

**Packaging the Presidency: A History and Criticism of Presidential Campaign Advertising**

By Kathleen Hall Jamieson  
Oxford University Press,  
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By Joan Walsh

In 1968 author Joe McGinniss got backstage with Richard Nixon's presidential campaign and wrote the influential *The Selling of the President: 1968*. In it McGinniss argued that the Nixon voters rejected in the 1960 presidential race and 1962 California Senate campaign—the Nixon of McCarthyism, the Checkers speech and that suspicious five o'clock shadow—had been re-packaged and sold to an unsuspecting electorate with Madison Avenue methods more befitting a new brand of deodorant than a new president.

Since then analysis of political advertising has become a staple of campaign coverage, a development many editors and reporters have credited to McGinniss' book. Kathleen Hall Jamieson, in her new book *Packaging the Presidency*, thinks that the attention to advertising McGinniss generated is fine, but the political cynicism his book fostered is not. *Packaging the Presidency* attempts to counter the notion that advertising can "sell" voters a president, while historically assessing its incontrovertible significance to presidential campaigns, especially in the age of television.

It's a difficult balancing act, since Jamieson herself acknowledges that advertising may be a voter's only contact with the candidates' campaign stands, and that 30 to 60-second spots at best simplify complex issues. And most of us are predisposed to believe that American voters have been brainwashed into their political choices by high-paid masters of manipulation, rather than accept that Ronald Reagan's commercials, for instance, simply communicated his message to voters who examined and agreed with it.

Take one of the campaign's best Doonesbury strips, which spoofed Reagan's "Morning in America" ads with a fictional commercial contrasting Reagan's "Morning in America" ads with Mondale's. In Reagan's, the milkman arrives, families pray, kids leave for school and mother calls out, "Billy, you forgot your mittens." In Mondale's, milk costs \$5 a quart, Billy is snorting coke and a mother leaving the house announces, "I'm off for my abortion, dear." It was very funny, playing on our sense that such a commercial "might as well have" aired. But it didn't.

Jamieson scrutinizes the advertising used in the eight presidential campaigns between 1952 and 1980. Yet she starts even farther back, using William Henry Harrison's 1840 campaign as an example of how, even before the advent of radio, TV and mass circulation newspapers, candidates used imagery and rhetoric to highlight their strengths and mask their weaknesses. Harrison's campaign slogan, "Tippecanoe and Tyler too" substituted Tippecanoe, the site where Harrison led an 1811 battle against Shawnee Indians, for the candidate's name, playing up his military record to obscure questions about his poor health. A log cabin was his symbol, creating a rustic, backwoods image for the upper-class governor's son who

# INPRINT

## CAMPAIGNS

# The media is the message



Paul Cornstock

Author Kathleen Hall Jamieson argues political advertising has served democracy.

actually lived in a Georgian mansion. Harrison beat Democratic incumbent Martin Van Buren and died in office.

Today, Jamieson notes, "the counterfeited image would likely

have been exposed by Roger Mudd or Dan Rather live from the Georgian mansion. Doctors' records mysteriously would have found their way within camera range of investigative journal-

## Jamieson on campaign '84

*The Mondale campaign followed a classic Democratic strategy for facing a strong Republican incumbent, reminiscent of the Adlai Stevenson and Hubert Humphrey campaigns: play up Democratic issues and Democratic allegiance, play down the incumbent. What should it have done?*

It's been a real problem. When you've got a candidate who's personal popularity you're not sure of, who's not a particularly effective communicator, there is a tendency to keep the candidate out of the ads. But since Watergate, you've got to know what the candidate will be like as president: you've got to establish "I'm not a Richard Nixon, I'm not a Lyndon Johnson, I won't lie to you." What's called "image advertising" is actually a valuable form because it's trying to tell you about the candidate as a human being. You can't do that unless there's some Mondale in these ads. Thus we don't know who Walter Mondale is.

*But he seems to be a candidate who honestly asserts that TV doesn't work for him.*

There are formats in which Mondale is very effective—small group interviews, press conference formats—in which you do

get a sense of Walter Mondale the human being. I don't know of any Mondale advertising that tried him in small groups, *cine-ma verite*, just let him forget the cameras and interact and just let him be Mondale.

Reagan's strength is that he lets you get to know him as a person, you trust him, you like him, even if you don't know how he's come to some very strange positions on issues. In part it's also what the country seems to need right now. He takes you through traumas—Vietnam, Watergate, Iran—and says this is a good country. He goes back to things that aren't controversial—the Normandy invasion. It's no accident they use that Normandy scene in the advertising—it's an extremely effective moment.

The question Mondale should have been raising in the final days was, "Is he competent?" There were real questions raised in the first debate and the closing statement of the final debate.

*This was something like what Stevenson faced with Eisenhower—the health question.*

But Eisenhower established he was healthy—he went to Suez, he kept campaigning, he didn't give Stevenson any evidence. After the first debate Mondale had evidence.... What Mondale should have done was bought time the last night of the campaign for a live call-in show, and say, "I'm going to take the toughest questions from around the country

ists." There lies her faith that advertising can't falsify presidential candidates: their opponents and the press are alert for outright lies in today's media-dominated campaigns. And with federal funding of presidential campaigns, neither side can significantly outbroadcast the other.

### Democracy and advertising.

Jamieson starts from the premise that political advertising, especially in the broadcast media, has on balance served democracy by bringing candidates directly to voters and forcing consistency on their messages. Candidates today have a harder, though not an impossible, task telling one group of voters one message and abandoning it when addressing another.

She finds, not surprisingly, that the candidates who have the most success in framing their appeal to voters through their ads tend to win elections. But adver-

*Advertising—can it sell voters a president... especially in the TV age?*

tising inadequacies, she argues, have been linked to flaws in the campaign or candidate himself. Adlai Stevenson's inability to speak in short, simple sentences or keep his campaign speeches within their allotted time "raised doubts about his ability to act decisively." Gerald Ford's difficulty with crafting a single advertising theme reflected his lack of presidential direction. And Jimmy Carter, perceived as a less than competent president but a good man, lost his claim to de-

and prove I have what it takes to be president. Ronald Reagan won't do that because he doesn't command what it takes. He's going to deliver a speech, and we're going to come back on the air afterwards and poke holes in it."

*Doesn't the reliance on short TV ads dilute the process?*

Obviously, spot ads simplify. You can state a candidate's position, but you're not building a case. But spot advertising is the only form we will watch as an electorate. The other stuff is there—position papers, political speeches, half-hour and hour-long news and documentary shows. But how are you going to blame candidates for not giving you more when spot ads are the only thing we'll watch?

Reagan did an innovative thing earlier this year: he had a half-hour show and he road-blocked, bought all three networks and got the habitual television viewers. Lyndon LaRouche knew enough about TV to promote his half hour with spot ads. And the National Conservative Political Action Committee and the Mondale campaign used toll-free numbers with some of their ads. When you called you were asked for money, but they also asked if you wanted more information and sent it out to you. That creates mailing lists. ...Those were innovations that helped push the electorate to longer forms, which is very important.

—J.W.

gency by attacking Reagan personally.

The chapter on the 1980 election is, in some parts, the book's most persuasive; in other sections, it's the least convincing. There Jamieson makes the case that dishonesty in advertising most often backfires on the candidate advancing the falsehood. Convincingly, she blames Carter's failure to persuade voters that Reagan was a dangerous, unqualified aspirant to the presidency on his exaggerated claims about Reagan's goals and motives.

Having claimed Reagan would separate black from white, Jew from Christian, North from South, rural from urban," Carter gave Reagan's campaign the opening to simply focus on Reagan the man, who comes across on TV as unlikely to aspire to the evil Carter attributed to him. As a Hollywood producer told Carter media advisor Gerald Rafshoon, "Ronald Reagan is not a good actor. But he played in 59 movies and in all but one he played...a sincere guy. He knows how to play sincere people. And you should have known better."

Yet the Reagan phenomenon, well-encapsulated in that quote, also makes it hard to accept Jamieson's argument that "the ability to deliver televised messages artfully...has not become so central a qualification for the presidency that it has exiled candidates who lack it."

Watergate forced campaigns to a higher standard of what constitutes fair and reasonable claims, Jamieson notes, and highly visual montage ads were mostly replaced by neutral, fact-laden spots. But the Reagan campaigns have exhibited a marked inattention to fact and policy in favor of image and emotion. Ads like the Morning in America series have helped reverse the post-Watergate trend. "You want us to put poor people in these ads?" a White House official asked a skeptical *Washington Post* reporter.

On the other hand, the Mondale campaign's inability to counter Reagan's image-making bolsters Jamieson's assertion that difficulties with successful advertising reflect difficulties with articulating a political message—or even a lack of a clear political message (see accompanying interview).

Jamieson herself places two restrictions on how far her conclusions can be taken. They do not extend to congressional or local legislative races, where spending imbalances and lower levels of press scrutiny let candidates get away with a lot more distortion. And her entire thesis could be upended by the continued growth of political action committees (PACs), which can boost the amount of money spent on behalf of presidential candidates and also resort to the kind of attacks and half-truths that don't appear on the national scene. In 1980, she notes, Reagan spent just over \$18 million on political advertising, but benefited from another \$12 million spent by conservative PACs. Carter got about \$50,000 worth of comparable advertising support.

*Packaging the Presidency* is exhaustive, based on 75 interviews with campaign staff and advisors from the eight campaigns covered. With occasional exceptions, it succeeds in establishing a link between what voters in presidential elections see—or don't see—and what they get. But a lot of people are still going to want to believe otherwise. ■



**The War at the End of the World**  
By Mario Vargas Llosa  
Farrar Straus Giroux, 568 pp.,  
\$18.95

By Pat Aufderheide

In 1893, in the Brazilian backlands, the war issuing in the millennium commenced. Or so it seemed to the thousands of religious cultists of Canudos, who had migrated to that dusty outpost from surrounding enclaves of peasant and ranching misery. To the attackers, federal troops sent to quell what seemed a rebellion against the new republic, it was to be an easy victory.

Both were wrong. It took four military campaigns (the last involving 4,000 troops), the death in combat of every last able-bodied man, woman and child in the town, and a house-by-house leveling to end it. This was not the millennium. But it was an epochal conflict.

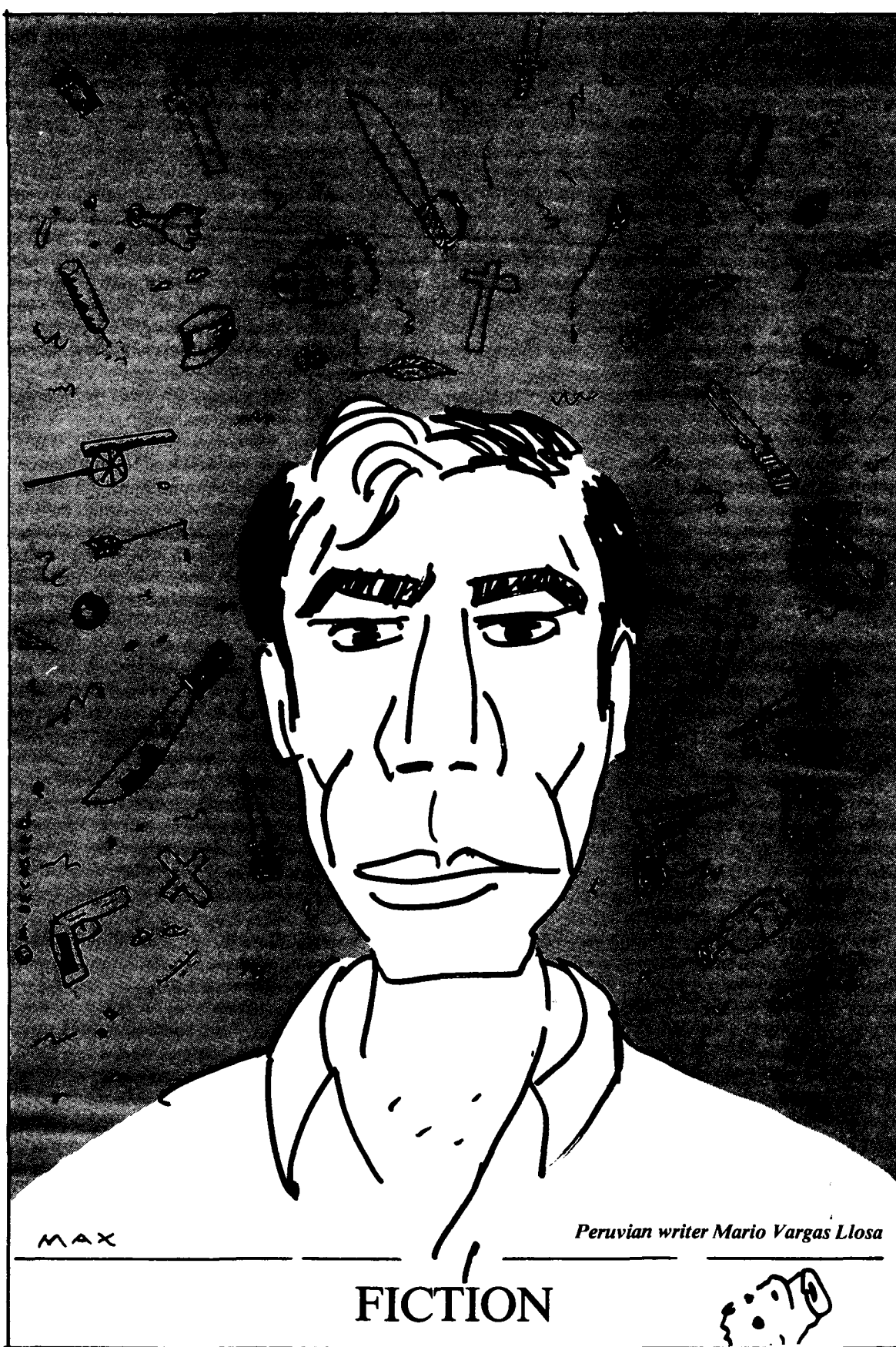
The war in Canudos made headlines for years in Brazil. It also provoked a thoughtful engineer and journalist, Euclides da Cunha, to write a classic of Brazilian literature: *Os Sertões* (translated as *Rebellion in the Backlands*). For him, the war was not just a civil-religious conflict, but a battle that went to the core of Brazilian culture. He argued, in hundreds of pages of meticulous and elegant prose, that the 1889 imposition of republican government had been a crude graft from Europe. Brazil, a mestizo nation, was hundreds of years behind "enlightened" nations. Canudos had pitted the peculiar Brazilian race, an amalgam of white, Indian and black, against the Europeanized elite, and the 19th century of the coast against the middle ages of the interior. Canudos had been a crime of genocidal proportions, in which the government had become inadvertant "mercenaries" against the people.

Da Cunha's racial notions have been superseded, although you will still find many in Brazil who argue that darker races are more primitive than whiter (but never white enough) elites. But his work still stands as a record and challenge for developing nations battling for cultural autonomy and economic survival.

Eighty years after *Os Sertões* was published, Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa, internationally respected and recently known in North America for his *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*, was captured by the drama of Canudos, for many of the same reasons da Cunha was. He too saw in it, as he said in a *Washington Post* interview, "something that has been happening in Latin American history over the 19th and 20th centuries—the total lack of communication between two sections of a society which kill each other fighting ghosts, no? Fighting fictional enemies who are invented out of fanaticism, out of religious or political or economic blindness! This kind of reciprocal incapacity of understanding what you have opposing you is probably the main problem we have to overcome in Latin America if we want to civilize our countries."

#### Best tradition.

*The War at the End of the World* is as monumental as *Os Sertões*, although time and political context give it a different cast. What for Da Cunha, influenced by the positivism and physical anthropology of his day, was science is for Vargas Llosa tragic, but changeable history. In the best tradition of Latin American liter-



Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa

## Llosa's *War and Peace* of the Third World

ature, the book is both a pointed contribution to political life and a highly crafted work of art.

This novel is a kind of *War and Peace* of the Third World. Masterful in its tactical analysis of a guerrilla war, brilliant at exposing the confusion at the center of battle, it also, like *War and Peace*, weaves a tapestry of pas-

*Like Tolstoy, Llosa weaves a tapestry of passions in which people emerge distinct without leaving their place in a complex historical process.*

sions in which individuals emerge distinct without leaving their place in a complex historical process. Like Tolstoy, Vargas Llosa believes that history is contingent, shaped in part by the conflicts that warring doctrines of predestination engender.

In this novel, you can see boldly why Vargas Llosa has made so many enemies on the left, and why he is reviled by the Cuban intelligentsia as well as Cuba supporters. For him, the rebellion in Canudos is not a revolutionary act—not even potentially. It is part of a pathological clash of fanaticisms out of which no healthy new society emerges. (He sees unnerving parallels between Canudos and the struggles today in the Peruvian highlands, where radical leftists and government forces fight it out with peasants as fodder.)

The multilayered drama of Canudos is developed with superb skill from the perspective of major participants. Vargas Llosa creates characters—some fictional, many historical—among Canudos' leaders and followers; military officers and men; a plantation owner; Republican politicians using Canudos to undermine plantation owners' power; and representing the foreign and

the left (not an accidental unity here), a Scottish anarchist convinced that Canudos is really a vote for anarchism.

Vargas Llosa has the mark of a writer who lives so surely inside his characters that there is no need for them to talk at length. A novel that starts slow, *The War at the End of the World* cannot be read quickly even when its pitiless drama captures the reader, because the story is too dense to be digested in a hurry.

#### Fanaticism.

The theme of the novel is fanaticism, in all its forms. Most obvious is that of the simply pious followers of Antonio the Counselor, who held that people should devote themselves to the Lord in the imminent prospect of the millennium, and that they should resist the satanic secularism of the Republic. As that fanaticism is lived out by ex-bandits, abandoned women and the dregs of a travelling freak show, it looks no more grotesque—indeed, somewhat more hopeful—than the barbaric terms of their previous existences as slaves and near-slaves, starved peasants and castaways. Their understanding of salvation matches their perception of their bleak future in

IN THESE TIMES. NOV. 14-20, 1984. 19 society. By the end of the novel, it is possible to understand why, when Canudos is under its final attack, peasants stream from all over the backlands to get in.

The rigid terms of backlands culture, ruled by a strict and archaic code of honor and shame, prepare them for evangelical fury. A backlands cowboy whose wife is abducted by the Scottish anarchist enters into a duel to the death to defend his family's honor, and so exposes its centrality in daily life. As a local priest explains, "It's as though they were one great open wound. They don't have a thing to their names but they possess a surpassing sense of honor. It's their form of wealth."

Into this world enters the anarchist zealot, who tries to open peasants' eyes with such phrases as: "Your sickness is called injustice, a base exploitation.... Occupy the lands, the houses...." His words only bore and confuse people, and a member of the freak show harangues him: "Feel their heads, predict the future—do something that'll make them happy!" When reality is unbearable, magic is essential.

Fanaticism is by no means the preserve of the illiterate and poor. Vargas Llosa is just as scathing in his portrayal of agents of the state. The plantation owner explains a reality confirmed in the actions of a suicidal military commander of Canudos: "He's not interested in money or honor, and perhaps not even power in itself. It's abstract things that motivate him to act: an unhealthy nationalism, the worship of technical progress, the belief that only the army can impose order and save this country from chaos and corruption. An idealist of the same stamp as Robespierre...."

The baron eventually surrenders, once his plantation and his wife's sanity have been destroyed, to his political enemies the Republicans. He says to his opponent: "The time has come for action, daring, violence, even crimes. What is needed now is a total dissociation of politics from morality." For him, out of the collapse of relationships held together with brute force and the harsh order of honor and deference, comes only the rankest opportunism.

Elegant, perceptive (and self-consciously reactionary), the baron often appears to echo the author's sentiments. But another voice also carries the author's acerbic commentary—that of a confused reporter whose cowardice, Vargas Llosa tells us, is matched only by his curiosity. The reporter covers every campaign, and ends up trapped in Canudos up to the end. Loosely modeled on Da Cunha, he quickly asserts a personality of his own. When he is not abjectly terrified, he is pondering how most journalism gets so distorted. Of one reporter's account, he says, "He didn't write what he saw but what he felt and believed, what those all around him felt and believed. That's how the whole tangled web of false stories and humbug got written."

*The War at the End of the World* is a novel so complex and yet so accessible that it begs to be read again, and to be shared. There are political challenges in it, but no mandates. If it is about Latin American politics and society then and, to some extent, now, it also transcends its setting with a profound and sympathetic understanding of people whose humanity has been crippled too long.

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