About the Author

Jill Lepore is the David Woods Kemper '41 Professor of American History at Harvard University, a staff writer at the *New Yorker*, and host of the podcast *The Last Archive*. Her books include *The Name of War*, winner of the Bancroft Prize; *New York Burning*, a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in history; *The Story of America*, shortlisted for the Pen Literary Award for the Art of the Essay; *Book of Ages*, a finalist for the National Book Award; *The Secret History of Wonder Woman* and the international best-seller, *These Truths*.

Cover design by Steve Attardo

Frontispiece photo: Simulmatics Corporation at the *New York Times*, 1962.

Contents

How to use this eBook

Look out for linked text (which is in blue) throughout the ebook that you can select to help you navigate between notes and main text.

You can double tap images to increase their size. To return to the original view, just tap the cross in the top left-hand corner of the screen

What If?

The mystery surrounding Simulmatics started with its name.

—*Statement to Simulmatics*
Corporation stockholders, 1966

The geodesic dome in Wading River, Long Island, where Simulmatics
met in 1961, with the Greenfields' house to the right.

THE SCIENTISTS OF THE SIMULMATICS CORPORATION SPENT the
summer of 1961 on a beach on Long Island beneath a geodesic
dome that looked as if it had landed there, amid the dunes, a
spaceship gone to ground.[1] Inside, they wrote mathematical
formulas on blackboards. Chalk dusted their fingertips. Reams of
perforated computer printouts unfurled across the floor.

The Simulmatics Corporation, Cold War America's Cambridge Analytica, claimed credit for having gotten John F. Kennedy elected president of the United States in November 1960. Months later, its scientists spent a summer at the beach planning new projects for their invention: a computer program designed to predict and manipulate human behavior, all sorts of human behavior, from buying a dishwasher to countering an insurgency to casting a vote. They called it the People Machine.[2]

Hardly anyone, almost no one, remembers Simulmatics anymore. But beneath that honeycombed dome, the scientists of this long-vanished American corporation helped build the machine in which humanity would, by the twenty-first century, find itself trapped and tormented: stripped bare, driven to distraction, deprived of its senses, interrupted, exploited, directed, connected and disconnected, bought and sold, alienated and coerced, confused, misinformed, and even governed. They never meant to hurt anyone.

They were young men, the best and the brightest, fatally brilliant, Icaruses with wings of feathers and wax, flying to the sun. "The scientists are from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Yale, Harvard, Columbia and Johns Hopkins," the *New York Times* reported. "They are preparing to work with electronic computers, the giant question-answering devices in use for some years, but are using social and economic data and their own knowledge to work out new programs for computer simulation, the name given to the technique of acting out, so to speak, all the probabilities that might flow from a given set of circumstances."[3] They wrote in a new language, FORTRAN, using an expression known as an IF/THEN statement to instruct a computer to simulate possible actions and calculate their consequences, under different conditions, again and again and again. IF this, THEN that. IF this, THEN that. IF this, THEN that, an infinity of outcomes.

To the beach that summer, they brought their wives and their children. The men wore bathing trunks and polo shirts and pondered punch cards; the women wore summer dresses and sandals and made potato salad and tuna salad and barbecue and macaroni salad and ham salad and pots of stew and piles of corn on the cob; their children—seventeen of them in all—waded in the

ocean and built sandcastles, Camelots-by-the-sea, and sailed one-masted Sunfishes and chased a black poodle named Sputnik up and down the beach and over the creek. The children got so badly sunburned that at night their mothers doused them with vinegar to cool their skin: they smelled like pickles. On rainy days, they played Monopoly, hopscotching from Park Place to the B. & O. Railroad, collecting two hundred dollars every time they passed Go, and trying, as all monopolists must, to keep out of jail. The wives traded paperback copies of *Peyton Place*, a steamy novel about sex and female rebellion, its pages wilted from the humidity.[4] And everything, and everyone, was covered with sand, as if, if they'd stayed there long enough, they'd have been buried, like ancient Egyptians.

The sun rises, the sun sets, and still no one ever really knows what will happen next. In a world of endless uncertainty, the forecasting of the future began with the very oldest human societies. The Greeks built a shrine to the Oracle of Delphi; the Incas built a temple to the Oracle at Pachacamac. Buddhists, Muslims, Christians, Jews, every religion, every culture: all have had their prophets and their temples, their diviners, their readers of omens, their seers. Time passed, centuries, millennia. And then, beginning in the middle decades of the twentieth century, Americans began building machines meant to serve as their oracles, new seers, electronic prophets, diviners of data.

Founded in 1959, the Simulmatics Corporation established offices in New York, Washington, Cambridge, and, eventually, Saigon before it declared bankruptcy, in 1970. The company wore a cloak of intrigue. This was, in part, unintentional. "The mystery surrounding Simulmatics started with its name," its president once explained to the company's stockholders. "We were a contraction of two words—'simulation' and 'automatic.'"[5] Its founders hoped the name would become a watchword, a byword, like "cybernetics." It did not. The obscurity of the word "simulmatics" is a measure of their failure. But its meaning is a measure of their ambition: to automate the simulation of human behavior.

The scientists of the Simulmatics Corporation acted on the proposition that if they could collect enough data about enough

people and feed it into a machine, everything, one day, might be predictable, and everyone, every human mind, simulated, each act anticipated, automatically, and even driven and directed, by targeted messages as unerring as missiles. Facebook, Palantir, Cambridge Analytica, Amazon, the Internet Research Agency, Google—they were all incubated there, beneath that honeycombed dome by the edge of the gray-green sea, like so many eggs.

Simulmatics' scientists were known as the What-If Men. They believed that by simulating human behavior, their People Machine could help the human race avert each and every disaster. It could defeat communism. It could counter insurgencies. It could win elections. It could sell mouthwash. It could accelerate news, like so much amphetamine. It could calm agitated wives. It could win the war in Vietnam by targeting hearts and minds. It could predict race riots, and even plagues. It could end chaos. The scientists of Simulmatics believed they had invented "the A-bomb of the social sciences."[6] They did not predict that it would take decades to detonate, like a long-buried grenade.

Still, even at the time, the People Machine seemed to many people to be a species of madness, a harbinger of a coming dystopia. In 1964, the Simulmatics Corporation served as the subject of two ominous novels. In Eugene Burdick's political thriller *The 480*, a barely disguised "Simulations Enterprises," equipped with hulking, sinister IBM computers, meddles with the 1964 U.S. presidential election. In Daniel F. Galouye's *Simulacron-3*, science fiction set in the year 2033, specialists in the field of "simulectronics" build a people machine—"a total environment simulator"—only to discover that they themselves don't exist and are instead merely the ethereal, Escherian inventions of yet another people machine.[7] After that, Simulmatics lived on, in fiction and film, an anonymous avatar. In 1973, the avant-garde German filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder adapted *Simulacron-3* into *World on a Wire,* a terrifying futurist tour de force, a forerunner to the 1999 film *The Matrix* in which all of humanity lives in a simulation, locked, trapped, deluded, and dehumanized; *Matrix*'s main character, trying to set humanity free, hides stolen software inside a hollowed-out copy of Jean Baudrillard's 1981

book, *Simulacra and Simulation*, a metatext about the meaningless "hell of simulation."[8]

In fiction and film, Dr. Frankenstein yielded to Dr. Jekyll and, finally, to Dr. Strangelove, as mad science moved from biology to chemistry to physics. But Simulmatics' fiction-and-film avatar— the mad scientist of computer science—is wildly outsized, the lengthening shadow of a very small man. The Simulations Enterprises of *The 480* is a megacorporation, and the simulectronics specialists in *Simulacron-3* are technical geniuses. The real Simulmatics Corporation was a tiny, struggling company, its technicians bumbling, its accounts disastrous. It soared and then it sank, like a helium balloon. The geodesic dome became a Space Burger, a drive-through hamburger joint.

And yet Simulmatics' legacy endures in predictive analytics, what-if simulation, and behavioral data science: it lurks behind the screen of every device. Simulmatics, notwithstanding its own failure, helped invent the data-mad and near-totalitarian twenty-first century, in which the only knowledge that counts is prediction and, before and after the coming of the coronavirus, corporations extract wealth by way of the collection of data and the manipulation of attention and the profit of prophecy. In a final irony, Simulmatics, whose very past has been all but erased, helped invent a future obsessed with the future, and yet unable to improve it.

Simulmatics' own origins lie still further back in time, in the early-twentieth-century science of psychological warfare: the control of people's minds by assault, interruption, and distraction. Simulmatics' scientists carried that work into the 1950s, the age of the modern computer, and into electoral politics, with a commission from the Democratic National Committee during the 1960 presidential election, and then into targeted advertising. Later, they flew that work across an ocean, to Vietnam, until student protesters called them war criminals.

It would be easier, more comforting, less unsettling, if the scientists of Simulmatics were villains. But they weren't. They were midcentury white liberals in an era when white liberals were not expected to understand people who weren't white or liberal. They were husbands and fathers in an age when men were not

expected to understand women and children. By "human behavior," they meant the behavior of men; by "artificial intelligence," they meant their own intelligence—a fantasy of their own intelligence—which they intended to graft onto a machine. They did not consider the intelligence of women to be intelligence; they did not consider a female understanding of human behavior to be knowledge.

They built a machine to control and predict what they could not. They are the long-dead, white-whiskered grandfathers of Mark Zuckerberg and Sergey Brin and Jeff Bezos and Peter Thiel and Marc Andreessen and Elon Musk. The Simulmatics Corporation is a missing link in the history of technology, a clasp that fastens the first half of the twentieth century to the beginning of the twenty-first, a future in which humanity's every move is predicted by algorithms that attempt to direct and influence our each and every decision through the simulation of our very selves, this particular hell.

If, then, in the 1950s and 1960s, things had gone differently, this future might have been averted. If, then, history had taken a different course, humanity might not have been demoted, humanistic knowledge might still be cherished, and democracy might have grown stronger, not weaker. Or very little might have been different. It is not possible to know. No machine can run an IF/THEN program backward, calculating possible pasts. History cannot answer "What if?" But it can explain what happened, and why.

The future invented by Simulmatics has a past, a history washed away, like a sandcastle, by the tide of time. It can only be pieced back together grain by grain, each parapet and battlement, each rampart and turret, every last feature of its towering audacity.

The new underworld is made up of innocent and well-intentioned people who work with slide rules and calculating machines and computers which can retain an almost infinite number of bits of information as well as sort, categorize, and reproduce this information at the press of a button. Most of these people are highly educated, many of them are Ph.D.s, and none that I have met have malignant political designs on the American public. They may, however, radically reconstruct the American political system, build a new politics, and even modify revered and venerable American institutions—facts of which they are blissfully innocent.

—*Eugene Burdick,* The 480, *1964*
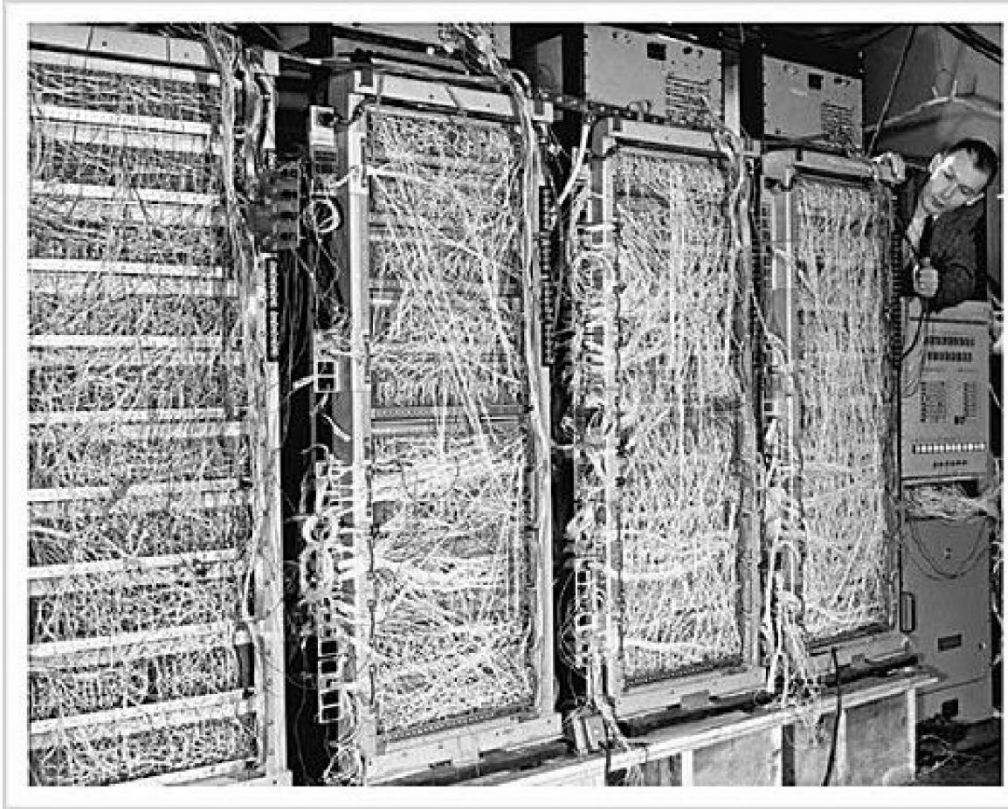
The inside of a mainframe computer, c. 1956.

The Social Network

Given that A knows B,
what is the probability
that B knows *n* persons
in the circle of acquaintances of A?

—*Ithiel de Sola Pool, 1956*

Madly for Adlai

It did Adlai Stevenson great harm, not having a wife, and trying to be funny all the time, too. Great harm.

—*Gore Vidal*, The Best Man,
1960

Ed and a pregnant Patty Greenfield, with Michael, 1954.

Ed GREENFIELD COLLECTED PEOPLE THE WAY OTHER MEN COLLECT comic books or old stamps or vintage cars. "Ed Greenfield," he'd say, flashing a made-for-TV, Dean Martin grin, slapping a back, clasping a hand, offering a vodka and tonic,

palming a business card, *Edward L. Greenfield, President, Edward L. Greenfield & Co., 501 Madison Ave.* He was like a ten-million-volt Looney Tunes electric magnet, a giant red-handled iron U that pulled everyone toward him, *plink, plink, plink.*

Greenfield founded the Simulmatics Corporation in 1959 and became its president, but the company was years in the making, and the use of computer technology to estimate probable human behavior, like any starry-eyed idea, involved scores of people. To pull off a big bank heist, you need a munitions expert, a surveillance guy, a computer whiz, a security team, a money man, and an all-around huckster. To pull off the computer prediction of human behavior, you need a political theorist, a mathematician, a behavioral scientist, a market researcher, a computer scientist, and an all-around huckster. Greenfield was the huckster. "If you see a frog sitting on top of a flag pole, you know it didn't get up there by itself," a very wise man once said.[1] Greenfield collected the men who figured out how to get the frog up there, watched them build the tools to do it, and then, when they were done, roped in a crowd, pointed to the top of the flag pole, and shouted, "Look, a frog!"

Ed Greenfield had thick, wavy black hair, a big nose, and jug-handle ears. He had wide shoulders and narrow hips and toothpick legs, misfit parts disguised by his custom-made suits. He was warm, loving, and affectionate and he was charming and he was sweetly funny and impossibly fun and he was sexy, in the way of a certain very dapper, animal of a man. He smoked Pall Malls, except when he was smoking a pipe that smelled like a campfire, of pine and night sky. He drank Scotch, in glasses made of crystal as clear as ice.

The future president of the Simulmatics Corporation was a Madison Avenue ad man—a "mad man"—and like all ad men, he sold nothing so well as himself. Born in Chicago in 1927, he was the only child of Jacob Greenfield, an insurance salesman who used to be a Communist, and Theodora Rubenstein, the daughter of a rabbi. He had a neat little résumé: "Edward L. Greenfield, Public Relations, N.Y.C. Formerly Univ. of Chicago, Yale Law School." Most of these credentials were fake. He never graduated from the University of Chicago, or from Yale Law School, either. He went to

Wabash College in Indiana for a year, in 1945, and then dropped out, and although he liked to tell people that he still owed the University of Chicago a library book, the University of Chicago has no record of his ever enrolling there. Neither does Yale Law School.[2] Still, he'd been to Yale and must've sat in on a seminar there, because once, when he applied for membership at the Yale Club of New York, Harold Lasswell, a dome-headed, grim-faced, world-famous Yale professor and expert on propaganda, vouched that Greenfield had studied with him in 1950. "Greenfield is a very convivial and attractive human being who has a very wide net of personal acquaintances in this country and abroad," Lasswell testified.[3] Very convivial. Very wide net. A fisherman, fisher of men.

When Ed Greenfield was in his early twenties, he met the very smart and very pretty and sometimes terribly sad Patricia Safford, a talented pianist and dancer who'd studied with Martha Graham. Patty Safford was born in 1928; her mother was a Vienna-trained Freudian analyst and her much older and much-married father, Frank Safford, was an eminent neurosurgeon and patron of the arts. She spent her summers at the family's forty acres of seaside and hills, a little village of cottages on Wading River, Long Island, with her father's friends: artists, writers, and intellectuals who included the painters Willem and Elaine de Kooning, the poet Edwin Denby, and the novelist Richard Wright. Denby and the de Koonings made silent films starring the Safford children, Patty in a swimsuit, her little brother in a rowboat, abducted by pirates, kidnapped by a witch, rescued at the last minute: fairy tales in black and white, tales of sorcery.[4]

In 1951, when Ed Greenfield and Patty Safford got married, Patty's father gave them, as a wedding gift, a rambling old wooden Victorian house on the beach. It had a fireplace made of stones from Long Island Sound. Next door, another of Frank Safford's friends, the visionary and eccentric architect Buckminster Fuller, would build for the Saffords one of his early geodesic domes, a shell of struts of aluminum and triangles of glass and porcelain, intricately balanced, a feat of engineering, a marvel, out of this world: the future summer headquarters of the Simulmatics Corporation.[5]

Ed Greenfield had big ideas and big ideals, big liberal ideas. For all his hucksterism, he was much more than an ad man: he was a philanthropist earnestly dedicated to midcentury American liberalism. He raised money for liberal causes, especially civil rights and civil liberties; he grabbed checks out of thin air, like a magician who pulls a nickel out from behind your ear. He served on the boards of the Fund for the Republic (which fought for the freedom of speech), the American Freedom of Residence Fund (which fought for desegregated housing), and Operation Crossroads Africa (a precursor to the Peace Corps). The civil rights attorney Harris Wofford, who would serve as John F. Kennedy's special assistant for civil rights and help found the Peace Corps in 1961, once advised Martin Luther King Jr., "Let me suggest that some time soon you try to talk with a good friend of mine, a very astute public relations man, Ed Greenfield."[6]

Very astute, my good friend, knows everyone. Very convivial. *So* fun. Warmhearted, witty. And that *laugh.* You'll love him. Very wide net. He was here, he was there, he was everywhere, the beautiful and clever Patty on his arm.

But for all his interests and acquaintances, Ed Greenfield's real passion was politics, Democratic politics, presidential politics. A huckster's game.

THE PEOPLE MACHINE began as a glint in Ed Greenfield's eye during the election of 1952, the first presidential election waged in the television age, the first presidential contest whose outcome was predicted by a computer, and the first presidential campaign orchestrated by a mass advertising firm. It was also, notably, a devastating loss for the Democratic Party.

Democrats had held the White House for two decades, since Franklin Delano Roosevelt's historic election in 1932. By 1952, liberalism, which crossed party lines, appeared triumphant, unassailable. This turned out to have been an illusion, but at the time, it was hardly questioned. In the 1930s, Democrats and Republicans had fought over Roosevelt's New Deal, with Democrats arguing for the regulation of business and banking, and Republicans opposed. And they'd fought over the United States' entry into the Second World War, with Roosevelt in favor and

Republican isolationists opposed. But starting in 1941, in the let's-all-come-together war years, and after 1945, in the isn't-life-grand postwar years, the distance between the parties had narrowed. What did they have left to fight over? After the Cold War began, in 1949, opposition to a common enemy tended to smooth over whatever differences remained. Republicans were still the party of business and Democrats the party of labor but both parties were liberal, and by 1952, Americans could hardly tell Democrats and Republicans apart: Tweedledee and Tweedledum.

Given that the differences between the parties were so few, the contest in 1952 seemed less likely to turn on policy issues than on the two candidates' personalities, which made it a perfect campaign for Madison Avenue. This posed a problem for Democrats, since, with rare exceptions, Republicans made much better use of ad men than did Democrats, a problem that got a whole lot worse when the Democratic nominee, Adlai E. Stevenson, decided to run on a platform that included opposition to the influence of advertising agencies on American politics.

Advertising was booming. In 1935, the Manhattan phone book listed ten public relations firms. By the middle of the 1950s, that same phone book list covered seven columns and contained the names of more than seven hundred firms, including Edward L. Greenfield & Co.[7] During the Second World War, American manufacturers had churned out for the Allies not only arms and ammunitions but clothing and food and more. After the war, hoping not to close shop but instead to find new markets for consumer goods, manufacturers churned out everything from dishwashers to hair curlers to Barbie dolls. To sell these products—many of which no one had ever thought to make or own before—manufacturers turned to advertising agencies, whose industry, between 1950 and 1955, grew from $6 billion to $9 billion. "We don't sell lipstick," one manufacturer explained. "We buy customers."[8]

Political campaigns had begun turning to advertising agencies, too, saying, in effect, "We don't sell candidates, we buy voters." Shrewd observers greeted this development with alarm. In 1951, the fearless muckraker Carey McWilliams published an explosive three-part series in the *Nation*, a profile of a married couple, Clem

Whitaker and Leone Baxter, who ran a California company called Campaigns, Inc., the first political consulting firm in the history of the world.[9] They'd opened shop in 1933, chiefly running political campaigns for Republican candidates. For a long time, they'd taken only California clients. But beginning in 1949, they'd engaged in a national campaign, and they'd won: retained by the American Medical Association, they'd defeated a national health insurance plan proposed by the Democratic president, Harry S. Truman—the last, unfinished work of the New Deal. The AMA paid Campaigns, Inc., $3.5 million. "This must be a campaign to arouse and alert the American people in every walk of life, until it generates a great public crusade and a fundamental fight for freedom," Whitaker and Baxter's Plan of Campaign began. "Any other plan of action, in view of the drift towards socialization and despotism all over the world, would invite disaster."[10] When Whitaker and Baxter claimed that national health insurance amounted to socialized medicine, Truman fumed. Nothing in his bill, he insisted, "came any closer to socialism than the payments the American Medical Association makes to the advertising firm of Whitaker and Baxter to misrepresent my health program."[11] Whitaker and Baxter, McWilliams concluded, represented the new, cynical future of American politics. "This is expert political management," he wrote. "This is government by Whitaker and Baxter."[12]

For the Republican presidential nominee in 1952, Clem Whitaker and Leone Baxter liked the amiable and avuncular Dwight D. Eisenhower, former supreme commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force in Europe, a greatly admired war hero who had never been known to belong to either party. Eisenhower agreed to run out of a sense of duty to the country, even though he didn't think military men should occupy the Oval Office. He didn't enter the New Hampshire primary, but he won anyway, as a write-in, upsetting the conservative candidate, Robert Taft, an Ohio senator and the son of former president William Taft.

In 1952, most states didn't hold primaries and instead chose their nominees at state nominating conventions. Primaries weren't binding, and party leaders tended to ignore them. Instead, party leaders used polls to gauge the prospects of their candidates, and

polls, of course, can be driven by advertising. Eisenhower won five primaries; Taft won six. But Eisenhower led in the polls.[13]

That summer, delegates to the Republican National Convention met in the International Amphitheatre, on the South Side of Chicago. Like a lot of big halls, it had originally been built for livestock shows: promenades of cattle. The convention was televised live, coast to coast, a first. Eisenhower won on the first ballot. To balance the ticket, party leaders connived to anoint as his running mate the shovel-jawed young California senator Richard M. Nixon, a Whitaker and Baxter protégé. Eisenhower was sixty-two; Nixon, thirty-nine. Eisenhower was a liberal, Nixon a ferocious anti-Communist. Whitaker and Baxter ran the Eisenhower-Nixon campaign in California.

The Republicans had put together a formidable ticket. The Democrats were vulnerable. Truman had assumed the presidency in 1945 with FDR's death and had been elected in 1948. He campaigned for a Fair Deal. But in 1952 he was unpopular, not least because voters blamed him for the United States' involvement in the Korean War. He also faced a challenge from within his own party from slender Tennessee senator Estes Kefauver, who'd made a national name for himself by heading a sensational investigation into organized crime. "I'm running on my own," Kefauver said, distancing himself from the party of Truman. Asked if he was a New Dealer and a Fair Dealer, he said, "Well, I don't classify myself on the dealers. I believe in progress."[14] Kefauver entered the Democratic primary in New Hampshire, where he campaigned in a coonskin hat by dogsled. When Kefauver won, Truman announced that he would not seek another term and instead urged his former secretary of commerce, Averell Harriman, a wealthy New York businessman, to seek the nomination. Harriman hired Edward L. Greenfield & Co. to help manage his campaign. Harriman won only one primary. Kefauver entered fifteen primaries and won twelve. But at the Democratic National Convention, held in the same Chicago amphitheater as the Republican convention, the unruly delegates of the Democratic Party drafted into the contest Adlai E. Stevenson, the governor of Illinois, who hadn't run in a single primary.

Stevenson would become the Hamlet of American presidential politics. A moderate and a party loyalist who had served in both the Roosevelt and the Truman administrations, he was best known in 1952 for the role he'd played in establishing the United Nations. He was famously eloquent and learned. He also enjoyed nearly universal support among intellectuals, including the historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and the economist John Kenneth Galbraith, and among some of the nation's finest political writers, including *The New Yorker*'s Richard Rovere and John Hersey. (Rovere, wry and fair-minded, wrote the *The New Yorker*'s regular "Letter from Washington," and Hersey, one of the most acclaimed political reporters of the twentieth century, had written a breathtaking account of the bombing of Hiroshima and its aftermath.) Schlesinger, Galbraith, Rovere, and Hersey all wrote speeches for Stevenson, speeches celebrated for their erudition and elegance. Eisenhower placed his faith in ad men; Stevenson placed his faith in writers.

At the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, Stevenson agreed to enter his name into nomination. He won on the third ballot. His acceptance speech is one of the best in the history of American political rhetoric. He offered himself as a bridge between the democracy of the New Deal and the democracy of a new America. "The workingman, the farmer, the thoughtful businessman, all know that they are better off than ever before, and they all know that the greatest danger to free enterprise in this country died with the Great Depression under the hammer blows of the Democratic Party," he told a crowd that stamped in the stands. The Democratic Party, Stevenson argued, had rescued the country from the Depression and ushered in an age of abundance. And yet a danger lurked. Something evil stalked the land. The political savage. Senator Joseph McCarthy, a brawny Republican from Wisconsin, had in 1950 begun a campaign against supposed Communist subversives in the United States, a campaign of nearly unrivaled demagoguery. He stoked fear. He fought phantoms. He incited panic. He persecuted the weak. He lied. And people believed him. That night in Chicago, Adlai E. Stevenson of Illinois presented himself, not to his party but to the nation, as a

political savior who could rescue Americans from the malice and vulgarity of modern American politics.

"I hope and pray that we Democrats, win or lose, can campaign not as a crusade to exterminate the opposing Party, as our opponents seem to prefer," Stevenson said, "but as a great opportunity to educate and elevate a people whose destiny is leadership, not alone of a rich and prosperous, contented country, as in the past, but of a world in ferment." Promising to "talk sense to the American people," Stevenson spoke with a forcefulness and a dedication to principle not often heard in American politics, before or after. Truman talked with something of a whine. Eisenhower stammered. Nixon raged. McCarthy seethed and sweated and spat. Stevenson spoke with the precision of a scholar and the power of a poet. "Better we lose the election than mislead the people," he said, "and better we lose than misgovern the people."[15] He ran against dishonesty. He ran against demagoguery itself.

IN THE LATE, CANDLELIT DECADES of the unruly eighteenth century, American political philosophers had thought a great deal about the dangers of demagoguery. "Men of factious tempers, of local prejudices, or of sinister designs may, by intrigue, by corruption, or by other means, first obtain the suffrages, and then betray the interests, of the people," James Madison warned in 1787.[16] Madison drafted a Constitution designed to thwart such men by the nature and very structure of government, its separation of powers, its checks and balances. But the framers hadn't anticipated the electrified, neon-glowing, vacuum-tubed twentieth century's methods and machines of mass advertising and political manipulation, methods and machines so powerful that they sparked a panic about something well beyond demagoguery and into mind control.

Adlai Stevenson worried about all of that. McCarthy troubled him, led him to fear for the republic. But he had another concern, too, one that had to do with the cost Democrats and Democratic policies had paid for Republicans' willingness to engage the services of advertising agencies. In 1952, after the Republican National Convention, Eisenhower's national campaign retained

one of the largest advertising agencies in the United States, Batten, Barton, Durstine & Osborn, better known as BBDO. (Straight-talking Harry S. Truman said BBDO really stood for "Bunko, Bull, Deceit, and Obfuscation.") BBDO's ad men sold Eisenhower like a laundry detergent. The most-watched television advertisement of 1952 was a Disney-produced animated short of little people marching in a parade, led by an elephant, singing a jingle written by Irving Berlin: "You like Ike, I like Ike, everybody likes Ike." Eisenhower became the first presidential candidate to appear in televised ads, including one called "The Man from Abilene": it borrowed its graphics from the television version of *Superman*.[17]

The Eisenhower campaign hired ad men; the Stevenson campaign denounced them. To run against demagoguery is to commit to a campaign of restraint, a campaign of decorum, a campaign of understatement. For Stevenson, running against dishonesty in American politics meant running a campaign almost entirely without the aid, or at least without the seeming aid, of Madison Avenue. Forty-two-year-old George Ball, a principled New Dealer and former law partner of Stevenson's, headed Volunteers for Stevenson. Some people "like Elvis Presley, and I like Marilyn Monroe," Ball said, in a much-reported speech, "but I doubt that is sufficient reason for electing either president." Ball dubbed the Eisenhower operation the Cornflakes Campaign.[18]

Behind the Stevenson campaign's criticism of the role of mass advertising in American politics lay another fear. "Brainwashing" entered the American lexicon in 1951 with the publication of *Brain-Washing in Red China: The Calculated Destruction of Men's Minds*, by the journalist Edward Hunter. Hunter promised to reveal "the terrifying methods that have put an entire nation under hypnotic control."[19] "Brainwashing" was Hunter's translation of the Chinese *hsi nao*, and he used it to describe Communist China's methods of Maoist indoctrination. (At the end of the Korean War, American psychologists would be charged with interviewing former prisoners of war to determine if they had been brainwashed, too, a story that became the plot of the 1959 novel *The Manchurian Candidate*.)[20] If McCarthy tapped into a fear that Communists were secretly controlling Americans' minds, animus against mass advertising tapped into a growing fear that someone else was

tampering with the American mind. Not Chairman Mao or the Communist Party or the Soviets but American ad agencies.

For these reasons and more, Stevenson balked at campaigning on television. He found the idea of appearing in television advertisements—advertising himself—undignified and insulting to the office of president. He refused. Eisenhower had no such qualms or, at least, he'd had those qualms assuaged by Rosser Reeves, of the Ted Bates advertising agency.

Reeves was the unquestioned top dog of Madison Avenue, later famous for the campaign he'd devise for M&M's ("Melts in your mouth, not in your hand"). "I think of a man in the voting booth who hesitates between two levers as if he were pausing between competing tubes of toothpaste in a drugstore," Reeves explained. "The brand that has made the highest penetration on his brain will win his choice."[21] Speeches were long and boring; candidates had to be willing to get their message across in under a minute. For the Eisenhower campaign, Reeves proposed to make a series of short television ads, called spots. "Is there a <u>new way of campaigning</u> that can guarantee victory for Eisenhower in November?" Reeves asked. "The answer is: 'Yes!' ... Most people do not know the power of spots. However, here are the cold facts. THE HUMBLE RADIO OR TV 'SPOT' CAN DELIVER MORE LISTENERS FOR LESS MONEY THAN ANY OTHER FORM OF ADVERTISING. Let us repeat that!! THE HUMBLE RADIO OR TV SPOT CAN DELIVER MORE LISTENERS FOR LESS MONEY THAN ANY OTHER FORM OF ADVERTISING."[22]

Reeves also pioneered targeted political advertising. To win in 1952, Republicans needed to flip the vote in forty-nine counties and twelve states they'd lost in the last election. Reeves made their spots for those counties. He titled his series of spots "Eisenhower Answers America." After George Gallup conducted polls to establish what Americans cared about the most, Reeves wrote scripts for Eisenhower, answers to questions raised by voters, about those issues. Eisenhower read the answers from cue cards, and then Reeves got ordinary Americans, off the streets of New York—tourists waiting in line outside Radio City Music Hall—to come inside and read the questions off the cue cards.

"General, the Democrats are telling me I never had it so good," says a young black man in a suit.

Answers Eisenhower: "Can that be true when America is billions in debt, when prices have doubled, when taxes break our backs and we are still fighting in Korea? It's tragic. And it's time for a change."[23]

Stevenson supporters found Eisenhower's spots embarrassing. Eisenhower was "a plodding five-star general uttering pedestrian language written by some journalistic hack with all the grace of a gun carriage being hauled across cobblestones," George Ball complained. Stevenson, Ball said, "was a man of culture and intellect seeking not only to educate the country but also to elevate its taste."[24] And that, alas, was the heart of the problem. The country didn't much want to be educated and elevated. It wanted slogans. Melts in your mouth, not in your hand! I like Ike! It's time for a change!

Meanwhile, Nixon went after Stevenson, viciously, which is the way Nixon always campaigned, not educating and elevating the country but misinforming and degrading it. He called Stevenson a "weakling, a hustler, and a small-caliber Truman." He dubbed him "Adlai the Appeaser." McCarthy attacked Stevenson as a Communist; Nixon merely slyly *hinted* that Stevenson was a Communist. (Stevenson called Nixonism "McCarthyism in a white collar.")[25] And Nixon used television even more effectively than Eisenhower, answering seemingly career-ruining charges of corruption in a televised speech that ended when an aw-shucks Nixon admitted that he had indeed taken a campaign gift: he'd accepted the gift of Checkers, a black-and-white spaniel, and "we're going to keep it." Ball later said that watching the Checkers speech was like watching a Geritol commercial.[26] But Geritol commercials sell a lot of Geritol.

Stevenson all but boycotted television advertising, agreeing only to have his speeches televised—very long speeches, which few stations were willing to broadcast and few people bothered to watch no matter how well-written they were. In 1952, Republicans spent $1.5 million on television advertising to the Democrats' puny $77,000.[27] This seemed, somehow, unfair. Ball asked the Federal Communications Commission to look into the legality of the Republican television spots, suspecting them of violating provisions of the 1934 Communications Act (requiring equal time

us predict this election from the basis of the early returns as they come in. UNIVAC is going to try to predict the winner for us just as early as we can possibly get the returns in. ... This is not a joke or a trick. It's an experiment, and we think it's going to work. We don't know, we hope it will work ..."

It didn't work. Or at least it didn't work well. Cronkite kept throwing to Collingwood—"And now to find out perhaps what this all means, at least in the electronic age, let's turn to that electronic miracle, the electronic brain, UNIVAC, with a report from Charles Collingwood"—but Collingwood kept having to explain that no prediction had yet come in.

"UNIVAC, our fabulous mathematical brain, is down in Philadelphia mulling over the returns that we've sent him so far," Collingwood said, filling time. "He's sitting there in his corner, humming away. A few minutes ago I asked him what his prediction was, and he sent me back a very caustic answer, for a machine. He said that if we continue to be so late in sending him the results, it's going to take him a few minutes to find out just what the prediction is going to be. So he's not ready yet with his prediction but we're going to go to him in just a little while."

Not long after midnight, CBS turned to the man from Remington Rand, in Philadelphia with the actual UNIVAC, for an explanation. He claimed that UNIVAC had predicted an Eisenhower landslide early in the evening, but he'd been too nervous about it to pass the projection along to Collingwood. "When UNIVAC made its first prediction with only three million votes in, it gave five states for Stevenson, 43 for Eisenhower, 93 electoral votes for Stevenson, 438 for Eisenhower," he said. "We just plain didn't believe it." In the end, Eisenhower won 442 Electoral College votes to Stevenson's 89 and 55.2% of the popular vote to Stevenson's 44.3%. A rout. UNIVAC had been right.

Ed Greenfield was mesmerized. Two new machines, the television and the computer, were transforming American politics. The influence of the first was much easier to see than the influence of the second. But the way Greenfield figured it, Republicans had made better use of television in 1952, by way of advertising, which meant that Democrats ought to figure out how to make better use

of the computer, and fast, because what could be more valuable to a campaign than a computer that could predict the vote?

Eyeing the election of 1956, Greenfield began collecting men, the very best.[32] Not Madison Avenue men but scientists. He knew everyone. Very convivial. Very astute. The man was a magnet. Ed Greenfield, University of Chicago, Yale. He cast his net, fishing for men, the best and the brightest scientists of the mind and minders of machines, gigantic brains. He went to California, where he found Eugene Burdick in the ocean, surfing.

CHAPTER 2

Impossible Man

$f + h = p$
(fear plus hate equals power)

Eugene Burdick as the "Ale man," c. 1961.

EVERYONE ASSUMED THAT EUGENE BURDICK WAS A SPY, which meant, of course, that he wasn't. A man can't drink whiskey with Marlon Brando and eat dinner with Ingrid Bergman and teach political theory to PhD students and advise American presidents and write best-selling novels that get made into big-budget Hollywood films and also steal secrets, undercover, incognito, unknown, as if he were nobody.

Or maybe he could. If anyone could pull it off, it would've been Burdick. He was an impossible man, exactly the sort of man he was forever inventing in his fiction, Cold War thrillers starring dashing men of mystery, rugged, daring, and brilliant, who defended Americans against the age of automation. Once, when Burdick sent a short story to The New Yorker—"Happy Man in Berlin"—his editor wrote back, "I understand that Pico is a skillful man, but sometimes he seems almost too miraculous."[1] Burdick, too.

Eugene Burdick walked with the rubbery gait of a surfer and wore owl's-eye glasses and smoked a pipe and liked to be photographed sitting at his typewriter, an old Royal, well-used and well-oiled. He had two selves and two costumes, both disguises: he wore scuba gear; he wore tweed suits. He was James Bond; he was Ernest Hemingway. He didn't write like Hemingway, but he looked like him, with the same hair, straight and thin and flat, and the same head, too: as boxy as a biscuit tin. Wallace Stegner once said Burdick was "as energetic as a bulldozer and as persistent as an Egyptian fly."[2]

He'd been born in Sheldon, Iowa, a railroad town, in 1918, at the end of the century of the railroad, the great machine of the nineteenth century, whose coal-black, smoke-puffing locomotives chugged from town to town on tracks that reached across the continent like the legs of a giant arachnid. He was named after Indiana-born Eugene V. Debs, the onetime railroad worker, founder of the American Railway Union, and self-proclaimed socialist who, in 1920, when Burdick was not yet two, ran for president for the fifth and final time, from prison in Atlanta, as Convict No. 9653, with the campaign slogan "From the Jail House to the White House." It earned him nearly a million votes.[3]

Democracy is a mystery. In the 1950s, Eugene Burdick wanted to solve that mystery. He wanted to know whether or not it could be

solved by the great machine of the twentieth century, the computer, whose whirring, blinking parts were housed in gray boxes and stored in gleaming, temperature-controlled rooms, as if they were streamlined steel coffins, standing on end, in a hospital morgue. He decided to immerse himself in a new field that became known as behavioral science, which was why, in the late summer of 1954, he drove his Jaguar up the winding, redwood-lined roads of Palo Alto, California, to a paradise sometimes called Lotus Land, a Buddhist-style, monastic retreat of cedar and glass perched on top of a hill overlooking San Francisco Bay: the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences.[4] It was exactly the sort of place where Ed Greenfield would turn up, looking for men to staff a new department of Edward L. Greenfield & Co., a Social Science Division, with which he hoped to help get a Democrat elected president in 1956, by a method other than plastering the candidate's face on boxes of cornflakes or hawking him like canned soup in one-minute television spots, as if the Oval Office were a kitchen pantry.

EUGENE BURDICK was a beach boy. After Iowa, he'd grown up in Los Angeles. His father died when he was four. His mother went to work in a waffle shop; she sent the children out to live with neighbors, little vagabonds, wandering the beaches and dunes and boardwalks. Burdick started smoking cigars and sleeping with one of his teachers when he was fourteen, a story he told in his first, partly autobiographical novel, *The Ninth Wave*.[5] (The novel's lead character counts the women he's slept with the way other people count sheep, ticking off "each pinkening breast, each exhalation of breath, the twist of a thigh, the feel of hair and flesh and moisture.")[6] He had no money for college and worked at a life insurance company to pay for a year at Santa Barbara State College before going to Stanford, where he supported himself by waiting tables while studying psychology, from Freud to Fromm.

He was interested in everything. "He read anthropology, sociology, psychology, mathematics, philosophic, ethics, history, and logic," he wrote in *The Ninth Wave*. "He stole books from the library, bought used books in Palo Alto, borrowed books and bought still more books. Some books he glanced at, threw under

Harold Lasswell had gone to the University of Chicago when he was only sixteen, completed a PhD in political science, and published his dissertation, *Propaganda Technique in the World War*, in 1927, when he was twenty-five. Then he'd gone to Berlin to be psychoanalyzed by a disciple of Freud's, before accepting a position teaching at the University of Chicago and publishing his two seminal works. If Burdick was a bulldozer, Lasswell was a virus. He didn't lecture people; he infected them. He flared his nostrils and sniffed. He held forth like an oracle, as if he were Aristotle. "His monologues are symposiums," said one student. "Lasswell was not a teacher but a tornado."[18] People treated him like a god. He flirted with boys. He humiliated girls. "If you asked Harold a question, he would say, 'We don't know enough about that,' and you knew he meant the entire body of knowledge of the universe, because if anyone knew it, he knew it," said Naomi Spatz, the woman for whom Ed Greenfield would one day leave his wife. Once, when Spatz had Lasswell over to brunch at her apartment, her cat started rubbing against him. "The cat likes you," Spatz said. Answered Lasswell, nostrils flaring, "He knows where the power is."[19]

Lasswell enjoyed such influence because his work purported to explain "*who* says *what* to *whom* in *which channel* and with *what effect*."[20] He claimed to know how ideas get into people's heads—and how to get them out. During the Second World War, he founded a war communications research project at the Library of Congress and recommended that the United States preserve democracy from authoritarianism by way of systematic, government-run mass manipulation.[21] For a long time, this stuff was known either as propaganda or as psychological warfare (the Nazi version was known as *Weltanschauungskrieg*, or worldview warfare), but after a while, people who worried about how that sounded started calling it the study of "mass communication."[22] With the war over, this sort of work also required a new justification. Who says what to whom with what effect? That's the question that had drawn Ed Greenfield into Lasswell's seminar room at Yale in 1950. In peacetime, there seemed no better place to study mass communication, or psychological warfare, than democratic campaigns and elections, because campaigns produce