FROM SCUFFLING TO CHANNEL-SURFING: AMERICAN POLITICS IN THE TELEVISION AGE

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In the final section of her essay "Insider Baseball," Joan Didion, after a wide-ranging discussion of the American political media, takes a curious detour to visit 544 Camp Street in New Orleans. Historically, the address was connected with Lee Harvey Oswald in the months before he assassinated President Kennedy, as well as being the site of numerous other subversive political activities. What seems at first like a non-sequitur in her narrative, however, upon closer examination develops into a carefully crafted image of the state of politics as Didion sees it. She asserts that the people who had gathered at 544 Camp Street, including and perhaps most of all Oswald, "had taken the American political narrative seriously. . . . They had argued about it, fallen out over it, had hit each other over the head with pistol butts over it" (85). These subversives represent a passionate and combative engagement in politics that Didion sees missing in the consensus narratives that she critiques in the rest of her essay. When she arrives at 544 Camp, however, the building is gone, replaced by a federal courthouse. Nevertheless, she lingers listening to two anti-abortion protesters, described like grotesques of an old political type, the soapbox orator. A young man on a makeshift platform describes "unwanted babies being put down the Disposal and 'clogging the main sewer drains of New Orleans,'" while the woman with him lip-syncs to a tape, singing "Satan–you're the liar" (85).

Into this eerie scene enters a presidential motorcade on its way to the nearby Republican convention. With the image of Lee Harvey Oswald still lingering in our minds, the scene as Didion describes it has seemingly deliberate overtones of the Kennedy assassination. With Didion on the corner watching, police and Secret Service line the streets, while she notices "a man in uniform on a roof" (86). As the "entirely and perfectly insulated" motorcade passes, Didion reflects on the moment, expressing the central theme of her essay:

> I stood for a while on Camp Street, on this corner that might be construed as one of those occasional accidental intersections where the remote narrative had collided with the actual life of the country, and waited until the motorcade itself . . . a mechanism dedicated like the process for which it stood only to the maintenance of itself, had passed. (86)

Unlike Kennedy's motorcade in Dallas, this motorcade passes safely, and obliviously. The political process, and the media which aid and abet it, are perfectly insulated from both the combative, subversive elements and the ideological grotesques that linger past and present in the "melancholy of Camp Street" (Didion 86). This is Didion's central

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critique of what has become of presidential politics at the time of her writing in 1988. The democratic process, which she defines in the ideal as "the general mechanism affording citizens of a state a voice in its affairs" (49), has been replaced by a profoundly disconnected process in which media professionals, complicit with those in power, craft a political narrative remote "from the actual life of the country" (Didion 49-50). Her essay demonstrates in rich detail how this narrative is constructed and controlled, but I find myself wondering what for Didion is the "actual life of the country," and why the mechanisms of democracy have become less combative and more disconnected from those outside of the political class.

The actual life of the country, or the empirical as Didion formulates it elsewhere, is in fact largely absent in her essay. The outsiders whom she describes are in one place quintessentially romantic outsiders whom Didion knew in her youth, "the people with whom I had preferred to spend time in high school" (47). Instead of attending elite schools and pursuing careers in Washington, these people "hung out in gas stations" (47), were drafted, ran off to Carson City to get married, and lived in tract houses on the social and economic edge of America. At other points in the essay, the actual America is a motley collection of types who appear at the fringe of political events Didion attends on the campaign trail. These include a slightly unhinged man at a Dukakis rally, some kids contrarily shouting for Jesse Jackson at another Dukakis event, and the aforementioned anti-abortion protesters. Didion also cites a few statistics to demonstrate the level of apathy among citizens. She notes that "only slightly more than half of those eligible to vote in the United States did vote in the 1984 presidential election" (50). She also points out the lack of viewership of political conventions, as eighty percent of television households did not watch these conventions in 1988. Besides these meager examples, though some are evocative and colorful to be sure, it is hard to locate in her essay a substantive picture of what the empirical realities of America look like. They are largely assumed to be familiar to the reader, or are invoked rhetorically in contrast to the insiders of the political class. In a sense, her outsiders remain in the rhetorical realm of "out there," without any evident reporting or research to bring them into better focus.

But if we allow for Didion's broad-stroke portrait of the disaffected citizenry, how does she account for the change in the process? As she sees it, the defining moment when combative politics began the movement towards consensus centrist politics was the Democratic Convention of 1968, when street protests outside the convention disrupted the attempt at order going on within. This event exists in the same realm as the Camp Street brawlers: a time when "the process was put to a popular vote on the streets of Chicago" (72). Rather than feeling apathetic, she implies, people outside of the political class were engaged and active in having their say. As a result, "it was decided that what had occurred could not be allowed to recur" (Didion 72). The power and motive behind this change is described thus by Didion:

> David S. Broder, in *The Washington Post*, offered this compelling analysis of the power these "reforms" in the nominating procedure had vested not in the party leadership, which is where the power of choice ultimately resides, but in "the existing communication system," by which he meant the press, the medium through which the party leadership sells its choice. (72)

Broder's analysis describes the multiplication of party primaries, and a resulting proliferation in coverage of those primaries, which leads to the state of affairs Didion portrays: vapid, ceremonial political conventions devoid of any real contention. Didion implies in the phrase "it was decided" that the powers-that-be, presumably the party leaders, decided to complicate the primary process in order to prevent unrest like that at the '68 Convention. In so doing, they invested the media with the power to dumb down debate to the point that the leaders' choice is the only choice. But it is difficult here to identify how much of this change was intended or planned by those leaders, and how much was a larger evolution of politics and technology taking place beyond specific agency. Did the party leaders and the complicit media create this new process, or did they adapt to a new technological landscape?

Susan Sontag, in her 2002 essay "Looking at War," proposes two theories about the impact of the media in general, and television specifically, on the viewing public. In several ways, Sontag corroborates Didion's thesis of a pervasive media narrative leading to a disconnected citizenry. On the one hand, Sontag argues, "public attention is steered by the attentions of the media" (96). Wherever the media tell us to look becomes the reality we know. But simultaneously, the sheer saturation of these images leads to a deadening effect. So while an event is made more real by its coverage, the overall glut of images leads to a lesser impact. Sontag further defines the nature of this image-glut as an integral aspect of the medium of television: "television is organized to arouse and to satiate, by its surfeit of images. Image-glut keeps attention light, mobile, relatively indifferent to content" (96). Thus, in relation to Didion's subject, the political media craft their banal narrative, creating "reality" for the public. But the narrative is banal, lacking "a more reflective engagement with content" as Sontag puts it, precisely because of television's tendency to glide over meaningful content (96). This state of affairs is news as entertainment, what Sontag calls "a mature style of viewing . . . and a prerequisite for dismantling traditional forms of party-based politics that offer real disagreement and debate" (97). In her mind, a reality does exist independent of the images, but the "sense of reality" has been eroded, and the public has been increasingly reduced to mere spectators.

In general, Didion and Sontag would seem to agree on the general nature of the change in political engagement. With the rise of television coverage of politics, there has been a movement away from the scuffling and disagreement of earlier forms of party politicking. The public are increasingly spectators of a process that has been leached of real issues by television's tendency to gloss. While Sontag's emphasis is

more on the technological effect of television, Didion details the specific construction of narratives. But for both writers, the change in medium has been decisive in the change in political engagement. However, on either side of the medium are the powerful and the public. Their roles in the transformation of politics since 1968—in crafting and consuming the narrative—are vague and hard to locate in Didion's essay, but I would argue they are far more decisive than Didion's emphasis on the banal narrative.

Another way to consider the issue is to see that politics is ultimately about winning—as much as in sports or the competition of brands. Whoever crafts the more successful or evocative message will convince the most voters to support them and confer the power of governance. In her own nostalgia for the battles of conventions past, Didion misses this larger dynamic—the dynamic of politicians doing what it takes to convince voters through the media. Those disaffected figures of the other America she portrays are not as important as mildly or passionately engaged voters, many of whom might hang out in gas stations and live on the fringes. Successful politics might require successful propaganda.

In "Slavery, Ideology, and Race in the United States of America," Barbara Fields proposes a critical and useful definition of propaganda, as defined in relation to her central theme of ideology. For Fields, ideology is "the descriptive vocabulary of day-to-day existence, through which people make rough sense of the social reality they live and create from day-to-day" (110). Ideologies are embedded in social relations, and are used by people to interpret their positions in collective bodies such as towns, churches, the military, or political parties. Fields makes the key point that while an ideology is integral to a particular group and thoroughly plausible to those inside the group, to outsiders the same ideology might seem irrational or implausible. Propaganda then is an argument, often political, directed at a group's ideology to achieve a certain end. Fields argues that "the most successful propagandist is one who thoroughly understands the ideology of those to be propagandized" (111). She provides the example of Southern secessionists in the Civil War, who appealed to non-slave-owners' ideology of self-determination and independence in order to rally their support to fight for slavery in the name of protecting the Southern way of life. In the world of presidential politics that Didion describes, Fields' definition of propaganda offers another way to read the tactics behind the images in the banal narrative.

The crux of Didion's critique of the banal narrative is that while America faces a whole range of real issues and problems—the empirical reality of the country—the political class creates and debates a set of issues that nostalgically refer to an America that no longer exists. She describes Dukakis' use of a snowblower to symbolize an "amusing frugality and . . . admirable husbandry of resources . . . derived from some half-remembered idea of what citizens of this vanished America had laughed at and admired" (78). Similarly, George Bush obscures his wealthy Connecticut upbringing by invoking the struggle of his young idyllic family to establish itself in 1950's small-

town Texas. Both candidates are crafting paeans to a gentler and safer time in an America of simple, homespun values. For Didion, "what was at work here seemed on the one hand a grave, although in many ways a comfortable, miscalculation of what people in America might have as their deepest concerns in 1988" (78). I would argue that rather than a miscalculation, grave or otherwise, this imagery is specifically calculated to capture a maximum of votes.

In using nostalgic imagery, the campaigns create propaganda that attempts to capture some important ideologies among the voting population: a desire for safety among a suburban middle class that feels threatened by crime; a belief by union laborers that hard work and honesty are duly rewarded; or a longing among churchgoers for a return to a moral world before pornography and hedonism were rampant. One could analyze the campaign narratives as specifically directed at particular groups with strong ideologies, and the groups given preference would likely correspond to those who are most organized to vote, such as churches, unions, and the elderly. The fact that Didion finds these narratives so disingenuous and empty might also reflect her position as an outsider to the ideologies at which the narratives are directed. Within her social sphere, represented by the well-heeled liberal Californians who support Jesse Jackson in her essay—or perhaps the readers to whom she directs her assumptions about outsiders—these ideologies seem foolish and disconnected from present circumstances. But for the calculations of political strategy, where every vote is equal regardless of logical consistency, in these ideologies lies the power to move voter blocs in order to win election.

Didion's essay overstates the influence of a callow political media in draining the democratic process of citizen participation and substantive issues. As Sontag's essay demonstrates, the shallow nature of the television medium and the accelerated glut of images over the last thirty-five years have led to a spectator public with far more interest in affecting images than substantive engagement and debate. Equally, Didion, for all of her beautifully crafted images and architectural sentences, fails to explore what is a vital element in any discussion of political campaigns: the game of politicians trying to move voters by any possible means to vote for them. Central to that process is ideology, as Fields defines it, embedded in social groups. While I personally agree with many of Didion's democratic ideals and her desire for a more substantive political process, I think that her arguments reflect her own kind of nostalgia for a by-gone era: the street politics of the Sixties. Moreover, her lack of in-depth reporting about the outsiders she mythologizes reveals the romantic assumptions about the public of her own liberal intellectual milieu. The 1968 Democratic Convention was indeed a profound rupture in American political history, but its implications are not so simple as Didion's dissent portrays it.

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