

'Amusing Ourselves to Death'... through the Elections

William Howard Taft was "multi-chinned" and weighted about three-hundred pounds.

In 1908 he was elected as the 27th president of the United States. But according to scholar Neil Postman, he would never even make a presidential ticket today due to the nature of television.



In his classic [*Amusing Ourselves to Death*](#) Postman writes:

"The shape of a man's body is largely irrelevant to the shape of his ideas when he is addressing a public in writing or on the radio or, for that matter, in smoke signals. But it is quite relevant on television. The grossness of a three-hundred-pound image, even a talking one, would easily overwhelm any logical or spiritual subtleties conveyed by speech."

Postman wrote these words in 1985, when the president was a former Hollywood actor. But they are just as true today. Not too long ago, New Jersey governor Chris Christie was considered one of leading contenders for the Republican presidential ticket. But his electability was contingent upon losing weight, [which he eventually did](#) (about a hundred pounds' worth) through Lap-Band surgery.

As Postman laments, the medium of television has served to make all public discourse—including presidential elections—into "forms of entertainment" and "adjuncts of show business." For on television, image inevitably dominates over words:

“The emergence of the image-manager in the political arena and the concomitant decline of the speech writer attest to the fact that television demands a different kind of content from other media. You cannot do political philosophy on television. Its form works against the content.”

Thus, in the 2016 presidential race, we are treated to political speeches that are written at a [fourth-grade level](#), debates that mimic middle-school squabbling, and candidates who make allusions to the size of their junk.

And the news media is perfectly happy, because they’re also in the entertainment business, and the presidential race thus far is entertaining.

And most of the population is happy. Never mind that we are now living in a country where our leader is elected primarily on the basis of image. Never mind what that means for the future viability of America. The key for most is that the process is “fun to watch.”

