

By and large, both the media and the public tend to follow strong leadership, capable of identifying the clear national interest in a course of action. It remains true in the television age as in the past. The foreign-policy agenda is driven by a president or prime minister until he or she, instead of riding the tiger on a particular issue, lets it ride him or her. While the leader is in the saddle, television acts as a megaphone, explaining, selling, critiquing policy and acting as a catalyst in the chemical reaction between opponents and proponents of a policy within government and outside.

If television senses that the country generally approves of a policy—especially with troops in the field—it amplifies a particular action to the point of stupefaction.

However, when events slip into the saddle and ride the leader, then television will loudspeak the leader's helplessness, inaction, seeming impotence or overreaction. I think of Jimmy Carter in the Iran hostage crisis.

By focussing attention and raising the temperature, modern media and the polls they generate increase the pressure on a political leader, not necessarily to act impulsively, but to be decisive. As a former U.S. Ambassador to Moscow, Jack Matlock, put it recently:

Public officials have to account to the public, and, if nothing else, they've got to decide either to do something or to explain why they're not doing something ... when television brings these things into people's living rooms, this tends to deprive policy-makers of the option of ignoring them. If that's helping set an agenda, maybe it's not too bad.

Coincidentally, the collapse of Communism and the new technology have made visible many issues neglected in the Cold War struggle—the environment, global ecology, disparities in resources and standards of living between North and South, and human rights. They are things that cameras can now see, and this will increasingly drive them to the attention of publics and governments.

For Canadian policy-makers, who have been pushing precisely this agenda for years, this pressure should be welcome.

So the alarms sounded by George Kennan and Barbara McDougall seem to mean this: political leaders must not be in thrall to the powerful new media. But in the democracies today, no modern leaders take office unaware of that media power in shaping public opinion. They use it themselves to win office, and they have to continue to use it to hold office. None are quite the Prosperos they might like to be; they have to compete with their opposition and many other interest groups using the same media to turn opinion their way.