

# SMOOTH IS BEAUTIFUL

BY JEFF GREENFIELD

Once upon a time politicians were an absolutely reliable source of hackneyed phrases. They pointed with pride, they viewed with alarm, they proclaimed the nation at a crossroads of destiny. And they did all this with *fervor*.

That doesn't happen much anymore. Whatever the television has or has not done to our political life, one of its clearest effects has been to make the Purple Throbbing Hyperbole a near-extinct species of political speech.

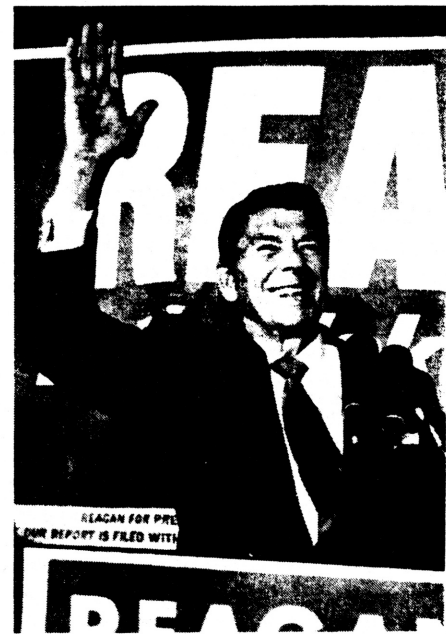
It has a lot to do with the intimacy of the medium. Five-dollar words and fifty-dollar sentences that seem appropriate in a packed hall with thousands of sweaty, cheering bodies sound terribly out of place in a living room or bedroom where one or two people in bathrobes or T-shirts are quietly listening.

Does this mean that elections are no longer accompanied by notable clichés? Not at all; it's just that the *supplier* has changed. Rather than the politician, it is the *journalist* who provides the readiest source of rhetorical fertilizer.

Take, for example, the word "privately." It is used to suggest that the reporter is privy to tightly guarded political secrets, as in "Publicly, Jones's staff is optimistic, but privately, they say they'll be happy with thirty percent of the vote."

Now, it does not take a genius to realize that if you *really* believe something privately, you do not tell it to a reporter for the network news; in fact, that could almost be a dictionary definition of the word (*prī-vāt-lē*; done in a way so as not to divulge an opinion to a network reporter). In the current politi-

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cal context, it is more properly defined as "how a campaign organization anonymously conveys a piece of information to the general public."

As a campaign nears its conclusion, reporters—particularly on local news stations—report that the campaign is *heating up*. It does not matter whether the contest has been run with enough civility to make a British diplomat look like a stevedore; with ten days or so to go, the campaign will *heat up* with absolute certainty. Why? Because local TV news programs are generally governed by what their outside consultants tell them. These consultants report that the public is bored by such trivia as politics and public policy; they want to know how to lose twenty pounds and save \$5,000. Consequently, local news reporters don't cover a campaign until the last two weeks or so. Overwhelmed by the sudden discovery that two candidates for high office are criticizing each other, they breathlessly straighten their blazers and report that the temperature is rising.

During the 1980 primary season, the hands-down winner for shopworn phrases was "momentum." When George Bush won the Iowa caucuses, the next day's network news shows were filled with speculation about the impending collapse of Ronald Rea-

gan. "I've got the Big Mo," Bush exulted, thus giving the all-important momentum its own nickname. What happened, though, was that each state seemed to act by itself, choosing winners without regard to the Big Mo; it was that hopelessly old-fashioned notion of ideological agreement and at least twelve years of organizing that gave the nomination to Reagan.

The problem with journalistic clichés in general is that they lack the hot-bloodedness of politicians' old-fashioned rhetoric.

Because they are not fueled by ambition or intense belief or the passions of the crowds, they sound more like the phrases found in memos from the assistant secretary of personnel to the deputy coordinator for regional decentralization. They are the products of an age when Smooth Is Beautiful, when the raw edges of regional discontents or of policy disputes do not show up well on the tube. And I fear we are the losers; for if it is true that politicians fear to appear like fools on television if they declaim too passionately, it is also true that this political year has brought us (even despite Kennedy's moving cadences) scarcely a single memorable phrase out of the millions of words spoken by our would-be leaders. The line between an immortal phrase and a cliché is a thin one; and those who fear to step over it never dare to inspire us. □