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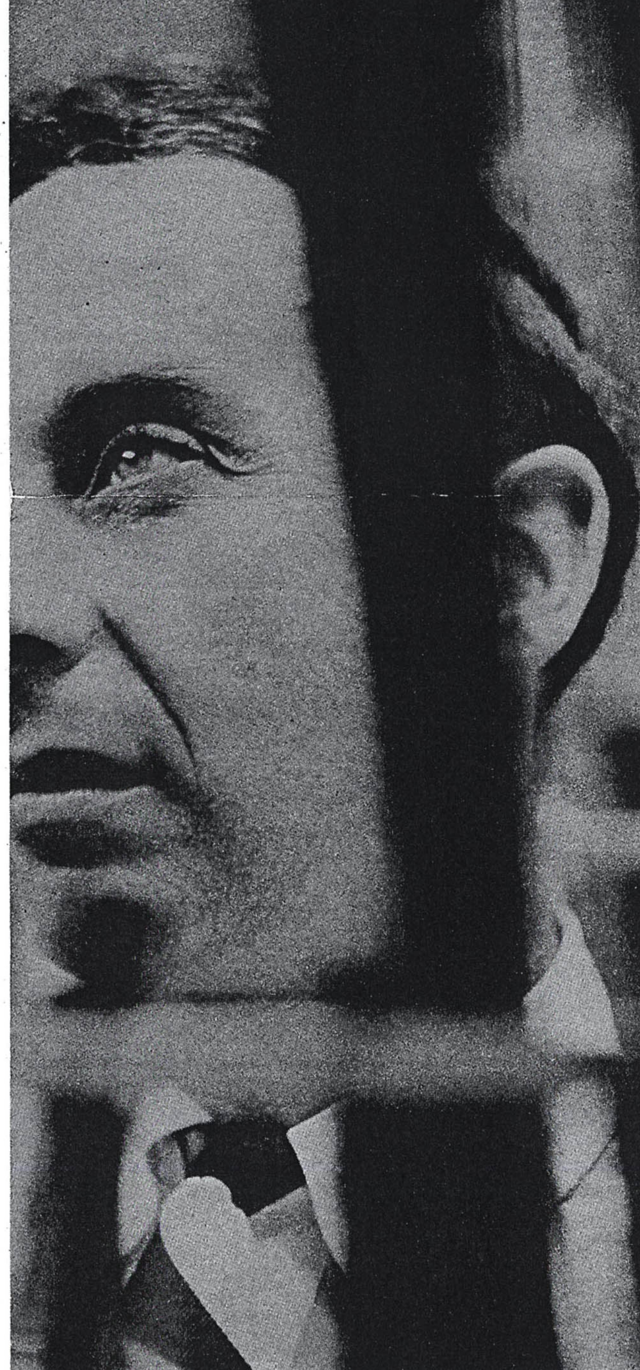
From the Editor:

Charles Guggenheim doesn't consider his political movies his major bag, but it's they that have brought him most to notice in Washington. So **Shelby Coffey III** explores this week "Politics as an Art Form" in the way it's practiced by the producer who made "Robert Kennedy Remembered."

Politics as an Art Form: Guggenheim and the Movies

By Shelby Coffey III



ABOVE, ASSOCIATED PRESS; OTHER PHOTOGRAPHS BY DOUGLAS CHEVALIER

A pioneer in the art form of the political documentary, Charles Guggenheim had what was probably his finest hour last August when his film *Robert Kennedy Remembered* was presented at the 1968 Democratic National Convention.

After the pathos-laden images faded—the images of Robert Kennedy campaigning, playing with his children, confronting critics in Japan, and finally of Kennedy walking alone on a sea-misted beach while his brother Ted's eulogy was repeated in the background—after the black and white re-creation of The Legend was finished, the delegates sat silently for one of those brief moments that are less homage than recognition. Then the convention splintered. Some delegates were shown on television weeping and clapping simultaneously, private agony mixing with the need for public adoration.

Some delegates stopped their *pro forma* applause when Carl Albert tried to quash the outburst. Disorganized, forlorn and angry, the hard-core display went on for some 17 minutes after Albert first attempted to silence the crowd. In all, a wrenching display of the shock of remembered loss, a display realizing its own hopelessness in front of a blank screen. Chants of "We want Bobby" sounded in parts of the hall. And picket signs of sheer sentimentality ("We miss you, Bobby") were hoisted but somehow did not seem quite so naive after the film.

Meanwhile, Charles Guggenheim was sitting in his Chicago hotel room with his wife, finishing dinner. He had been exhausted from a day of observing the bargaining of Humphrey's staff with the Kennedy people over when the movie would be shown and over whether or not the Vice President would be able to see it first. Guggenheim had decided to watch the showing on television and was almost immediately sorry.

"It's the sort of thing you hate not to have been a part of," recalls Guggenheim in his low-pitched voice, referring not to his film but to the whole event of its showing. After the presentation he went back to the convention where people like John Glenn and Art Buchwald kept coming up

and telling him how moving, how excellent it was. But the real testimony was on the floor of the convention.

"I wanted to show the loss . . . to put the importance of Robert Kennedy's life . . . upon the conscience of the convention," says Guggenheim. "To sustain his values and, hopefully, help change the Democratic party."

The film as sculptor of opinion. Sitting in his office in the Transportation Building on 17th st. nw., Charles Guggenheim will tell you he never really meant to wind up doing this sort of thing. But Fearless Fosdick changed all that.

Guggenheim started out, after World War II and the University of Iowa on the GI Bill, as a messenger at CBS radio station in New York City. He became the neophyte producer of the TV series of *Fearless Fosdick*, got in on the ground floor of educational television and watched it sink into the basement, helped manage Adlai Stevenson's television campaign in 1956, began to explore the persuasive power of the political documentary, produced the first movie starring Steve McQueen *(The Great St. Louis Bank Robbery)*, and won an Academy Award in 1966 for documentary films. In short, an artist who grew up with his medium.

Now 44, olive-skinned and slightly fragile-looking at a slim 5 feet 10, he has a quizzical, childlike stare, a wide foxy smile, a wardrobe of stylishly dark suits, and large mounted photographs of his children on his office wall. Seemingly edited, thorough, his conversation sometimes meanders off into abstractions.

After writing comedy ("not my thing") for Herb Shriner's CBS radio show Guggenheim joined Louis G. Cowan's organization. Cowan was a highly successful television packager *(Quiz Kids, $64,000 Question)* and a friend of Al Capp. Through a jumble of decisions Guggenheim still doesn't understand, he was asked by Cowan to produce the floundering *Fearless Fosdick* series. Suddenly piggy-backed with an unfamiliar responsibility, Guggenheim lumbered after some idea of what being a producer entailed, inviting cameramen and other workers out for lunch and explanations after confusing mornings in the little studio beneath the Brooklyn Bridge. Guggenheim brought in 13 Fosdick episodes for a phenomenally low average of $5,000 per installment before the show went the way of all low Neilsens.

"I still show the prints to my kids on their birthdays," says Guggenheim, *"They* love it."

He skips another part of his past, a Peabody award in 1951 for a children's series on the New York Zoo. And he glides over his post-Fosdick project.

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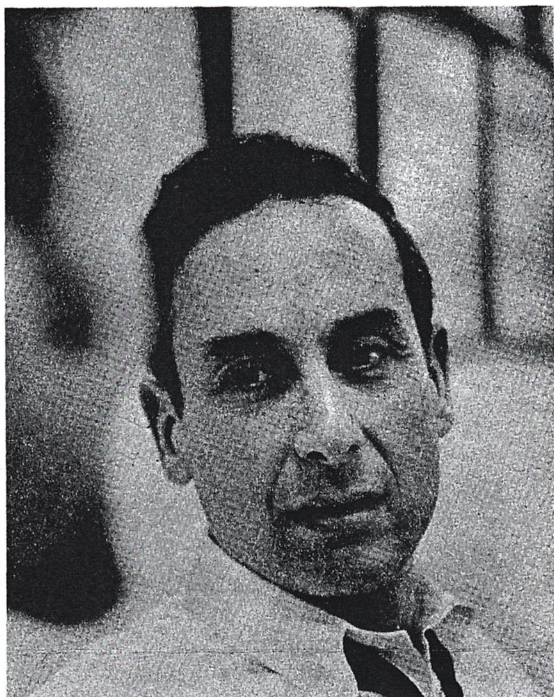
Guggenheim Films *Continued*



"After Fosdick I quit my job, bought a camera, took the unexposed film left over from the series and traveled up the Alcan Highway." He shot what interested him for five or six months in 1952, edited it and took the picture on a relatively unheralded lecture tour. Irony mellowing his memory, Guggenheim looks out his office window and says: "I only gave about ten or twelve lectures . . . one to tireworkers in Akron . . . I had an *agent.*" This last word is pronounced with a slight snort.

What happened next was crucial. In 1951 Guggenheim became chief producer for an experimental Ford Foundation project, an adult education TV series. This job took him to the station in Ames, Iowa, where he produced 26 shows dealing with local problems and titled *The Whole Town's Talking*. And Ames, Iowa did.

"The shows were fascinating." Guggenheim's thin face becomes a mask of seriousness. "They were on subjects like the water supply, school consolidation, the Indians, everything . . . After they were shown community action took place . . . Then I got very interested in the dynamics of political change.

"It showed that community TV could be really influential . . . And I resolved not to go back to commercial TV."

Then in 1952 came St. Louis—a crack at being head of a community-operated educational station, considerable friction, and a subsequent resignation-firing. He believes the St. Louis fiasco is in a sense indicative of the disappointment of educational television over the past two decades—the failure of America's most powerful medium to move beyond its commercial orientation.

Guggenheim came bubbling with concepts from his Ames experience. Junior members of the local power structure, however, funding and advising the station, saw Guggenheim and the people he imported for the project more as technicians than as idea men.

"The worst thing about educational TV has been to put it in control of the educators, not the communicators," says Guggenheim. "I had the idea that educational TV should have relevance for people who weren't already educated."

After the policy brawls, Guggenheim opened up his own film company in St. Louis where he was located until moving to Washington two years ago. Then as now he kept the company small to maintain the precision he calls "teamwork" and his own artistic control. He has continued to use numerous free-lance writers and directors from time to time but only does films on "what excites me, what really interests me."

One member of his present crew sees working for Guggenheim as similar to "working for a big soft child. He's an enigma. He's very kind but also a perfectionist . . . He chews people out sometimes. He'll start shouting, 'We've been editing for three months and you haven't cut that crap out yet.' But it doesn't last. No grudges."

Guggenheim may not be the sort to bear grudges but he is a man of definite political preferences, tending almost exclusively toward the liberal Democratic side of things. On his office bookcase is a picture of Gen. Eisenhower (famous grin and gray suit) with a halo pasted above his head.

Of course, there were image problems with Gov. Stevenson, too, when Guggenheim advised him on television matters during the 1956 campaign. Stevenson wouldn't quit talking when time was up, and "that's pretty revealing" when a candidate has to be cut off in mid-sentence. And then there was the matter of Stevenson's "crazy hat," a dilapidated Brooks Brothers number with sweat stains on it. "Everybody tried to get him to get rid of it. One day we were all standing around the railroad station waiting for a train and the wind blew the hat down the tracks. Everybody thought, 'At last, it's gone.' But there went Gov. Stevenson running down the tracks after it, and he caught it."

Guggenheim has learned from the Stevenson and subsequent campaigns that you can't change a candidate's style much. What you can change is the color of the ink his treasurer uses—the half-hour film biography that Guggenheim is noted for costs "in excess of $100,000."

Some candidates have been regrettably slow in paying off—including the Democratic National Committee this lean year. Because he is almost always "friends on a personal basis" with his political subjects, Guggenheim refuses to talk details on such matters. On the other hand, some candidates never get a chance to toss a hundred grand into the Guggenheim Production coffers.

"We have made about 18 political films," says Guggenheim, "and we have turned down about as many as we have made."

The reasons for refusal vary, but chief among them is the candidate's ideology—whether or not he stands for the same principles or is an antagonist of the film-maker's other political subjects. Translation: no conservatives need apply.

Although they finished *Robert Kennedy Remembered* on a crash basis (12-14 hours a day, six days a week) in 3½ weeks, the company generally requests about six months to work on the biography. An assistant and usually the director (who may or may not be Guggenheim) will travel to the subject's hometown to interview teachers, old friends, childhood sweethearts—anyone who can help reveal the essence of the man.

"Once we figure out what qualities we want to portray, Charles begins to think about the concepts and the approach," explains Meredith Burch, a pretty honey-blonde and a former assistant to Kennedy aide Fred Dutton and ex-Gov. Brown of California.

A consistent point of view—an aspect that Guggenheim stresses—and similar techniques run throughout many of his political films. Candidates are often shown explicating their views to housewives and to laborers and farmers. Concern for the future of America is emphasized, for instance, by Robert Kennedy's rompings with his children in a short spot prepared for his Presidential campaign. In the highly regarded *The Man and the Machine* (Pennsylvania gubernatorial campaign of 1966), Milton Shapp's war experiences are dramatized by the insertion of actual footage taken from the concentration camps

Guggenheim Films *Continued*

he visited. The biography of George McGovern contains film from the 1930s which point up the stark reality of the Depression years, which in turn affected McGovern's views immensely.

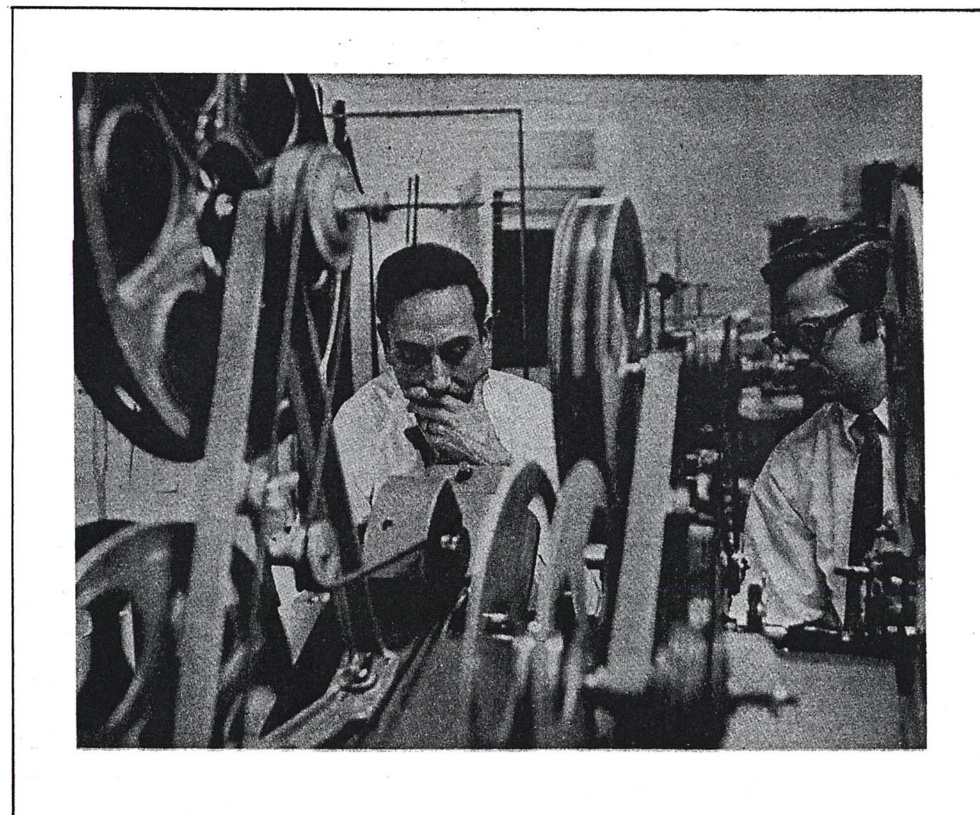
Panoramic sweeps of childhood snapshots help to establish the impression of unguarded authenticity in the film. Comments of acquaintances are edited to be revealing rather than merely laudatory. A sudden freezing of, say, Ohio Senate candidate John Gilligan's image, heightens the effect of his immediately preceding statement. Hand-held cameras *("Verite* all the way," Meredith Burch explains) and shots of the candidate taken through a group of bystanders add to the sense of spontaneity that the company strives for. Often the persuasiveness has the force and the inevitability that rhetoric possessed in the Golden Era of Burke and Fox when it was the medium as well as the message. And, in fact, a number of the cinematic effects are directly comparable to the guidelines for persuasive oratory laid out in Aristotle's *Rhetoric.*

Criticism of the manipulative power of political ads on television grew louder this year. Guggenheim, who is careful to point out that he does not specialize in political films, does not see too much of a clear and present danger in TV spots that employ sophistry: "We (the public) are bombarded with information . . . People know that there is a difference when the packaged spots are presented. If nothing else, they're told it's a paid political announcement. And what a man allows to be packaged and presented on his behalf is revealing, too . . ." As far as the disparities in how much television time candidates can afford are concerned, Guggenheim notes that a candidate gets considerably more TV exposure on unbiased news broadcasts than he can buy. When an office-seeker can't afford *any* television ads at all, Guggenheim admits the system may be unfair. But this is rarely the case, he contends.

Guggenheim was a student who couldn't get into a good college because of poor high school grades. He finally went to what is now Colorado State University where he promptly flunked a course in Market Types of Animal Husbandry before entering the service. Since then Charles Guggenheim has come quite an intellectual distance. His associates remark on his Renaissance variety of knowledge, and he says he reads constantly"—*Time, Newsweek, New York Times,* The Washington Post, William Styron's novels and always "something not connected with what I'm working on." He thinks of himself as a general film-maker first, and, in fact, most of his wall-full of award certificates came from nonpolitical motion pictures. The Venice Festival Award was given for *Monument to the Dream,* a lyrical documentary on the America in whose honor St. Louis erected its civic monument.

And Guggenheim won the 1966 Academy Award for *Nine From Little Rock,* which detailed the lives of the nine Negroes who entered Little Rock's Central High School amid turmoil in 1957. The film was commissioned by USIA and focused on the impressions of one of the students seven years after the Little Rock episode.

Since most documentaries are suicidally expensive in relation to their potential as money-making attractions, much of Guggenheim's nonpolitical work has been funded by private corporations or government agencies such as USIA. Indicative of this sort of financing was the backing given for *Monument to the Dream*—The Laclede Gas Co., the American Steel Institute, and the National Park Service all contributed to erasing the debts of the production. In another instance, he made a film for the city of St. Louis which counted as the municipal budget report that year. The film drew considerable critical praise and was shown in Europe. And a small check for royalties from its Continental tour made the film possibly the only city budget report in history to make money.



At the moment Guggenheim is working on a sound and light creation which will set an 1860s mood in Ford's Theater. The National Park Service commissioned the Ford project, but Guggenheim sees more television projects as part of his professional future, too.

Tennis and skiing relax him, and his house in Aspen near Robert McNamara's remains a sanctuary. But his wife and three children are his source of real pride. If there were no family he would "jump into making" feature-length films all the time, he says. As it is, he has an assistant look through summaries of every book published to try to find the story that will stir Guggenheim into production.

"I have a love affair with America . . ."says Guggenheim. "You can call me and 18th century American ameliorist . . . if you want . . . But I like what Robert Kennedy used to say at the end: You can do something about tomorrow."

Shelby Coffey III is an assistant editor of Potomac