

Eye of the Beholder: Defining Negative Campaigning

Since the 1984 presidential race was a snoozer that would result in Ronald Reagan's 49-state landslide reelection victory, much of the political world turned its gaze to North Carolina. There, a brawl of a Senate race had begun more than a year and a half before Election Day; the incumbent senator, Republican Jesse Helms, was locked in a bitter fight with Governor Jim Hunt, a rising Democratic star.

Helms did not usually like to debate opponents, relying instead on television advertisements that blanketed the Tar Heel State during election season. But the famously conservative senator saw that he faced a formidable challenger who indeed was threatening to end his 12-year career. So Helms engaged in several head-on clashes with the governor, whom he had repeatedly called a flip-flopper lacking core ideological convictions and a "limousine liberal" in his television ads. During their second debate, in Wilmington, Hunt challenged Helms to join him in prohibiting negative ads on television, so they could focus more on what the candidates would do to improve the lives of North Carolinians. Helms's response? "We haven't put on any negative advertising. We just told the truth about you. It's sort of like Harry Truman said

one time. He said the Republicans think I'm giving them hell. I'm not giving them hell. I'm telling the truth on you."¹

Candidates routinely offer similar explanations to defend aggressive campaign tactics, in races from president of the United States to county assessor. Few, if any, of them openly admit to negative campaigning. To office-seekers, criticizing an opponent's voting record is comparative advertising, while spotlighting a rival's marital infidelity or woeful personal finances is perfectly appropriate because it raises character issues for voters. What constitutes negative campaigning is usually a matter of perspective; tactics that to one voter seem misleading, mean-spirited, and immoral can impart to another important and relevant information about how the candidate would perform under the pressures of public office. Negative campaigning, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder.

Still, general outlines of what constitutes negative campaigning can be defined, whether or not the candidates and their campaign staff members mentioned in this book would agree with those descriptions. This book traces the modern history and evolution of negative campaigning tactics, primarily from the beginning of the television age in politics, in 1952, to the present; for purposes of discussion, the term "negative campaigning" refers to the actions a candidate takes to win an election by attacking an opponent, rather than emphasizing his or her own positive attributes or policies.

First, I want to distinguish negative campaigning—charges and accusations that, while often distorted, contain at least a kernel of truth—from dirty tricks or cheating. Examples abound of campaign dirty tricks, most famously the tactics of Richard M. Nixon's 1972 Committee to Reelect the President (CREEP), which were exposed in the Watergate proceedings of 1973 to 1974. Perhaps the most notorious dirty trick was a letter planted in a New Hampshire newspaper alleging that a leading Democratic presidential candidate, Senator Edmund Muskie of Maine, had approved a slur that referred to Americans of French-Canadian descent as "Canucks." On a snowy New Hampshire day, standing outside the offices of the newspaper, Muskie gave a rambling denial in which tears seemed to drip from his eyes (some contend they were actually melting snowflakes). His emotional conduct, replayed on television, caused him to drop in the New Hampshire polls shortly before the presidential primary. Senator George McGovern of South Dakota, considered a weaker candidate by Nixon political strategists, eventually won the 1972 Democratic

nomination and lost the general election to the Republican president in a landslide.

In this book, I'll touch on a few cases of dirty tricks when they directly affected the operations of a campaign. As detailed in chapter 11, "push polling" (more accurately push calling) was used against Senator John McCain in the 2000 Republican presidential primaries when scurrilous smears against his character were advanced over the telephone, along with false rumors in the South Carolina Republican primary that the senator from Arizona had fathered a black baby. (In reality, McCain and his wife had adopted a girl from Bangladesh.) But because dirty tricks are not considered legitimate campaign tactics by most political professionals, and are often illegal,² I've largely excluded them.

WHY CANDIDATES MUST GO NEGATIVE

Yet even beyond dirty tricks, many people still recoil at legitimate negative political ads on television, radio, the Internet, and in other forms. Negative campaigning has become a catchall phrase that implies there is something inherently wrong with criticizing an opponent. Negative campaigning is one of the most bemoaned aspects of the American political system, particularly by academics and journalists who say it diminishes the level of political discourse and intensifies the divisions among voters.³

These complaints emerge each election cycle, partly because political spots are so different in content, style, and form than ads for commercial products. Anyone peddling breakfast cereal needs to be careful about criticizing competitors too overtly or else run the risk of turning off consumers so much that they'll start their day with another form of breakfast food. Rarely do product advertisements include hard-hitting direct comparisons to competitors. (And when they do, the contrasts are usually mild and fleeting.)

The goal of political marketing is entirely different, whether in a Republican versus Democrat match or a tough party primary. Unlike product campaigns, political campaigns do not mind at all turning off some "consumers," the voters. In fact, political operatives often *prefer* to keep voter participation down among those inclined to vote for the opposition. They are perfectly happy to drive down turnout, as long as those who do show up vote for them.⁴ And then there's the timing. The stakes of elections are higher than everyday consumer purchases. Consumers do not have to live with the same cereal or

beer for the next few years, but they do have to live with the same president, governor, or member of Congress.

Challengers in particular must, almost by definition, go negative on the lawmaker they are trying to beat. Challengers must demonstrate flaws of the policies put in place by the incumbent and show how they would do things differently. Going negative on the opponent is the best way to draw clear differences and run on the issues the challenger favors. There are exceptions to that rule. During the 2004 presidential race, the majority of President George W. Bush's ads against his Democratic rival, Senator John F. Kerry, were negative. This was a marked departure from Bush's campaign in 2000 when his ads were generally more positive, painting the then Texas governor as a "compassionate conservative."

CANDIDATES' COMPREHENSIVE PLANS FOR NEGATIVE CAMPAIGNING

The most familiar forms of negative campaigning are the hard-hitting television ads that flood the airwaves each election cycle. These often feature grainy black-and-white photos of the opposition, looking as if he or she just rolled out of bed in the morning, tasted a sour pickle, or had a root canal about an hour before.

But television ads by themselves are often only one element in a comprehensive negative campaign strategy. An effective approach revolves around painting an unlikable portrait of the opposition through many different forums, including speeches, candidate debates, press statements, and appearances on talk shows. And, as will be demonstrated in chapter 12, direct mail and more recent technological innovations such as blogs and Web video commercials have become very important tools to use in criticizing opponents.

Often, negative campaigning means telling a damaging story about the opponent over and over again. In 2000, Republicans said repeatedly that Vice President Al Gore, the Democratic presidential nominee, was an exaggerator who would say whatever it took to get elected. Four years later Senator Kerry was portrayed as a flip-flopper lacking the resolve to prosecute the war on terror. Democrats did not come up with equally compelling messages about the potential perils of a Bush presidency, and the party's nominees lost both elections.

Negative campaigning also means honing in on an opponent's gaffes, verbal or physical. Senator Barry Goldwater's politically unconventional state-

ments, many of them joking or before friendly audiences, became fodder for some of the hardest-hitting and funny television ads of his era. The 1964 presidential race, in which President Lyndon Baines Johnson crushed Goldwater 61 percent to 39 percent in the popular vote and took 44 states in the Electoral College, set the standard for using candidates' own words against them. As described in detail in chapter 3, the Republican's words included suggestions that the eastern seaboard be sawed off and that the nuclear bomb was merely another tactical weapon.

Or consider Fred Heineman, a one-term Republican congressman from North Carolina, who rode the national GOP tidal wave in 1994 to a narrow victory over veteran Democratic Representative David E. Price. After losing by a scant 1,215 votes, Price returned to teaching political science at Duke University, but quickly geared up for a 1996 rematch against Heineman, a long-time New York City police officer who moved to Raleigh to become the city's police chief.

During the 1996 campaign, Heineman told a reporter for *The (Raleigh) News & Observer* that his congressional salary and police pensions (totaling more than \$180,000 annually), made him "middle class," a claim likely to be disputed by many workers who toiled long and hard and earned considerably less. Heineman's comments provided an opening for Price in his comeback bid to label the incumbent as out of touch with regular folks. The campaign aired an "Earth to Fred" ad, featuring a mock conversation between "Mission Control" and the commercial's announcer, with visuals of planets, stars, and space flights. The announcer said, "Heineman claims his \$180,000-a-year income makes him, quote, 'middle class.'" Mission Control then responded with "Earth to Fred. Come in!"⁵ With the help of the humorous "Earth to Fred" television ad, Price won back his old seat, 54 percent to 44 percent.

Heineman's defeat also illustrates the importance of humor in negative campaigning. In fact, some of the most effective negative ads barely seem negative at all; shrouded by humor or irreverence, the stinging message is delivered in a less-than-harsh manner. The familiar "scorched earth" negative ads, with a scolding voice-over, unflattering pictures of the opponent, and ominous sound effects, have become less effective because viewers are cynical about political ads already. So they just hit the remote.⁶ "Humor . . . can be a very effective way to make a point, and connect on an emotional level, which . . . has more impact than sort of a tic-list of failures," said Jim Margolis, a

veteran Democratic ad maker, whose work has helped elect many U.S. senators and governors.⁷

GOP Senator Mitch McConnell (Ky.) helped set a standard for humorous, effective political ads during his first Senate campaign in 1984 against two-term Democratic incumbent Senator Walter D. Huddleston. McConnell's campaign persistently criticized Huddleston's voting record and attendance at roll-call votes. Most memorably, McConnell's campaign featured a television ad in which bloodhounds tracked the absentee senator (played by an actor), who fled down a city street before being driven up a tree. The bloodhounds also followed the senator to the lawn on the east side of the U.S. Capitol. The spot noted that while Huddleston was missing votes, he was giving speeches for \$50,000 a pop. In conclusion, the narrator of the ad said, "We can't find Dee. Maybe we ought to let him make speeches and switch to Mitch for senator."⁸ McConnell won by about 5,000 votes out of more than 1.2 million cast.

Tony Schwartz, creator of the 1964 "Daisy Girl" ad for Lyndon Baines Johnson, produced one of the most biting—and memorable—ads of the 1968 presidential campaign. The commercial for Hubert Humphrey, the Democratic presidential nominee, called into question the abilities and qualifications of Republican vice presidential candidate Spiro T. Agnew. The spot simply showed "Agnew for Vice President" on a television set, while an off-screen viewer laughed hysterically. The tag line at the end was, "This would be funny if it weren't so serious."⁹

Campaigns can also go negative by playing the victim. Nancy Reagan played the role to perfection in a commercial for her husband's successful 1980 presidential campaign. In a one-minute commercial, the wife of the former California governor sat in a nondescript office and looked into the camera. "I deeply, deeply resent and am offended by the attacks that President Carter has made on my husband," she began. "The personal attacks that he has made on my husband. His attempt to paint my husband as a man he is not. He is not a warmonger, he is not a man who's going to throw the elderly out on the street and cut off their Social Security. That's a terrible thing to do and to say about anybody. That's campaigning on fear."

Without missing a beat, she then attacked Carter's record, while still seemingly playing the aggrieved spouse, the victim of negative campaigning by her husband's opponent. "There are many issues that are at stake in this campaign. I would like Mr. Carter to explain to me why the inflation is as high as

it is, why unemployment is as high as it is. I would like to have him explain the vacillating, weak foreign policy so that our friends overseas don't know what we're going to do, whether we're going to stand up for them or whether we're not going to stand up for them. And the issue of this campaign is his three-and-a-half year record." A narrator then concluded with, "The time is now for strong leadership."¹⁰ In the space of 60 seconds, Mrs. Reagan had offered a strong defense of her husband and then got in the campaign's main line of attack against the opponent.

Campaign attacks that don't seem harsh can come in other forms, such as interspersing optimism about one's own candidate with troubling information about the opponent. President Bill Clinton's 1996 reelection campaign turned the tactic of "positive negative" ads into high art by trumpeting his own accomplishments while at the same time linking the Republican nominee, former Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole, with unpopular House Speaker Newt Gingrich, a development examined in depth in chapter 8. The president's campaign against Dole wasn't the meanest, shrillest, or hardest-hitting White House race in memory. It wasn't particularly competitive either, because Clinton romped to a solid, near-landslide level Electoral College victory. Yet, like other contests mentioned in these pages, the race was instructive because it amplified existing tactics in negative campaigning that later became commonplace in campaigns, including going after opponents early, before they have a chance to define themselves for voters.

Whatever the format, any winning effort needs to convince voters they should vote for one candidate and against the other. It's that simple, said Chris Lehane, spokesman for Al Gore's 2000 presidential campaign and leading practitioner of comparative politics. The Harvard Law School graduate learned his craft working in the Clinton White House during the mid-1990s as part of a rapid response team created to deal with Whitewater and the growing number of other investigations into the administration. He then moved onto the campaign trail for Gore, scoring kudos from members of his party and scorn from Republicans for his hard-charging ways; at one point amid the post-Election Day legal wrangling in 2000, he compared Florida's then secretary of state, Katherine Harris, to "a Soviet commissar."¹¹

Unless the race is a sure bet, Lehane said, a negative message about the opponent should be driven home every day. This keeps the opposing campaign off balance and wears down its resources. Even if a campaign's positive ratings

are up and things seem to be going well, sometimes it is worthwhile to continue hammering the opponent. It's a method he compares to boxing. Begin with the basic jab, then a series of body shots, to drain the opponent's energy. Next comes a series of "hooks" to the head, which can inflict serious damage, and finally, the knockout punch. "You're either throwing a punch, or being punched," he said.¹²

Late in the 2000 presidential race, Lehane executed a tactically brilliant plan to string out for several days a series of negative news stories about the Bush campaign. The Gore campaign focused on one of Bush's television spots that seemed to subliminally flash the word "rats" across the television screen. The spot's words and standing images criticized the vice president's plan to expand health insurance coverage for prescription drugs as one that would needlessly involve federal "bureaucrats." A retired machinist volunteering for the Gore campaign in Washington State saw the words "rats" flash across the screen for a split second. After further research, Gore's people suspected that subliminal advertising was at work, with the word "rats" appearing for about a 30th of a second. So Lehane and Mark Fabiani, the deputy campaign manager, offered the story as an exclusive to the *New York Times*, along with supporting legal documentation on subliminal advertising and how the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) had declared it deceptive.

The *Times* accepted the pitch from the Gore campaign and on September 12 published a lengthy story that was posted on the paper's website around midnight. Lehane then notified several television correspondents that the story was breaking. Gathered in an Ohio hotel, he allowed the television reporters to watch the tape individually, and each prepared a separate piece, providing further amplification of the negative story about the Bush campaign. The next day, in Orlando, Florida, Bush was bombarded with questions about the "Rats" ad, which gave the story more traction. The day after that, several Democratic senators asked the FCC to investigate, keeping the matter alive even longer.¹³

JUST THE FACTS

Considerable criticism of negative campaign tactics comes from the media, particularly columnists and editorial pages. Yet much of the consternation is misplaced, when editorialists and opinion mavens confuse negative campaigning with healthy debate about contentious and divisive issues. Take the 2004

presidential campaign, the first since the terrorist attacks of September 11. Naturally much of the debate in the White House race centered on which candidate, President Bush or Senator Kerry, could best protect the United States from future attacks. Bush contended his opponent was not up to the task during wartime. Democrats naturally took umbrage with the Republican president's charges. During one campaign stop in Florida, Senator John Edwards (N.C.), the Democratic vice presidential nominee, accused Bush of "exploiting a national tragedy for personal gain." Edwards went on to declare, "George Bush today is making one last stand to con the American people into believing that he is the only one who can fight and win the war on terrorism."¹⁴

Media outlets echoed the criticism, portraying Bush as the purveyor of unprecedented negative campaign attacks. During early fall 2004, the *New York Times* editorial page scolded Bush and his Republican allies for suggesting that Kerry would be less competent protecting the nation from terrorist attacks. The editorial, "The Un-American Way to Campaign," took issue with comments by Vice President Dick Cheney, House Speaker Dennis Hastert (Ill.) and Senator Orrin Hatch (Utah) that suggested a Kerry presidency would lead to more terrorist attacks, because he would not be as aggressive in confronting the nation's enemies. "This is despicable politics," the *Times* wrote. "It is absolutely not all right for anyone on [Bush's] team to suggest that Mr. Kerry is the favored candidate of the terrorists."¹⁵

The American people, however, disagreed. To many voters the juxtaposition of facts was not negative campaigning but the telling of a difficult truth. The national audience found the predictions about Kerry to be quite "American," in that they continued the long, important tradition of contrasting candidates' stances and positions—with significant exaggeration to be sure—and letting the voters sort out what was and was not negative campaigning. Bush won the first majority (51 percent) in a presidential race since 1988.

Surveys repeatedly show that voters like to hear about the differences between candidates, as long as they are presented in a factual manner. For instance, one of Reagan's most effective ads in his 1980 presidential run asked starkly, "Can we afford four more years of broken promises? In 1976, Jimmy Carter promised to hold inflation to 4 percent. Today it is 14 percent. He promised to fight unemployment. But today there are 8.5 million Americans out of work." Those were the facts presented in a straightforward way, undoubtedly an important element in Reagan's landslide victory.¹⁶

While candidates and their campaign consultants usually shy away from focusing on personal problems of an opponent's family, such as a wife's drug problem or a son's arrest for drug possession, most agree that criticizing an opponent's voting record and policy proposals should be fully open to examination. "It's completely fair game," said Chris LaCivita, a leading Republican political consultant based in Richmond, Virginia. "If the candidate is not willing to define their opponents and their differences, they're wasting their time."¹⁷

Others contend attacks on voting records are usually distorted, because legislators must often vote on amended bills that contain many provisions they oppose. "It is one thing to take an even-handed look at one's voting record and another to twist the facts to make it appear as something that it isn't," said Bob Garfield, *AdAge* columnist and co-host of National Public Radio's *On the Media*. "It's nominally true, but it's fundamentally a lie."¹⁸

Some of the nation's most accomplished public servants do not subscribe to negative campaigning, suggesting voters deserve to hear what candidates would do for constituents, not how terrible the opponent is. "A campaign should primarily be about a candidate having ideas about what the state or the nation or the local district ought to be doing," said Jim Hunt, who narrowly lost that 1984 Senate race to Helms, before returning as North Carolina governor for two more terms in the 1990s. "A campaign ought to be a time in which a candidate talks to people, listens to people, discusses ideas with them, and at the end of the day, when elected, has a mandate about what they want done."¹⁹ He added, however, that the 1984 Senate race taught him a candidate should not sit on his hands in the face of campaign attacks, adding there is nothing wrong with responding in kind, and even turning up the heat higher on the opponent.

Congressman Jim Leach (R-Iowa) simply declines to criticize opponents, focusing instead on his own record and accomplishments. A moderate Republican first elected in 1976, Leach has consistently refused to go negative on opponents on television, radio, the Internet, in person, or in any other way, even when it has jeopardized his own reelection chances in his Democratic-leaning district.²⁰ Leach also does not accept political action committee money or campaign contributions from people out of state, putting him at a potential financial disadvantage to challengers. Campaigns should focus on ideas, he said, not slash-and-burn tactics. "How one runs a campaign is as important as what one stands for. How a game is played does matter."²¹

In 2002, Leach faced one of the most serious threats to his political career, yet did not engage in negative campaigning. The cerebral Princeton-educated former Foreign Service officer faced Dr. Julie Thomas, a pediatrician from Cedar Rapids. She assailed Leach over issues related to health care, Social Security and prescription drugs, and many others. Because of his self-imposed restrictions on negative campaigning and fundraising, the congressman found himself in an unusual position. “We’ve almost reversed roles,” he said at the time. “I’m running the challenger’s campaign.”²²

Leach asked the House GOP campaign arm, the National Republican Congressional Committee, to stay out of the race so it could be fought on the local level. But Republican leaders, working frantically to keep their narrow House majority, ran ads anyway knocking Thomas. Leach won the race 52 percent to 46 percent.

Other veterans of the political wars contend deeply negative campaigns are harmful to lawmakers’ ability to govern once they are in office. Former GOP Senator Bill Brock (Tenn.) (whose aggressive 1970 campaign against Democrat Albert Gore Sr. is recounted in chapter 5) lamented how much television is now relied upon in political races. He said 30-second spots are not enough to discuss complicated issues. “It has tended to create the impression that solutions are simple,” Brock said. “It also leads to polarization in politics.”²³

While tough and harsh political commercials frequently draw criticism, some political professionals and academics extol the virtues of negative campaigning. In a 1996 essay, Northeastern University political science professor William G. Mayer wrote, “No candidate is likely to provide a full and frank discussion of his own shortcomings. Such issues will only get a proper hearing if an opponent is allowed to talk about them by engaging in negative campaigning.”²⁴

Positive ads, featuring candidates with family members in orchestrated camera shots, listing off their accomplishments, and proclaiming their “family values,” do not provide voters enough information to make informed decisions. Many consider *positive* television campaign commercials to be more deceptive than negative ones. Some feel the practice of negative campaigning should be encouraged and expanded, for the good of the electorate. “Campaigns have always been about differences,” suggested Carter Wrenn, who, as a leader of Senator Helms’s political machine, the Congressional Club, from the 1970s through the early 1990s, helped pioneer many direct mail and

polling techniques now familiar on the political landscape. “I think negative campaigning is good. . . . With negative ads you have the virtue of a real debate.”²⁵ Moreover, tough races can sometimes increase turnout. For the vitriolic Helms-Hunt 1984 Senate race in North Carolina, voter turnout reached 68 percent of registered voters.²⁶

For better or worse, aggressive campaign tactics have been a vital part of the American political system from the very start. As will be seen in the next chapter, the tenor of modern political campaigns is actually considerably milder than that of old. And, as will become apparent in the following chapters, negative campaign tactics have been constantly reinvented, to adapt to the latest technologies and to fit the prevailing mood of the electorate during different eras of American history.

NOTES

1. William D. Snider, *Helms & Hunt: The North Carolina Senate Race, 1984* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 164.

2. Dirty tricks and illegal campaign tactics have been the subject of several worthy books, including, most recently, Andrew Gumbel’s *Steal This Vote!* (New York: Nation Books, 2005). Such deceptions can take many forms and range in severity from the outrageous, like breaking into the Democratic National Committee’s Watergate building headquarters in Washington, D.C., to more common acts like stealing yard signs in city council and other local races.

Attempts to tamper with voting machinery and voter suppression also fall under the category of dirty tricks and cheating. For instance, a Republican political consultant ended up serving five months in jail for his role jamming phone lines in New Hampshire that Democrats were using for get-out-the-vote operations on Nov. 5, 2002, Election Day. The effort involved making so many calls at the same time that the Democratic phone lines jammed just when voters were expected to call for rides to the polls in Manchester, Nashua, Rochester, and Claremont. The more than 800 computer-generated calls lasted about 90 minutes, as voters decided races for governor, U.S. senator, and hundreds of other offices.

3. Academic research has drawn varying conclusions about the effectiveness of negative campaigning and voters’ attitudes toward the practice.

Voters often decry negative campaigning in theory—82 percent of Americans said they believed that “negative, attack-oriented campaigning is undermining and damaging our democracy,” and a majority believed that unethical practices in

campaigns occur “very” or “fairly” often (58 percent), according to a November 1999 survey conducted by Lake Snell Perry & Associates for the Pew Charitable Trusts and the Institute for Global Ethics, and from a September 2000 survey conducted by Yankelovich Partners, Inc., for the Center for Congressional and Presidential Studies.

Yet other studies have shown voters find negative campaigning helpful in drawing distinctions between candidates. Consider a study by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press in November 2004, which surveyed voters’ attitudes toward the just concluded presidential race between George W. Bush and John F. Kerry, widely considered among the most negative in modern times. More than eight in ten (86 percent) said they learned enough about the candidates and the issues to make an informed choice. That was similar to the results from 2000 (83 percent). At the same time, 72 percent said there was more mud-slinging or negative campaigning in the 2004 election than in previous campaigns.

Other studies have similarly found that despite decrying “negative campaigning” in general, voters still appreciate a full airing of the issues and personalities in campaigns. Data from the 1998 and 2002 California gubernatorial races found that voters generally do not consider all negative advertising unhelpful or uninformative, according to a 2003 study by John Sides of the University of Texas, Austin, and Keena Lipsitz, Matthew Grossman, and Christine Trost of the University of California at Berkeley.

That study of voters’ attitudes toward the California gubernatorial races also found that the more voters knew and care about the political process, the more desensitized to negative campaigning they had become. More informed and interested voters tend to be less outraged by campaign practices and generally more sanguine about political attacks.

In an exhaustive study of U.S. Senate races from 1992 to 2002, *Negative Campaigning: An Analysis of U.S. Senate Elections* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), Rutgers University political scientists Richard R. Lau and Gerald M. Pomper found “previous literature on negative campaigning provides no clear evidentiary base for either the unusual effectiveness of the technique or its presumed deleterious effects on the political system.” The authors also found that negative campaigning is less prevalent than commonly believed, and varies by campaign situation, party, and gender. In addition, the political science professors concluded, “negative campaigning does not generally reduce turnout; when combined with high levels of spending, it may actually increase turnout” (p. 91).

4. Joshua Green, “Dumb and Dumber: Why Are Campaign Commercials So Bad?” *The Atlantic Monthly*, July/August 2004.

5. David E. Price, *The Congressional Experience*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Westview Press, 2004), 38–40.
6. Gary Nordlinger, “Negative Ad Survey Results Consistent with Experiences in the Trenches,” *Campaigns & Elections*, October/November 1999.
7. Interview with author, Washington, D.C., Feb. 18, 2005.
8. Tape courtesy of the Julian P. Kanter Political Commercial Archive at the University of Oklahoma Political Communication Center.
9. Victor Kamber, *Poison Politics: Are Negative Campaigns Destroying Democracy?* (New York: Insight Books, 1997), 225–26.
10. Ad courtesy of The Living Room Candidate, a collection of campaign commercials sponsored online (<http://livingroomcandidate.movingimage.us/index.php>) by the American Museum of the Moving Image in Astoria, Queens, New York.
11. Joe Garofoli, “The Spinner: How Chris Lehane, Revered by Some and Reviled by Others, Gets the Campaign Consultant Job Done,” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, Oct. 24, 2004.
12. Interview with author, San Francisco, Nov. 29, 2004.
13. Joshua Green, “Playing Dirty,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, June 2004. (In March 2001 the FCC concluded that no action was warranted in the matter. In a letter to the two Democratic senators requesting the investigation, Ron Wyden of Oregon and John Breaux of Louisiana, the FCC noted that its Enforcement Bureau had tried to communicate with the licensees of 217 stations specifically alleged to have aired the ad. Of the 179 stations that responded they had aired the advertisement, 162 indicated they were not aware it contained the word RATS! in it. Representatives from the other stations said they realized the word was present on the screen, and therefore it was not subliminal.)
14. Liz Sidoti, “Edwards Accuses Bush of Exploiting 2001 Terrorist Attacks,” *The Associated Press*, Oct. 18, 2004.
15. “An Un-American Way to Campaign,” *New York Times* editorial, Sept. 27, 2004.
16. Kathleen Hall Jamieson, “Shooting to Win: Do Attack Ads Work? You Bet—and That’s Not All Bad,” *The Washington Post*, Sept. 26, 2004.
17. Interview with author, Washington, D.C., Jan. 27, 2005.

18. Interview with author, Washington, D.C., Sept. 13, 2004.
19. Interview with author, Raleigh, N.C., Feb. 22, 2005.
20. James Q. Lynch, "Leach Bests Thomas in Hard-Fought Race," *The (Cedar Rapids) Gazette*, Nov. 6, 2002.
21. Interview with author, by telephone, Jan. 24, 2005.
22. Robin Toner, "A Tough Race for a Moderate in the GOP," *New York Times*, Sept. 16, 2002.
23. Interview with author, Annapolis, Md., Aug. 5, 2004.
24. William G. Mayer, "In Defense of Negative Campaigning," *Political Science Quarterly*, Fall 1996.
25. Interview with author, Raleigh, N.C., Feb. 22, 2005.
26. Pamela Varley, "The Helms Hunt Senate Race (D): Case-let Sequels, Phase III, and Post Mortem," John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 1986.

Going Nuclear 1964: The Rise of Television Attack Ads

Few candidates have needed to employ negative campaigning less than President Lyndon Baines Johnson in 1964. The assassination of President John F. Kennedy in November 1963 ensured that the Republicans would face an uphill battle no matter whom they pitted against the Texas Democrat. After all, the new president had ridden a wave of goodwill after the tragic events of Dallas, toward swift passage of much of his predecessor's idling legislative agenda. Most notably, LBJ, the former Senate majority leader, muscled through a recalcitrant Congress the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964, which guaranteed blacks access to all public facilities and accommodations and banned discrimination because of race, religion, national origin, or sex. The Vietnam War, later to be Johnson's downfall, was escalating. But on Election Day of 1964, it had yet to become a real liability.

The ambitious Johnson did not just want to win his own term as president; he craved a resounding victory that would establish a new White House power base. Then he could push forward his own legislative agenda, which included creation of Medicare and Medicaid, aid to education, regional redevelopment and urban renewal, and scores of other proposals to establish a "Great Society."¹

President Johnson did not care to take chances on his own reelection; he had a history of tough races that sometimes required aggressive tactics. A gangly 28-year-old Johnson had out-campaigned his nine Democratic primary opponents to win a U.S. House seat from Texas in a 1937 special election. He narrowly lost a 1941 U.S. Senate special election, a contest in which his Democratic primary opponent appeared to have benefited from creative vote-counting procedures and ballot box stuffing in certain Texas counties where his influence ran strong. And in 1948 it looked as if Johnson would lose his second bid for Senate. In what was then a monolithic Democratic state, Johnson had come in second during the primary to Coke Stevenson, though the conservative former governor did not win a majority. In the hard-fought runoff, notable for Johnson's pioneering use of a helicopter as a campaign vehicle, LBJ still came up short. But a series of favorable ballots in Boss George Parr's Duvall County somehow materialized after Election Day, to make Johnson the winner of the crucial Democratic primary, by the infamous margin of 87 votes. The case was challenged all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. There Justice Hugo Black dissolved a federal injunction nullifying Johnson's runoff victory, ruling that the federal government did not have jurisdiction to interfere in the counting of ballots in a state primary election.²

So as he looked toward a victory of historic proportions as president in 1964, Johnson approved his campaign's launch of the first media campaign centered on the rapidly growing medium of television, much of it an assault on the Republican presidential nominee, Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona. Johnson adviser Bill Moyers said the president "was determined to roll up the biggest damned plurality ever and he felt that anything that could help—and he believed advertising could help—was worth the price."³

Goldwater himself became the focus of the election, not foreign policy, taxation, or other issues. According to Johnson's ads, Goldwater would destroy Social Security, end government programs to aid the poor, and potentially launch a nuclear war that could endanger all humanity. While LBJ's victory was never really in doubt, his campaign set the precedent for the television attack ads Americans now take for granted. Many of the spots seem tame and downright quaint compared to the commercials that followed forty years later, but at the time the massive television onslaught of political commercials stunned the Republican opposition.

The 1964 presidential race also offers a vivid illustration of how effectively negative campaigning has worked when it has played into voters' preconceived notions voters about candidates. The Johnson ads did a masterful job of using Goldwater's words against him, which typecast the Republican. The vaunted "Daisy Girl" ad that suggested Goldwater would start a nuclear war (it never mentioned his name) was consistent with many voters' views of the Republican candidate. "The commercial evoked a deep feeling in many people that Goldwater might actually use nuclear weapons," wrote Tony Schwartz, creator of the famous ad. "This distrust was not in the Daisy spot. It was in the people who viewed the commercial."⁴

The strategy of massive negative campaigning on television did the trick, as the president crushed Goldwater by a 16-million-vote margin (43 million to 27 million; 61 percent to 39 percent). Johnson won 486 Electoral College votes to Goldwater's 52; the president fared poorly only in the Deep South, losing Mississippi, Alabama, South Carolina, Georgia, and Louisiana, along with Goldwater's native Arizona.

EARLY POLITICAL TELEVISION COMMERCIALS

In some ways the sitcoms of today bear little resemblance to the early television comedies of the 1950s—in color for one thing, and the language is often cruder and the camera angles always sharper. Yet in some respects the genre of situation comedy has not changed significantly, as the shows center on family situations, with parents using gentle humor to guide their growing children through life's travails. Similarly, while technology used in campaign commercials has evolved exponentially, the themes expressed in candidate spots in the earliest days are also familiar.

Political newsreels began to be played before movie audiences regularly during the 1930s; they served as early prototypes of the hard-hitting campaign ads that would emerge on television decades later. The 1940 Republican National Committee film *The Truth about Taxes*, on behalf of GOP presidential candidate Wendell Wilkie, showed an ironsmith slaving away over a hot furnace. The narrator then explained that all working people had to labor for three months just to pay for what government spent. "Everyone, whether in the factory, shop, farm or office, pays for the cost of government." The narrator continued, "Let us rid ourselves of our New Deal failure, before it's too late. Let us end wasteful spending and return to good, old American sanity in

economy. All Americans must unite to stop the New Deal, with its lust for power to perpetuate itself in office for another four years. To save ourselves, we must dismiss incompetents and radicals from high places of government. We must elect Wendell Wilkie president.”⁵ These same basic themes, minus the overt calls to dismantle the New Deal, would be present in Republican campaigns six decades later, with increasingly sharp language.

Some of the earliest political television advertisements, too, carried arguments that would be present in political television advertising for decades to come. The first batches of campaign commercials made in the early 1950s, included “the general themes of Republicans saying, ‘We’re strong on the military, and we want to cut your taxes,’ and the Democrats saying they are for the common people,” noted David Schwartz, curator of the American Museum of the Moving Image in Queens, New York.⁶

The very first political television commercials, made for Democratic Senator William Benton of Connecticut in 1950, were actually positive: They featured the Democratic lawmaker’s wife and neighbors lauding him. Those spots played a role in Benton’s razor-thin election victory over Republican Prescott Bush, by about 1,000 votes (Benton had been appointed to the seat in 1949 when the incumbent senator, a Republican, died). Benton had come to realize the importance of television through his work in advertising; he co-founded the Benton-Bowles agency in New York and was so successful that he retired at age 36.⁷

It wasn’t long before the television commercials featured politicians sling- ing mud at each other, a reflection of candidates’ and consultants’ consistent abilities to adapt negative campaign tactics to technological advances in communications. By the 1952 election cycle, about 19 million homes had television sets,⁸ and in that presidential race, former General Dwight D. Eisenhower’s campaign commercials criticized the Democrats relentlessly without naming his opponent, Governor Adlai Stevenson of Illinois. The spots focused on taxes, high prices, the Korean situation, and alleged government corruption under Democratic President Harry Truman, whose sagging popularity led him to decline a reelection bid. One ad featured two soldiers on the battlefield in Korea, discussing the war’s futility. Suddenly, one of the soldiers was killed, while the other charged the enemy. The tag line said simply, “Vote Republican.”⁹ Stevenson’s ads generally featured the erudite governor pontificating on issues of the day in a somewhat academic manner. But he did get in

some jabs against Eisenhower by suggesting he would be a puppet of Robert A. Taft, the Ohio senator and anchor of the Republican Party's conservative wing. Eisenhower spent more than \$1 million on television commercials on his way to a sound victory, while Stevenson laid out less than \$80,000.

During Stevenson's unsuccessful 1956 rematch against President Eisenhower, the challenger's ads got tougher; the arsenal included a television attack against Vice President Richard M. Nixon. The president's heart attack a year before raised the possibility Nixon could be elevated to commander in chief, and Democrats tried to play on voters' fears. The 10-second-long ad showed a picture of the vice president looking shifty and sneering, while the announcer asked, "Nervous about Nixon? *President Nixon?*" Running mates would be the focus of criticism in television spots for decades to come, with increasing degrees of sophistication, Republican vice-presidential candidates Spiro T. Agnew in 1968, Dan Quayle in 1988, and Dick Cheney in 2004 being the most prominent recent examples.

Nixon was on the wrong end of the most memorable negative ad of the 1960 presidential campaign, when he was the Republican presidential nominee. And the person who inflicted the verbal wound was not the sponsor, Democratic Senator John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts. It was Nixon's boss, President Eisenhower. Democrats seized on an offhand comment made by the president in response to a reporter's request to name a "major idea" that Nixon had proposed and the president adopted. Eisenhower replied, "If you give me a week, I might think of one. I don't remember." To capitalize on the remark, the Kennedy campaign built a long, explanatory ad to cause the most damage. An announcer began by saying, "Every Republican politician wants you to believe that Richard Nixon is experienced. They even want you to believe that he has actually been making decisions in the White House. But listen to the man who should know best, the president of the United States. A reporter recently asked President Eisenhower this question about Mr. Nixon's experience." After the president's barb at his understudy, the announcer returned to say, "At the same press conference, President Eisenhower said, 'No one can make a decision except me.'" And as for any major ideas from Nixon, the viewer then saw Eisenhower saying again, "If you give me a week, I might think of one. I don't remember." The commercial concluded, "President Eisenhower could not remember, but the voters will remember. For real leadership in the '60s, help elect Senator John F. Kennedy president."¹⁰ The spot was

considered tough for its time, as it focused almost entirely on the opposition, instead of listing any positive attributes of the candidate running the ad. But this style of the slow, almost apologetic attack ad would be antiquated by the end of the 1964 president campaign.

TELEVISION ADS OF 1964: A YEAR OF FIRSTS

During the 1964 campaign, Goldwater's primary opponents stirred up some of the ammunition that Johnson used against him. As the 1964 election cycle began, Republicans were split between a base of activist conservatives and a generally more liberal leadership. Conservatives organized early support for Goldwater, an outspoken libertarian-leaning right-winger. Entering the race with a lower level of grassroots support was New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller, a liberal who had alienated conservatives by inserting moderate planks in the 1960 Republican platform and who had wounded his public image with a highly publicized divorce. Rockefeller, like many Republican donors and voters, was unsure that Johnson could be defeated but was certain that Goldwater would lead the party into an electoral massacre. His political advisor George Hinman said as much to prospective Rockefeller delegates, hinting that "Rockefeller would step aside for another, more electable, moderate at the convention: They were fighting a crusade to save their party from the infidels."¹¹

In the primary campaign and at the Republican National Convention, Rockefeller and moderates such as 1960 vice presidential nominee Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. and Pennsylvania Governor William Scranton campaigned to stop Goldwater. They loudly attacked the front-runner's controversial stands on issues, publicized his often-incendiary public statements, and predicted disaster if the party anointed him the nominee. The public and private maneuvering sharply divided the party as it went into the convention at San Francisco's Cow Palace. Cameras picked up NBC anchorman John Chancellor being roughly ejected from the floor,¹² and Rockefeller getting furiously heckled during his speech. According to political scribe Theodore H. White, "As the TV cameras translated their wrath and fury to the national audience, they pressed on the viewers that indelible impression of savagery which no Goldwater leader or wordsmith could later erase."¹³ Making his problems worse, Goldwater stoked the crowd by paraphrasing the Roman politician Cicero in his acceptance speech, saying, "I would remind you that extremism in the de-

fense of liberty is no vice! And let me remind you also that moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue!" This made Goldwater appear to agree with the most fringe elements of the American right; his campaign bought ads positively defining "extremism" in a vain attempt to blunt the damage.¹⁴

The Johnson campaign used these events to its advantage. In March, campaign managers had signed with Doyle Dane Bernbach, a New York firm that had risen to prominence with ads for Volkswagen and Avis Rent-a-Car.¹⁵ The agency had never handled a political campaign, and approached the challenge with bracing, aggressive ads that put the Goldwater team on the defensive for most of the race. Part of the Johnson strategy was revealed in the official slogan, repeated in every ad: "Vote for President Johnson on Nov. 3rd. The stakes are too high for you to stay home." That motto underscored the fact that Johnson was already in the Oval Office and had been tested under incredibly trying circumstances; it hinted that replacing LBJ with Goldwater would lead to catastrophe. The rest of the strategy utilized Goldwater's own words against him to paint him as a dangerous extremist, and followed these up with attacks from other Republicans collected from the primary campaign.

One ad that utilized Republican attacks was "Convention," which presented a cluttered floor made up to look like the scene inside the San Francisco Cow Palace after the crowds had emptied out. As the crew picked up placards, a narrator rolled off some of the Republicans' harshest attacks on Goldwater. "Back in July in San Francisco, the Republicans held a convention," said the announcer. "Remember him? He was there, Governor Rockefeller. Before the convention he said Barry Goldwater's positions can 'spell disaster for the party and for the country.' Or him, Governor Scranton. The day before the convention he called Goldwaterism a 'crazy quilt collection of absurd and dangerous positions.' Or this man, Governor [George] Romney [of Michigan]. In June he said Goldwater's nomination would lead to the 'suicidal destruction of the Republican Party.' So even if you're a Republican with serious doubts about Barry Goldwater, you're in good company."¹⁶

The next group of ads bolstered Goldwater's extremist image by publicizing statements he'd made off the cuff or in front of friendly crowds. In 1961, Goldwater had joked, "Sometimes I think this country would be better off if we could just saw off the eastern seaboard and let it float out to sea." So Doyle Dane Bernbach created an ad showing a cardboard map of the United States getting the East Coast states slowly but steadily sawed off,

as a narrator read Goldwater's quote. The senator from Arizona had told an interviewer that the Tennessee River Valley Authority should be sold, and Doyle Dane Bernbach produced an ad portraying an auction on top of a giant dam. The spot opened with the auctioneer in the midst of rapid fire speech, helping bidders raise the price of the commodity he was trying to sell. As the camera panned away from the auctioneer, it was revealed that the bidders were on top of a giant water dam. "In a *Saturday Evening Post* article dated August 31, 1963, Barry Goldwater said, 'You know, I think we ought to sell the TVA.'" The narrator continued, "This is a promise: President Johnson will not sell TVA. Vote for him on Nov. 3rd. The stakes are too high for you to stay home."¹⁷

Another spot to turn Goldwater's statements against him opened with a Social Security card on a table. As the narrator named media outlets in which Goldwater said he would change the system to make it voluntary "on at least seven different occasions," those newspapers and magazines were thrown on top of the Social Security card. After *The Congressional Record* was named, a pair of hands appeared, tore up another Social Security card, and threw it on the pile. "Even his running mate, William Miller, admits that Barry Goldwater's voluntary plan would wreck your Social Security," the narrator said. President Johnson was then shown, saying, "Too many have worked too long and too hard to see this threatened now by policies which promise to undo all that we have done together over all these years." It was the most repeated ad of the entire campaign, and according to Theodore H. White, "probably had greater penetration than any other paid political use of television except for Richard M. Nixon's 'Checkers' broadcast in 1952."¹⁸ The spot presaged a long line of federal campaigns that would seek to scare voters about opponents' plans for Social Security. Rarely did a candidate make such an explicit statement as Goldwater's suggestion that the system could be made voluntary. But proposals to trim benefits, raise Social Security taxes, and other unpleasant remedies to shore up the social insurance system would be exploited, often quite successfully, in future campaigns.

A couple of ads by the Johnson campaign aired only one time each. The "Daisy Girl" spot, perhaps the most famous campaign ad of all time, ran during NBC's *Monday Night at the Movies* on September 7; it turned Goldwater's outspokenness on military action and nuclear weapons into a story of nuclear apocalypse (he had once joked about tossing a nuclear weapon

into the men's room of the Kremlin.)¹⁹ The 30-second ad showed a little girl in a field picking petals from a daisy. As she counted, the camera moved closer, finally freezing on a close-up of her eye. At the same time, an announcer started to intone a countdown. Suddenly, the screen erupted in a nuclear mushroom. The voiceover of Lyndon Johnson then admonished: "These are the stakes; to make a world in which all God's children can live, or to go into the darkness. Either we must love each other or we must die." Then words appeared on the screen: "On November 3rd, vote for President Johnson."²⁰

The ad served to remind American voters of Goldwater's propensity for warlike statements, even though the spot never mentioned the Republican or made reference to him. More than forty years after the ad ran, its creator, Tony Schwartz, said it was fair game based on Goldwater's record. "He had made two speeches" on the use of nuclear weapons, Schwartz recalled. "It was a very effective commercial."²¹ The Goldwater campaign actually filed a complaint with the Fair Campaign Practices Committee to stop the ad, which didn't go through when the Johnson team made it clear the commercial would only be run once.²² (Even Senator Hubert Humphrey, the Democratic vice-presidential candidate, publicly disapproved of the spot.) Still, for many Republicans, the Daisy Girl ad eviscerated whatever goodwill existed toward LBJ after he assumed office in place of Kennedy, the martyred president. "That's negative campaigning carried to an unbelievable excess," said Bill Brock, who in 1964 was a freshman Republican House member from Tennessee and later won election to the U.S. Senate.²³

Though the ad ran only once on commercial television, it earned tremendous airtime through repetition and discussion on news shows. In a sense, the ad served as a precursor of the "free media" effect the Swift Boat Vets would have forty years later, when the group's spots, purchased on an initially small budget, attacked the military record of Senator John F. Kerry, the 2004 Democratic presidential nominee. In 1964 most of the Daisy Girl ad's repetitious playing came from three television networks' nightly news shows. Forty years later, the ability to post such controversial ads on the Internet and send them by e-mail had increased their visibility exponentially.

Ten days after "Daisy Girl" aired, the Johnson campaign ran a similar ad portraying a young girl licking an ice cream cone as a woman off-camera (the first female voiceover ever in a campaign commercial) patiently explained the

history of nuclear testing and radioactivity. “Do you know what people used to do?” asked the motherly sounding narrator. She continued:

They used to explode atomic bombs in the air. Now children should have lots of vitamin A and calcium, but they shouldn't have any strontium 90 or cesium 133. These things come from atomic bombs, and they are radioactive. They can make you die. Do you know what people finally did? They got together and signed a nuclear test ban treaty. And then the radioactive poison started to go away. But now there's a man who wants to be president of the United States, and he doesn't like this treaty. He fought against it. He even voted against it. He wants to go on testing more bombs. His name is Barry Goldwater, and, if he is elected, they might start testing all over again.²⁴

This ad, also run just once, played on some of the same emotions as “Daisy Girl,” with a slight twist—that if President Goldwater didn't kill your children, he would at least make them sick. Other ads showing mushroom clouds (one based on a comment Goldwater had made about the nuclear bomb being “merely another weapon”) or listing other militaristic statements by Goldwater were put into rotation, with the same intent.

The Johnson campaign did run positive ads, mostly in a documentary style that portrayed the president as a careful thinker (a contrast with Goldwater) and a defender of the public programs that helped the poor, sick, and elderly (another contrast). Still, the attack commercials were far more prevalent. Goldwater Campaign Director Denison Kitchel acknowledged that the nuclear ads had been the most devastating to the campaign. “My candidate had been branded a bomb-dropper—and I couldn't figure out how to lick it,” Kitchel told political advertising scholar Kathleen Hall Jamieson.²⁵ The whole Johnson ad campaign was effective because voters had not seen anything like it before on television. “They had not built up the cynicism and skepticism that now condition their response to negative ads,” wrote political consultant Dick Morris. “If it was on television, they believed, it was probably true.”²⁶

For their part, Goldwater's ads were initially dedicated to improving the candidate's image. His campaign bought expensive 30-minute blocks for television specials in which the Arizona senator sat at a desk and answered an interviewer's questions, and another ad that showed Goldwater chatting with former President Eisenhower at his home in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

When these spots and films didn't improve Goldwater's poll numbers, his people developed a new tack. Through more polling, the campaign found an increasing number of voters were concerned about President Johnson's "personal honesty," after it was revealed that an old senate staff friend, Bobby Baker, had probably peddled influence to turn a \$20,000-a-year job into a \$2 million net worth. On October 11, Goldwater adviser Lou Guylay wrote a memo suggesting Goldwater take on a perceived "shocking decline in political morality."²⁷ Unfortunately, the ads crafted around this theme were clumsy and ineffective. They opened with video of another Johnson ally who was associated with scams, Billie Sol Estes, and a cartoon of Baker, opening the Capitol dome and dipping his arm inside. Another spot matched these images to a hyperbolic announcer, who sounded as if he were selling a B-movie: "Graft! Swindle! Juvenile Delinquency! Crime! Riots!"²⁸ All of this was accompanied with confusing footage of street violence, before cutting to Goldwater sitting in a quiet den, speaking to the camera. The intention was for Goldwater to seem like a calm presence cutting through the chaos, but the effect was an amateurish-looking campaign commercial.

Still, the campaign kept the "moral leadership" message in the rest of its ads. A final spot featuring then-citizen Ronald Reagan of California saying, "Let's get a real leader and not a power politician in the White House."²⁹ But that message was overshadowed by Johnson's attack ads, and their focus on fundamental issues of war and social welfare.

Lyndon Johnson's negative campaign commercials would be remembered for the trends they set and themes introduced. "Daisy Girl" was the first in a long series of Cold War-era campaign commercials to focus on a candidate's potential for launching a nuclear conflict. Just four years after that spot aired, the campaign of Vice President Hubert Humphrey, the 1968 Democratic presidential nominee, aired a spot—this time in color—that showed a nuclear bomb exploding. Then, the film of the explosion was reversed to show the mushroom cloud collapsing back into itself. "Do you want Castro to have the bomb?" the announcer asked. "Now? Do you want any country that doesn't have the bomb to be able to get it? Of course you don't. Where does Richard Nixon stand on the UN threat to stop the spread of nuclear weapons? He says he's in no hurry to pass it. Hubert Humphrey wants to stop the spread of nuclear weapons now before it mushrooms. Hubert Humphrey supports the UN treaty now, as do the 80 countries that have already signed it."³⁰

The themes of “Daisy Girl” continued to resonate long after the Cold War ended. Many recalled the famous spot when, during the run-up to the 1996 Republican presidential primaries, Senator Richard G. Lugar of Indiana ran a series of spots that warned ominously of nuclear terrorists blowing up an American city. The commercials used actors, dramatic music, and jerky camera shots to depict the terror and chaos of a threatened nuclear attack. The senator, a foreign policy specialist, had warned that the bombings at the World Trade Center in February 1993 and in the federal building in Oklahoma City in April 1995 underscored American vulnerability to terrorism. Lugar, badly trailing his GOP primary foes, said in a letter released along with the ads that “it is not my intent to create unnecessary anxiety.”³¹ Whatever the intent, Lugar had little support among rank-and-file Republican primary voters, and he quickly dropped from the race.

Over the years, partisans across the political spectrum adopted “Daisy Girl” for their own ideological purposes. Images from the ad made a cameo appearance in an election cycle thirty-two years after its one-time airing, as part of a commercial for 1996 Republican presidential nominee Senator Bob Dole. The issue at hand had nothing to do with nuclear threats. Rather, Dole’s television ad, attacking President Bill Clinton, included images of crack pipes and junkies shooting heroin. The spot opened with footage from “Daisy Girl,” as the narrator said, “Thirty years ago, the biggest threat to her was nuclear war. Today the threat is drugs,” before reeling off a litany of criticisms about the president’s inadequate funding for antidrug programs and his first surgeon general, who had raised the specter of legalizing certain drugs (Clinton repudiated the remarks).³² Dole’s advisers thought Clinton could be vulnerable on the drug issue, and the ad became one of the tougher, more memorable spots of a relatively uncompetitive campaign. However, the ad ran in a vastly different context than 1964, doing Dole no good; he lost overwhelmingly to Clinton.

In January 2003, the far-left group MoveOn.org ran an updated version of the “Daisy Girl” spot, as a warning against the pending U.S.-led invasion of Iraq to depose dictator Saddam Hussein. The MoveOn commercial also featured a little girl picking petals from a daisy, unknowingly to the sound of a missile-launch countdown. At countdown’s end, the screen filled with the image of a nuclear mushroom cloud, and the ad continued with the warning: “War with Iraq. Maybe it will end quickly. Maybe not. Maybe it will

spread. Maybe extremists will take over countries with nuclear weapons. Maybe the unthinkable.”³³

No doubt “Daisy Girl” will continue to be incorporated into future candidacies according to the issues of the moment.

OTHER INNOVATIONS

The 1964 presidential campaign increased the outlets for negative campaigning not just through television advertising, but also with a wide wave of literature critical of the candidates in the form of books. Works such as J. Evetts Haley’s *A Texan Looks at Lyndon* painted the political veteran in the worst possible light, as a corrupt power grabber lacking core convictions. Less than a year after the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the air was thick with conspiracy theories. Haley’s book included a detailed look at the relationship between Johnson and swindler Billie Sol Estes. Haley pointed out that the three men who could have provided evidence in court against Estes all died of carbon monoxide poisoning from car engines. Other books that year were published with the goal of defeating one of the presidential candidates, early forms of what would become a multimillion-dollar phenomenon forty years later (described in detail in chapter 12). In that cycle, anti-Kerry books such as *Unfit for Command: Swiftboat Veterans Speak Out against John Kerry*, by John E. O’Neill and Jerome R. Corsi, criticized the senator’s military conduct in Vietnam and helped cement opposition to his candidacy. And a slew of partisan books, aimed to coincide with the heat of campaign season, emanated from the left.

Other independent attempts at negative campaigning in the 1964 presidential race were almost comical. Perhaps the campaign’s lowest moment came in October, when *Fact* magazine published the results of a pseudo-scientific “psychiatrists’ poll” about Goldwater’s mental fitness to be president. The periodical’s maverick publisher, Ralph Ginzburg, had rented the American Medical Association’s roster of more than 12,000 psychiatrists from a broker of mailing lists. The doctors received a questionnaire asking Goldwater’s psychological state of mind. Despite the obvious ethics breached by offering a diagnosis of somebody the professionals had not personally examined, more than one in seven psychiatrists responded. Of those, two-thirds said Goldwater was unfit to serve as president (571 replied that they could not judge the candidate’s mental fitness at long range). Republicans suspected Democratic

operatives were behind the “scientific” survey; Democrats said they had nothing to do with it.³⁴ Forty years later, Vic Gold, deputy press secretary for Goldwater’s campaign, said the episode was the dirtiest part of the 1964 presidential campaign. “That really crossed the line,” he said.³⁵

NOTES

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9. Ad courtesy of The American Museum of the Moving Image’s “The Living Room Candidate: Presidential Campaign Commercials 1952–2004” (<http://livingroomcandidate.movingimage.us/index.php>) [Known hereafter in this chapter as The Living Room Candidate.]
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12. Perlstein, *Before the Storm*, 382.
13. Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President 1964* (New York: Atheneum, 1965), 201.

14. Jamieson, *Packaging the Presidency*, 183.
15. Jamieson, *Packaging the Presidency*, 172.
16. Tape courtesy of the Kanter Archive.
17. Tape courtesy of the Kanter Archive.
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19. Jamieson, *Packaging the Presidency*, 186.
20. Ad courtesy of The Living Room Candidate.
21. Interview with author, by telephone, Jan. 25, 2005.
22. Jamieson, *Packaging the Presidency*, 200.
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26. Morris, *Power Plays*, 288.
27. Jamieson, *Packaging the Presidency*, 208.
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30. Jamieson, *Packaging the Presidency*, 252.
31. Howard Kurtz, "Lugar Tries a Dramatic Approach; Ads Focus on Threat of Nuclear Terrorism," *The Washington Post*, Dec. 19, 1995.
32. Howard Kurtz and Spencer Hsu, "Dole Smacks Clinton with Drug-Policy Ads," *The Washington Post*, Aug. 27, 1996.
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