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RELEASE: OCTOBER 15, 1984

THE MEDIA'S UNHAPPINESS WITH REAGAN'S IMAGE

The national media are going through a terrible reappraisal of their own power. Their first comeuppance was the reaction of the American public when the media were not invited to President Reagan's liberation of Granada; their second blow is the realization that Ronald Reagan will win big because he uses television so effectively.

Oh, the horror of it all! When Professors S. Robert Lichter and Stanley Rothman a couple of years ago made their landmark survey of the attitudes of the media elite, and asked the mighty moguls who run CBS, NBC, ABC, and PBS which groups should rule America, the media identified themselves as the group most fit to rule. They think of themselves as the Philosopher-Guardians whom Plato thought should rule society.

Then, in early 1984, (to borrow a famous Sam Goldwynism) Ronald Reagan "included them out" of his stunning landing in Grenada. The media indignantly got up on their high horse at such lese majesty, and cried around about the "chilling effect" that such impertinence would have on the First Amendment.

The media elite were stunned when the American public collectively said "ho, hum; who cares?" After a couple of days of trying to claim that Reagan had rescinded the First Amendment, the media elite's own polls reported that the score was Reagan-1, media-0, with the President still at bat and nobody out on his side.

This fall, public opinion polls have discovered that Ronald Reagan will be a landslide winner, not only with the conservatives who invented his candidacy, but with both parties, both sexes, every section of the country, and even every age group. Even more devastating to the national media's self-importance is the realization that the chief reason why Reagan is so popular is that he has effectively used the medium of television.

So now we hear the cries of anguish from the media. Television networks give us in-depth analyses purporting to convince viewers that the White House staff has "managed" television coverage in order to conduct a campaign of "image," and that the President is "isolated" from reporters and won't answer their questions. The New York Times prints a

page-one "political memo" that "Reagan appears to succeed by avoiding specific issues," and that "Reagan's skill as a performer and the communicative impact of television seem to have combined to turn incumbency into a political weapon of awesome potency."

The Times moans that reporters have diligently shown "a consistent, detailed interest in such issues as the Federal deficit, tax policy and nuclear disarmament, but Mr. Reagan has mounted a campaign in which 'issues' are clearly secondary." The Times complains that President Reagan creates "visual images," invokes "themes" such as "leadership," communicates "shared values," and stimulates "moods."

Those are just crocodile tears. The media are not unhappy because a campaign of "image" and "moods" has replaced a campaign of "issues"; they are just disconsolate because they didn't create the "images" and the "moods" to which the American people are responding; Ronald Reagan did.

The media are certainly not against the triumph of images over issues. They are just angry that Ronald Reagan is better at creating images than they are.

The presidential election of 1964 is a good example of the many elections when "image" and "mood" won out over "issues." The national media ganged up to hang on Barry Goldwater the false "image" that he was a "trigger-happy warmonger," and to build in the American people the "mood" that we would be more "comfortable" if we elected Lyndon Johnson.

The careful exposition of the issues of war and peace made by Goldwater and his supporters was detailed, accurate, timely, and prophetic. But it was like King Canute hopelessly trying to talk back the incoming tide because Goldwater and his facts were overwhelmed by the false images created by media power.

The unscrupulous political TV ad showing the little girl picking daisies before she was blown up in a mushroom cloud was merely the 30-second version of the daily barrage of "image" propaganda heaped on Goldwater by the liberal establishment determined to defeat him.

Ronald Reagan comes through loud and clear on television because, in the modern colloquialism, "he's for real." That's an image, that's a mood, that's moral and political leadership; and that's what the American people want.