SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 13, 1992

The Washington Post

VOLUME XXII, NUMBER 37

Book World

The Unholy Alliance: Politics, Advertising and the News

DIRTY POLITICS
Deception, Distraction, And Democracy
By Kathleen Hall Jamieson
Oxford. 335 pp. $25

By Deborah Tannen

FOLLOWING this year's Republican Convention, Bill Clinton observed that the Republicans were trying to make Hillary Clinton the Willie Horton of 1992. Kathleen Hall Jamieson shows how right he was, for "Willie Horton" has become shorthand for the "Dirty Politics" she deftly deconstructs in her important book by that name. If you read this book—and you should—you will never again listen to a news broadcast or read a newspaper in the same way. By conducting focus groups across the country, interviewing journalists, and painstakingly analyzing both statewide and presidential elections, Jamieson uncovers a complex of phenomena that has tragically compromised political campaign discourse. She amasses examples and statistics and provides incisive interpretive analysis to show that campaign discourse has become increasingly "adlike." Reading *Dirty Politics* leaves one with the troubling conviction that our democracy is threatened by the failure to provide voters with the information they need to make meaningful use of the right to vote.

Jamieson, dean of the Annenberg School for Communications at the University of Pennsylvania, shows that slandering, smearing, distorting, lying, and exploiting fear and prejudice have long been electioneering staples, but recent campaigns have added new twists: a destructive interrelationship between political advertising and news media, and the dwindling of campaign discourse to the ubiquitous, shrinking sound bite. Journalists have largely abandoned their role as conveyors of information and transformed campaigns into, alternately, metaphorical theaters in which we evaluate actors' performances and metaphorical horseraces or wars. (In a few brief minutes of evening

—*Continued on page 10*

Deborah Tannen, University Professor at Georgetown University, and author of "You Just Don't Understand," is a fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in Stanford, Calif.

INSIDE

Dirty Politics

Continued from page 1

news I recently heard that the candidates were "off and running," "neck and neck," that the campaign was a "dogfight," and they'd "fight it out on that battleground.")

The horserace frame, Jamieson notes, gives rise to the two questions that drive most campaign coverage: Who is winning, and how? The first is answered by incessant polling. But polls are like gossip: They divert people's attention from their own judgment and encourage them to be ruled by what others presumably are thinking.

As Jamieson shows, the second question leads to an obsession with campaign strategy: What is each side doing to account for its lead or its lag? Thus when the Democrats aired a speech by President Jimmy Carter on the economy in 1980, CBS reported, "The paid political broadcast was part of an effort to breathe fresh life into the Carter campaign" but didn't mention what Carter said. And when Democratic candidate Michael Dukakis rode in an M-1 tank to dramatize his support for the buildup of conventional weapons, the media portrayed him as vainly trying to appear strong when he was weak in the polls.

THE WORST ASPECT of focusing on strategy and polling is, as Jamieson shows, not what is reported, which is after all of some interest, but what is crowded out: candidates' proposals and actions. In 1988, when the S&L debacle and the end of the Cold War were clearly emerging, reporters were busily covering Dukakis playing catch with Red Sox outfielder Ellis Burke to capture the moment when Dukakis dropped the ball as an illustration of his losing in the polls.

Framing campaigns as horseraces also leads to a development that is at the heart of Jamieson's thesis: In the context of tracking who's winning and why, networks incorporate political ads in news reports, giving free air time to the candidate who is ahead and draping the often scurrilous ads in a mantle of credibility by framing them as news. Admakers encourage this confusion by designing ads to look like news programs, and newscasters compound it by intercutting ad footage with excerpts of candidates' speeches. News programs, moreover, have adopted the techniques and vocabulary of ads: their "disjunctive, abbreviated, telegraphic, narrative form." As a result, many viewers recall as news the misinformation contained in the ads.

Even televised debates are drawn into the vortex. Since the goal of campaign rhetoric is to maximize the chances of appearing on the evening news, candidates have learned to produce answers, like their speeches, that are strings of oversimplified, catchy sound bites. Following debates, experts enlighten voters not about whose statements were true but about who, in their opinion, "won." Then poll results show who everyone else thought had won. Some stations invite viewers to call in their winner, making the only real winner the telephone company.

As Jamieson points out, framing candidates as actors who try to make impressions, rather than as leaders with opinions and beliefs, engenders a pervasive cynicism. It struck me as The Emperor's New Clothes in reverse: if a candidate came forward fully dressed, media pundits would show us the strategies by which he managed to appear clothed.

Dirty Politics begins with the Willie Horton example and revisits it frequently because it was emblematic and spectacularly successful. Although the broad outlines of the deception are now well known, it is both illuminating and shocking to read Jamieson's detailed analysis. Her focus groups showed that in 1991 what most voters remembered about the 1988 campaign was that Dukakis had established a "revolving door" program so convicted murderers like Horton could murder again on "weekend passes."

In fact the furlough program had been created by Dukakis's Republican predecessor, and Horton was an aberration, the only man convicted of murder (he had actually driven the getaway vehicle) who went on to kidnap and rape (not murder) while on furlough. Journalists' reinforced Republican distortions by adopting their terms, like "weekend passes" and "revolving door." Even the name "Willie" was a Republican reframing of the man who had previously been "William." Most crucially, Horton's mug shot played on and incited whites' fear of black male criminals. (Indeed, Jesse Helms exploited this association by presenting the face of his 1990 opponent for senator, Harvey Gantt, who is black, in close-up stills.)

The Horton ad helped win the election for Bush and Quayle because it was blasted into prime time by newscasters intent on explaining Bush's lead. Dukakis's attempts to refute the lies were doomed because, as Jamieson shows, every mention of the story occasioned its retelling, and the refutations were abstract whereas the fabricated story was dramatic and memorable. The visual power of television is an enemy of truth: If a commentator did expose the claims as lies, the verbal track was overwhelmed by the gut power of the visual one. Democratic attempts to counter with a comparable federal case in which a convicted felon did go on to commit murder failed because they featured a photo of the smiling victim, an image that had none of the visceral impact of the mug shot. Finally, anything Dukakis said to defend himself made him seem, well, defensive.

The unholy alliance between political ads and news is a step ahead of the law. While regulations require truth in product advertising, none protect voters as consumers. Rather than money wasted on useless products, the result is the election of leaders whose character, abilities and actions bear no relation to the images we have been sold during the campaign.

Dirty Politics leaves one with awe and something like nausea at how the news media have allowed themselves to be manipulated by admakers, mostly Republican. Perhaps political advertising should be banned, or ads required to pass bipartisan committees evaluating their truthfulness. Certainly journalists should limit polls to a small percentage of their reporting and focus on substance rather than strategy, thus eliminating the temptation to display political ads as news. Although this is not likely to happen, there is some hope. Jamieson notes that a few newspapers and radio stations have begun Adwatch and Truth Test programs, examining ads for their validity and logic rather than their effectiveness. And she quotes journalists, like Thomas Oliphant, pleading with their colleagues to serve the country better: "If there's a lesson in 1988, it takes the form of an appeal to editors . . . 'Stop me before I kill again.' We do like to do the tactical pieces, the horse-race coverage . . . Don't let us. Ruthlessly cut it out."

"Tracking who's winning and why, networks ... drape the often scurrilous ads in a mantle of credibility by framing them as news."

Dirty Politics is not flawless. It's often repetitious, and occasionally omits needed background information. I understand (but dislike) publishers' insistence on lumping notes at the end, but what can explain failing to put chapter titles with chapter numbers at the head of notes sections? As it is, anyone who wants to look up a note has to hunt in two directions: first flipping back to find the number of the chapter one is reading, and then flipping forward to find that number in the Notes section. But these are surely quibbles in a book that is impressively researched, clearly written and organized, and enlightening throughout.

This year's campaign has not (yet?) reached the lows of 1988 but the patterns Jamieson describes are all there. Using her book as a field guide, you can watch them go by. Jamieson believes the best defense against the distortions of attack ads is inoculation: If voters can see the tactics intended to persuade them, they are less likely to be swayed. So the best hope for 1992 is for enough people to read this book to inoculate themselves against the venom of debased cam-