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Packaging the Presidency

KATHLEEN
HALL
JAMIESON



A HISTORY AND CRITIQUE
OF PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN
ADVERTISING

PACKAGING THE PRESIDENCY

A History and Criticism
of Presidential
Campaign Advertising

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Preface

In the years since the original publication of *Packaging the Presidency*, the amount of money spent on political advertising, the impact with which it is credited, and the amount of news time devoted to discussing it have all increased. There is no reason to believe that the actual power of the ads themselves has been either muted or magnified as a result. Ads remain better able to reinforce than to create new attitudes. Indeed the much heralded Reagan ad campaign of 1984 was an exercise in the rhetoric of reinforcement.

What has changed is the relationship between advertising and news. That change is the subject of the book's new introduction. Altered as well has been the willingness of advertisers to air material that invites false inferences. The year 1988 saw a marked increase in such ads. In the absence of counterinformation from the opposing campaign, such inferences can and do lodge in the public. But that fact is not new; 1988 simply provided a more dramatic instance of the power of unanswered charges than we had had available previously in the history of televised presidential politics.

This edition of *Packaging the Presidency* brings the history of presidential advertising through the 1988 campaign.

Philadelphia
April 1991

K.H.J.

Preface to the First Edition

In 1968 Richard Nixon's media advisers allowed a relatively unknown journalist with little prior inside campaign experience to follow them around, see their reports, and write a best-selling and highly controversial book about their role in the presidential race. Both because the Nixon media people were the first to expose themselves so openly to reportorial scrutiny, and because the reporter himself was so unfamiliar with the inner workings of American campaigns, the book, *The Selling of the President*, tended to create the impression that what its author had found in the Nixon campaign was new to American politics or unique to the campaign he had examined. Neither was the case.

It was, of course, easy to elevate public concern about the power of political advertising. If there is one area of our lives in which we would like to believe that "what you see is what you get," it is in political elections, a fact reflected in a 1983 Harris Poll that reported that 84% of the American public favored a limit on the amount that could be spent on political ads, 82% condemned political ads as "too negative," and 79% worried that political ads were offering the electorate "packaged" candidates.

What an historical analysis reveals, however, is that from the country's first contested election, strategists have offered voters advertising that venerated their candidate and vilified his opponents. If one side did not offer the public a cultivated image of its candidate, the other side's caricatures would shape a voter's decision. So advertising provided the means of reaching a mass audience with the "truth" as the campaign saw it and with rebuttals of "untruths" by the other side. The advent of nonpartisan newspapers and then of broadcast news added a second reason for a means of communication controlled by the candidates. Only by use of advertising could candidates guarantee that their messages would be communicated in their most persuasive form to the electorate.

Underlying this book is the assumption that presidential campaigns can be viewed productively through the lens provided by their print, radio, and

television advertising. Were the book to focus only on ads that aired, it would overlook such intriguing spots as the one scripted but unproduced promising that Reagan would negotiate arms limitations with the Soviets within his first 100 days as president. The book would bypass as well an ad that in 1964 allied Goldwater with the Ku Klux Klan and one that in 1956 magnified fears about a Nixon presidency. Both were scrapped after reaching final production. Were the book to limit itself to television spot advertising, it would have to ignore the most influential ad of 1960, Kennedy's repeatedly aired speech to the Houston ministers, as well as Nixon's decisive Checkers speech. If the book focused solely on television, it could not explain how JFK used print and radio to rally black voters in 1960 or how in 1976 Ford capitalized on Carter's revelation that he had "lusted in his heart." Were it to limit itself to national ads, it could not explain how Carter mobilized the South in 1976.

The book starts from the assumption that, like the rest of us, media consultants are persons of good will and human failings and as such are neither as innocent as their mothers believe nor as invidious as their doubters aver.

Because media strategists, like the rest of us, suffer from selective recall, the book tests their claims against those of their colleagues, and against the campaign memos they wrote in the heat of battle.

Although political advertising is the act that dares not speak its name in presidential memoirs, this book also draws evidence from the candidates' own recollections of how they came to win and lose. Finally, the book shamelessly mines the campaign reports of such fine journalists as Jules Witcover, Martin Schram, Elizabeth Drew, Theodore White, and Robert MacNeil.

Out of this sifting and winnowing comes a chronicle of the schemes and strategies presidential candidates and their ad executives have employed to sway the hearts and ballots of sometimes unsuspecting voters. Focusing on each presidential election from 1952 through 1980, it explains how presidential advertising came to be and what it has become, how candidates have shaped it and been shaped by it, what it has contributed, and the ways in which it has contaminated the political process.

The book reveals how one presidential contender counterfeited an image . . . how another bankrolled his own advertising while contending publicly that he was funded by small donors . . . how corporate America almost closed one party out of Madison Avenue . . . how a candidate's confidence in his own skills as an adman and campaign manager may have spelled his downfall . . . how an ad team was pressured to violate professional ethics . . . how one candidate's ads succeeded in part because they were dull while another's failed because the candidate could not master televised communication.

Interlaced throughout is an examination of the role that campaign finance and the changing laws that govern it have played in presidential campaigns. The book also asks what the advertising revealed and concealed about the persons who would be president. Finally, by setting contemporary presidential advertising in an historical context, dating from the country's first contested election, the book shows how the ways in which the presidency is packaged have changed and how they have remained the same.

Hyattsville, Maryland
June 1984

K.H.J.

Acknowledgments

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The research assistants who sweated and swore in service of this book are Lynn Derbyshire, Maura Clancy, Dwight Sullivan, Rod Schwartz, Phil Wilbur, Lars Hafner, and Craig James. Seamus Neary carried the largest burden. For his unfailing competence and tenacity, omnipresent index cards, and good humor, I am especially grateful.

The staffs of the Truman, Eisenhower, JFK, LBJ, and Ford presidential libraries as well as of the Wisconsin and Minnesota Historical Societies and of the Denove collection at UCLA have provided service beyond the call of duty as have the reference librarians at the University of Maryland and at the Library of Congress. Anyone who writes about presidential advertising owes a special debt to Victoria Schuck who had the foresight to collect and preserve television's early presidential advertising.

Without the cooperation of the people listed on page xv I could not

have written this book. Thank you to them for sharing with me the story of their involvement in these campaigns.

I am grateful to Robert Cathcart, professor at Queens College and Sam Schoenbaum, professor at the University of Maryland for guiding *Packaging the Presidency* to Oxford and to Susan Rabiner, my editor, who championed the book, leashed its tangents, and excised its excesses. I would thank Rosemary Wellner, manuscript editor, at the length her sensitive and sensible editing deserves but were I to do so she would excise the praise on the grounds that this book already is too long.

For fourteen years the students in my classes in Television and Politics, Political Broadcasting, and Political Communication at the University of Maryland have contributed ideas and inspiration. I am indebted to them as I am to my colleagues Vicki Freimuth, Andy Wolvin, Charles Kauffman, Larry Lichty, Gene Weiss, and L. John Martin for their selflessness and sanity through it all.

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Patrick and Robert Jamieson provided bicycle service to the copying center, supervision of the computer's printer, retrieval and return of library books, and peanut butter and jelly or tuna salad sandwiches; they were as quiet and thoughtful during "work hours" as any mother could reasonably ask; they limited to once a day their posing of the questions "Are you done yet?" and "Will you put our names in the book?" So, to Pat and Robert, "Yes," "Yes," and thank you. Thank you too to my sister Rita Hall for typing and care-taking and to my parents, to whom this book is dedicated, for providing the kind of support over the years that makes it possible for daughters also to be authors.

Any contribution this book makes to our understanding of presidential advertising reflects the collective wisdom of my sources, students, colleagues, editors and friends. For its flaws I alone am to blame.

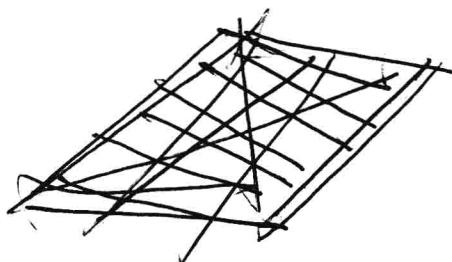
I wish to acknowledge gratefully the assistance of the following individuals in the preparation of this book. Unless otherwise indicated, the persons listed were interviewed or responded to written queries between January

1983 and February 1984. An * indicates that the statements attributed to them were made during presentations at a debriefing seminar at the University of Maryland. These seminars occurred in November 1972, 1976, and 1980 and in Fall 1983.

Roger Ailes	Carl McGowan
Maxwell Arnold	Louis Martin
Earl Ashe	Bill Moyers
Doug Bailey	*Roger Mudd
George Ball	Joseph Napolitan
Reggie Shuebel Ballard	Carroll Newton
Gabriel Bayz	William Novelli
William McCormick Blair, Jr.	Larry O'Brien
Ken Boehm	Vincent O'Brien
*Vincent Breglio	*Brad O'Leary
Sam Brightman	*Richard T. O'Reilly
Muriel Humphrey Brown	Don Oberdorfer
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Elliott Curson	Jeno Paulucci
Peter Dailey	Ray Price
*Terry Dolan	Gerald Rafshoon
Maxwell Dane	Estelle Ramey
Richard Denove	Leonard Reinsch
Robert Finch	Ted Rogers
Clayton Fritchey	*Greg Schneiders
Frank Gannon	Reenah Schwartz
Cyrus Gardner	Tony Schwartz
Leonard Garment	Donald Segretti
*Bob Goodman	Frank Shakespeare
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Beverly Ingram	Tim Smith
Don Irwin	Philip Stern
Michael Kaye	Bob Squier
Denison Kitchel	Bill Taylor
Gene Kummel	Roger Tubby
Morris Leibman	Jack Valenti
Charles Lichenstein	*Paul Wilson
Frank Mankiewicz	William Wilson
Edward McCabe	Willard Wirtz
Eugene McCarthy	Bob Woodward
Joe McGinniss	Lloyd Wright
George McGovern	

In addition to those listed earlier, many of whom continued to return my phone calls as I tried to make sense of the 1984 and 1988 campaigns, I would like to thank the following individuals: Charles Black, Anita Dunn, Ed Fouey, Geoffrey Garin, Craig James, Peggy Noonan, and James Wooten. I am grateful as well to the creative team at Frankenberry, Laughlin & Constable for providing access to specific ads and to Craig Shirley for information on The National Security Political Action Committee.

Introduction



Never before in a presidential campaign have televised ads sponsored by a major party candidate lied so blatantly as in the campaign of 1988.

Television ads of previous presidential contenders have, to be sure, seized upon votes cast by the opposition candidate and sundered them from context, resurrected political positions from the distant past and interpreted legislative moves as sweeping endorsements of unpopular positions. And, in eras gone by, the penny press, which didn't even feign political neutrality, published scurrilous assaults on would-be presidents—albeit to far more limited audiences than those reached by televised broadcasts. But in the era of mass visual communication, major party candidates, until 1988, assumed that outright lying in an ad would create an outcry from the press, a devastating counter-assault from the other side and a backlash from an incensed electorate.

That assumption no longer governs. Take, for example, this ad from the Bush campaign: The picture shows a pool of sludge and pollutants near a sign reading, "Danger/Radiation Hazard/No Swimming." The text indicts Michael Dukakis for failing to clean up Boston Harbor. But the sign shown in the ad has, in fact, nothing to do with the Massachusetts governor or his record. Instead, it warns swimmers to stay away from waters close to a nuclear repair space.

Here's another from the Bush image mill: A procession of convicts circles through a revolving gate and marches toward the nation's living rooms. The ad invites the inference—false—that 268 first-degree murderers were furloughed by Dukakis to rape and kidnap. In fact only one first-degree murderer, William Horton, escaped furlough in Massachusetts and committed a violent crime—although others have done so under other furlough programs, including the one that continues to be run by the federal government and the one run by California under the stewardship of Ronald Reagan.

There is only one precedent for such visual demagoguery in the history of electronic presidential campaigning. In 1968, during the Richard Nixon–Hubert Humphrey contest, the Republicans aired a wordless sequence of images as “Hot Time in the Old Town” played in the background. The images: Humphrey smiling; carnage in Vietnam. Humphrey smiling; Appalachian poverty. Humphrey smiling; bloodshed outside the Democratic convention. The inference invited was that Humphrey either approved of, or was responsible for, the unsettling images juxtaposed with his own jovial one.

But when the 1968 ad sparked protests, the Republicans quickly withdrew it. No such protest greeted either the Boston Harbor or furlough spots. An electorate numbed by the negative campaigns of 1986—and a press corps preoccupied more with ad strategy than content—simply took the visual demagoguery in stride.

Thus encouraged, the campaigns moved beyond false implications to direct distortion. The Dukakis campaign joined in with an ad claiming that Bush cast “the tie-breaking Senate vote to cut Social Security benefits,” when instead, Bush had voted to eliminate a cost-of-living adjustment in benefits, thus eroding purchasing power but not diminishing the actual level of the checks.

From the Republicans came a portrait of the Democratic candidate looking somewhat silly as he rides in a tank and thus attempts to dramatize his support for a strong defense. “Michael Dukakis has opposed virtually every defense system we have developed,” says the ad. Untrue. The Democrat favors the Trident II submarine and the D5 missile and the SSN21 Seawolf attack submarine among others. “He opposed the Stealth bomber. . . ,” says the ad. Another falsehood. Dukakis supported Stealth.

Has the electorate lost its sense of fair play? Certainly earlier candidates of the electronic era feared that they might forfeit the election if they offended voter’s notions of fairness and honesty. Even in 1964, which witnessed the most negative electronic campaign prior to 1988, caution pervaded the politicking. A 1964 Democratic ad highlighting the Ku Klux Klan’s endorsement of Barry Goldwater was shelved, unaired, when Goldwater rejected the Klan’s embrace. Evidence was produced to support claims. To document Goldwater’s position on Social Security, one ad showed five corroborating sources.

Ads dramatizing Goldwater’s stand repeated words actually uttered by the candidate. Goldwater had, in fact, said that he wouldn’t mind if the “Eastern seaboard were sawed off” and that the nuclear bomb was “merely another weapon.” The famous “daisy” commercial, which juxtaposed a child counting with a bomb exploding, certainly played on voters’ fears of a

Goldwater presidency, but the ad didn't even need to mention his name; the electorate's disposition to believe that the candidate was trigger-happy had been well-fanned by his Republican opponents as they vied for the GOP nomination in the spring.

Comforted by such examples from recent decades, I concluded the last edition of this book with the assurance that the public had little to fear from distortions in TV and other ads. I was wrong.

Just as the Battle of Agincourt demonstrated the vulnerability of French armor to the British longbow, the 1988 campaign showed the deceptive power of visual association and the weaknesses of the protection provided by debates, news broadcasts, counteracting advertising and press coverage.

Part of the fault lies with the Dukakis campaign which ignored the Bush attacks until they had so pervaded the attitudes of the electorate that Dukakis had plummeted from front-runner to also-ran. Part of the fault resides with reports more disposed to discussing advertising strategy than substance or accuracy. Part of the fault resides with a public more inclined to gather political information from inadvertent exposure to ads than from news accounts, attention to candidate's speeches or examination of position papers.

Only in the last half of October did Democratic ads attempt to clean up a campaign environment so awash in distortions that Bush's portrayal of Boston Harbor seemed clean by comparison. Without counter-advertising by Dukakis, or counterevidence in news or clarification in debates, the electorate had no reason to doubt the inference that was invited by the Bush furlough ad.

Only those who had closely followed campaign speeches and position papers, as well as broadcast and print news accounts, would know that the facts provide absolutely no support for the implication that a President Dukakis would usurp the rights of the states and furlough first-degree murderers to mug or murder Reagan Democrats. Among those little-known facts are that: only one first-degree murderer furloughed by the Massachusetts program, William Horton, had committed a violent crime; that the typical furlough jumper was an unarmed robber, not a murderer; that 72 of the escapees hadn't escaped at all—they had simply returned more than two hours late; that a comparable federal program continues and furloughed no less than 14,000 drug dealers during the Reagan Administration; that programs comparable to Dukakis's existed in other states (including under the Reagan administration in California) and that both the crime rate and the murder rate in Massachusetts are low for an industrial state.

So Dukakis could have knocked the GOP ad for a loop. But by refusing in the debates to rebut the distortions, and by waiting until October to respond in ads, Dukakis squandered two of the three means available to protect the public from deception in political ads.

For its part, the press, the third potential safeguard, spent much of this time focused on revealing the strategy rather than the inaccuracy of the ads. News has the potential to underscore false claims and inferences instead of undercutting them. In fact, by replaying ads in reports that examine strategy instead of substance, news can legitimize distortions and give them free air time. Only when the Bush tank ad rumbled into the World Series did its obvious distortion of Dukakis's defense posture prompt ABC, and then the other networks, the *Washington Post* and the other major papers to set the record straight.

But even if the news outlets had been more vigilant, news alone cannot adequately protect the public from deception. Single news segments cannot erase dozens of exposures to a sludge-clotted Boston Harbor or the seemingly endless procession of scotfree murderers. Besides, most viewers in key states will have seen the ads repeatedly, whereas a far smaller number will see the single correction in network news stories. A smaller number still will thumb back from the comics and sports pages to the articles unmasking the distortions.

Nor can the networks be called upon to screen out deceptive political advertising even if current bills to reform political advertising ultimately become law. Were the product a Plymouth and not a president, Bush's claim to leadership on the INF treaty, his assertion that Dukakis opposed the Stealth bomber and the implication that Dukakis freed 268 William Hortons would not have aired. Nor would Dukakis's claim that Bush voted to cut Social Security. Whereas the networks protect the consumer from distortions in product ads, the need to protect a candidate's right to free speech means that stations and networks can't reject deceptive presidential ads.

How then, can the electorate be protected? The best available defense seems to be the vigilance of the opposing candidate and party. But, as this campaign has shown, a candidate's access to news, counter-advertising and debates protects the public only if the attacked candidate moves quickly and strategically. Moreover, the protections of news and debates presuppose that the attacked candidate is comfortable with personally rebutting untruths and counter attacking. Neither seemed to come naturally to Michael Dukakis.

There is also the real risk that a counter-attack may simply legitimize false claims and magnify their impact. It can also reduce the campaign to a

shouting match in which each candidate calls the other a liar, leaving the electorate disillusioned and confused. That was where the campaign of 1988 wound up. It's also where future campaigns are likely to be headed unless this country can discover among the ranks of its politicians a pair of candidates self-assured enough to campaign on the facts.

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