Richard M. Nixon: a life on the TV screen

By William Lasser

Television has been both cruel and kind to Richard Milhous Nixon. It has shown him his best and worst political moments, saved his career and later helped to end it by showcasing the proceedings which led to his resignation from the Presidency. Nixon used television to advance his own ends, and used it well.

Next week, Nixon will again appear on the screen, this time to be interviewed by Eisenhower. It was primitive, unsophisticated triumph: in 1952, a mere $2 million worth of commercials as of distributing the programs had sold some 52 million words of commercials as of early April.

The Jekyll and Hyde effect which television has had on Nixon may well stem from the inconsistency and unpredictability of the man himself. Millions will watch the frost productions, some hoping that "Trickie Dickie" will confess all his sins over the TV screen, that he will act as it were, like it was 1952, and "let us look at America, let us listen to America" we will see a G.I. in Vietnam "slumping defeatingly." And when he would say "Tricia, the six-year-old, named it Checkers."

In middle America, there was nothing but praise for the young Californian. Eisenhowe could do nothing but keep Nixon on the ticket.

But television was to be lost kind eight years later, when Vice President Nixon took on Senator John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts in four debates during the 1960 election campaign. Of the four, the first was by far the most important. Nixon had just been released from the hospital before his joint appearance with Kennedy. He was underweight, pale, unattractive; his opponent appeared stronger, more assured, more powerful, and, despite his youth, fully in command. Nixon had refused to listen to his aides' advice that he use makeup, especially to cover up the heavy beard which was to become a favorite symbol for political caricaturists and cartoonists.

The 1960 debates taught Nixon that what counts is what one says on television. Nixon lost again in 1962, this time to Edmund "Pat" Brown for the governorship of California. Following the election, the defeated candidate burst into Herbert Klein's press conference to announce: "You won't have Nixon to kick around anymore, you're going to have to get along without him." A few days later ABC ran a 30 minute special entitled "The Political Obituary of Richard Nixon."

He was one of many more press conferences, of course, and he was resurrected from the politically deceased by television, which, along with an array of Madison Avenue advertising men, would create what would be known as "The New Nixon" just in time for the 1968 Presidential race.

One of Nixon's 1968 TV advisers, William G. Klein, wrote before the campaign that the candidate "has to come across as a person larger than life, the stuff of legend. People are stirred by the legend, including the living legend, not by the man himself. It's the aura that surrounds the charismatic figure more than it is the figure itself, that draws the followers. Our job is to build that aura."

And build it they did. Nixon's commercials portrayed him as the savior of America. When he would say "Let us listen to America, let us look at America" we would see a G.I. in Vietnam "slumping defeatingly." And when he would say "Tricia, the six-year-old, named it Checkers."

The music would swell and we would see a "montage of Americans creating and contributing." Television changed the image of Richard Nixon. After his victory over Humphrey, America still saw him in neatly packed form—waving from Air Force One, standing before the Great Wall of China, making speeches from the Oval Office wearing an American Flag pin, surrounded by flags, perhaps with a bust of Lincoln sitting on his desk.

And then came Watergate. The screen became filled with Senator Sam Ervin reading from the Bible, and Senator Howard Baker asking, "What did the President know and when did he know it?"

And we saw the President's chief aides: Mitchell, Haldeman, and Ehrlichman, the latter two with that lean and hungry look, a certain arrogance, a disregard for what Americans held dear. They were followed by John Dean, pictured as one man against the world, fighting not to go down alone, but to drag his fellow-conspirators with him. And that included the President.

Nixon took the airwaves in April of 1974. He spoke as always from the Oval Office, with a backdrop of 34 copies of the transcripts, one for each member of the Judiciary Committee. "I want there to be no question remaining about the fact that the President has nothing to hide in this matter," he declared confidently. But television could not save his career this time.

Through the summer America watched the House Impeachment Committee deliberated the fate of the accused President. Barbara Jordan, Peter Rodino, William Cohen, all the guardians of liberty, voicing, one by one, on whether to recommend the impeachment of Richard Nixon. By a vote of 25 to 11, on July 27, 1974, at 7:00pm, on national television they approved the first Article of Impeachment.

Nixon was to make one more speech from the Oval Office, on Aug. 8, to announce that he would resign effective noon the next day. "This is the thirty-seventh day I have spoken to you from this office, he began, a broken man, defeated, sick, beaten. Pathetically, he recounted his many achievements, all forgotten and replaced in the minds of his viewers by lies, Ehrlichman's nightmarish allegations of freedom. He quoted Teddy Roosevelt. He quoted from his own inaugural address. Then he concluded: "To have served in this office is to have felt a very personal sense of dedication."

In leaving it, I do so with this prayer: May God's grace be with you in all the days ahead. He was gone, to seclusion in San Clemente, to return only by a second visit to Peking. Now he is back, on the television screen. There have been many different Richard Nixons over the past quarter century, and all have been seen and judged through the power of television. How the medium will treat him next Wednesday evening — and how he will treat it — remains to be seen. The whole world will be watching.