

[<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,908051-1,00.html>]

TIME

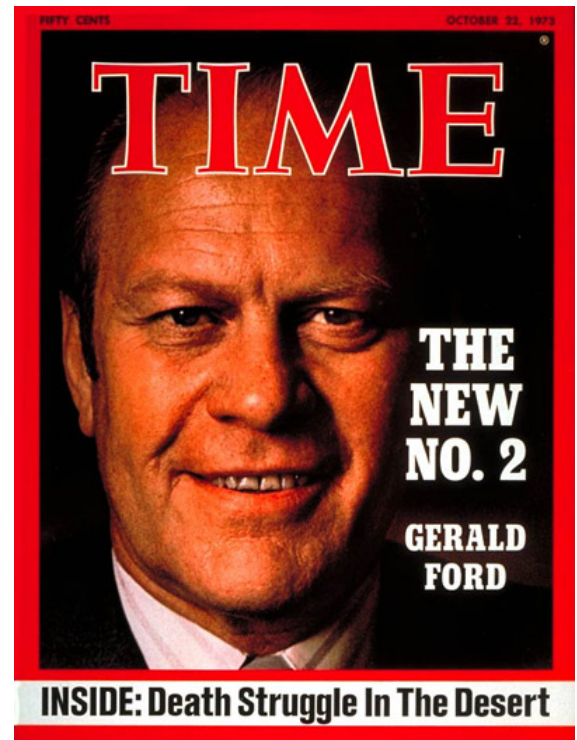
October 22, 1973

Svengali in Arizona

A shy, gap-toothed young woman arrives at the simple home of a doctor in Phoenix, Ariz. She says she is embarrassed about her teeth and bashful with men. Then, with sudden force and apparent malice, the doctor commands her to practice spurting water through her teeth until she is sure she can hit the young man who often meets her at the office watercooler. Soon after, the woman carries out her mission. The next day, the young man lies in wait for her with a water pistol. Eventually they marry. Her problem seems to have vanished magically.

This and many other oddly simple cures are credited to the foxy grandpa of American hypnotism, Milton H. Erickson. At 71, Erickson stands in the forefront of a revival of hypnotherapy—in eclipse since Freud rejected it as too superficial and impermanent. "Erickson is the most innovative practitioner of hypnosis since Mesmer," says Dr. Thomas Hackett, chief of the psychiatric consultation service at Massachusetts General Hospital. Although Erickson sometimes uses deep hypnotic trances to work his will on his psychiatric patients, he often limits himself to straightforward commands. He does not, however, explain the exact psychological mechanism behind his cures.

Erickson's successes have been described in a new and hagiographic book, *Uncommon Therapy: the Psychiatric Techniques of Milton H. Erickson, M.D.* (Norton; \$8.95), written by Jay Haley, his longtime colleague and admirer. Haley shows how, out of hypnosis, Erickson has drawn a whole bag of ploys that persuade the patient to change himself rapidly. For example, a 250-lb. woman says she is "a plain, fat slob." Erickson takes over: "You are not a plain, fat, disgusting slob. You are the fattest, homeliest, most disgustingly horrible bucket of lard I have ever seen, and it is appalling to have to look at you." He



continues insulting her—agreeing with her self-image and exaggerating it. The woman reduces to 140 lbs., finds work as a fashion artist and becomes engaged.

As a hypnotist, Erickson often reinforces his control over his subject by challenging him to wake up. For example, he might say: "I want you to try to open your eyes and find that you cannot." Similarly, performing therapy without hypnosis, Erickson will say: "I want you to go back and feel as badly as you did when you first came in with the problem, because I want you to see if there is anything from that time that you wish to recover and salvage." Thus, his directive to the patient to relapse actually prevents a relapse.

True Grit. Los Angeles Psychiatrist William Kroger credits Erickson with being one of the first to develop behavioral therapy, which tries to alter behavior patterns without dealing with the unconscious mind. But in addition to his hypnotic techniques, Erickson seems to affect patients through sheer force of personality. He is a man of true grit, who pulled himself through two attacks of polio (after the second, he hiked on canes in Arizona's Kofa Mountains).

He obviously had no trouble dominating the patients in the cases reported by Haley. Says one fellow therapist disapprovingly: "I had an ex-patient of his come to me; he had reduced her ego to nothing. He's a strong, powerful, charismatic man. The older he's got, the more authoritarian he's become." Psychiatrist Ira Glick of the school of medicine at the University of California in San Francisco says, moreover, that Erickson does not have a high standing among many therapists because "he has only described a few cases, and he never, never describes any failures."

Even though Erickson's practices and claims are sometimes called into question, many doctors give him credit for sticking with hypnosis at a time when it was considered merely a showman's trick. "Some types of disorders need a certain kind of therapist. Hypnosis is fine for those it helps," says Psychiatrist Jack Ewalt of the Harvard Medical School. In today's more open-minded approach to therapy, hypnosis—and its sister principle of strong suggestion—is again finding a place.