

THE BACK DOOR

Image

WHEN WOODY ALLEN directed an intentionally unfunny film, *Interiors*, critical reaction centered more on the fact of his change in mode than on the qualities of the film he had made. When President Carter emerged from the Camp David summit conference, he seemed suddenly a wholly different President from the one who had entered it. When Pope John Paul I died, almost all that survived him in the world's consciousness was, as with the Cheshire cat, a smile.

No human being is as uncomplicated as his image. Forced to think about it, one realized that Woody Allen may be more than a clown; that President Carter must have been capable of more effective leadership than he had been exhibiting pre-Camp David; that the late Pope must have been more than sweet, humble, and shy. Nonetheless, the mind categorizes. For the sake of order we confine complex individuals to the cubicle of an image. We do this not only to public figures but, to some

extent, to every person of our acquaintance. Old Jack is the perennial optimist; Miss Nit, a desiccated spinster; Billy, a jock; Alphonse, a lush; and so forth. Even those we know best and love most—for that matter, even our own selves—we simplify into an image for the sake of comprehension. The human being is the only creature who can "surprise" himself because he is the only creature who holds in his mind an image of himself that he can confute.

An image is built by selecting, weighing, and ordering facts. When few facts are available, the image tends to be simple and vivid: John Paul equalled his smile. What makes Dickens's secondary characters so memorable is his way of reducing them each to a single, absurdly magnified trait. When a myriad of details is available, image depends on emphasis: Was Nixon's wrongdoing a single mistake of judgment or emblematic of his personality?

In the days before instant com-

munications and the relentless and shameless nosiness of the press, the cultivation of an image was a simpler task than it is today. A politician could tell his various audiences what he wanted them to hear, and show to the country as much of himself as he wanted shown. Grover Cleveland and Woodrow Wilson, for instance, could hide their grave illnesses from an unsuspecting public, whereas today the world speculates if a President snuffles. Television is a particularly brainless and potent shaper of images that can make a less-than-glib politician seem a dolt or a bore, regardless of his intelligence or his politics.

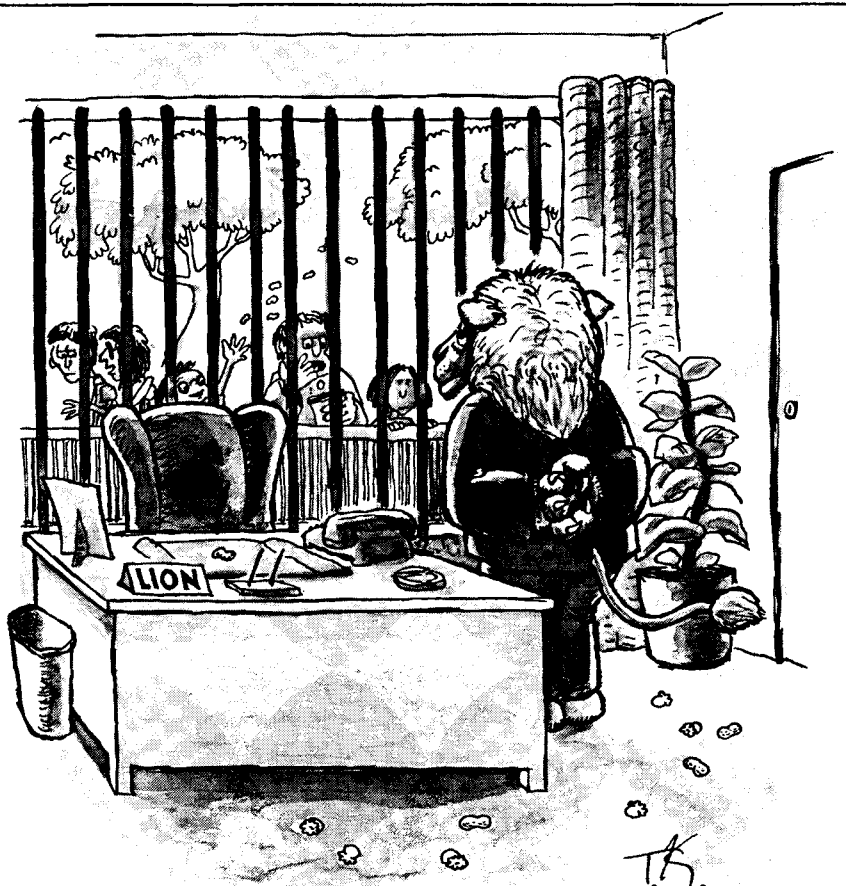
Rarely, indeed, will a person's image coincide with actuality. Long before Hamlet protested that he was more than he appeared to be, that he had "that within which passeth show," serious persons had been uncomfortable with their images. But to argue, on that basis, that able men shouldn't need to be "propped up" by image counselors (i.e., PR persons) is to envisage an ideal world that doesn't exist.

An individual's image enhances or detracts from his power to persuade. People tend to listen more attentively to the reputed wise man than to the wise-acre. When a person known for getting things done says something will be done, one is more likely to believe him. It was inspiring how quickly various politicians experienced a change of heart toward Carter's legislative initiatives after the Camp David summit.

A person engaged in solitary pursuits—a poet, for instance—need not worry about his image, except as conveyed through his work. For a politician, however, image cultivation is an essential activity. Those who fault Carter for employing Gerald Rafshoon to orchestrate that task on the President's behalf overlook how the appearance of leadership can facilitate leadership.

Children may believe that a "man is who he is." But in the actual world, men and women are judged not on the basis of what they have done, but on the basis of what they are perceived to have done. True, a person's image may have nothing to do with his worth as a person. But the fact that Walter Cronkite has never filmed an ad for instant-anything has a lot to do with his being the most trusted man in America.

—CARLL TUCKER

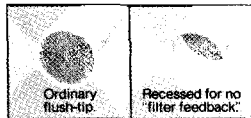


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