, and other such terms became the currency of the new marketplace. The new men were increasingly adept at understanding and manipulating deep human needs and desires. "Primal themes" were researched and related to a particular product, institution, or person. Primal themes are deeply held, sometimes unconscious, myths people hold about themselves and the world. For example, Packard identified eight "hidden needs" commonly exploited by advertisers: emotional security, reassurance of worth, ego-gratification, creative outlets, love objects, sense of power, sense of roots, and immortality.⁶ This partial list gives an idea of the vanities and fears to which advertising appeals can be linked. The primal theme emphasizes that using a certain product helps one become fashionable, popular, sexually potent, secure, even immortal.

Perhaps the most pervasive primal theme in advertising is the myth of family. Family love and solidarity is a deep-seated emotion and desire in many people. Advertisers repeatedly link the myth of family with a product. We go to a family restaurant; theme parks are family fun; choosy mothers are careful shoppers since "it's for my

family." The implication is obvious: The hyped product enhances family life. Consumption is related to a primal myth; by consuming, one's anxieties about family, health, approval, and so forth are allayed. Ads typically present a "fantasy skit" that shows prototypical individuals being "saved" by a product. A woman restores her husband's affection by removing the "ring around the collar," or she wins the approval of significant others by having shiny dishes that are "a nice reflection on you."

Packard, and more recently Wilson Bryan Key, suggest that much of the primal mythology in advertising is subtle, even subliminal. In other words, ads have secret messages that communicate primal themes at an unconscious level. The mere arrangement of objects and persons in visual ads is manipulated to appeal to primal desires. Themes may range from the suggestion of illicit sex being negotiated at a party where a certain brand of liquor is imbibed to hidden images of sexual partners in ice cubes. Key claims that ancient archetypal themes—universal mythical symbols and images—are constantly manipulated by advertisers to appeal to these underlying primal desires.⁷ There appears to be no question that there is considerable awareness of and use of primal themes in the expensive and competitive world of advertising. Indeed, even charities use ads constructed by Madison Avenue flacks as threatening and sentimental appeals in order to hype contributions. The National Society for the Prevention of Blindness hired an ad agency that creates horror-movie posters to produce an ad that would appeal to fear: The ad pictures a hand holding an eyeball with the caption: "Kiss Your Eyes Goodbye!"⁸

Pseudo-Reality and Pseudo-Myth

Flacks have been instrumental in the creation of pseudo-realities that people are told they should desire or like. They communicate, through mass media, mythical environments, events, or persons which audiences are supposed to relate to, identify with, enjoy, or act upon. It is a fantasy world that flacks conjure up, one that is linked to the primal desires just mentioned. Advertising, public relations, and publicity flacks have made this into high art. Oil company ads would have us believe that Exxon is a struggling company of just plain folks who are motivated by Salvation Army benevolence and have a high environ-

mental consciousness. Housing developers tell us that we acquire the good life by living in Heritage Acres. Utility companies hire pretty girls to give public information presentations to local groups about the safety and benefits of nuclear power plants. Agents for movie stars stage publicity stunts or encourage fan magazine gossip about the star to aid their client's fame and career. In myriad ways, the mass public is constantly bombarded with myths, realities created for mass consumption.

The proliferation and acceptance of mythical environments, events, and persons in contemporary America is astonishing. We buy not only the pseudo-reality of the world of advertising but also the invented actuality of the game show or talk show on TV. We are accustomed to being entertained by the sit-com peopled by attractive, funny types or by action shows that feature private detectives or bionic women. We are familiar with the marketing of celebrities (rock stars, TV characters, etc.) who often come and go quickly. Perhaps it is a tribute to man's ability to believe in mythical universes; it may also be a tribute to the ability of modern flackdom to bamboozle audiences.

What Is Sold?

Flacks sell many things. Anything that some group with the money wants to sell the public is translated into a marketable commodity by flacks. We have already alluded to many of the things sold, but here we wish to point out how the selling of a variety of things amounts to mythmaking in the process. All of the things we mention here are essentially products, objects for which flacks cold-bloodedly plan proper strategies in order to market them to mass audiences.

Images for sale. Flacks hype images of people. They have the often difficult job of building, maintaining, and sometimes changing the myths that persons want to foster about themselves. Introducing a new movie star, rock singer, or sit-com hero usually involves a publicity agency conducting an extensive campaign to communicate to the public the image that the organization or the personality desires. For instance, when Farrah Fawcett-Majors quit the *Charlie's Angels* TV show, a campaign began almost immediately (and had been planned

for months) to hype her chosen replacement, Cheryl Ladd. Not accidentally, Ms. Ladd's picture and information about her began to appear in *People* magazine, newspapers, and Hollywood gossip magazines around the time she made her debut on *Charlie's Angels* at the beginning of the fall TV season.

However, it is difficult to maintain the constructed public image of someone if that person does something that disconfirms the flack myth. Cher's image was hard to sustain during her marital problems. Ann-Margret's image changed from that of a sexy and somewhat floozy young star to that of a more intelligent and mature actress. Cheryl Ladd, Cher, and Ann-Margret were handled by Hollywood superflack Richard Grant.⁹ Like most image campaigns, this involved the communication of mythical qualities (in the sense of qualities that the actresses mentioned may not possess—interests, maturity, even sexiness).

Flacks also communicate the images of organizations. Corporations, unions, universities, churches, associations, cities: The list is endless. And it is nothing new. Ivy Lee, a reporter turned flack early in this century, did publicity work in the 1904 presidential election, but his first major public relations (PR) account was to build the image of a coal company in 1906. A little later, Henry Ford set up a company News Bureau, since he didn't trust newspapers (especially Chicago *Tribune* publisher Colonel Robert McCormick, who had called Ford an "anarchist"). The Ford PR office later became the first "mat service," sending out stories prepared to put on the presses unchanged and, of course, favorable to Ford policy. Corporations still invest enormous time and money in propaganda campaigns. One favorite pitch that stems from the primal theme tactic is to portray the corporation—which may employ many hundreds of thousands of people—as a big, happy family. Images of typical employees and casual, light-hearted management-employee relations portray a pseudo-reality: that a large modern industrial corporation is a kind of Walton family that pulls together, loves each other, and gets beneficent things done while whistling a happy tune.

Similarly, cultural institutions once immune to the vulgarities of selling themselves as products in a marketplace have recently hired flacks and gone shamelessly after clients. New "media churches" go after money and converts with a vengeance—vast mailing lists, telethons, slick TV and road show productions, promotional gimmicks,

and so on. The effect is to combine the appeals of that "old-time religion" with modern, cold-blooded propaganda techniques—old myths packaged in new media. Faced with declining numbers of students, American colleges and universities have recently taken to flack arts to hype their enrollments. Many have used, in their mail-out brochures and the like, the primal theme of individuality—the myth that the student will be treated as unique, thus appealing to our modern fears about institutional impersonality and anonymity in the crowd. College flacks appeal to the mythology of contemporary youth without batting an eye. One state university advertised its general education program as "Getting It Together," featuring courses such as "In Pursuit of Awareness" and "Me-ology." A small college put out a psychedelic poster featuring a busty girl wearing a T-shirt strategically captioned "I'm somebody." After hyping the college as a "people place" and a "place where you can be the center of a successful educational experience," the poster invited the prospective student to detach the return postcard, titled "Yes, I'm Somebody Too." The mythical prospect of both individuality and sensuality is a powerful propaganda appeal.

"_____ *Has a Better Idea.*" Flacks hype ideas. On behalf of a particular group or organization, they attempt to convince mass audiences that a certain idea, and the state of affairs or actions stemming from it, should prevail. Idea X sells because of some myth linked to it in a media campaign. This may range from attempts to change ordinary human habits to the reinforcement of master myths. The American Cancer Society hyped the idea of nonsmoking by picturing a fantasy skit involving two cute kids dressed up like their parents while a voice-over said ominously, "Kids love to imitate their parents." Pause. "Do you smoke?" Other groups promote the myths of education, of attending the church of your choice, of freedom of the press. Corporations and business groups in recent years have hired ad agencies to hype their images for the mass public by linking corporate activities to the idea of free enterprise, a master economic myth still held in capitalist America (recall Chapter 3). One recent tactic has been to fund "chairs of free enterprise" in universities, designed to educate students about the operation of the market system. However, such chairs come in for criticism as being veiled propaganda vehicles used by big business to hype a myth, since free enterprise is no longer extant in many market areas (e.g., automobiles, oil, steel, etc.) but

serves instead as a convenient slogan for oligopolies or monopolies trying to avoid government intervention.

"*Keep truckin'.*" Flacks also sell the illusion of movement. Many organizations and groups like to convince mass audiences that they are growing, succeeding, changing, or whatever, and they hire flacks to hype, and thus help to create, the force of their movement. The aforementioned media churches constantly conduct extensive campaigns (as in "Key '73," "I Found It!" the recurrent Billy Graham campaigns) that, at least in their media manifestations, communicate the illusion of a great revival, of conversions, and, of course, of contributions. Some observers think that the notion that such campaigns bring about massive increases in the number of believing and practicing Christians is dubious and that the campaigns only reinforce those already prone to believe in and give to such organizations. But the myth of movement is pervasive in their propaganda.

POLITICAL FLACKS AND CONSUMERS

Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders* has a chapter entitled "Politics and the Image Builders," which was one of the first popular accounts of the invasion of politics by flackdom. "Americans," he said, "in their growing absorption with consumption, have even become consumers of politics."¹⁰ By the time Packard wrote in 1957, many social commentators pointed to the growing presence and influence of professional flacks in politics. Actually, the trend had been building for several decades. Whitaker and Baxter had been managing political campaigns in California from the early 1930s. Social scientist Hadley Cantril had advised Franklin D. Roosevelt on public opinion in the early 1940s. Wendell Wilkie was hyped by adroit image-building in the press. Even before television, a man who was to serve as the director of publicity for the Democratic National Committee said of presidential elections:

The American people will elect as President of the United States in November a nonexistent person—and defeat likewise a mythical identity.

They will vote for and against a picture that has been painted for

them by protagonists and antagonists in a myriad of publications, a picture that must be either a caricature or an idealization.¹¹

But with the media revolution of post-World War II, the ability and the opportunity of modern flacks to communicate mythical identities in politics increased. In settings including election campaigns, the White House, and various government agencies, there emerged campaign management firms on retainers; "image committees"; press secretaries; public relations budgets; and an influx of programmers, pollsters, and propagandists. Their successes—and the myths they created about their power—gave them entry into the inner councils of politicians. Some observers, such as political scientists Stanley Kelley, thought that their entry into politics would be beneficial, improving communication between politician and public; others, such as Daniel Boorstin and James Perry, thought that the techniques and cynical attitudes of show-biz and business advertising were destructive of traditional democratic processes.¹² By the 1960s, it was commonplace for major candidates for public office to be handled by campaign management firms, for the White House and major federal establishments (such as the Pentagon) to have large PR staffs, and for political hopefuls to seek advice not from the inner circle of a political party but from the "feasibility studies" of professional consultants.

The advent of the "New Politics" and the access of political flacks to politicians altered the style, the budget, and the experience of many political leaders. Politicians sought photo opportunities, advance men, packaging, aggregate data, PR gimmicks, media exposure, positioning, image management. Richard Nixon, always a bellwether of trends, became a pioneer in this new style. Richard Rovere said of him in the 1950s:

Richard Nixon appears to be a politician with an advertising man's approach to his work. Policies are products to be sold the public—this one today, that one tomorrow, depending on the discounts and the state of the market. He moves from intervention (in Indochina) to anti-intervention with the same ease and lack of anguish with which a copy writer might transfer his loyalties from Camels to Chesterfields.¹³

But Nixon was only symptomatic of a large-scale political trend. Political flackdom is now a billion-dollar industry. People running for national, state, and even local offices increasingly hire professional campaign assistance; flacks pervade the briefing rooms of political executives everywhere; governmental agency heads fret with their flacks over the agency image.

Flacks, politicians, and political commentators talk much about the ethics and long-term effects of the increased sophistication of political selling. Some feel that flackdom in politics translates both the politician and the public into commodities to be produced and consumed, reducing politics to manipulation. More specifically, these critics say, political flackdom makes myths. The candidate's or agency's alleged image is an illusion, a mythical identity with mythical qualities acting in a mythical world. Rather than clarifying political communication with the public, flacks mythologize in order to sell myths about a politician or government or agency to a political audience. Their expertise is *not truth, but credibility*—not how to present the fact of truth, but rather how to present the myth of truth. To these areas and methods of mythmaking we now turn.

FLACKS AND MYTHMAKING IN ELECTORAL CAMPAIGNS

Perhaps the most spectacular area of the growth in political flackdom is the electoral campaign industry. The range (and the cost) of campaign services available is staggering: speechwriting, advertising, computer mail-outs, time buying, polling, fundraising, catering, wardrobe—even complete coordination of every campaign activity. The rationalization of campaign procedures has had many effects, but the one we are concerned with is the use of and creation of myths.

Campaign flacks use myths. It is part of their business to know what myths the voting public hold and to use those myths in the campaign setting. These include primal themes, contemporary myths, myths of us and them, prejudices, and so on. But, as in product adver-

tising, the thrust in elections is to associate the candidate with a mythical theme that will stick.

The most common tactic is to link the candidate with macro-myths. The political rhetoric and imagery of candidates typically celebrates the origin and destiny of the political order. The imagery of campaign ads—portrayed in both pictorial and verbal communications—reminds voters of deeply held symbols. Joe McGinniss's backstage look at the 1968 Nixon media campaign found Kevin Phillips writing memo commentary on how to use certain commercials:

Great Nation: This is fine for national use, but viz local emphasis it strikes me as best suited to the South and heartland. They will like the great nation self-help, fields of waving wheat stuff and the general thrust of Protestant ethic imagery. . . . We need a red-hot military music, land of pride and glory special for the South and Border. . . . We need more concern for the countryside, its values and farmers welfare spot, complete with threshing threshers, siloes, Aberdeen Angus herds, et al.¹⁴

Such imagery, with Nixon's voice-over, reassuring and calm, played upon the deep patriotic feelings many people have about America. Such ads were made systematically and were directed toward regions of the country where campaign organizers thought that linking candidate and macromyth would do the most good.

Since the macromyths of a political culture are complex and even contradictory, presidential candidates often represent different aspects of political mythology in a campaign. The Nixon and McGovern campaigns of 1972 offered two competing rhetorical visions that spoke to aspects of the American Dream. Nixon represented the materialistic myth, whereas McGovern represented the moralistic myth. The materialistic myth is manifest in the American belief in individual effort, work, self-reliance, competition, and the goodness of wealth and success. The moralistic myth is manifest in Christian duty to our fellow man, equality and democracy, reform and morality. (DeTocqueville long ago saw Americans motivated by the incompatible myths of equality and achievement destined to conflict because of the schizophrenia in the American psyche.) McGovern expounded the moral of equality, whereas Nixon extolled the value of individual achievement. McGovern condemned the "special, grasping, greedy in-

terests" who were making the rich richer; Nixon condemned "those who call for a confiscation of wealth." Yet both candidates were haunted by the other aspect of the American Dream: McGovern extolled the work ethic and free enterprise, whereas Nixon, on face value at least, paid respect to egalitarian and compassionate values. Indeed, it may be that when a person votes for a candidate who represents one aspect of the myth, he or she will in effect be nagged by voting against the other aspect that is also part of our political consciousness. As one acute observer noted, "Insofar as one votes for himself in a presidential election, one also votes against himself."¹⁵ In any case, flacks attempt to ascertain what elements of political macromyths their candidates should emphasize.

Myths of "us and them" are also a common theme in campaign propaganda. The most obvious is appeal to partisanship. Democratic presidential candidates appeal to the ancient loyalties, now somewhat less strong, that sustained the Democratic Party through many an election. Their national conventions, ads, rhetoric, and so on conjure up visions of FDR and the New Deal, Truman, Kennedy, and the whole pantheon of party heroes and attack the villainy of the uncaring and party-of-the-rich Republicans. Jimmy Carter sought to place himself in that Democratic tradition, and he attacked Gerald Ford as the latest manifestation of the Republican villain, Herbert Hoover.

Flacks use primal themes to differentiate us from them by associating positive desires with "our" success, negative fears with "their" triumph. Fears about crime, safety, financial ruin, family values, and the like can be linked to the success of a particular candidate. If the opponent wins, crime will be rife, money inflated, and the authority of the family undermined; if we win, crime will be controlled, money solid, and authority restored. Such fantasies relate deeply held myths close to one's life and inner circle of loved ones with the success of a political candidate remote from that primal scene. Yet such appeals have great success.

Some of the most remarkable political ads ever made linked a deep primal theme with the success of political candidates, for example, ads by Doyle Dane Bernbach, Inc. (DDB) for the Johnson Campaign in 1964. DDB made spot ads reinforcing a campaign myth that Johnson's opponent, Barry Goldwater, was "irresponsible" and that he was a "hipshooter" with nuclear weapons. DDB made subtle ads joining this myth about Goldwater with a primal myth about the

health of one's children. The first, called "Daisy Girl," showed a pretty little girl picking daisies in a field, a dream child in her sunny world. As she counted the petals, the scene faded through her eyes to an atomic testing site, and then into a nuclear mushroom cloud. A voice-over (President Johnson) said (without mentioning Goldwater): "These are the stakes: To make a world in which all of God's children can live or go into the darkness. Either we must love each other or we must die." The second, called "Ice-Cream Cone," showed another girl, this time eating an ice-cream cone while a female voice-over said that Strontium 90 fallout could be found in milk and that Senator Goldwater had voted against the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. The primal fear about the big, bad world hurting children was brought to bear on Goldwater, conjuring up consequences that might stem from his alleged "irresponsibility"¹⁶ In this case, flacks were both using and making myths, employing a primal theme to scare people and at the same time reinforcing a current myth about Goldwater.

Flacks also make candidates into political heroes. Given that there are mythical norms as to the traits that a political hero is supposed to have, it is one job of flacks to communicate that their candidate possesses those qualities. In America, this includes characteristics such as mature, fair, hard-working, active, calm, stable, clean, and practical.¹⁷ Campaign biographies and brochures herald the candidate's qualities and accomplishments. The former might be termed the mythologization of political virtue. The candidate is a "man of the people" (although in fact he is wealthy); he's "his own man" (although he is beholden to his party and to fat cat contributors); he is a "family man" (marital breaks may be patched up for public consumption); he has played other social roles voters can relate to—soldier, farmer, businessman, and so forth. Representatives from congressional and state districts spend considerable campaign effort confirming that they respect and in some sense represent local expectations about them. Flacks focus advertising and press releases on these qualities in order to claim that their candidate lives up to the myths associated with the office.

In 1976, the campaign management firm working on behalf of Gerald Ford stressed his attractive personal qualities as well as the notion that he was a leader of "inner serenity" who, although of presidential stature, had not lost his common touch in the White House. The Carter ads used "vision" themes, developed throughout the

primary campaign, interspersed with montages of "Great Nation" landscapes, culminating in a shot of the four presidential faces carved on Mt. Rushmore and followed by a slow close-up of Carter: The subliminal implication was that Carter could be the fifth face.¹⁸ As in most American campaigns, flacks have a dual task: to sell the candidate as personal and presidential (or senatorial or whatever)—as possessing mythical qualities of both areas of life.

Flacks cannot always simply sell the myth of a candidate's personal and political qualities, so they often focus on myths about the candidate's political accomplishments. The candidate will be credited with bringing about a set of desirable states, as if any politician could have the power or magic to create roads, schools, and so on. When a politician is well known—especially an incumbent—it is a common ad strategy to stress accomplishment. In 1966, Nelson Rockefeller was up for re-election as governor of New York. Jack Tinker and Partners were retained to refurbish the Rockefeller image, since his popularity was slipping in the polls, and his re-election was in doubt. Tinker produced a series of ads that never displayed Rockefeller's face or voice. Rather, they simply pointed out all the great things that had happened during Rockefeller's tenure as governor. One featured a fish talking to a reporter about how much cleaner New York's water was after Rockefeller's Pure Waters Program. Another showed a stretch of road, while a voice-over claimed that if you took all the roads that Rockefeller built or fixed, they would stretch to Hawaii and back. Another extolled the number of state college scholarships Rockefeller was responsible for. In fact, there would have been road repairs no matter who was governor, and many other politicians—in the state legislature, for example—were probably as responsible for these things as was Rockefeller. But the campaign ads presented brilliantly the myth of Rockefeller's single-handed power to achieve things. The implication was that Rockefeller was godlike, omnipotent, and capable of mighty acts, and the ad simply depicted accomplishments that were yet another example of his benevolent power.¹⁹

Flacks spend a great deal of time defining situations for the press and the public in order to sustain the myth of their boss's heroism. In primaries, for example, press secretaries claim victories even though their opponent gets more votes. In 1972, two months before the New Hampshire primary, a Boston *Globe* poll showed Edmund Muskie leading George McGovern as the preference for Democrats by a 65 to

18 percent margin. After the poll release, McGovern flack Frank Mankiewicz announced that if Muskie were to get anything less than 65 percent, it would show that his support was slipping and that McGovern was gaining. As it turned out, Muskie defeated McGovern in New Hampshire by a 46 to 37 percent margin. Mankiewicz's definition of the situation stuck with the press, and the McGovern camp claimed a great "moral victory." Muskie lost while winning, and McGovern won while losing. The myth of what Muskie "had to have" to win was defined by his opponent's flack, and that definition doomed Muskie to eventual defeat. McGovern suddenly had "momentum," press coverage, "support," all built on the myth of his New Hampshire "victory."²⁰

The extent to which flacks engage in mythmaking in order to sustain their employer's heroism is astonishing. The flacks of major candidates put out solemn news releases on the personal habits of their Great Man. Much of such trivia seeks to charm the public—that such a giant has little human quirks, just like you and me! In recent years, this has included such tidbits as the fact that Nixon liked ketchup on cottage cheese, that Ford toasted his own English muffins, or that Carter listens to Mozart while he works. But other little facts hyped by flacks relate more directly to selling their candidate's heroism: Carter has an awesome capacity for work; Ford is a man of great inner serenity; Nixon has a grasp of foreign relations and a personal relationship with other Great Men, such as Brezhnev; Johnson dominates any setting he is in; and so on. These personal non-facts are designed to add to the myth of the leader by attributing to him superhuman traits. Similarly, in any context, flacks, with a straight face, assert that their man has another triumph. During the first Ford-Carter debate in 1976, the audio portion of the telecast went off, and there was a long delay. During the pause, Ford flack Ron Nessen emerged and solemnly announced that the debate was a "clear victory for the President"—even though the debate was not even finished!

Finally, campaign flacks drum up a variety of pseudo-myths on behalf of their employers. We distinguish these from the above kinds of mythmaking simply by their immediate and breathtaking cynicism. Flacks may (as we noted at the beginning of the chapter) be caught up in their candidate's heroism, in the goodness of whichever partisan "us" he represents, and in his embodiment and furtherance of some definition of political macromyths. But in the turbulence and anxiety

of campaigns, flacks have proven capable of communicating myths about their candidates that are blatantly manipulated in order to produce certain effects. We will mention four familiar ploys: pseudo-qualities, pseudo-associates, pseudo-issues, and pseudo-events.²¹

By *pseudo-qualities*, we mean the manufacture of myths about the personal qualities or professional qualifications of the candidate. This is distinguishable as a form of mythmaking from what we discussed above; in many cases, such as Rockefeller's, there is some truth in the claim made. Here, we have in mind the creation of qualities where none, or only bogus ones, exist. For instance, in 1962, young and inexperienced Edward M. Kennedy ran for a Senate seat from Massachusetts. His campaign brochure showed pictures of him with three foreign figures with the caption, "Familiarity with World Problems." A list of "Kennedy's Community Service" included such earthshaking achievements as "Judge Advocate of the Polish American Veterans Post of Boston." A study of that campaign concluded that these "are 'contrived' achievements since Kennedy had none of the customary political or professional achievements to his credit as the term is traditionally used."²² Even so, with the Kennedy name and organization, he won.

Sometimes, of course, one can create a pseudo-quality making a virtue of ignorance or inexperience. One of the more deft efforts in this vein occurred in the challenge of ex-actor Ronald Reagan against incumbent Governor Pat Brown in California in 1966. After the campaign, Reagan's packagers, Spencer-Roberts, frankly admitted that they made an asset of Reagan's total lack of political experience. He was sold as a "citizen politician" running against Brown, the "professional politician." Thus, according to Roberts, ". . . We had an automatic defense. He didn't have to know all the answers. He didn't have to have the experience. A citizen politician is not expected to know all of the answers to all of the issues. It was a foundation point from which, on any issue, he could get as bright as he wanted, but he could always retreat to the fact that he was a citizen politician."²³ Reagan's chief qualification for office, then, was that he was unqualified; Brown's chief disqualification was that he was (in traditional terms, at least) qualified. Brown was a "professional politician," burdened by having to take a stance on issues; Reagan was a "citizen politician," freed by not having to take a stance. The myth that Reagan was different, a citizen politician, was to catapult him into

presidential politics. In 1968, he produced a film for Republican presidential primaries entitled "Ronald Reagan: Citizen Governor." The myth of political virginity as a virtue was exploited by other candidates later.

Pseudo-associations refer to using celebrities as explicit or implicit endorsers and, more directly, using them to prove that the candidate has famous friends in areas of life that are important to people. In 1976, Jimmy Carter's campaign ran televised endorsements by racing car driver Cale Yarborough in the South, where both Yarborough and stock car racing is popular. During the same campaign, rock singer Linda Ronstadt and the Eagles played rock concerts to raise money for Jerry Brown. Flacks like their candidates to be seen in the company of such celebrities. Such pseudo-association helps to communicate the myth that a candidate is great because he is known by celebrities, values the same entertainment as his voters (be it Lawrence Welk or the Allman Brothers), or is simply "with it." That the candidate is "with it" can obviously be a myth, and flacks are capable of hiring celebrities for the "rubbing elbows with the glamorous" effect.

A *pseudo-issue* refers to a hyped "controversy" in a campaign, a tempest in a teapot that creates a myth that there is a major difference between candidates. Campaigns often look like the early stages of a boxing match: Both fighters size each other up, look for openings, establish their strategies. Campaigners and their flacks feel around for a slogan, a theme, or an issue that differentiates them from their opponents and strikes a responsive chord among voters. Since oftentimes there is no substantial difference, or pseudo-voters feel such substantial differences are boring, flacks conjure up pseudo-issues, non-differences claimed to constitute a difference. Many campaign controversies whirl around fantasied pseudo-issues that are quickly forgotten after the campaign. Kennedy and Nixon debated the monumental importance of Quemoy and Matsu in 1960. Richard Nixon had a "secret plan" to end the Vietnam War in 1968: He could *not* reveal it since, for one thing, it would no longer be a secret, and, for another, it might "undermine negotiations." The secret plan was a pseudo-issue (the candidates could not debate it), but it helped to create the myth that a Nixon win would bring about a desirable (for both hawks and doves) conclusion to the war. In many cases, pseudo-issues are created in campaigns in order to attack one's opponent, tagging him with a position he doesn't take. In 1972, Republican ads attacked George

McGovern as wanting to put half the country on welfare. In reality, McGovern's welfare reform proposal didn't differ much from President Nixon's; but the myth stuck, and it helped to bring about McGovern's massive defeat.

Flacks stage *pseudo-events*, mythical environments for candidates. Conventions and rallies are choreographed for maximum possible media effect. The Republicans hired George Murphy, actor, public relations director at M-G-M, and later Senator, to "produce" the renominating convention for Eisenhower in 1956, including directing delegate responses, fanfare, cues, and so on.²⁴ The art of staging conventions and rallies for prime-time mass audiences has since become increasingly sophisticated. The 1964 Democratic convention and the 1972 Republican convention were both mythical environments, scripted and executed in order to eliminate open conflict, on-camera flubs, boring intervals, and droning speeches. The illusion of lavish and unanimous enthusiasm for the candidate was, in both conventions, suggesting that, the enthusiasm of that mythical world could be extrapolated to the country as a whole.

Similarly, campaign ads frequently use a pseudo-event format. Some flacks believe that television news influences voters more than traditional hard-sell political ads, so they attempt to make ads resemble TV network documentaries and news stories.²⁵ A typical pseudo-event in campaign advertising will show the candidate, perspiring, tie loosened, coat over shoulder, sleeves rolled up, talking candidly to workers in a factory, with the noise of machines in the background. In most cases, the candidate actually did talk to workers, but the "best parts" are edited into the spot ad; the candidate did not go to the factory to find out what a small group of factory workers thought, but to be filmed in that setting. The candidate is making news, but the environment is mythical.

A variation on the pseudo-event in campaigning is what we call the *pseudo-movement*. Campaign flacks, through a variety of means (advertising, direct mailing, etc.), create the illusion of a vast movement, what Theodore White called "the impression of a force in being."²⁶ In 1964, a small group of Henry Cabot Lodge supporters, through direct mailings and a TV "documentary," created the impression that there was a groundswell of support for Lodge in New Hampshire. The press had exhausted stories about Goldwater and Rockefeller and began to write about the "rising tide" for Lodge, thereby

helping to create the "force in being." Lodge's flacks kept hyping new stories and the myth of movement, and they brought off a write-in victory for Lodge against two well-oiled and -financed campaigns.²⁷

In summary, campaign flackdom has become remarkably sophisticated in the exploitation of myths. Many of the messages constructed are directed at people's emotions, tugging at deeply held myths about their country, political values, and prejudices. Flacks also create fantasy worlds for people, allowing potential voters to be transported into the drama presented.²⁸ Many social critics have thus argued that contemporary campaigns are a massive exercise in human gullibility consisting of voters repeatedly believing the myth that a particular candidate can change things for good or ill if elected. In any case, it is likely that campaign mythmaking will continue.

FLACKS IN AND AROUND GOVERNMENT Selling Leaders, Policies, and Institutions

Flackdom as a social phenomenon can be traced to the growth in size and complexity of large organizations in the modern world—corporations, professional associations, unions, interest groups, political parties, and, of course, government. A corporation responds to a suit through a spokesman who is likely to be a professional flack. A union hires an ad agency to shore up the image by making and running ads where workers sing that people should "look for the union label." But in most cases, the organization takes formal steps to rationalize its relationships with the outside world by hiring flacks who are expert in the management of communications.

So it is with American government. Most major federal offices and agencies (and many state and local ones as well) have large staffs to perform increasingly complex functions, and one major addition has been a vast increase in budget and staff for flacking. Estimates as to how much government spends on public information and the like runs into the many hundreds of millions of dollars.²⁹ Similarly, other large organizations take political stances and attempt to further political interests through flack staffs hired for that purpose. Here, we discuss selected ways that government flacks and their counterparts in

interested organizations use and make myths to further a political leader, policy, or agency.

Political Leaders and Flacks

In most modern states, major political executives (e.g., presidents, governors, prime ministers, secretaries of government departments, chairmen, and commissioners) are surrounded by a personal staff that includes flacks. Presidents have press secretaries who control communications with the press, pollsters who do sampling and advise their employer on public feelings about him and policies, and aides who extol the president in public. Even in nations where political executives are not elected, leaders appear to worry about their popularity. In all cases, flacks build, sustain, or change the myths that the leaders desire people to hold about them.

The contemporary presidency is the most obvious and spectacular case, but the process of increasing flack influence in the life of the executive is not confined to that office. Major presidential contenders keep a stable of flacks on retainer in case they decide to run. The Kennedy family, for instance, has and does hire a variety of flacks to serve their political interests; for example, William Manchester mythologized the death of President Kennedy.³⁰ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., a long-time associate of the Kennedy family, recently published a biography of Robert Kennedy that speaks of the "mystical bond" between RFK and "the Other America"; how Kennedy was the "last liberal politician who could communicate with white working-class America"; and how Kennedy was going (in 1968) to reconstruct the Democratic party and win the presidency with a coalition of the poor, blacks, blue-collar whites, and the "kids."³¹ More skeptical observers might argue that all this is mythmaking similar to the semi-official history of Manchester: that much of the white working class was for Wallace; that a coalition such as the one envisioned was still a minority and not likely to control the Democratic Party or presidential elections; and that the Other America was a nonexistent (and romanticized) political force that was in reality likely to be as skeptical of Kennedy as it was of any other politician. In any event, when and if

Senator Edward Kennedy decides to run for president, the talented stable of Kennedy flacks will prove useful. At such a time, we might witness the marketing of a "New Ted," more mature and responsible, a myth similar to the "New Nixon" of 1968.

To illustrate the similarity of executive flackdom pervasive in modern states, one may usefully compare disparate operations and see the common bond of mythologizing in the political executive. Take three well-known executive establishments: the contemporary White House, Stalin's Kremlin, and Hitler's Reichschancellery.³² Flacks in both the "imperial" (Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon) and "nonimperial" (Carter) White Houses devote much time glorifying the boss, polishing his image, agonizing over public opinion, planning the performances and moves of their employer, and so on. The degree of mythologizing their boss's qualities is astounding. Aide Jack Valenti made a speech in which he said he "slept better at night" because Lyndon Johnson was president. Nixon's surrogates in the 1972 campaign attributed to him every imaginable kind of personal and political virtue. Even during Nixon's last year or so as president, when he spent considerable time rambling about or brooding over Watergate, the official version of his mood and activity was quite different. Presidents are typically portrayed by their flacks as on top of fast-breaking events, in control of every situation, pondering and mastering the great issues of the day—men who bear the most awesome responsibilities with courage and grace.

But even in the nonelective setting of the Kremlin and the Reichschancellery, there was considerable selling of the political executive. Both Stalin and Hitler saw that they could not base their rule totally on fear induced by terror; they also created a propaganda machine to induce admiration and downright adoration. Stalin's flacks portrayed him as contemporary as some presidents: He was resolute and cunning in war, a jovial "Uncle Joe" to the masses he sprang from and instinctively understood, and yet also a sort of remote Old Testament God with magical powers of benevolence and vengeance.³³ Similarly, Hitler's flacks made him into an equally remote god with awesome powers and with human touches, such as entertaining a little girl on her birthday. These cases of political mythmaking are more extreme than those surrounding the contemporary presidency, but the process is essentially the same: to portray the current leader as possessing, like Superman, "powers far beyond those of

ordinary men" and as indispensable. It is interesting to note how contemporary presidents' portrayals, like Stalin's and Hitler's, emphasize men of reason who stand calm and unshakable against the forces that would bring chaos and ruin. Lyndon Johnson stood firm against the "nervous Nellies" who would undermine American interests in Asia; Nixon was "tough" against anarchistic domestic forces that would destroy the country; and Carter stands for "reason" in energy, budget, and foreign policy against a stubborn and fearful Congress. In all cases, flack mythmaking about the boss serves the purpose (if successful) of augmenting public support and political power.

Political Policies and Flacks

Flacks sell policies in a variety of ways. Competing interest groups attempt to influence policy making by hiring flacks to conduct propaganda campaigns. Policy makers attempt to influence public opinion and other deciding institutions by the same tactic. And of course, interest groups and policy makers form alliances for the same purpose.

The American policy process involves much mythmaking. Partisan groups or policy participants attempt to convince others that some particular policy is good or true: If policy X is adopted or continued then result Y will be or is being realized, and that is good, for reasons A and B. This may all be so much eyewash or wishful thinking, but sometimes it is successful in convincing people. The Nixon administration conducted a large-scale campaign to sell the Vietnamization policy as both good and true: good in that it was a gradual withdrawal from the war and no "bug out," and true in that it was in fact occurring with success with the assurance that the South Vietnamese could "hack it" on their own. Actually, there were several major escalations of the war after the Nixon policy was announced, and the South Vietnamese, in the final analysis, did not hack it on their own. Yet at home in America, the policy did command some support. Oftentimes the official myth appears as what will happen unless policy X is followed. Both the Johnson and Nixon administrations hyped the domino theory, that unless South Vietnam was defended, the rest of Asia would fall to communism like dominos in a row. More recently, both sides of the intense debate about the Panama Canal treaty predicted dire consequences if their course was not followed. Similarly,

both proponents and opponents of the Equal Rights Amendment predicted that conflicting sets of consequences would flow from adoption or rejection. Opponents, for instance, conjured up the vision of women being drafted and sent into combat if ERA passed.

There are many mythmaking strategies commonly relied upon in policy struggles. The military lobby (e.g., the Pentagon, the armed service organizations, veteran's groups, congressional allies, etc.) trots out the myth of national security during budget fights over military appropriations. The defense secretary warns of new dangers of Soviet aggression and leaks to the press talk of new weapons systems the Russians are supposedly building; Senators warn of the peril of America becoming second in defense, and so on. Such rhetoric appeals to the deeply held myth that we prevent war and make ourselves secure by arming ourselves with more destructive and complex weaponry. After the appropriations and reassurances are forthcoming, the dire warnings abate.

Another standard ploy is to assert that there exists out there a great groundswell of support or righteous indignation about something that is happening or about to happen. The National Rifle Association creates the illusion of great public opposition to gun control legislation by flooding congressional offices with mail from NRA supporters. Various interest groups claim that public opinion is behind them on a certain matter, appealing to the illusion that there is enormous interest in and support for a policy. They commission polls, quite valid in their sampling procedure, but which load questions about a particular issue—for example, "Do you favor creating a vast new bureaucracy costing billions of dollars in your tax money to administer socialized medicine?"—selected results are presented in testimony before Congress and other forums as evidence of public opposition to socialized medicine.

Flacks and the Selling of Government Agencies

Finally, flacks sell not only leaders and policies, but also government agencies themselves. Government establishments are aware that their budgets and policies often depend on their image, on how much support they are believed to have, and on how effective policy makers think they are. The Federal Bureau of Investigation is a well-known

example. Its vastly successful public relations program gained it a positive public image and reputation among policy makers that accrued to the agency's benefit. FBI propaganda successfully sold the myth of a vast communist and criminal conspiracy in the country that was exponentially increasing in power all the time, while at the same time convincing policy makers and the public that the Bureau was never more successful in combating these forces!³⁴ The FBI's reputation, of course, was enhanced by the adroit hyping of the long-time director, J. Edgar Hoover, through publicity stunts (such as having Hoover personally arrest some noted criminal for the benefit of news organizations) and cooperation with the popular media (see Chapter 5). There are many other examples of such agency flacking, such as the Pentagon and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), but the process is essentially the same: to convince people, especially policy makers, of things about the agency that may be largely mythical.

THE FUTURE OF FLACK MYTHMAKING IN POLITICS

In this chapter, we linked the emergence of economic and political flackdom with the advance of industrial consumer civilization. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about this historical trend is not the adroit use of myth but the constant creation and re-creation of myths about political objects. Bloom noted that campaign flacks made it feasible "to package, test-market, re-package, and re-market the same man several times over. And when the job is finished, the voters will apparently buy a variety of images, even if self-contradictory."³⁵ That this should be so in a culture dedicated and addicted to consumption and change should not surprise us. Primal and cultural myths would be an obvious target of these new economic and political forces and skills. But the larger view of what this trend augurs for the future of politics has been fearful to contemplate. Perhaps Ernst Cassirer went to the heart of the matter when he wrote the following:

Myth has always been described as the result of an unconscious activity and as a free product of imagination. But here we find

myth made according to plan. The new political myths do not grow up freely: they are not wild fruits of an exuberant imagination. They are artificial things fabricated by very skillful and cunning artisans. It has been reserved for the twentieth century, our own great technical age, to develop a new technique of myth. Henceforth myths can be manufactured in the same sense and according to the same methods as any other modern weapon—as machine guns or airplanes. That is a new thing—and a thing of crucial importance. It has changed the whole form of our social life.²⁸

How much more the increasing pervasion and sophistication of the flack arts in politics will affect our lives is difficult to know. Orwell's famous vision, *1984*, portrays a world in which flacks hype a heroic, yet nonexistent, political leader (Big Brother), a war that probably is not being fought, increases in productivity and abundance that are actually not occurring, and so forth; yet people buy it. However, in the present, many people don't accept many of the economic and political messages put out by professional flacks. Much of the cynicism and rebellion of the present over politics stems in part from the suspicion that the message, as well as the product hyped, is phony. One sees a popular demand for that which is real, natural, free of hype. Yet, people in the present buy Coca-Cola ("the real thing") and "natural" hair coloring and are attracted to politicians who bill themselves as real and natural. In a political world overrun by the flack arts, discerning the real from the phony is ever more difficult. How do we know that the current version of the politically true, beautiful, or good is not simply another myth, with modern flacks manipulating the shadows on the cave wall?

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CHAPTER 5

That's Entertainment! Politics Through Popular Culture

*What does it mean when a nation
turns tragedy into comic books?*

CYCLOPS