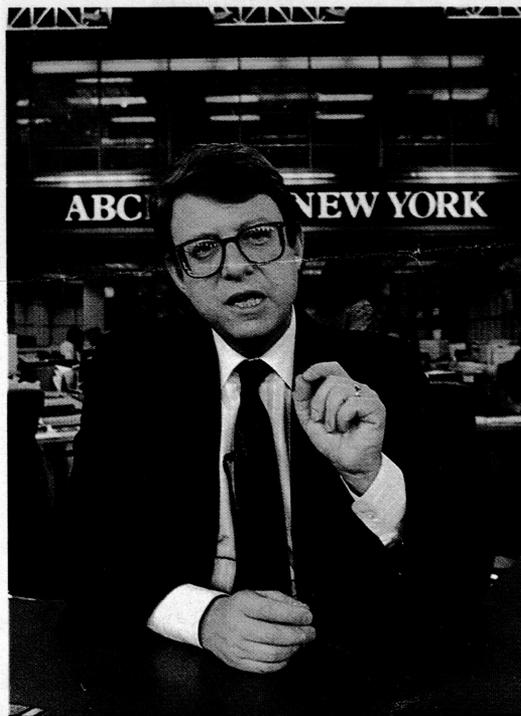


Media/Edwin Diamond

MONDAY-NIGHT POLITICS



IMPROBABLE ANCHOR: Greenfield on the set.

STARRING JEFF GREENFIELD

IT'S TEN O'CLOCK, AND JEFF GREENFIELD still isn't sure where his program is.

Chinese-take-out cartons litter the conference table at the *Nightline* offices at ABC News on West 66th Street. An unmemorable *Monday Night Football* game sputters and stumbles on the overhead monitors. Greenfield is writing what the producers call the "homily," or closing remarks, for *Nightline*'s weekly "Campaign '88" program, a half-hour magazine show focusing on the presidential race. This particular show looks as if it won't go on until the middle of the night. In fact, given the game's 9 P.M. EST starting time, plus the local news programs that follow in most TV markets, *Nightline* will be lucky to begin at 1 A.M.—if the game doesn't go into overtime, as the Raiders-Broncos' did the Monday before. Ted Koppel, exercising a star's prerogatives, got Mondays off during football season specifically to avoid talking to empty pews.

But this night, it all comes together for ABC's Monday Night Politics and Greenfield, its regular guest anchor. The Saints' Morten Anderson kicks a last-second field goal to win the game in regulation time. Greenfield, a former Yale law student and speechwriter for John V.

Lindsay, produces a deft introduction for the top of the show and a strong, funny closer. George Bush's appearance at Edwards Air Force Base that day to greet the returning astronauts wasn't a political event, Greenfield writes in his script, because Bush didn't ask them to recite the Pledge of Allegiance. Smart politicians, he adds, were using the perks of their offices at election time long before television and the era of the photo opportunity ("Abraham Lincoln toured Civil War battlefields during his 1864 campaign").

Campaign '88 has not been a very good one for the candidates, who often seem to be staggering through a contest of mediocrity and meanness. But ABC News has been a consistent winner, starting with its convention coverage. And no television journalist has quite been able to match ABC's Greenfield for incisiveness under pressure. While the candidates—or, more precisely, the

candidates' speechwriters—search for the best sound bite of the day, more often than not Greenfield is getting off the wittiest one-liners on the news. His success signals a new maturity in commercial television's coverage of politics: Greenfield and *Nightline* show that network news can be informative and unpatronizing for a significant (if sleepy) audience.

Greenfield is an improbable candidate for television stardom. First of all, with his chipmunk cheeks, he doesn't look like the generic anchorman. "Jeff couldn't anchor your local six o'clock news," says *Nightline* executive producer Rick Kaplan. "He's not your snappiest dresser." Of course, Koppel was once called "Howdy Doody" and "the guy with the funny haircut." Greenfield argues that audiences can learn to adapt their notions of "what an anchor is supposed to look like: Look at Koppel's reputation now."

Then there's Greenfield's rapid-fire delivery. After the first Monday-night "Campaign '88" show, Greenfield remembers, "at least five people came up immediately to tell me I talked too fast. I'm learning to slow down."

Greenfield's "New York" manner—in rough translation: wise-guy, brash, opinionated—is more problematic. That style

is rarely on view on national network news shows. But Greenfield has seen the heartland; after high school at Bronx Science, he went to the University of Wisconsin, where he edited the student paper. He graduated from Yale Law School in 1967, worked for Senator Robert Kennedy, then became chief speechwriter to the liberal mayor of New York. Next came six years with the political-advertising-and-media-consulting firm headed by David Garth (where the clients were mostly liberal Democrats).

Greenfield, 45, didn't seriously get into television until he was 35. Though he'd done some commentary on Channel 13, his first full-time job was with CBS News. Neither his late start nor his liberal politics hampered his career. "I've made the trip from partisanship and polemics," he says. "Besides, the statute of limitations has run out." He claims he knew he was clean one day in 1984, when he praised a Ronald Reagan speech and was denounced by Charles Manatt, then chairman of the Democratic National Committee, for doing a "propaganda piece." Now Greenfield says that when he's on camera, "my hero is Bill Klem, who called 'em as he saw 'em."

Greenfield may be succeeding on television in part *because* of his political background. Obviously, he's been on the inside and has a better understanding of the way things work than most "pure" journalists. Perhaps more important, he has the political player's joy of the game and its lore. When ABC News president Rooney Arledge decided to make Greenfield a roving floor reporter at the 1988 conventions, the payoffs were immediate. In 1980 at CBS, Greenfield had been one of the boys in the booth, doing above-the-fray analysis. He came across as just another "judicious" voice in the babble of experts. By 1984, he was working for ABC News, though his campaign role was minimal.

This year, however, Greenfield's work simply took off. At the two conventions, he fed off the energy of the delegates and party operatives on the floor, "schmoozing them," as he says. The ex-speechwriter also understood the underlying principle of the sound bite: With 30 to 40 seconds of airtime, try for no more than one or two thoughts and make them vivid "take-home" points that viewers will remember. Arkansas governor Bill Clinton's interminable address in behalf of Michael Dukakis, Greenfield told ABC viewers right afterward, "wasn't a nomi-

Reagan Democrats in the suburbs, was a few lines of praise for Jesse Jackson—who is regarded as the Antichrist's first cousin in ethnic wards and suburban towns like Cicero. "Terrific," sighed a Dukakis aide. "But what can we do?"

Good question: Is there any message that would play in both Cicero and the South Side ghetto?

I think there is, but the message requires some courage and a willingness to cut through the rhetorical baloney that has encumbered civil-rights speech-making since the days of Martin Luther King Jr. Sooner or later, some white candidate ("a Democrat, I'll bet," says one Republican, "like Nixon going to China") is going to walk into a black neighborhood, talk simply—and say that there are some things government can help with and others you've got to do for yourself.

The first half of the equation is easy. Even George Bush has come close to identifying the most plausible, immediate course of government action: a major effort to help inner-city children, especially with early education and health care. A good Democrat might up the ante and insist on slashing class sizes and sending the best teachers (perhaps with federally subsidized stipends) to the worst schools. This is the path of least resistance toward equal opportunity, a program that could win support among conservative and liberal Democrats alike: "Welfare queens" and "furlough kings" may be easy marks, but no one dares deny a child.

The second half of the equation is trickier. Black audiences aren't used to hearing Democrats talk about what government can't do. "But we have to," says one Dukakis state coordinator who had hoped his candidate would be bolder on this subject. "There are certain problems you just can't fix with money. Sooner or later, we're going to have to start talking about the declining moral and educational standards everywhere in the society—but particularly in the inner city. This is something only Jesse has been able to do so far, but I think it should be an important part of our message. We're going to have to challenge black audiences to reverse the decline of moral values in their neighborhoods."

The consensus among a half-dozen Democratic strategists I contacted last week was that the message was worthy, but no white politician could deliver it to a black audience and survive. "Blacks will just stay home [on Election Day]," said one, expressing the rather depressing and perhaps condescending conventional wisdom about an important Democratic constituency. "You need someone like Bobby Kennedy, someone who has credibility in that community."

Either that, or someone with a sharp mind, a good heart, and a little guts. ■

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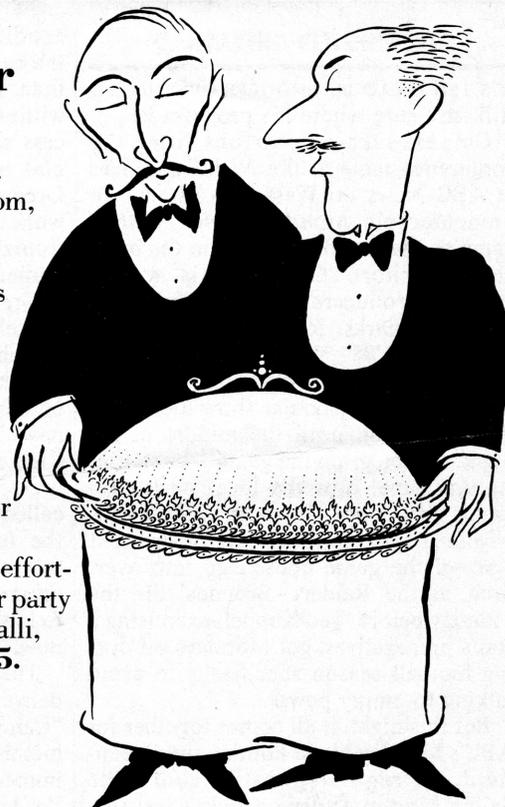
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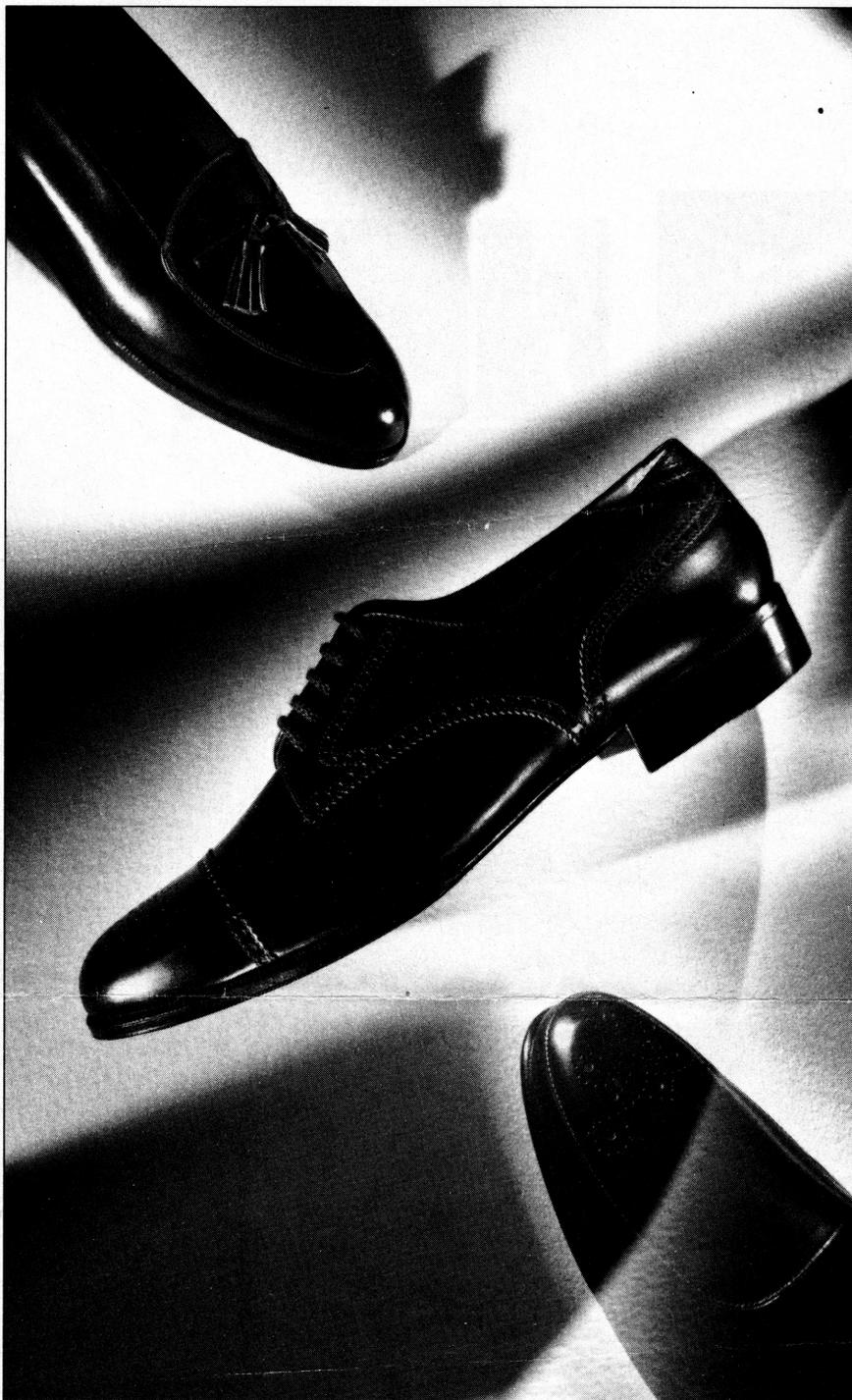
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nating speech; it was a nominating chat." At the Republican Convention, Greenfield described New Jersey governor Tom Kean's soporific speech as a "three-course, well-balanced meal from the seven political food groups."

The *Nightline* format allows Greenfield to use his writing abilities and sound-bite skills. He comes to every program with his chipmunk cheeks stuffed with political materials and historical allusions. One of the best shows brought in Michael Kinsley of *The New Republic* and William Safire, the *New York Times* columnist and former speechwriter for Richard Nixon. The trio discussed the shortfalls of the campaign and its coverage. Greenfield reminded viewers of past candidates with occasional problems on the stump (he recalled the line "To err is Truman"). Safire said that any discussion of the media's role was basically removed from reality, something like "taking a picture of a statue of a man."

As inside as these discussions may sound, the *Nightline* political shows have been attracting 3 million to 4 million viewers over the past two months (the later the football game runs, the smaller the audiences). Viewers tend to be younger and more urban than the audiences for the *Tonight Show*, No. 1 in the late-night time period. They are not necessarily political-news addicts and media insiders but rather a mid-market group, including people who tune in right after their local news shows to find out what *Nightline's* topic is going to be before committing themselves.

ABC knew enough not to try to do "The Ted Koppel Show With Jeff Greenfield." Instead of asking Greenfield to be the master of the one-on-one interview, ABC has him anchoring a half-hour informational show with a variety of elements, such as the main story or "cover," polling, and campaign highlights and lowlights.

Interestingly, neither anchor sees his future tied to *Nightline*. Koppel's four-night week enables him to do prime-time specials and ABC "Town Meetings." Greenfield also has other interests. He took a leave of absence from ABC last year to be a fellow at the Gannett Center for Media Studies at Columbia and used some of his academic term to work on a political novel ("no ripping off the doors of bedroom or boardroom," he says. "It's about a constitutional crisis"). One option for Greenfield would be to combine his part-time writing with part-time TV work. "There are all kinds of ways to use newspeople at ABC," he says, pointing out that "there's a part of the schedule ABC has never figured what to do with. It's the time after *Nightline*."

Maybe they'll have to call it "Dawnline." ■