

The Selling of a Candidate: Political Advertising at its Worst and Best

Ninfa Anita Sepulveda

Introduction

Consider the following statement: "With a few seconds of carefully designed advertising a candidate can make oneself a hero or leave one's opponent's campaign in tatters. In these ads, the candidates may be firing at each other, but they're aiming at you" (Bill Curtis, *A&E Investigative Reports: The Living Room Campaign*).

During the 1964 presidential campaign, a TV ad called the "daisy commercial" ran only once, yet created such a controversy that it is still discussed today. The commercial began in this way; the opening scene shows a young five or six year old girl pulling daisy petals and counting. The picture freezes and a loud voice begins 9,8,7,6,5,4,3,2,1 BOOM! An enormous atomic blast is shown. Next, in the voice of President Lyndon Johnson, we hear, "These are the stakes, to make a world in which all of God's children can live, or to go into the darkness. We must either love each other or we must die." The final frame appears, showing a black screen with white letters reading: 'Vote for President Johnson on November 3' (from the book *Media and Politics*).

Within minutes of its showing, Barry Goldwater and his supporters howled "foull!" and called it "the dirtiest ad ever done." (Goldwater's name was never mentioned, yet he, similar to others interpreted the commercial as an attack on his previous statement about use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam.) The creator of the ad, Tony Schwartz described his technique as using the previous knowledge of the people to react to the ad. From previous research, he knew that the public was wary of Goldwater statements advising using nuclear weapons to defoliate trees in Vietnam, that he was perceived as a hawk, and generally trigger happy (*Media in Politics*). Within hours of the showing and after a flood of protests to the White House, President Johnson ordered the ad stopped, even though, he did not see the ad until later.

I saw the ad years later and even then I thought it was very powerful and effective. I was very impressed with Tony Schwartz who developed a more psychological approach to advertising. His sophisticated advertising techniques contrasted sharply to the early efforts of Dwight D. Eisenhower and Adlai Stevenson in the 1950s (*Media in Politics*). In this way, we can begin to examine how political campaigns have used different propaganda techniques throughout American history.

Dwight D. Eisenhower, for example, began a series of ads titled "Eisenhower Answers America." Ordinary people are shown looking up to Ike and asking questions such as, "Is America prepared for war?" Adlai Stevenson also used the "plain folks" approach showing a man coming home with groceries, working in his den, etc. He was awkward and unimpressive (*The Living Room Campaign*).

Beginning with amateurish ads of "Eisenhower Answers Americans" and extending to the negative "Release of Willie Horton," this teaching unit will ask

students to be able to do a number of tasks: a) describe the basic political advertising (propaganda) techniques and apply them, b) identify political techniques in selected commercials, c) compare and contrast how the TV ads of 1950-present reflect social, economic, or political climates of the time period, d) analyze how the selling of a candidate is depicted in films such as "The Candidate," "Primary Colors," or "Power," and e) explain how propaganda could be good or bad.

SPECIFIC TAAS SOCIAL STUDIES SKILLS OBJECTIVES INCLUDE:

- A. Compare and contrast issues and personalities.
- B. Take a pro or con position and defend it.
- C. Research and analyze assigned topics

OBJECTIVE I: IDENTIFY POPULAR CURRENT POLITICAL PROPAGANDA TECHNIQUES AND APPLY THEM.

In this section, I plan to define various propaganda techniques and provide activities in which students will write or plan ads using the techniques. The sources for this information are several videos; *The Classics of Political Television Advertising* (see bibliography for complete sources), the A&E video documentary series *The Living Room Campaign*, Kathleen Hall Jamieson's book *Packaging the Presidency: a History and Criticism of Presidential Campaign Advertising*, and "Election Kit" provided by Prentice Hall INC. as part of the MacGruder *American Government* textbook resource kit.

ACTIVITY 1 A:

Pass out Handout A (found below, in the appendix) and have the students complete it based on the following information. (Teacher may wish to use a lecture or chalkboard notes to provide the following information to the students.)

CURRENT PROPAGANDA TECHNIQUES

Try to illustrate and explain these techniques to your students. Try to bring up ads or commercials that they will be familiar with.

BANDWAGON promotes the idea that "everyone is voting for this candidate, so why aren't you. In the fifties as ad jingle ended with "I Like Ike! Everybody Likes Ike" (scene: people forming a parade). In 1984, the Reagan "Morning in America" campaign showed ordinary Americans in mostly rural areas and suburbs waking up to go to work, apparently content with the leadership of President Reagan. The scenes depicted various ethnic groups and the implication was that all Americans are happy with Reagan, who has restored American leadership in the White House, so join everyone in reelecting him (refer to *The Classics of Political Advertising*).

TESTIMONIAL involves having a famous or ordinary person describe why they support you. Eisenhower media advisors used the neighbor to the White House ad (*Living Room Campaign*), Kennedy used Eleanor Roosevelt, and Barry Goldwater used Ronald Reagan (*The Classics of Political Advertisements*).

SCARE TACTICS: Fear of nuclear war was the prevalent theme of the 1964 LBJ ads, as well as the fear of having Spiro Agnew one heartbeat away from the presidency in 1968. Most of these ads were created by Tony Schwartz who successfully used preliminary research to find out what the public feared. (*Media in Politics*). In 1988, fear of crime led to the creation of the Willie Horton ads by the George Bush ad consultants (see *The Living Room Campaign*).

PLAIN FOLKS involves either showing the candidate with his or her family as a symbol of family values, or the candidate mingling with ordinary people giving him their opinion. Today the family ad is almost obligatory.

TRANSFER involves using symbols like the flag, or groups such as veterans, boy scouts and unions, or religious or ethnic gatherings, or music to establish a mood or theme. For example, President Reagan's ad "God Bless the USA," with music by Lee Greenwood (*The Living Room Campaign*).

HUMOR usually involves making fun of the opponent. In "The Best Political Advertisements" there is an ad for a politician who does not reside in his district; it depicts a man with bloodhounds looking for Dee Huddleson who has been missing important votes in Congress and has been spending time in his beach home in Puerto Rico, or his condo in Los Angeles. Instead, Huddleson has been out earning thousands of dollars making public speeches. (see *Classics of Political Advertising*).

SELF-PROMOTIONAL advertising involves candidate's visions and goals if elected. Examples of terms used are honest, integrity, stronger America, stronger defense etc. (*Classics of Political Advertising*). This technique is sometimes called *GLITTERING GENERALITIES* because it uses terms that sound good, but are not specific.

CARDSTACKING: Listing all the great things about a candidate, but none of the weaknesses.

ACTIVITY 1 B:

Select an up-coming election and prepare an ad campaign for a candidate chosen by the student. The students will write a speech for a candidate using at least five techniques. They will read the speech and have the class identify the techniques.

OBJECTIVE II: IDENTIFY POLITICAL TECHNIQUES IN SELECTED ADVERTISEMENTS

ACTIVITY 2 A:

Using the following videos *Media and the Press*, *The Classics of Political*

Advertisements, The Public Mind: Image and Reality in America (a Bill Moyers documentary), and the most effective video, *A&E Investigative Reports: The Living Room Campaign*, students will study and identify various political techniques.

ACTIVITY 2 B:

Show the video *The Living Room Campaign* and pause the tape after each video you have chosen to show and ask the students to identify them by techniques. An option is to ask students to develop a set of flash cards, each card naming a technique which students can hold up to identify a particular technique.

OBJECTIVE III: COMPARE AND CONTRAST COMMERCIALS FROM THE 1950 TO THE 1990s

ACTIVITY 3 A:

Divide students into groups of 5-6 or in pairs to research a presidential campaign between 1950 and 1996. They should analyze the ads, issues, and how they reflect the decade. Indicate if the ads for the two major candidates reflect personal information, domestic or international issues. Are the ads positive or negative? Based in the research, the groups will complete a collage, chart, or written analysis of their assigned political campaign.

Teacher Information

The early Eisenhower and Stevenson commercials were amateurish, but at this time TV was a new medium and many programs in this medium were amateurish. The issues such as inflation, the cold war, and our military strength were addressed, but the politicians were uncomfortable and awkward (*Media In Politics*). With the 1960 election, John F. Kennedy emerged as a glamorous media star in the political campaign of that year. The media propaganda techniques had become more sophisticated and expensive. Kennedy was the first candidate to be shown in an ad interacting with the people (*Living Room Campaign*). Kennedy ads relied on newsreel footage, for example, his speech effectively facing the Catholic issue in Houston. Another example was footage showing Republicans criticizing Nixon – Eisenhower asking reporters for a week to try to think of any important advice given by vice president Nixon, this comment was especially damaging because Nixon bragged about his superior experience and influence as vice president (*Classics of Political Advertising*).

The 1964, Lyndon Johnson campaign was characterized by scare tactics. The daisy commercial, and the red phone ringing were all written to ask the public “Who do you want in the White House making the decisions concerning the use of atomic power Lyndon Johnson or trigger happy Barry Goldwater?”

The 1970s and early 1980s had many self-promotional ads and feel-good advertising. A classic example of this was Carter and family at the White House (offering a silent contrast to Edward Kennedy who was divorced, known as a womanizer, and still linked to the Chappaquiddick) and Ronald Reagan’s “God Bless the USA” with Lee Greenwood singing (*Classics of Political Advertising*).

The 1988 election was the year of distortions and the Willie Horton ad. It was considered a very negative campaign because of the distortions by the Bush campaign, which his Democratic opponent, Michael Dukakis, failed to address promptly or effectively. Therefore, the election of 1992 pitting Bush against Bill Clinton became the election of the news-watch. The media tried to be more responsible by checking for accuracy and distortions in the ads. The Clinton campaign strategy was to react and correct every distortion within 24 to 48 hours (Jamieson, xxi-xxiv).

The best sources for this activity is Katherine Jamieson's book, *Packaging the Presidency*, and the video *The Living Room Campaign* which matches the ads to the techniques used and issues. Additionally, Jamieson's other book, *Dirty Politics: Deception, Distraction and Democracy*, Darrell West's *Air Wars: Television, Advertising In Election Campaigns*, and Montague Kern, *30 Seconds Politics: Political Advertising in the Presidential Campaigns* are also helpful.

ACTIVITY 3 B:

The students will compare and contrast the 1988 and 1992 elections which Ms. Jamieson describes as two of the most distorted in history, as a result of George Bush's campaign tactics and the ineffectiveness of Michael Dukakis to correct or counter each distortion. The most damaging strike against Dukakis was the Willie Horton furlough release ad, which implied Dukakis was personally responsible for the early release of over 200 felons who committed rapes and other felonies while on parole. As Jamieson explains, Dukakis waited too long to correct or counter attack.

In 1992, the Clinton campaign strategy group planned to counter, within 24 hours, any negative, distorted ad or accusations. Because of the criticism of the media for the distorted ad campaigning, most TV news crews, newspaper, and radio spots began offering ad analyses which pointed out lies, distortions and a general report on the accuracy of the ads (Jamieson, xxi-xxvi).

ACTIVITY 3 C:

The students will select one political ad to analyze. They will be instructed to identify the techniques employed in the ad, and indicate if the ad is trying to appeal to a particular group. (Take, for instance, this ad: "*Muchas Gracias Nuestro Amigo Senador Tower*"). Do the ads run during the Vietnam era reflect the domestic conflicts at home, such as the incidents at Kent State? Do they promote fear of being a crime victim as in the Willie Horton ads? Do they reflect the Cold War competition of the major powers, the United States and the Soviet Union?

Assign an ad from either *The Living Room Campaign* or *The Best Political Commercials*, and give them an **Ad Analysis Handout 1** (found below, at the end of this unit).

ACTIVITY 3 D:

Have the students brain-storm issues today that would be important to mention in a political campaign (such as in the 2000 presidential election). Put the list on the

chalkboard and then prioritize list according to importance. Have students select a topic from this list and design a bumper sticker for a current or future candidate. The bumper sticker should reflect a propaganda technique and it should emphasize the topic selected.

ACTIVITY 3 E:

Now is time to focus on the *accuracy* of political ads. Have students research the newspapers in the months prior to the 1992 and 1998 presidential elections and find news watch articles which were used by the press to report on the accuracy of the political advertisements. Make copies of some of the articles and report to the class on the issue and accuracy of a particular political advertisement.

OBJECTIVE IV: ANALYSIS OF CAMPAIGNS IN FILM

Analyze how the selling of a candidate (that is, his or her campaign) is depicted in films. Some examples of films focusing on political campaigns are *The Candidate*, and *Primary Colors*.

ACTIVITY 4 A:

Students will be given a handout with questions to answer as they watch a film or excerpts from a film.

The movie *The Candidate* may be the best choice because it shows a young attractive political activist, played by Robert Redford, who enters a Senatorial campaign simply to raise issues and public consciousness about the environment, welfare, health care, etc. Winning is not so much a goal of the campaign as an opportunity to raise important issues and force the incumbent to address these issues. With the media, he is awkward and his ads ineffective.

The slick media campaign strategists soon recognize the potential of the candidate to possibly succeed, and the result is a major turning point in the film, after which the candidate begins to change. These changes, he is told, are necessary for him to win. They include a greater focus on his family, the need to reconcile with his father (a former successful politician), a new wardrobe, and the slow changing of (or compromising on) positions which he had strongly supported before. The most fascinating aspect is the change from a sincere, unsophisticated activist to a slick campaigner ready with the short sound bites and politically correct speeches. Lost during the transformation was the passion and sincerity he had displayed earlier on important issues.

The ending of the film is great for class discussion. He wins the election, but does he really win? His last comment is: "What do we do now?"

ACTIVITY 4 B:

Campaign Posters: students will design a campaign poster for the movie *The Candidate* (an alternate option would be to have them create a poster for a current local or presidential candidate).

ACTIVITY 4 C:

Conduct a mock election on the movie candidate. Students may write speeches for or against the candidate portrayed in the film and read them in class. Secret ballots will be cast and the results announced. Ballots would ask: *Would you vote for this candidate for United States Senator from your State? Yes_____ No_____.*

ACTIVITY 4 D

Movie Discussion: As a class, students will identify as many of the advertising techniques used by the candidate in the movie.

ACTIVITY 4 E:

The Clinton factor: In one scene of the film, an attractive young woman is seen leaving a hotel room and the candidate leaving the room soon afterward. Ask the students if this scene detracted from their opinion of the candidate, and did it affect their vote in the mock election in any way?

OBJECTIVE V: EXPLAINING HOW PROPAGANDA CAN BE GOOD OR BAD

ACTIVITY 5:

Have students in groups or as a class complete Handout 4, titled *Propaganda: Good or Bad?* This activity asks students to give examples of good and bad propaganda, and discuss its effect on our lives. Questions included in the handout encourage the student to (A) identify terms, (B) identify techniques, (C) analyze the effects of propaganda.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ansolabehue, Stephen. *Going Negative: How Attacks Shrink and Polarize*. New York, Free Press, 1996.

This book offers a good analysis of negativism in the political realm.

Baker, Edwin, *Advertising and the Democratic Process*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1994.

This book covers all types of advertising.

Jamieson, Katherine. *Dirty Politics: Deception, Distortion, and Democracy*. Oxford University Press, New York, 1997.

This book is very good about explaining the tactics, especially those of negative advertising.

Jamieson, Katherine. *Packaging the Presidency*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1984.

This is the best source for this unit. It provides a fascinating overview of the issues, ads, and effects of the presidential campaigns by decade. It provides insight into the candidates and campaigns.

Kamber, Victor. *Poison Politics are Negative, Campaigns Destroying America*.

New York, Insight Books, Plenum Press, 1977.

The focus of this book is negative campaigning.

Kern, Montague. *30 Second Politics: Political Advertising*

New York, Praeger, 1989.

A good book on political advertising, especially the section on television and politics.

Mc Ginniss, Joe. *The Selling of the President*. New York, Penguin Books, 1988 reprint. (orig. published by Simon and Schuster in 1969 titled the Selling of the President 1968).

The book is an interesting study of how men such as Roger Ailes repackaged Nixon in the 1968 campaign. These advisors adopted the policy that issues bore voters and that image is what is most important.

Miller, Jerry L. *Dynamics of Political Advertisements, New Coverage, And Candidate Gender*. Ann Arbor, Michigan, University of Michigan, 1997, 1998.

I am including this source because it offers insight into the 1990 and 1994 gubernatorial campaigns in Texas and California focusing on advertising techniques. The campaign of 1994 in Texas involved George W. Bush, currently mentioned as a presidential candidate.

Rosenstiel, Tom. *Strange Bedfellows: How Television and the Presidential Candidates Changed American Politics*. New York, Hyperion, 1993.

Rosenstiel followed ABC coverage of the 1992 presidential campaign and describes how the use of shows and town meetings shaped new untraditional approaches to presidential campaigning.

Spero, Robert. *The Duping of the American Voter: Dishonesty and Deception in the Presidential Television Advertising*. New York, Lippincott & Crowell, 1980.
It provides insight into deception in television advertising.

U.S. Congressional Records.

Campaign Advertising: Hearing Before a Subcommittee on Telecommunications and Finance, of the Committee on Energy and Commerce, House of Representatives, June 13, 1991. Government Printing Office, 1992, Shipping list no. 92-107-P.

Campaign Advertising and Disclosures Act of 1993
Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and transportation on S.329.
Washington D.C., Government Printing Office, December 9, 1993, Shipping List No. 93-0700-P.

West, Darrell M. *Air Wars: Television Advertising in Election Campaigns, 1952-90*. Washington D. C., Congressional Quarterly, 1993.
A very good source for information on specific presidential campaigns

OTHER WORKS CONSULTED

Films:

Media in Politics, Films for the Humanities Inc.

Describes Tony Schwartz's psychological approaches or techniques of political advertising. This film is very good for the teacher and/or students to use to understand campaign strategy and techniques in TV ads.

The Candidate, starring Robert Redford

The Movie describes the packaging and selling of a candidate for the U.S. Senate. It focuses on the question of whether to emphasize issues or image and image wins out. This is a good film for students to watch and analyze.

The Classics of Political Television Advertisements, Focus Media Incorporated,

1986.

Includes 90 minutes of some of the best political ads. Narrated by Eugene McCarthy the ads are labeled according to political techniques and focuses on the 1964 election campaign of LBJ and Barry Goldwater.

The Living Room Campaign, video documentary by A & E.

Includes the early Eisenhower and Stevenson commercials, Kennedy, before the Houston ministers, Willie Horton etc. It provides an excellent focus on political advertising by decades..

The Public Image, narrated by Bill Moyers.

This is a series with various segments on political advertising.

RECOMMENDED READING FOR STUDENTS:

Jamieson, Kathleen. *Packaging the Presidency*. (see details above)

McGinnis, Joe. *The Selling of the President*. (see above)

(Appendix – Handouts)

MOVIE REVIEW: THE CANDIDATE (Handout 3)

1. The candidate is running for the office of _____.

2. List some issues that the young candidate is focusing on :
 - a. _____
 - b. _____
 - c. _____

3. His campaign takes a turn when he gains new political advisors.
 - a) How does he begin to compromise in the above areas/issues?

 - b) What are his new campaign techniques?

 - c) What is the role of family in his campaign?

 - d) How does he change overall as his popularity rises?

4. How do you interpret the last line of the film, when he faces his political advisors and says “What do I do now?”? What might he be feeling at this point?

5. Would you vote for this candidate? Why or why not?

CURRENT PROPOGANDA TECHNIQUES (Handout to go with activity 1A)

Briefly explain the following techniques (how they work) and provide a real or imaginary example of each one.

1. Bandwagon:

2. Testimonial:

3. Scare Tactics:

4. Plain Folks:

5. Transfer:

6. Humor:

7. Self Promotional:

8. Cardstacking: