

Nathaniel Benchley
on Art Buchwald

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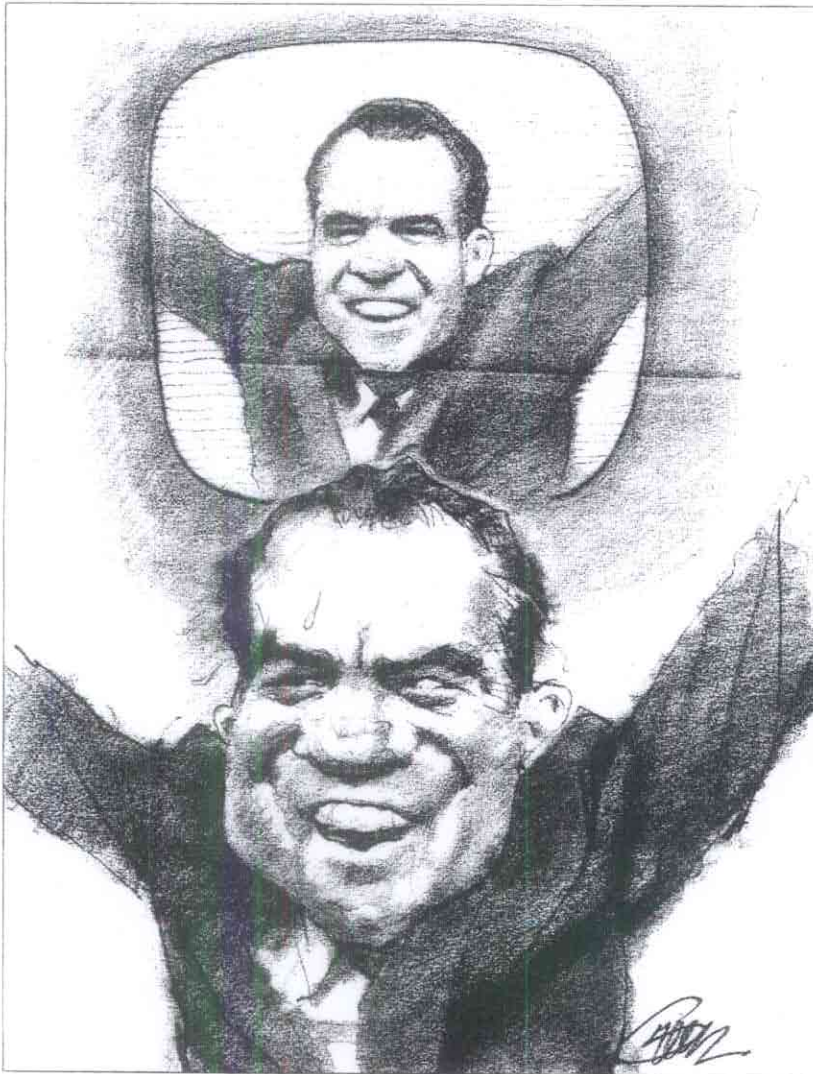
Marvin Kitman
on academic pomp

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BOOK WORLD

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An M.A. in Political Cosmetics

THE SELLING OF THE PRESIDENT 1968, By Joe McGinniss. Trident Press. 253 pp. \$5.95.

By Alistair Cooke

At ten minutes to eleven on the morning of October 21, 1968, Richard Nixon entered a television studio on West Forty-fourth Street, in New York City. He went straight to the make-up room, an admirable bit of foresight in view of the five o'clock shadow that fell across his presidential hopes in the first television debate of the 1960 campaign. He stayed ten minutes in the care of the make-up man and emerged as the new, cordial, barbered Nixon.

It is an episode that may soon be compulsory to memorize among all applicants for a master's degree in Political Cosmetics. That is what this rather gruesome book is about: "That there is a difference between the individual and his image is human nature. Or American nature, at least. That the difference is exaggerated and exploited electronically is the reason for this book."

Joe McGinniss was in on the Nixon campaign very early and seems to have embraced as an essential campaigning technique what other professional pros, even then, were merely deploring as a scandal. Namely, that since politics and advertising are both con games, "it is not surprising that politicians and advertising men should have discovered one another. And, once they recognized that the citizen did not so much vote for a candidate as make a psychological purchase of him, not surprising that they began to work together." How they worked together during the twelve months before the election is set down here with terrifying raciness, tempered only by the day-to-day cynicism of men who were working all the harder, affecting a deadlier seriousness, in order to down the suspicion that they are in a shabby trade.

"Human beings," McGinniss flatly says, "do not need new automobiles every third year; a color television set brings little enrichment of the human experience; a higher or lower hemline no expansion of consciousness, no increase in the capacity to love." But, he seems to add, suckers are born by the millions, and here we are manufacturing, packaging and marketing a President, so goddamn, let's get on with it. His frankness would be brutal if his perception of the inherent fraud were not so acute. He is never fooled (Continued on page 3)

Would you believe a Will Rogers with chutzpah?

THE ESTABLISHMENT IS ALIVE AND WELL IN WASHINGTON. By Art Buchwald. Putnam's. 251 pp. \$5.95.

By Nathaniel Benchley

Trying to write a rational review of a collection of Art Buchwald's pieces is like trying to report on a riot in a madhouse; it looks as though most of the characters are crazy, but there's a streak of cold sanity lurking in the background, and you occasionally get the feeling you should be screaming instead of laughing. Sometimes you do both, and sometimes neither. It's all very confusing.

The present volume consists of 119 pieces, written over two years, and it is Buchwald's tenth such collection. Quick addition will show that this represents a prodigious amount of work, and to be funny—or even to try to be funny—in print, three or four times a week, year in and year out, is a job that would flatten most aspiring humorists. That Buchwald's eyes bulge every now and then, and a glister of sweat appears on his forehead, should not be held against him; his bating average is remarkably high. He is an American institution, the Grandma Moses of the humorous columnists, and to snipe at him would be like hurling tomatoes at the two Jima monument. (He was, incidentally, in the Marine Corps, but otherwise occupied when the historic flag was raised. It's interesting to speculate what the occasion would have turned into had he been there.)

For the first fourteen years of his journalistic career he was based in Paris, and whenever he writes about the French he seems understandably on home ground. They are, so to speak, his pigeons, and he revels in it. (We'll worry later about the picture of a man reveling in pigeons; the purport of the sentence is clear.)

To me, one of the neatest pieces in the present book,

Nathaniel Benchley's *The Wake of the Icarus* will be published this month.



possibly because of its simplicity, is the one in which he explains the entire international situation in terms of the comic strip "Peanuts": Lucy as France, Linus as Great Britain (with his blanket marked "Made in U. S. A."), Charlie Brown the United States, Schroeder West Germany, and Snoopy Italy. With this established, everything falls into place with quiet perfection; Lucy wants to be leader of the gang and keeps berating Charlie Brown, who can say nothing but "good grief," and so on. It is a masterpiece of explanation, and once understood it simplifies everything except Russia and China, who have no place in a "Peanuts" strip anyway. Of course, without de Gaulle, France has assumed a somewhat different mien, but this doesn't change the point of the piece. Nor the point of another one, which holds that the way to have handled de Gaulle would

have been to agree with everything he said, which would have automatically made him take an opposite course.

In his domestic pieces, Buchwald concentrates most heavily on Washington and the political scene, which by its very nature is made to order for satire, but he is by no means unaware of the domestic—in the sense of household—scene as well. Preferences here must naturally be a matter of taste, and I prefer the home-front pieces to the political-front ones simply because they're harder to do, and therefore more rewarding when they work. There's something deceptive about domestic comedy: it looks so easy to write that a lot of people think they can do it, and most of them fail. When Buchwald succeeds, as with "God Bless You, Mrs. Robinson," he is splendid. Here he has a suburban matron turning her coincidental name with the leading lady in *The Graduate* into an asset instead of an embarrassment, and it is neat and deft and a small triumph.

When he doesn't succeed, it is either because the punch telegraphs itself in the beginning, or the idea becomes too tricky to be handled without straining. In either case, the result is nothing worse than a mild let-down. Furthermore, the reader's eyes tend to become glazed with too much humor; it is fairer to the book to read the pieces a few at a time and at varying intervals, so that the inevitable pattern doesn't become too obvious. And also to skip around among the subjects; they are lumped together in various categories, and too much of one category at one time can bring on a nibbling ennui.

These are, however, minor quibbles, and will probably outrage his fans. Buchwald, his publisher tells us, is syndicated in more than 450 newspapers, and the last thing his readers need is to have me explain to them what he's like. He is, as he has always been, a sort of Will Rogers with chutzpah, and if that doesn't make Grandma Moses turn over in her grave then nothing ever will.

An M. A. in Political Cosmetics

(Continued from page 1) into the account executive's delusion that somehow the doctored product is an ideal improvement on reality. It is false, he knows, "and much more attractive . . . television has given status to the 'celebrity' which few real men attain. And the celebrity is . . . the human pseudo-event . . . fabricated on purpose to satisfy our exaggerated expectations of human greatness."

The honest admission of the author that he is doing something less than helping in a great crusade, that he is involved rather as a bilious onlooker in a cunningly contrived deception (which is now, however, mandatory in political campaigns) is all that saves us from the grubby feeling that we are reading another man's love letters or rifling his locked business files.

Two-thirds of the book is devoted to brilliantly bald accounts of the tedium, fret and humor of coaching the candidate in his one- and five-minute spot commercials; rounding up a team of very smart cookies, the admen, TV producers, speech-writers, a schoolteacher volunteer; mobilizing, for the ten Nixon panel shows, the planted audience ("just enough Negroes so the press could not write 'all-white' stories, but not enough so it would look like a ball park"); filming the celebrity endorsements; rifling through thousands of feet of film—

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Vietnam, slums, proud peasants, squabbling Democrats, happy Americans—to use as counterpoint to Nixon narrations; such proposals as a grand one-hour color spectacular, to be aired on prime time during the Sunday evening before the Nixon inauguration. This last, I am dazzled to read, "will be narrated by Alistair Cooke and

Bob Hope." Happily, I read on: "That was a bit too much, even for the image builders."

The last third of the book is an appendix, a stream of memoranda from the staff, charting campaign strategy here, there and everywhere, advising Nixon how to talk, think, look, behave, be.

And how does the packaged raw material come out of all this? Well, he emerged, didn't he, into the White House? Not, one feels, with great gratitude for the beautifying process. Time and again he is seen as a bullied and bewildered victim, as a spirited nag that refuses to back into the shafts. He is anxious, remembering 1960, not to "go shifting my eyes." After one successful session, his rueful comment from the sidelines is, "I sweat too much anyway." Towards the end, someone in Oregon asked him, on camera, what he thought about the image business. He spoke up with uncommon natural zest: "I for one rejected the advice of the public relations experts who say that I've got to sit by the hour and watch myself. The American people may not like my face but they're going to listen to what I have to say." The advertising director of his campaign was watching. "I don't know why I enjoy that," he said, "but I do."

Could it be that Nixon in such a moment grew a character that was at once released from the 1960 Nixon but also from the confection his devoted staff had labored so loyally to package? The payoff on this whole elaborate experiment with a human being may be that it just failed to work.