

## Eye on Washington by Freyda Greenberg



Mr. Wirthlin at work.

### Latter-day astrologer revisited

How is it possible that the President of the United States, like so many of his predecessors, is induced to accept "Big Lies"—such as the imminent economic recovery, the necessity of courting Peking, or the indispensability of Henry Kissinger's overall counsel?

The Kissingers and Paul Volckers receive indispensable assistance from the Washington stage managers, as everyone suspects. These are the pyrotechnicians who juggle polls, computer printouts, and "image" formulas to prepare the White House to accept lie after lie, in the form of disastrous policies, as the magical solution to magically formulated problems—all at the expense of the national interest.

In this column on Aug. 17, we identified a team operating out of the basement of the White House, in the so-called situation room, consisting of pollster Richard Wirthlin, who headed Reagan's transition team for planning and created the Office of Planning and Evaluation; Richard Beal, a colleague of Wirthlin's who was made

head of the new office; and White House director of communications David Gergen. These are more than the President's "PR men."

It has been said of Gergen, who by the way has been often accused of being the notorious "deep throat" of Watergate fame, that "no one sees more of Reagan than Gergen." "Communication needs" are polling, counseling and writing speeches, and most importantly, convincing the President what will sell in Peoria.

While President Reagan's landslide electoral victory reflected the rejection of the "electronic" candidacy and administration of the media-created Jimmy Carter, Carter pollster (and top controller) Patrick Caddell believes the Reagan administration has surpassed his wildest fantasies: "The Reagan people have merged their communications with their political needs in a tighter definition than you've seen in previous administrations. I could kiss them for using thematic approaches. They really do understand the importance of themes as the great projecting force of political management." It is not necessary that the "theme" be true, only that this be projected!

### Remember Abraham Lincoln?

At the risk of sounding old-fashioned, it would seem only proper that the President of the United States make decisions, drawing on solicited advice, but determine policy nonetheless based on his fundamental beliefs, i.e., the policies and the morality for which he was elected. For example, even granted the fact that Presidents of recent times do not compose speeches on the order of those composed and delivered by Abraham Lincoln, it might be hoped that speeches would be written by the President, or at least at the behest of the President, and according to his specifications.

Richard Beal began writing Mr.

Reagan's first State of Union address (to be delivered on January 1982) in early September 1981. Beal described this task: "We lay out scenarios for winning and losing. Our work concerns the identification of issues, goals, and principles at the macro level. . . . The whole issue of running the Presidency in the modern age is control of the agenda. We deal with what ought to be the buildup of things six to nine months out. It's a process question."

The situation room team does not always speak gobbleygook, however. Perhaps because they specialize in "communication," they at times do not hesitate to define their art in almost brutal terms. What follows is a startling example of advice and evaluation from this quarter concerning the near-fatal shooting of President Reagan on March 31, 1981. While most Americans froze in shock, the situation-room prophets were involved in a cheerful discussion, revealed in part in a September 1981 *New York Times* magazine feature.

Wirthlin: "His [the President's] image characteristics were those of a conservative, right-wing Republican, fiscally responsible, strong on defense. There tended to be feelings he was brittle, not warm. . . ."

Beal: "What the crisis [the assassination attempt] was about in terms of image was a totally unscripted event. It focused on the President. It did a lot to endear the President to the people. If the endearing thesis is right, his personal attitude might never have come across without the assassination attempt."

Less than a week after the shooting, White House adviser Michael Deaver convened a strategy meeting at Blair House to discuss how to invest this new "political capital." David Gergen specified that whatever Reagan talked about at his first public appearance after recovery would be a winner. The team determined that the topic would be the domestic economy. And so it was. . . .