

POLITICS A MERCHANDISE FOR SALE ON TELEVISION: IT ALL STARTED WITH EISENHOWER



Isaac is not the only storm blowing in America, there is a campaign storm blowing with an even greater force that threatens to escalate even more as the campaign season enters the home stretch. Hundreds of millions of dollars are being recklessly spent to produce ad spots and then TV channels are paid even more to broadcast them. The question is when did this all start? When did politics become merchandise that could be sold over television? Rosser Reeves, the name may not ring much a bell with television viewers of today, but he was the gentleman, a political operative, who changed the face of campaigning forever. He is credited with helping Dwight Eisenhower win the presidency, his ratings boosted by a range of televised spots that Reeves created for him. Rosser Reeves worked at the Ted Bates Agency and was renowned for his direct, uncomplicated but result oriented ads. One of America's most unforgettable and iconic ads for Anacin was his creation. It showed the inside of a head, a pounding hammer and bolts of electricity clearly revealing the turmoil inside. Reeves was convinced that politics had a future on the airwaves, but could not sell his conviction to the politicians. In 1948 he explained to Republican Thomas Dewey that he stood a better chance of beating Harry Truman if he used the extent of the radio reach for campaigning. He had even prepared a series of radio spots to help him persuade Dewey. Unfortunately he could not as Dewey felt that it improper and unbecoming to run ads on the radio. Luck was on his side, when four years later a group of businessmen, in today's parlance PACs, approached him to coin a slogan for Eisenhower. He managed to convince them that a mere slogan would not be enough and it would be much better to put Eisenhower's face on television and allow millions of potential voters to hear him speak directly to them in the comfort of their living rooms. Thus was born television advertising, a trickle that has today turned to flood. Initially Eisenhower was a very reluctant starter. Like Dewey he too worried about the image this would create. He told his well-wishers that he was apprehensive that it would make him look like a 'huckster,' someone who peddles articles from door-to-door. Rosser Reeves, however, harbored no such doubts. He convinced that his spots could carry the essence of an entire speech to a few lines and be as much or even more effective. To convince Eisenhower, he condensed Franklin Roosevelt's epic speech to a 15-second spot saying, "the only thing we have to fear, is fear itself." The Eisenhower ads were a huge success. The novelty and innovativeness caught his opponents by surprise. Reeves framed them in his trademark simple but impactful format. A person would be seen asking the future president something like, "Mr. Eisenhower, are we going to have to fight another war." Then Eisenhower's face would appear and give a concise but appropriate answer. The Democratic nominee, Adlai Stevenson, called it "merchandising the presidency." Unfortunately for Stevenson and others of his ilk, television was here to stay and there was no way that they could halt its rapid progress. When Rosser Reeves passed away in 1984, he left behind a legacy of linking advertising with politics and bringing the two together. Simplistic Reeves style slogans are now things of the past. They often make deceptive or false claims. They also shamelessly malign their opponents, whereas earlier the ads showed grace towards their opponents. But ads give results and at the end of the day that is what matters – politics has transformed itself into a television product. That is a fact that cannot be changed, buyers can only be cautioned to be careful about the product they end up buying – remember you can replace it only after four years.

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