



GREAT DEBATE—Vice President Nixon and Senator Kennedy campaign on television. The nominees' first joint appearance, tomorrow night, marks a new departure in Presidential politics.

## 52,000,000 TV Sets—How Many Votes?

More than ever before, the voter's image of the candidate will be formed on the screen in his living room. An observer assays the effect of this political revolution.

By EMMET JOHN HUGHES

**T**HE political eye of the country—for almost a decade now—has been, in great degree, the TV camera.

That revolutionary machine was rolled onto the national political stage with the election of 1952. In the years since, more than 98 per cent of the American people have found themselves living within range of a television station. There are now some 52,000,000 TV sets in the nation; eighty-five of every 100 families own at least one. The average family spends a daily average of six hours focusing on the moving screen.

And so—with 1960—a near-revolutionary change in the democratic process seems possible: the people's choice will crucially turn upon the sounds and syllables, gestures and inflections, shadows and lights appearing, in forms but a few inches high, on the millions of television screens before which the sovereign citizen will nod, smile, glower or doze.

For the current campaign, the dramatic possibilities of this revolution in method have been shaped to fit a neat and explicit script. The Democratic and Republican contenders for the Presidency have signed up for

a series of four joint television appearances. The first—a debate on domestic issues—will be broadcast from Chicago tomorrow night. By the time the forensic bout has gone its several rounds, citizens and critics will be proclaiming—perhaps prematurely and inaccurately—a new political champion.

Before the citizen settles down into his ringside armchair, however, he may (so it is to be hoped) give a little thought to the serious meaning of all this, politically and historically. Has the power of television—now dramatized by the device of debate—really revolutionized the democratic process? Is the change more apparent than real? For better or for worse?

**S**O stunning are the factors of size of audience and speed of communication on the grand scale that the very rhythm of political life does seem revolutionized. And a case can be at least plausibly argued that American political history has been decisively affected, these last eight years, by this revolution in technique.

Three witnesses—three of America's political giants—can be summoned to lend evidence to that case.

Richard M. Nixon in 1952 dramatically appeared on national television to explain to all the homes of America how he had financed his home,

his career, his whole life—in a performance that made Checkers the nation's most famous dog since F. D. R.'s Fala. Hours, even minutes before that telecast, Mr. Nixon stood an excellent chance of making history as the first candidate on a national ticket ever to be stricken from the lists in mid-campaign as an insufferable embarrassment to his own party.

So nearly definite was this stern verdict of the party leaders that it is not enough to note that television remarkably served the man: it saved him. No other kind of apologia—nothing but television, with impact both massive and instantaneous—could have spared Mr. Nixon swift retirement to the little town of Whittier, Calif., whose residents thronged the streets, just a few weeks ago, to hail the 1960 Presidential nominee.

Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1956 spent an agonizing late spring in slow recovery from major surgery, following his earlier heart attack. His decision to run for re-election trembled in doubt for weeks; even the thought of it would have made a weaker man tremble. But it is hardly conceivable that even he would have elected to wage a national campaign were it not for the fabulous facilities of television to ease and simplify the ordeal.

John F. Kennedy in 1960 found his

spring offensive for the Democratic nomination fatefully committed to the primary battle for West Virginia. His most ominous problem was the state's massive and pervasive hostility to a Catholic candidate. Only the most full and personal kind of campaign—directly reaching and affecting tens of thousands—could counter popular passions so diffuse, so widespread. And only television made such an effort conceivable.

**T**HREE different men, in three different years: for all of them, the road to this political moment took its crucial turning around the same extraordinary fact.

Towering personalities and dramatic incidents aside, the impact of television on American political life can be reckoned in a number of other ways. These are ways less crisply clear, yet perhaps more seriously historic and lasting.

First, TV makes political life itself more fluid and more volatile. Men can surge or stumble with astonishing speed—either triumphing over obscurity or tripping over a hasty or graceless public word or gesture. And issues can become as mercurial as individuals: A single performance before a sufficiently massive audience can virtually end an issue or precipitate one.

In the golden days of radio, the nightmare of (Continued on Page 78)

EMMET JOHN HUGHES, an editor and student of our times, wrote "America the Vincible."

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performers in the studio was the mumbling of some indiscretion or vulgarity a moment before the microphone was dead. Now the politician almost lives before a live "mike" and camera. His world is tapped.

Second, TV forces much of the backstage machinery of political life to endure the same exposure. Conventions tend to become not national caucuses of politicians, but public spectacles, designed less for deliberation (or dealing) among the participants than the delight (or entertainment) of an audience. It is at least debatable whether this makes the event itself more sober or merely more contrived.

It is equally debatable whether the effect upon the audience is one of visual education, in a serious sense, or one of visual enjoyment just a notch or two above the level of the peepshow. What is not in doubt is the fact that the people see more.

**T**HIRD, TV dramatically tends to nationalize political life. The citizen who can watch and hear Presidential candidates from his easy chair feels understandably less excitement than his father at the prospect of a "live" appearance in the local auditorium of a Congressman or even a Senator. Local political clubs—as centers of political life—tend to suffer and sag in appeal.

The firing of local partisan zeal, then, requires ever more prestigious names—as close to the top of the ticket as one dare demand. Ultimately, this could dictate, of course, greater dependence of all local tickets upon the national ticket.

Fourth, TV can strikingly shift political advantage toward those office-holders with easiest access to a national medium; these are national office-holders. It seems hardly an accident that 1960 has been notable for the fact that three of the four candidates on the national tickets come from the U. S. Senate—traditionally inferior to state governorships as sources of national candidates—while the fourth candidate, Henry Cabot Lodge, has enjoyed unique exposure on national television.

**I**N the future of television, it would seem doubtful if the most distinguished governor, whatever his record or his personality, could come close to national candidacy without finding a way, first, to establish his identity as nationally as Washington leaders.

Fifth, accenting the person and the personal, TV both imposes new demands and offers new opportunity to the individual politician. This transcends the level of a Kennedy's concern with his hair or a Nixon's anxiety about his eye-

brows (both appropriately adjusted for the current campaign). In the meeting—or the muffing—of issues, it puts new and heavy stress on the man himself.

Thus, for example, one astute political commentator, watching last spring's West Virginia primary, anticipated Senator Kennedy's massive victory on the basis of one response, discovered universally among all citizens queried a fortnight before election. This was the simple fact that all who had seen the Senator on television had reacted favorably, even if grudgingly. Enough television, then, logically would prevail. It did. But it underscored the fact that there could have been no effective substitute for this entirely personal attack on the political problem.

Sixth, TV obviously quickens the tendency of big politics to resemble big business. The cost of campaigning, of course, soars: the relatively easy political struggle of 1956 cost the G. O. P. some \$2 million for television and radio. The eager novice, in this televised political life, can afford to start unknown—but not unfunded.

And more and more, the higher he aspires politically, the candidate must equip himself, like a corporation, with advisers, specialists, public relations experts and every kind of retainer with ideas and words, counsels and cautions, to guide him in his almost totally exposed existence. Paradoxically, the "product" who alone must sell himself—by his person, his living presence—cannot be left alone.

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**A**RE all these not marks of a new age in American politics? Oddly, in the face of

such evidence, the answer would seem to be only perhaps, in part, and in still quite uncertain measure. This becomes most clear when one assesses realistically the more extreme judgments—the laments and the eulogies—that have attended the advent of the new technique.

The laments are sharp and familiar. Television exalts the factor of personality. It invites, even demands, appeal to emotion rather than intellect. It commercializes, savagely hammering political discourses into capsule banalities to fit one-minute, thirty-second, ten-second "spots." It cheapens the value of the spoken word since one does not listen to television (and it is no accident that surveys showed Adlai Stevenson far more highly esteemed by radio listeners than by televiewers).

**I**T compels candidates for the highest political office in the world to fret anxiously, self-consciously, over minutiae of personal grooming, as if they were agonized ingenues. And—most depressing of all—it introduces them to the intellectual companionship of Jack Paar, with or without Zsa Zsa. What manner of farce is this? Sideshow-for-free—for a free people—or dress rehearsal for national tragedy?

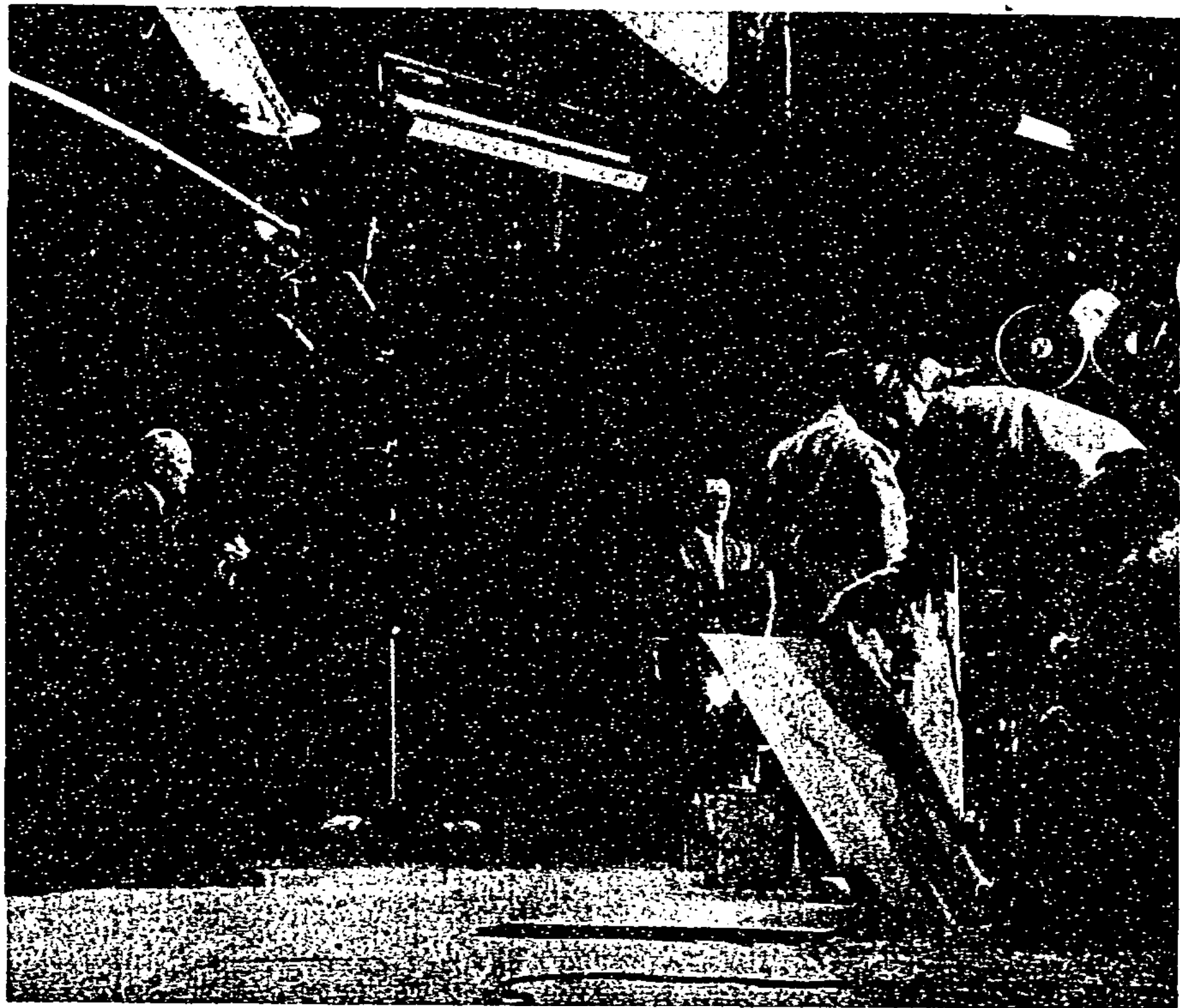
For all the fragments of truth in this kind of lament, it hardly states the whole truth. Personality (or "the image") has always mattered critically in politics—back through the age of radio to the street-corner rally and the doorbell-ringing campaigns. Nor is television the cause of the fact that few citizens of



**EYEWITNESS**—The TV camera covered the 1954 Senate hearings involving the late Senator McCarthy (standing) and the Army.

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**ON CAMERA**—President Eisenhower delivers a 1954 TV talk before an audience of production men.

1960 have time, even if the occasion arose, to listen leisurely to exquisitely constructed, grandiloquently delivered orations—the sort hailed as classics in the nineteenth century.

Nor is there much new in the importance of deliberate artifice, calculated technique, studious striving for effect. Many of those great orators of a century ago were wont to rehearse their dramatic addresses for weeks. Bryan was able to talk his way to a Presidential nomination no less than three times—and the dramatic "Cross of Gold" speech had been given careful trial-runs at the crossroads many times before it stunned, swept

and exalted his party in convention.

At another extreme, the tributes paid to the power of television—to enrich and mature the democratic process—have been hardly less emphatic than the indictments. It promises (so the optimists proclaim) fuller popular awareness and sense of participation, even intimacy. It inevitably educates—visually and vividly. No method of communication could make governors and governed more close, more mutually responsible and responsive.

This benign vision could, some day, become a little real. But the living signs of it are few. There is not a shred of

evidence to date, for example, to suggest that television has increased the size of the politically active and concerned populace. As for the general notion of television bringing the politician "closer" to the average citizen, this pleasing estimate jars against the clear fact that TV costs compel this politician to command financial resources further than ever beyond the means of this average citizen.

And as for enabling public affairs to compete with entertainment for attention in the American home, the classic, curt disproof came in a telegram from a viewer to Adlai Stevenson in 1956, not long after a message of his had pre-empted five minutes from the season's most popular show: "I like Ike and I love Lucy. Drop dead."

**A**BOVE all such extreme judgments, pro and con, perhaps one illusion seems to thrust itself most menacingly. For this is an illusion widely entertained not by experts or critics (who tend to affect a democracy's workings rather little) but by the people (who affect those workings rather decisively). This is the general belief, only partly conscious and rarely articulate, that the sight seen on the television screen boasts some special authenticity. It somehow seems much more "the real thing" than, for example, a formal speech or statement. Seeing is believing—or disbelieving.

This notion itself might eventually mark and measure the gravest impact of television on America's political life, and it may be doubted whether any such result would be for the good. For any popular illusion of "authenticity" or  
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**STRAIGHT MAN**—Vice President Nixon enjoys a laugh with comedian Jack Paar while taping his appearance on Paar's program.

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"purity" could be a grotesque self-deception.

The fact that national conventions are elaborately televised, for example, does not remotely assure their being "open"—though the camera eye implies the contrary. And the implicit invitation to judge a man by the accident of the camera's glimpse of him could only encourage in the national mind a political world populated by caricatures and stereotypes, demons and angels—a world in which great leaders always shave cleanly, smile easily, and look one right in the eye, while all villainous bosses are caught whispering mysterious secrets and wearing dark glasses.

**C**AUTION—for an alert and thoughtful citizenry—extends with no less force to television at its most "serious." Television will be serious—portentously so—as it presents the debates, in the weeks ahead, between Vice President Nixon and Senator Kennedy. These will be provocative encounters. They may be exciting. They might be illuminating. So far, so good, for the democratic process.

But, how good this will prove to be will not finally depend upon the debaters themselves. It will depend upon how wisely the nation of viewers appraise this debate—or any debate.

Such an appraisal turns on the simple question: How logical and reasonable a way is this to determine a man's qualifications for the Presidency? A useful and pertinent addition to other evidence—this it surely is. A convenient and quick substitute for either other evidence or any thought—this it surely is not.

It is not true, for one thing, that debates in politics usually prove seriously illuminating. Neither the Stevenson-Kefauver encounter in Florida in 1958 nor the Kennedy-Humphrey encounter in West Virginia in 1960 impressed their viewers as adding at all substantially to impressions already conveyed by more conventional, less publicized, TV appearances.

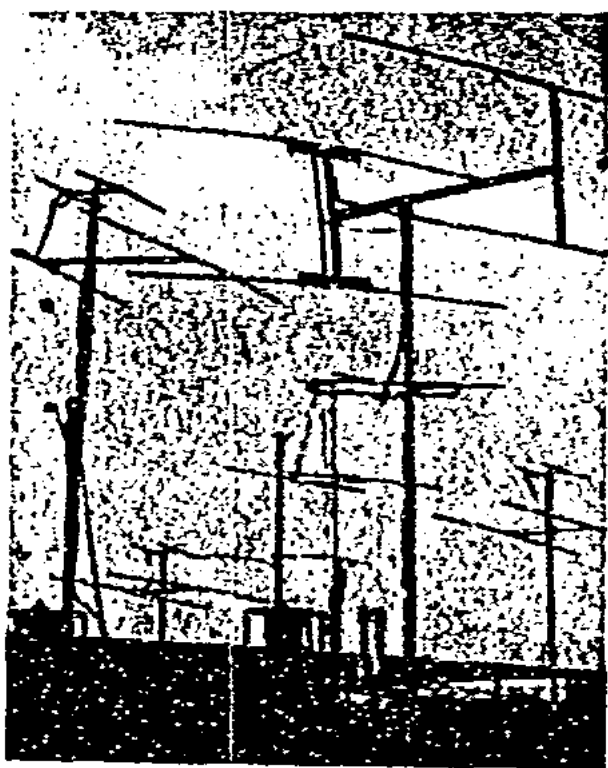
**I**T is not true that a large volume of serious words, earnestly spoken, even before an interrogator or an adversary, are necessarily revealing of even a candidate's views, much less his qualifications. Thus, last spring, Vice President Nixon subjected himself—stolcally and shrewdly—to the verbal endurance test of a televised interview that lasted three hours and forty-five minutes.

The result (no fault of the Vice President, but a measure of the vapidness of the questioning) was summarized accurately by one reviewer as an interview that "had such depth it almost disappeared." For the newspapers of the following morning could report, from all the verbiage, not a single notable item of news—

other than the news of so much "serious" time being spent making no news.

It is not true, of course, that the historical recollection (so cavalierly made) of the Lincoln-Douglas debates has the slightest relevance. Those debates turned upon a single, clear and universally understood issue—slavery. And most of them lasted almost three hours—a good enough time for truly serious argument.

**F**INALLY—and most important—it is manifestly not true that a good debater clearly qualifies as a good President or, for that matter, as anything but a good debater. By way of analogy, the Washington press knows (without wishing to publicize the fact too clearly) that, as often as not, a good government official happens to conduct a poor press conference, while his



mediocre colleague may happen to have a most felicitous talent for the occasion.

It is perfectly true that a "debate" can be singularly revealing: a rude grimace, a brusque gesture, a hasty retort can suddenly color the whole event. But the discovery of one of these phenomena suggests a quixotic, if not reckless, test of capacity for high office.

And as for the great issues, the unfortunate fact is that far less skill is required to blur them than to clarify them ("I have been concerned a great deal about that myself. \* \* \* You have stated one point of view most persuasively, but \* \* \*. Frankly, I once held that view myself, but \* \* \*. There is much to be said for what you have said, but I honestly think that a broader perspective \* \* \*").

If and when such smoke and fog films the nation's television screens, only a most credulous people could imagine the wispy, curling clouds of words are magically going to assume the shape and form of a national leader.

**T**HERE are quite a few Americans who have worried, for some time now, about the slow, steady degrading of the democratic dialogue—by cliché and sophistry, loud euphemism and pompous platitude, cheap symbol and sly slogan. They have worried because the way men talk must

both reflect and affect the way they think—the process of thought that, ultimately, is the process of democracy.

Will the revolution in surface method and technique, brought to political life by television, make this life-giving process more true and profound?

If the people who watch (and manage) this visual feast sense and admit its limitations as a diet for the brain; if its vast range opens the exchange of ideas to a truly national scale; if its sustained reportage of the fate of men and nations makes a larger public better informed; if it affords to new men in public affairs a unique forum for swiftly conveying new and urgent understanding to the citizenry; if its full power serves to make the democratic dialogue between men and parties, between people and government, more full and free, more precise and more purposeful—the answer will be yes.

**I**F it is imagined to serve not in the search for truth but as a substitute for truth; if it drives politics toward theatrics, so that the number of politicians who imagine themselves entertainers swells to match the number of entertainers who imagine themselves politicians; if it ruthlessly practises a kind of intellectual payola that rewards the man who can reduce the most complex issue to the silliest simplification; if it effectively invites a whole people to fore swear the labor of reading for the ease of gaping; if the merchandising of tranquilizers and sedatives is imitated or surpassed by a concept of leadership that pits party against party, orator against orator, in rival stroking and soothing of the complacencies of the citizen; if the pungent slogan asserts such sovereignty that disarmament is discussed on the level of deodorants; if all impulses conspire to glut the channels with what sells rather than with what matters; if, by all these lapses and deceits, a whole people lets itself become mentally trapped in a suffocating kind of isolation booth from which no sound can be heard but the voice of the huckster—the answer will be no.

**T**HE hope is obvious—that a marvelous voice will be used, by free men talking to free men, in syllables of fit majesty.

The ultimate test is what the philosopher has called "the chastity of the mind," uncovertous of the impure answer, un seduced by the simple solution.

The final result will be dictated as with every great resource or device in the hands of a free people—be it fire, be it water, be it nuclear power. It will serve or it will damage—it will dignify, or it will degrade—as the wisdom and will of free men, fervent or feckless, decide.