

Warren Christopher says television images should not be the "North Star" of foreign policy. But television images were quite acceptable to the White House when they made the Gulf War look like a giant video game and sent Bush's approval ratings into the nineties.

Television images are quite acceptable in getting presidents and prime ministers elected; that is, in choosing the leaders who will make the foreign policy. Fleeting, disjointed, visual glimpses of reality, in Kennan's phrase, now dominate the central rite in our democracies. So, are we to believe that triviality, distortion, overdramatization are fine to get someone into office but not fine when the same medium casts its gaze around the world afterwards?

It has to be recognized that, ever since politicians discovered how to adapt public-opinion sampling and consumer-product mass-marketing, image-making is how they win office. But it does not end there. Governments in office cannot chuck the image-making habit. Increasingly, government policy is marketed by images. The making of foreign policy becomes in part a contest of images. Televised images condition the public. Constant opinion polling measures their highly simplified views. Politicians react to the polls.

Brian Mulroney singing "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling" with Ronald Reagan at the Shamrock Summit was foreign policy by calculated image-making, as was Reagan's disastrous visit to the cemetery in Bitburg. Every time Brian Mulroney rode out in George Bush's speedboat, it was an act of Canadian foreign policy. Whether it was smart domestic policy is for others to ponder.

The televised Rabin-Arafat handshake coaxed by Bill Clinton gave their decision to deal with each other an instant global credibility far exceeding their signatures on a piece of paper.

Governments are not passive victims of television. When Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan and George Bush wanted to go to war without the inconvenience of hostile public opinion, they let television see only what they wished in the Falklands, Grenada, Panama and the Gulf. No more Viet Nams for them. The public, able to live with cognitive dissonance, cheered the exclusion of the press, while it cheered the press for its reporting.

Governments live by television--and may die by it--but to deplore its influence is disingenuous. In our democracies, the creatures of television, the Ariel and Caliban of our time, have been given their freedom, but government still tries to be the Prospero who controlled them with his magic.