

by Mark Steyn

As Seen on TV

How television's importance has made it irrelevant.

According to Ed Rollins, the sixth rule of campaign combat is, "If it's not on television, it barely matters." Well, the Republican Convention was certainly on television, but did it matter? Traditionally, we're told, every party gets a post-convention "bounce" in the polls. On the other hand, precisely because we'd been told it and therefore the bounce was expected, leading bounce commentators were eager to emphasize, even as the bounce was happening, that bounce-wise it wasn't much of a bounce. The networks' bounce consultants suggested that the Republicans would have got more bounce to the ounce and, crucially, a better *perception* of their bounce if they'd downplayed expectations of it, by scheduling, say, Phil Gramm as the keynote speaker and then substituting Susan Molinari at the last moment. Besides, received opinion held that much of the bounce had been offset by the flounce—the flamboyant walkout of *Nightline*'s Ted Koppel. Luckily, Binty the gorilla came along to rescue some hapless moppet in the Brookfield Zoo and restore Ted's flagging interest in the exciting world of network news.

But does it matter?

Today, politics is not populist but post-modern: like the Pompidou Center, the plumbing's all on the outside. So, when Bob Dole makes a good speech, it's Mark Helprin who gets profiled and interviewed about where this or that image came from. Meanwhile, advisers announce that Dole

will be coming out strongly in favor of *Independence Day*, so they're now trying to get him in to see it. Convention managers run around town giving interviews about how everything's being packaged and scripted for TV and how anything as tiresome as "delegates" who want to talk "politics" will only be allowed onto the podium during the networks' commercial breaks.

And all the bits that have been expressly designed as "good television" never make it onto television because, during, say, the Republicans' video tribute to President Reagan, the anchors cut away and explain that what's going on is not a proper political convention but a slick ersatz convention designed to make good television. And then all the anchors interview each other about whether the "good television" strategy is working...even before it's happened. Thus, the first speaker at the Democratic Convention was a Chicago cop who'd been shot in the line of duty, but, instead of showing us the speech, Dan Rather talked all over it, explaining who the man was, what he was saying, and the rationale behind letting him speak—and then interviewed Bob Schieffer about whether this rationale was sound.

Almost everything you need to know about this approach to politics can be found on the jacket to Rollins's book, *Bare Knuckles and Back Rooms*. As has been noted, he's not bare knuckled: in the photograph, he's wearing boxing gloves. But he's not in the back rooms, either. All the backroom boys are on TV, as ABC News consultants and CNBC talk-show hosts. James Carville goes on Letterman and does lifestyle ads for American Express. Dick Morris has even cornered the mar-

ket in that traditional prerogative of elected politicians, the career-detonating hooker scandal. Years ago, Rollins reports, Barbara Bush was annoyed with Lee Atwater because he'd been profiled in *Esquire* and photographed in his boxer shorts. But she has a point: How did we end up in a world where the backroom boys are Playmates of the Year?

Once upon a time, there were events that television turned up to cover. Now all the events—the Oscars, the Tonys, the conventions—are made for TV. Most of them feature the same limited personnel. Christopher Reeve was at both the Academy Awards and the Democratic Convention, though the Hollywood speech was better. The cast of the Broadway hit *Rent* did a number at both the Tonys and the Democrats', though in New York they'd been plugging the show while in Chicago they were plugging the album. But, if you don't have a show or an album to plug, why play along?

I don't blame Susan Molinari. The Republicans lost in '92, so why not go with the bright-eyed rather than the Bushy-failed approach? But anyone who believes in democracy ought to at least feel ever so slightly ashamed at the spectacle of so many intelligent, articulate Republican adults going to such lengths to present themselves as simpletons.

Of course, this is what network news personnel do every day of their lives. In London, I used to get the occasional call from ABC's "Nightline" or "CBS This Morning" to go on and discuss Andrew Lloyd Webber's new musical or Mrs. Thatcher's campaign strategy or the pedophile allegations about Michael Jackson. Foreign commentators are always amused by U.S. production teams. They only ever say two things: first, they tell you how terribly interesting your ideas are but

MARK STEYN is theater critic of the New Criterion and movie critic of the Spectator of London.

regret that they're too complex for American television so could you please condense them to six words or so; secondly, they explain how the most important thing is to remember the name of your interviewer and use it frequently. "Great to be with you, Peter." "Pleasure to see you, Harry." Heaven forbid that you should be so careless as to mistake Diane Sawyer for Paula Zahn.

Elsewhere in this issue, you'll read about how the network news teams are biased towards the Democrats, which is undeniable. But, more than that, they're biased towards themselves. At both the Republican and Democrat conventions, Dan Rather spends most of his time interviewing Rita Braver and Bob Schieffer and other CBS colleagues. The delegates are mere set dressing for the crowd scenes. Rita and Bob always have big, bulky hand microphones and head sets. There's no *technical* reason for this: they could have small, barely visible mikes and earpieces, as visiting BBC correspondents do. But the big mikes, like the delegates, are props: the CBS team are acting at being reporters, though nothing approximating to real reporting is going on.

Meanwhile, those who make it on to TV play by TV rules, acquiring such expertise in delivering 9-second sound-bites that normal human conversation is beyond them. On the first night of the Democratic Convention, Rather interviewed Jesse Jackson. Was he upset at not being allowed to speak in prime time? "Any time I speak is prime because I have a prime message," he said. But wasn't the party hopelessly divided? "In '68, we were divided by warfare. Now, we're divided by welfare."

Like every politician, Jesse wants to be on TV because TV is supposed to make you famous. But, even in a celebrity age, the biggest celebs are those, like Streisand and Sinatra, who don't do TV at all. And where has being good at soundbites got Jesse Jackson? He's on television, but, *pace* Rollins, he barely matters. This is all you need to know about CBS News: nine out of ten Americans don't watch it. This is all you need to know about network news as a whole: a recent poll showed that over 50 percent of the American electorate did not know Bob Dole was a war veteran. All those soundbites, all

those photo-ops, all those left-handed waves, and the single most obvious, visible fact about Dole never registered.

The Republican response to its difficulties punching through the dozy blur of TV news is a curious one: "Let Dole be anybody but Dole." Helprin wrote a fine speech, but it was a speech that could have been delivered by any politician of Dole's generation and which wasn't in the Kansan's speech rhythms: he was cheered for getting through it without tying himself in knots. The Dole campaign wants to put over the real Dole, which, in television terms, means constructing an entirely artificial Dole. So the poor fellow struggles to be phonily genuine, while President Clinton breezes along as a genuine phony.

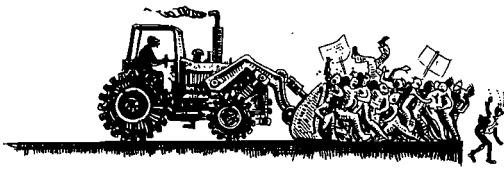
The *Weekly Standard* was pretty sniffy the other week about an Andrew Sullivan column claiming that Dole had potentially more appeal to the under-35s than any other candidate. But Sullivan was right. To Generation X slackers, Clinton is just like your dad—a boring boomer who plays golf and sings along to Fleetwood Mac. But the old Dole was one of them: like Letterman, he keeps letting you in on the artifice—the slogans that he can't get right, "A better plan for a better man, or whatever it is that the boys in the backroom have cooked up"; like Beavis and Butthead, he's too cool to be bothered learning a speech. And "Bob Dole—Whatever" could be the ultimate youth-appeal catchphrase, the most exquisitely all-encompassing since that of President Wintergreen in the Gershwin operetta *Of Thee I Sing*: "A Vote for Wintergreen Is a Vote for Wintergreen." I'm not being flip-pant here. If you're going to re-cast Dole for the TV age, why not do it properly? In sucking up to the network news, the Republicans were remodeling their man for a TV era that's come and gone. On the last night of the convention, they were beaten in the ratings by a "Seinfeld" rerun.

It's peachy for sitcoms and cop shows, but TV is a passive medium. In between the ads, the network news increasingly prefers soft lifestyle stories—on this week's health scare or human-interest tragedy. For politics, for society, for foreign affairs, for ideas, there is little room. Three days

after the Olympic pipe bomb, CBS News was running a montage of images from the disaster concluding with the line "To Be Continued..."—as if real life were no different from their moronic daytime soap operas. There is still a difference—*just*—but the fate of Richard Jewell, who went from the networks' designated hero to designated villain in the space of 48 hours, suggests the difficulties TV has with any story that doesn't fit the simplest scenario.

What's the real story of this election year? I'd say Pat Buchanan in New Hampshire. Steve Forbes spent a fortune, was profiled on *Time*, *Newsweek*, and every network, and got nowhere. Buchanan spent \$17.99, left the organization to his sister, and won. With the support of the *Union-Leader*—just about the oldest-fashioned newspaper in the land—and a bunch of shoestring radio stations in Berlin and Littleton to whom he made himself endlessly available, Buchanan met face to face with real people in nowhere towns Dole couldn't be bothered coming to; they were too far north of where Ted and Cokie were hanging out. Buchanan offered *real* populism, not the phony TV variety of Lamar! "walking across New Hampshire" for a few hundred yards until the cameras had enough footage, and then getting back in his car and driving to the next photo-op. Buchanan understood that the most significant political platform of recent years has been Rush Limbaugh's—quaint, antiquated steam radio. Almost any other outlet energizes the audience more than network news and its insular self-preoccupation, spinning itself into circles. The real scandal of campaign finance isn't the amount of money involved, but the fact that most of it's blown buying airtime on three networks who degrade and trivialize American politics even as they suck up their budgets.

After his unfortunate remarks over black ministers and Christie Whitman's victory, Ed Rollins said: "I spun myself out of control. This was an inside-the-Beltway bullshit game that I've become the victim of." *Victim*. Just like they say on "Oprah" and "Ricki." Rollins really is "good television." But his sixth rule couldn't be more wrong. American Politics is most definitely on television—which is why, to increasing numbers of the electorate, it barely matters. ❀



Getty's Fortune

Animal-rights activists wish this AIDS patient were dead.

Jeff Getty was in the hospital fighting for his life. Suffering from the advanced stages of AIDS, his T-cell count had dropped so low they could be counted by hand. Doctors had given him a year to live at most, unless he was willing to undergo a highly dangerous and experimental operation. Researchers at the University of Pittsburgh had discovered that baboons can withstand huge injections of HIV without ever contracting AIDS. If T-cells from a baboon's bone marrow could survive in Getty's body, his doctors thought, they might just save his life. His already ravaged immune system would be virtually destroyed with chemotherapy and radiation; then Getty would receive injections of the baboon's bone marrow.

Nobody had ever survived the procedure before. But even if the transplant were to fail, Getty believed, helping to find a cure for AIDS was worth dying for. The FDA was worried that the operation itself might kill him, but as Getty told CNN, "I'm in a situation where I'm going to die anyhow." Like thousands of people with life-threatening illnesses, Getty was fighting for his life against the FDA's delay in approving new drugs and experimental medical treatments.

Getty was also facing another challenge. The Humane Society had filed a complaint with the National Institutes of Health to bar the operation. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) had launched a massive PR campaign against the FDA with the same objective.

But at last Getty finally got the govern-

ment's permission. On December 14, 1995, he went into the operating room at San Francisco General. Three weeks later, he left the hospital triumphant: "To the naysayers, who said that I would never recover from this procedure, well, here I am and you were wrong." Almost a year later, his T-cell count is up, and he's off almost all the medications he was taking before the surgery. He says he feels better today than he has in five years.

Virtually every medical breakthrough in this century has come about through animal research. Indeed, almost every Nobel prize for medicine awarded since the turn of the century required some kind of animal research. Dr. Joseph E. Murray, a professor emeritus at Harvard Medical School who won a Nobel in 1990 for his research on organ transplants, says, "It is impossible to champion AIDS research without using animal experimentation." As former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop puts it, "We would be in absolute, utter darkness about AIDS if we hadn't done decades of basic research in animal retroviruses."

For the new generation of animal rights activists, however, such research is a moral abomination. "We don't have the right to use animals as if they were parts off the shelf," says Megan Patterson, a PETA spokeswoman. Ingrid Newkirk, the group's founder, is more to the point. Even if animal research resulted in a cure for AIDS, Newkirk said in a 1989 *Vogue* interview, "we'd be against it."

And, like many an activist group before them, PETA even supports the commission of illegal acts to further its struggle. "Arson,

property destruction, burglary, and theft are 'acceptable crimes' when used for the animal cause," declares PETA chairman Alex Pacheco. Some animal rights activists have even sabotaged AIDS research facilities, in the process costing patients not only more money but also valuable time.

"Animal liberationists do not separate out the human animal," Newkirk told *Vogue*. "So there is no rational basis for saying that a human being has special rights. A rat is a pig is a dog is a boy." Counters Getty: "In the animal extremists' world, rats live and I die. I don't appreciate PETA's willingness to help me into my coffin."

Bu North Carolina State University Philosophy Professor Tom Regan, widely regarded as the intellectual guru of the animal rights movement, doesn't see it that way. "We have no basic right...not to be harmed by those natural diseases we are heir to," Regan wrote in his 1983 opus, *The Case for Animal Rights*. "If abandoning animal research means that there are some things we cannot learn, then so be it." Asked once which he would save, a dog or a baby, if a boat capsized in the ocean, Regan responded: "If it were a retarded baby and bright dog, I'd save the dog."

Animal rights groups reportedly spend some \$200 million a year to fight for their cause—and the success of Getty's procedure only insures that the fight will intensify. Even though Getty's body rejected the baboon cells, he says, "I'm feeling better than ever." Dr. Steven Deeks, who helped perform the transplant, says, "Jeff's health has clearly improved." What really irks animal rights activists is that Getty paved the way for future transplants by proving the procedure is safe. "If they had admitted failure, and had decided not to waste any more time and money, that would be one

IKÉ C. SUGG is a fellow at the Competitive Enterprise Institute in Washington, D.C.