

By the late 70s the American citizen was becoming a passive spectator at political events handed down in snippets between commercials. American network television is mostly junk designed to produce reality-shortage, and the average American is said to watch seven or eight hours of the stuff each day. No wonder that the act of pulling the lever every four years seemed to mean less, and that fewer people went to the booth to do it. In the first free election after Franco died, nearly 80 percent of Spain's electorate voted. If 80 percent of American voters voted, as they regularly did in the rough old days between 1840 and 1910, that would be a populist revolution; it would mean that Americans really appreciated democracy, instead of just sitting around and making patriotic noises while urging democracy on other nations who, not uncommonly, value it by voting more than Americans themselves do.

But it was patriotic noise one got from Washington in the 80s. And who can honestly claim not to be fed up with it? The public face of politics dissolved into theater: a banal drama of pumped-up optimism, fireworks and ballets of Elvis look-alikes at the Statue of Liberty, little cosmetic wars in Grenada and Panama to simulate the sweets of victory after the bitter taste of Vietnam. In the 80s, as never before in America, we saw statecraft fuse with image-management. Too many things in the supposedly open republic got done out of sight of the citizens. Or they were presented in terms that mocked public intelligence by their brevity and cartoon-like simplicity. Did the Presidential setup of dazzling stage-lights in front of murky waters have anything to do with the early American ideal of open democracy?

The public face of politics, and especially of the Presidency, was radically overhauled to suit the public attention span abbreviated by TV. The more argument, and the harsher it is, the more people do vote. So one did not argue: one produced sound-bites, memorable icons of a few syllables. One did not appear, one granted photo-opportunities. In a sense, the President *was* TV – the world's most successful anchorman. Did he forget things? No matter: TV is there to help you forget. Did he lie? Never mind, maybe he just forgot. The box is the muse of passivity. With somnambulistic efficiency, Reagan educated America down to his level. He left his country a little stupider in 1988 than it had been in 1980, and a lot more tolerant of lies, because his style of image-presentation cut the connective tissue of argument between ideas and hence fostered the defeat of thought itself. Before the wildly cheering Republican conventioners in Houston in 1992, he quoted a passage of Lincoln that hadn't been written by Lincoln. Its author was a Pennsylvanian clergyman named Boetker, who penned it forty-five years after Lincoln's death. But who was

counting? For Reagan's fans, the idea that there ought to be, or even might be, some necessary relationship between utterance and source seemed impertinent to the memory of his Presidency.

This was not a frame of Presidential character that Jefferson or Lincoln would have been likely to imagine – or feel the slightest respect for. Retooled for TV as never before, the Presidential image came out of the box and went straight back into it. The big media went right along, because this was part of a seamless culture of spectacle.

Bush lacked Reagan's consoling histrionic power, and to his misfortune the bills accumulated by Reaganite economics began to fall due during his Presidency.