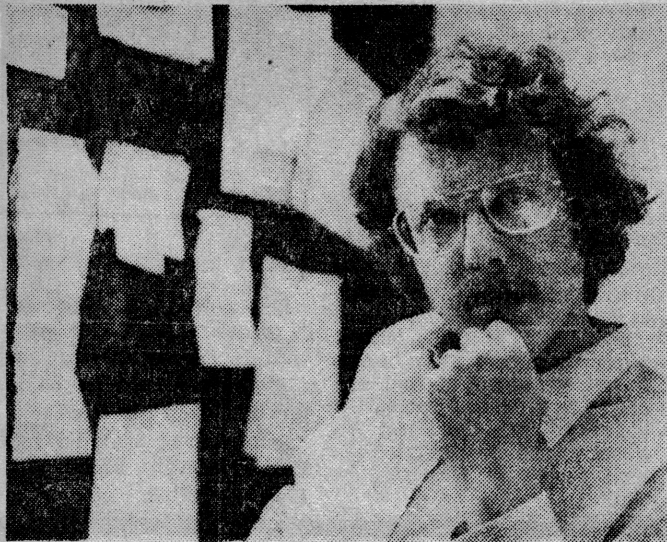


UNCOMMON CONVERSATIONS

Interviews by Philip Nobile



JEFF GREENFIELD, 28, a former speechwriter for the late Sen. Robert F. Kennedy as well as New York Mayor John V. Lindsay, is co-author with Jerry Bruno of "The Advance Man." The book tells about whipping up crowds and enthusiasm for RFK and his brother, President Kennedy.

There are many forms of political hype but basically hype is any attempt to portray a politician as wiser, cooler, kinder, tougher, handsomer and, in general, better than he really is. Like pornography, you may not know how to define it, but you know it when you see it.

Jeff Greenfield, a former speechwriter and a consultant to a New York ad agency which handles many important political accounts, knows enough about hype to go a few rounds on the subject. He offers a spirited defense of campaign advertising.

What is the most classic case of political hype in recent American politics?

Ronald Reagan. He's a man with absolutely no capacity, absolutely no credentials. Fortunately his face is falling into shreds, which is unfortunate for his cosmetic but very good for the country.

Have you ever been guilty of political hype yourself in your days with Kennedy and Lindsay?

Oh, a couple of times when we were just being too emotional.

Emotional about what?

To be quite candid, it's very hard to write a speech about Israel for a predominately Jewish audience that is not emotional. It's almost impossible to write a honest speech about the Middle East because that is an audience that demands an emotional satisfaction. But compared to what hyping is done, I feel my hands are fairly clean.

I thought Joe McGinniss' book, "The Selling of the President," would put an end to political advertising as currently practiced in America. But here we are again gearing up for another campaign and it seems like it's still the same old con game.

Then you probably misread McGinniss' book because the dangers inherent in political advertising do not arise from the mere fact of political advertising. Rather, they arise from imbalance, the failure of laws to provide effective limits and so end the disparity between rich and poor candidates. Also, the danger arises from and

No, what I'm saying is that I thought McGinniss' book would destroy the credibility of campaign advertising once and for all.

Politics doesn't work that way. What "The Selling of the President" documented brilliantly was that the people who worked for Richard Nixon were duplicitous. They didn't believe what they were doing and had no respect for the man they were trying to elect to the highest office in the land. But this doesn't happen all the time.

You don't think then that campaign advertising is basically deceptive and misleading in practice.

No. There's a curious irony here. Some well-informed people think we should study what a candidate says and read his speeches and position papers and not judge him on the basis of 30 second spots. Well, the fact is, most position papers, speeches and indeed the shaping of a candidate's substantive proposals are done by an enormous staff. What a political advertising campaign does, whether honest or dishonest, is shape what a candidate wants to tell people he's like in the shortest amount of time. But there is something to be said about the manner in which he chooses to present himself.

For example?

One of the reasons Nixon almost lost in 1968, despite entering September with a 10 million vote lead and despite outspending Humphrey 16-1, was that people could make a judgment on the basis of his advertising. They saw a man who was completely slick, utterly devoid of substantive issues and unwilling to tell us anything.

So how did Nixon win?

He won because he was running against the weakest Democratic candidate put up since Alton B. Parker. And he won because there was a war on that Humphrey was tarred with head to foot.

Still, there's something about the nature of television which forces candidates into an insidious kind of star system.

No candidate has ever presented himself warts and all. Sure, television has created a new style, but every medium does that. That's why FDR's incredibly rich voice, which has been imitated by generations of radio announcers, suited him perfectly to radio.

But I don't think the medium of television is necessarily any more dishonest than the situation 100 years ago when a politician was required to make himself heard before a crowd of 20,000 at a ploughing contest.

Let me give you some recent examples of political hype which insult my intelligence: Muskie's fireside chat from Maine during the congressional elections last fall was obviously contrived to make him out a wise old philosopher in contrast to Nixon who was then giving fiery speeches out in California.

What was he supposed to do? If that particular speech touched people and said things they wanted to hear, then why not? Is that more of a hype than going around to 50 cities and giving 50 speeches?

Well, take John Kerry of the Vietnam Veterans for Peace. He reads one speech — which he didn't write himself by the way — before the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee, and already he is being hyped as a future president.

Why does it matter who wrote the speech? This is a man with three purple hearts and two silver stars telling the American people that what he did was a crime. Does the fact that someone else gave his words shape, alter the truth of what he said?

No. I implied no such thing. But I'm awfully sure that if Kerry had a stutter or fumbled over the words, no one would be mentioning him and the presidency in the same sentence. This is what I mean by hype.

You may well be right. It may be correct to say that politics requires, in addition to good character, that a man be able to communicate very effectively. Because that's part of what politics is; a politician should be able to communicate with an audience. And I don't think it's a bad requirement.