

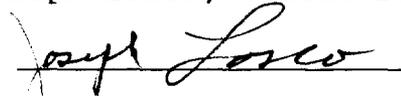
**The Uses and Effects of
Negative Political Television Advertisements
in the 1988 Presidential Election**

An Honors Thesis (ID 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Joseph Losco", written over a horizontal line.

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In 1988 a single television commercial might well have determined who was to become the 41st President of the United States.

Broadcast during network primetime, the advertisement showed a long line of zombie-like prisoners marching through a gate of bars. As it opened, the gate became a revolving door. The menacing prisoners marched out.

An ominous-sounding narrator is heard; the voice intones that Democratic candidate Michael Dukakis' policy was to allow weekend passes to first-degree murderers--even though they were not eligible for parole, and even though many had escaped while on furlough. The commercial's message was clear: a vote for Dukakis meant a vote for turning loose murderers and rapists onto the streets.

The highly effective "Revolving Door" ad was the work of the campaign of Republican George Bush. It was reminiscent of a commercial Lyndon Johnson ran in 1964, which showed a little girl plucking daisy petals while a countdown is heard in the background. Suddenly, the mushroom cloud of a nuclear explosion is seen. The ad powerfully implied that Johnson's opponent, Barry Goldwater, would start World War III. (Harrigan, 159)

Just as the "Daisy" ad created an unfavorable impression of Goldwater, "Revolving Door" and a few other Bush spots were successful in defining Dukakis unfavorably in the minds of the electorate. Dukakis' commercials, meanwhile, were less effective in defining Bush unfavorably.

Significantly, in both campaigns, the goal was not to present the candidate positively, but to portray the opponent negatively. Both Bush and Dukakis used this same strategy to defeat their opponents in the primary elections. The most effective vehicle for this plan of attack was the television commercial.

This thesis will show that negative political television advertisements played an essential role in the 1988 presidential election. "Negative ads" allowed Bush and Dukakis to win the nominations of their respective parties. And Bush's superior negative commercials allowed him to defeat Dukakis in the general election. This is demonstrable through surveys and electoral results.

The concept of "negative campaigning" is not just using invective to discredit a political opponent. It is, as will be seen, a stage in the advertising process. Negative advertisements persuade through strong emotional appeals and a careful manipulation of selected facts. The motive is not to cause the candidate broadcasting the ad to win, but to cause the opponent to lose.

Political advertising on television dates back to the Eisenhower-Stevenson race of 1952. Since then, the short (30- or 60-second) political commercial has developed both distinct rhetorical models and visual styles. It has grown to dominate American political campaigns, especially presidential elections. (Diamond, 1984, xi)

The Eisenhower-Stevenson campaign first raised the major, disturbing-and continuing--questions about politics, advertising, and television. Should presidential campaigns be run by marketing principles and Madison Avenue ad men? Do 30-second commercials ignore issues and content in favor of image and emotion? Does the best man win, or the most telegenic performer? Can money buy enough media to buy elections? Every four years since 1952, these questions have reappeared, and each campaign since has provided enough contradictory answers to keep them alive and unresolved. (Diamond, 1984, 65)

Diamond (1984) identified the four key rhetorical stages of political advertising during campaigns:

- 1) ID: The candidate must identify himself to the voter, give some biographical information, and associate himself with some symbolic issue.
- 2) Argument: After name recognition is established, a candidate must tell

viewers what his ideas are and what he stands for. Popular, "hot issues" are the subjects of these ads.

3) Attack: Once the candidate's name, history and something of his personality and ideas are known, the campaign enters its third phase, negative advertising. Name-calling, direct personal attacks and symbolic attacks are often used to discredit the opponent. Usually delivered by the candidate in the early years of TV spots, attack ads now are most often delivered by surrogate speakers. Attack ads enjoyed an unprecedented role in the 1988 campaign.

4)Resolution: In the final few days of the campaign, last-minute positive appeals are used to make the candidate look dignified and to overcome the strident negativism of the attack stage. (Diamond, 1984, 326-327)

The television advertising of the attack stage drew a great deal of attention in 1988. But as in previous election years, "going negative meant doing unto your opponent before he could do unto you." (Will, 1987, 188)

Candidates offer three elementary excuses for using negative advertising tactics, according to conservative columnist George Will: "The other guy started it;" "I'm not being negative, I'm just alerting the electorate to my loathsome opponent's squalid record;" and "Negative campaigning is as American as apple pie--and, by the way, did I mention that my opponent hates apple pie." (Will, 1987, 188)

But wouldn't such a tactic backfire? Surely intelligent people, regardless of their political affiliations, would recognize such tactics and wouldn't fall for such an appeal. But according to Will, negative advertising sometimes succeeds, because "people tend to confuse rudeness with sincerity and to equate sincerity with high principle." (Will 190)

Television has revolutionized political advertising and made negative

spots the ad tactic of choice. "Today voters do not venture out to experience negativism at torchlight rallies. Today negativism comes to voters in their living rooms." (Will, 1987, 188)

But television commercials are very expensive, and a candidate running for national office can have difficulty paying for network ad time. Yet serious contenders always manages to pay for their spots. They can afford expensive time slots if their campaigns are bankrolled by two principal sources: federal campaign subsidies and political action committees, or PACs.

The federal financing of the nomination campaigns works this way: A candidate qualifies for federal matching money by raising at least \$5,000 in amounts of \$250 or less in each of 20 states, starting one year before the election. Once that requirement is met, the federal government matches every contribution up to \$250 the candidate received during the prenomination period. (Germond, 53) After the conventions, the federal public financing system provides each nominee with \$46 million for the general election. And the parties can raise unlimited amounts--called "soft money"--to benefit a presidential ticket. (Germond, 417) Of the \$29 million in federally allotted campaign funds that Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter each spent in 1980, almost half went into paid political advertising, mainly on TV. (Diamond, 1984, xii)

By contributing to a candidate whose views they support, PACs can have a noticeable impact upon political debate. During the primary season, PACs are limited by law to \$5,000 donations to any candidate, but after the conventions, they can spend millions on their own television advertising supporting a candidate. (Devlin, 391)

The gusher of political money has made the negativism more audible. . . . Candidates have always said beastly things about one another in speeches and union halls or lodge meetings, but now that there is so much cash sloshing around in the system, candidates can afford to broadcast their attacks. (Will, 1987, 189)

After the vicious 1986 elections, Will wrote "what is new is not just the amount of negativism, it is the niggling tendentiousness of it. What is tiresome is the **reckless** use of a candidate's votes to characterize the candidate." Will explains: "A vote for less-than-maximum funding for a program for the handicapped or against the most stringent sanctions against South Africa becomes grounds for 30 seconds of rubbish about the candidate 'voting against the handicapped' or 'supporting apartheid.'" Taken out of context, almost anything from a candidate's background can be used against him by an opponent. (Will, 1987, 190)

Although negative ads were used widely in the 1988 campaign, they weren't broadcast in earnest until after the January Iowa caucuses. In the months preceding this first contest, all the candidates' ads followed Diamond's initial stages: identification of the candidate, then arguments for his ideas. The field of presidential hopefuls all spent a great deal of money on this farm state, hoping a big win early on would propel them to the nomination.

In the caucuses, two midwesterners prevailed. Kansas Sen. Bob Dole easily won over the other Republicans. Surprisingly, Vice President George Bush finished third behind televangelist Pat Robertson. Among the Democrats, Missouri Rep. Richard Gephardt was the top finisher. Massachusetts Gov. Michael Dukakis, an obscure figure at that time, placed third after Illinois Sen. Paul Simon. Jesse Jackson and the other Democrats were far behind.

One week later, in New Hampshire, the advertising of the Republican campaigns would shift into the third stage--attack. A strong Reagan ally, Dole had to find a way to attack the vice president personally without appearing to criticize the president. Bush had a long resume' of Washington

jobs, but Dole believed he could jab him for his persistently low profile.

In the week before the New Hampshire primary, Dole ran two negative ads to convey this message. "In homage to the comic strip that inspired it, 'Doonesbury' featured George Bush's image fading into invisibility, with a voice-over questioning what it was he had done in all those impressive jobs." (Mathews, 94) Meanwhile, "Footprints" showed boots crossing heavy snow on the ground--without leaving any trace of footprints. The ad made the argument that George Bush had not left his mark on any of his top-level jobs. (Germond, 140)

A Dole victory over Bush in New Hampshire would have likely knocked the vice president out of contention. But Bush had on his side advertising czar Roger Ailes, who had done commercials for Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford and Ronald Reagan, and consultant Lee Atwater, Deputy Director of Reagan's re-election campaign.

Ailes and Atwater insisted Bush do negative ads. Bush was hesitant, but they convinced him that attack spots were a necessity if the vice president's campaign was to survive. An ad called "Straddle" was produced just two days before the primary. Not only was it a turning point for Bush, "Straddle" was also an archetype for ads during the rest of the campaign. The teleplay was simple, but direct:

VIDEO

Pictures of Bush and Dole.

Bush alone, with caption:
"Led Fight for INF"

Two pictures of Dole,
facing each other, with
the caption: "Straddled."

AUDIO

Voice-over announcer:
"George Bush and Bob Dole on
leadership.

"George Bush led the fight
on the INF treaty for Ronald
Reagan.

"Bob Dole straddled until Iowans
pushed him into supporting
INF.

Cut back to Bush picture.
Caption: "Against Oil
Import Tax."

"George Bush is against an
oil import tax.

Cut back to two Doles.
Caption: "Straddled"

"Bob Dole straddled, but now
says he's for an oil import
fee.

Bush picture, captioned
"Won't Raise Taxes"

"George Bush says he won't
raise taxes, period.

Two faces of Dole.
"Straddled," dissolves
to "Taxes--He Can't
Say No."

"Bob Dole straddles, and he
just won't promise not to raise
taxes. And you know what that
means.

(Germond, 141)

"Straddle" was sent to TV stations the day before the primary and played constantly. The ad painted Dole as a "closet revenueur," and its late-hit timing left him no time to get out an effective answer. (Mathews, 94)

The New Hampshire results restored Bush as a serious contender for the nomination. He received 38 percent of the vote, ten points ahead of Dole, and buried Robertson, Jack Kemp and Pete DuPont. (Mathews, 94)

According to Germond (141),

"Straddle" was a classic case of seizing an opening and, with just the right amount of distortion, exploiting it. The notion that Bush "led the fight" for the intermediate-range missile treaty was ludicrous, as was the idea that Dole had been "pushed into" supporting the INF ratification. In his role as the Senate Republican leader, Dole had felt justifiably constrained not to endorse the treaty until it had been reviewed by his colleagues, some of whom had serious doubts about it But there was never any question of Dole's support for the treaty, and the claim that he had "Straddled" was farfetched. But the key element of the ad was the charge on taxes, and here Dole had left himself vulnerable because he had not . . . inoculated himself (against the charge). The truth was that Dole was not willing to "take the pledge" on all taxes at any time, which is what New Hampshire seemed to require. But the pledge on income taxes alone might have given him some protection from the charge of staddling.

Meanwhile, in the Democratic ranks, Dukakis, Gephardt, Jackson and the other Democrats were still attempting, through commercials, to identify themselves to voters and make known their individual themes. Dukakis rebounded

and won in New Hampshire, and he and Gephardt emerged as the front-runners.

The first strong use of negative ads among the Democratic candidates was seen in the South Dakota primary. Gephardt stymied Dukakis with a negative spot titled "Belgian Endive," that was similar to Bush's "Straddle." The ad "highlighted how out of touch a liberal, northeastern governor is with the common people of the farm states." (Payne, 374)

VIDEO

Photos of Gephardt and Dukakis with caption "Compare Two Candidates."

Gephardt photo shows him walking with union workers. Caption: "Trade Bill to Save Jobs." Under Gephardt photo, "Yes;" under Dukakis, "No."

Gephardt photo now shows him at a rally with a child in his arms. Caption: "Save The Family Farm Bill." Under Gephardt, "Yes;" under Dukakis, "?"

Cut to newspaper headline: "Dukakis to farmers. Grow blueberries, flowers, and Belgian endive. **Washington Post**, Feb. 15, 1987."

Cut back to photos. Gephardt shown talking to women. Under photo, "Cut Taxes;" under Dukakis, "Raised Taxes."

Cut to photo of Gephardt mingling with a crowd at a rally.

Cut to photo of Dukakis. Caption: "Belgian Endive?"

AUDIO

Voice-over announcer: "Compare two candidates for President."

"Dick Gephardt is fighting for a bill to save American jobs. Mike Dukakis is opposed to it."

"Gephardt is for the family farm bill. Dukakis won't take a stand."

"He says our farmers have to diversify and grow blueberries, flowers and Belgian endive."

"Gephardt fought to cut income taxes. Dukakis is one of the biggest tax raisers in Massachusetts history."

"These are some of the reasons why southerners are for Gephardt, not Dukakis."

"Belgian Endive?"

(Payne, 374-375)

Gephardt beat Dukakis 44 percent to 31 in South Dakota--"a defeat virtually everyone in the Dukakis campaign was convinced could be traced to the failure to respond on 'Belgian Endive.'" (Germond, 278)

But Dukakis was to have his revenge on March 7, "Super Tuesday," the mega-primary of 20 southern states. Gephardt suffered significant damage because of two negative Dukakis spots that aired all over the South. "List" ridiculed Gephardt's populist campaign slogan, "It's your fight, too," by showing a scrolling caption listing all the big corporations from whose political action committees Gephardt's campaign had accepted contributions. "Kind of makes you wonder," said the voice-over. "Is Dick Gephardt really fighting your fight--or theirs?" (Germond, 284)

According to Germond (284), "the commercial credited with doing the most to undermine Gephardt distilled the case against him on inconsistency." The thirty-second spot, "Flip-Flops," showed an acrobat--a man in a suit whose hair had been spray-painted red to resemble Gephardt's --doing flips and jumping through hoops.

VIDEO

Acrobat as "Gephart" does forward and reverse flips across the screen.
Captions: "The Gephardt record . . . Reaganomics . . . Minimum wage . . . Social Security . . . Corporate PAC money."

Cut to Dukakis talking to voters.

Cut back to acrobat doing flips. Scene freezes him in mid-air.

(Germond, 284)

AUDIO

Voice-over: "Congressman Dick Gephardt has flip-flopped on a lot of issues. He's been both for and against Reaganomics, for and against raising the minimum wage, for and against freezing Social Security benefits. Congressman Dick Gephardt acts tough toward big corporations but takes their PAC money."

"Mike Dukakis refuses PAC money, opposes Reaganomics and supports a strong minimum wage and Social Security. You know where Michael Dukakis stands."

"But Congressman Dick Gephardt? He's still up in the air."

Dukakis knocked off Gephardt with the ads. Commercials had become the prime sources of information that shaped opinion polls in the 1988 campaign.

"The only thing we really saw move the (poll) numbers was paid TV (advertisements)," Gephardt later said. "People didn't have a lot of information about any of us (candidates)." (Germond, 284)

Dukakis' Super Tuesday victories put him well on the way toward the Democratic nomination, and he eventually finished off Jesse Jackson and Albert Gore in the North. Bush, meanwhile, had easily done in Dole on Super Tuesday, thus locking up the Republican nomination.

In May, as the primaries were coming to an end, George Bush was not well liked and Michael Dukakis was largely unknown. According to Gallup and other polls, support for either candidate was a virtual tie, with many voters undecided. Relatively few voters had strong attachments to either candidate, but twice as many of Dukakis' supporters felt strongly about their candidate (38 to 19 percent.) (Pomper, 125)

Even before the conventions, Ailes and Atwater convinced Bush that the only way to beat Dukakis was to stage a negative campaign, as they had against Dole. It would be much easier for Bush to raise Dukakis' negative ratings than to lower his own. "If Bush could not pump himself up, he could at least tear Dukakis down." (Mathews, 100) This was to be Bush's strategy throughout the campaign.

Dukakis and his campaign workers were buoyed by an NBC poll taken after the July Democratic Convention that had Dukakis leading by 17 points, 51 percent to Bush's 34. (Germond, 359) Unlike the Bush camp, the Dukakis media campaign had no overall advertising strategy. (Devlin, 398) Although it was obvious that Bush would stage a negative campaign, Dukakis resisted doing negative ads, thinking he could take the high road. For example, after the Democratic convention, his commercials were all in a positive vein. "Dukakis was conditioned to a long race and thought that negative charges about his record

would subside or not be believed." (Devlin, 400)

The task of Bush's media campaign was clear: it focused on criticizing Dukakis' liberalism while claiming the governor lacked patriotism. Dukakis' views on the Pledge of Allegiance and taxes, and his membership in the American Civil Liberties Union were fodder for Bush attacks on the stump. But the best weapons of the Bush campaign were negative TV ads. When Dukakis failed to answer their charges, they became even more potent.

Bush commercials slashed Dukakis on three main issues: the environment, national defense and particularly crime--the latter because of a black convict named Willie Horton. (Devlin, 394) As is now well known, Gov. Dukakis had granted a prison furlough to Horton, a first-degree murderer. While on furlough, Horton went on a kidnapping and raping spree. Because of massive outrage in Massachusetts over the case, Dukakis put an end to the furlough program. But Horton would become Bush's most valuable player. (Barrett, 20)

Bush's advisors deemed crime so important an issue that Dukakis was hit with it first through two ads, "Crime Quiz" and "Revolving Door." "Crime Quiz" showed a complementary photo of Bush and a photo that, according to Devlin, "made Dukakis look like a sleaze." The announcer shot out a series of questions: "Who gave weekend passes to first-degree murderers who were not even eligible for parole? . . . Who vetoed mandatory sentences for drug dealers? . . . Who opposes capital punishment in all cases and even vetoed the death penalty for cop killers?" The viewer did not have to guess which candidate, because an "oily-looking" picture of Dukakis zoomed to the forefront after each question, a la "Straddle." (Devlin, 394)

The black-and-white 30-second ad "Revolving Door," which was filmed at the Utah state prison, will probably go down in political history as the hallmark negative ad of the 1988 campaign:

VIDEO

A guard with a rifle climbs the circular stairs of a prison watchtower. Caption: "The Dukakis Furlough Program."

A guard with a gun walks along a barbed wire fence.

A revolving door formed by bars rotates as men in prison clothes, some black and Hispanic, walk in and back out the door in a long line. Caption: "268 Escaped."

Closeup of the prisoners in slow motion revolving through the door.

Caption: "And Many Are Still At Large."

Cut to a guard on a roof with a watchtower in the background.

A small color picture of Bush appears. Small caption: "Paid for by Bush/Quayle 88."

AUDIO

Dissonant sounds are heard: a drum . . . ominous music . . . metal stairs. Voice-over: "As governor, Michael Dukakis vetoed mandatory sentences for drug dealers.

"He vetoed the death penalty.

"His revolving door prison policy gave weekend furloughs to first-degree murderers not eligible for parole.

"While out, many committed other crimes like kidnapping and rape.

"And many are still at large.

"Now Michael Dukakis says he wants to do for America what he's done for Massachusetts.

"America can't afford that risk!"

(Devlin, 389)

"Revolving Door" was "the single most effective (ad), by the estimates of most professionals, and one whose impact probably could not be overstated." (Germond, 410) Democrats charged racism because the black and Hispanic "prisoners" in the line supposedly dominated the images.

Later, independent groups supporting Bush aired several powerful TV ads on this issue, including one featuring the victims of Horton's crime spree. (Pomper, 86) Another showed a photo of the murderer himself, glaring out of the screen with the caption "Horton received 10 weekend passes from prison."

The ads drew criticism for a lack of fairness:

Most states have prisoner furlough programs, and murders have occurred as a result, including one in California during Ronald Reagan's terms as governor and in the federal furlough program while Bush was vice president. Ironically, the crime rate dropped sharply in Massachusetts since 1982. (Pomper, 86)

And, controlling crime is not a major policy issue of the federal government--it is a responsibility mainly of state and local governments.

If the Republican crime assault had stopped with pointing out the recklessness of the Massachusetts furlough policy which Dukakis once supported, then Democrats and blacks would have no just cause for complaints. But, as Barrett noted,

the Republican attack did not stop there. Instead, Bush's handlers tapped into the rich lode of white fear and resentment of blacks that the G.O.P. staked out more than 20 years ago, when the party of Lincoln recast itself as the embodiment of the white backlash. In Horton, Bush's staffers found a potent symbolic twofer: a means by which to appeal to the legitimate issue of crime while simultaneously stirring racial fears. (Barrett, 20)

The crime ads caused a marked shift among "Reagan Democrats," people who identified themselves as Democrats but who had voted for Reagan in 1980 and 1984. Dukakis had hoped to win among this group. But by enforcing Reagan Democrats' concerns about liberal crime policies,

the ads forced Dukakis to react to Bush's initiatives rather than set his own agenda. The impact was quick to be felt in the polls. . . . Coming from a double-digit deficit in early August, Bush had pulled ahead of Dukakis by the end of the month. For the first time in the campaign, more people had a favorable than unfavorable opinion of George Bush. (Pomper, 87)

On the environment issue, Ailes scored a hit for Bush against Dukakis with the 30-second "Harbor" ad. Filmed in garish color, "Harbor" depicted the Boston harbor oozing with sewer pipes, floating debris, and garbage washing up on the shore. The voice-over began, "As a candidate, Michael Dukakis called Boston Harbor an open sewer. As governor, he had the opportunity to do something about it, but chose not to." (Devlin, 395)

When it came to an attacking Dukakis on national defense, Bush was presented with a freebie. At a defense plant in Michigan, Dukakis' photo opportunity turned into a debacle when the Democrat donned a crash helmet and rode in an M-1 tank. The governor looked ridiculous, and Ailes and Atwater jumped at the chance to use footage of the stunt in an ad:

VIDEO

Dukakis riding around in tank, smiling and waving. Caption identical to the narration crawls up the screen.

Close-up and freeze of Dukakis smiling into the camera.

(Germond, 411)

AUDIO

VO: "Michael Dukakis has opposed virtually every defense system we developed. He opposed new aircraft carriers. He opposed antisatellite weapons. He opposed four missile systems, including the Pershing Two Missile deployment. Dukakis opposed the Stealth bomber and a ground emergency warning system against nuclear attack. He even criticized our rescue mission to Grenada and our strike against Libya. And now he wants to be our Commander-in-Chief. America can't afford that risk."

The summary of Dukakis's position on defense priorities was, unsurprisingly, a clever distortion and misrepresentation. Dukakis had, for example, supported the Stealth bomber throughout the campaign. (Devlin, 396) But the mere picture of Dukakis looking like Beetle Bailey in the tank was itself devastating. (Germond, 411)

Reporters covered Dukakis complaining that the "Tank" ad was unfair, but then the network news programs replayed the commercial, giving it more credibility. (**Broadcasting**, 27)

By Labor Day, George Bush had succeeded in getting people to like him and not to like Michael Dukakis. The Democratic candidate, still largely an unknown to two out of five voters, had as many voters disliking him as liking him. (Pomper, 127)

If Dukakis had learned anything from his negative ad battle with Gephardt, he didn't show it in the struggle against Bush. Dukakis' ad campaign was wracked with problems:

--His media staff was disarray. There was no Ailes or Atwater at the helm to deflect Bush's charges, much less define Bush negatively. Dukakis staffers reported to a "hydra-headed" operation that was slow to give orders. Dukakis' top personnel went through drastic changes in three months, with some advisers being fired soon after they were hired. (Devlin, 397) The confusion resulted in foolish decisions, like putting the governor in a tank.

--Dukakis did not like negative ads, and it was hard to get his approval to do a negative ad. He personally scuttled or made changes in several potentially effective commercials.

--The ads that were made were produced quickly and poorly. Several featured dull word crawls with no pictures. Devlin called them "commercials for the deaf (Dukakis' ad people) thought television was an electronic newspaper." (Devlin, 398-399)

--There was difficulty in making the negative ads stick. Because the vice presidency is perceived as being a powerless office, Bush had a certain invulnerability to the criticisms of the Reagan administration. (Devlin, 399)

By comparison to the Bush ads, Dukakis' commercials had less distortion, but they were ineffective in getting his message across. For example, in the crucial period of late September, what was produced and shown consisted of five ads in a "packaging" series--ads depicting George Bush's handlers cynically plotting strategy. (Devlin, 400)

In a spot called "Funny," actors appearing to be Bush advertising people are brainstorming a new spot promoting Bush as "a strong, experienced leader," as members of the group caustically note what are intended to reflect conflicts with that notion: "He was head of the task force on drugs," says one. "And drug traffic goes up 400 percent," says another.

"Very amusing," says a third, obviously troubled. "They're trying to sell you a package," says a voice-over at the close. "Wouldn't you rather choose a president?" It was not clear the message of cynicism came through; the message was criticized by some as leaving viewers confused as to which camp was running the spot. (*Broadcasting*, 29)

The "packaging" series tried to subtly respond to Bush's attacks, both past and future, "but the ads were too much 'inside baseball' for casual viewer-voters to grasp." (Germond, 411)

A far superior Dukakis ad was "Oval Office," which criticized Bush's controversial selection of Indiana Sen. Dan Quayle as his running mate.

VIDEO

A picture of the Oval Office appears with no one in it.

New York Times headline: "President Roosevelt Dead" while Harry Truman takes the oath of office. Zoom in on desk and chair. Headline: "Kennedy Is Killed by Sniper" as Lyndon Johnson is pictured taking his oath.

Zoom-in closer on the empty desk and chair. Headline: "Nixon Resigns" as Gerald Ford is pictured taking his oath.

Zoom-in on empty chair.

Close-up of chair.
Caption: "Hopefully we will never know how great a lapse of judgment that really was." Picture fades to black, but caption remains.

AUDIO

The beat of a heart is heard.
VO: "The most powerful man in the world is also mortal.

"We know this all too well in America.

One in five American Vice Presidents have had to rise to the duties of Commander in Chief.

"One in five have had to take on the responsibilities of the most powerful office in the world.

"For this job, after five months of reflection, George Bush made his personal choice--J. Danforth Quayle.

"Hopefully, we will never know how great a lapse of judgment that really was."

(Devlin, 390)

Unfortunately for Dukakis, "Oval Office" was too little, too late. "Vice presidential candidates rarely have much effect on the presidential vote,"

writes Pomper.

It was relatively easy to raise people's doubts about Dan Quayle. It was much harder to convince prospective Bush supporters that because of Quayle's inadequacies, they ought to switch to Dukakis. . . . Quayle's weakness offered Bush an odd advantage. Quayle made Bush look strong (by comparison). . . . Quayle was George Bush's George Bush. (Pomper, 93)

Other potentially helpful Dukakis ads, even the less negative ones, never made it to the screen. "Jimmy" showed a young man working in a pizza parlor, flipping dough. The voice-over explains that "Jimmy got accepted to college, but his family couldn't afford tuition." The announcer mentions Republican freezes in federal financial aid. Dukakis then appears onscreen as the voice says "Mike Dukakis wants to help. . . . If a kid like Jimmy has the grades for college, America should find a way to send him . . ." The ad was supposed to receive major air time on NBC during the Olympics, but it didn't. "The leadership vacuum and bureaucratic folly of the Dukakis advertising effort all but guaranteed such mistakes. A well-organized and well-thought-out effort might have helped." (Diamond, 1989, 385)

Some of the Dukakis spots, such as "Oval Office," were individually "competent," but they didn't add up to a coherent whole. According to Diamond (1989, 385), "They were isolated, unrelated to what the candidate was saying at news events Not surprisingly, Dukakis' advertising did little to stop the candidate's post-convention slide, much less move him forward."

By the beginning of October, Bush's verbal assaults on Dukakis hit their mark: Dukakis' negative ratings slipped to an eight percent deficit, while 10 percent more of the people surveyed found Bush favorable than unfavorable. (Pomper, 127)

Pomper noted that one reason the Bush campaign stayed with the negative appeals was that "after many months of work, George Bush was still not

considered a strong enough candidate to win on his own, with positive images." Another, quite simply, was that the negative campaigning kept working. "By late October, even Jesse Jackson's approval ratings were higher than Dukakis'" Even more significantly, the proportion of respondents saying that George Bush was "tough enough" on crime and criminals rose from 23 percent in July to a full 61 percent in late October, while the proportion saying Dukakis was not tough enough rose from 36 percent to 49 percent. "It would be hard to find more convincing proof of the efficacy of attack politics. The campaign did make a difference." (Pomper 95-96)

But Dukakis and his staff failed to see how well the Bush ad's symbolic themes resonated with Reagan Democrats. On the furlough issue, "Dukakis allowed himself to be defined as the kind of liberal who would use the legal system to protect aberrant behavior, rather than stamp it out." (Pomper, 86)

By the end of the campaign, Bush's furlough tactic had worked. One in every four voters was able to identify Willie Horton as a black convict who raped a white woman while on a weekend furlough from a Massachusetts prison. (Diamond, 1989, 386) Four days before the election, Bush was liked by about half the electorate (46 percent) and disliked by only a third. What Dukakis faced as election day approached was just the opposite: a third of the electorate liked him, but 41 percent disliked him. (Pomper, 128)

The night before the election, both Dukakis and Bush broadcast 30 minute messages during prime time. These were positive, almost sappy, fulfilling the fourth or resolution stage of Diamond's advertising chronology.

On election night, November 8, the returns gave Bush 53.9 percent of the popular vote to 46.1 for Dukakis. Bush had won 40 states, Dukakis only ten plus the District of Columbia. Bush won 426 electoral votes, Dukakis only 112. (Germond, 455)

A post-election Gallup poll of 2,325 voters for the Times Mirror Company, publisher of the **Los Angeles Times** and other newspapers, concluded that the assault on Dukakis had been responsible for Bush's victory. "We find the success of the Bush campaign was based on making liberalism, the pledge of allegiance and the prison-furlough controversy salient, while at the same time making Bush vulnerabilities of less relative importance," the Gallup Organization reported. (Germond, 467)

The election provided two final ironies: For all his rhetoric about "competence," Dukakis and his advertising staff were incompetent to run a presidential ad campaign. And although criticized for selecting Dan Quayle as his running mate, Bush had the judgment to hire Roger Ailes, Lee Atwater and an advertising staff that was arguably the best in the business.

In the aftermath of the 1988 election, political scientists had several concerns about future campaigns. First was the worry that too much emphasis was placed upon television commercials. Of the \$54.4 million in federal funds that each candidate and his party received, Bush spent \$35 million on television advertising and Dukakis \$30 million--hefty sums, to be sure. Out of his advertising money, Bush spent \$31.5 million to buy television time. Dukakis, however, used \$23.5 million for time-buying, and he spent far more on production costs than did Bush. (Devlin, 391)

Television advertising has driven up the cost of running for office. From 1912 to 1952, each national party spent about the same amount of money per vote cast in national elections. Then, with the introduction of television, campaign expenditures skyrocketed. (Diamond, 1989, 387)

By 1968, the Republican and Democratic committees were spending three times as much per vote as they had 16 years earlier. Moreover, the share of spending going to television has increased at an even faster rate--and at the expense of other campaign methods. Total political spending (adjusted for inflation) has tripled since 1952, while the amount spent

on TV has increased at least fivefold. (Diamond, 1989, 387)

Perhaps the larger question is, why is there so much negative advertising in presidential campaigns? "For the same reason there is so much crime: it pays, and most of it goes unpunished," says George Will.

Negative advertising works, and because it does, it provokes reprisals. An attacked candidate cannot spend a lot of time answering accusations. Play defense, you lose. And negative ads are cost-efficient It is quicker to gain political ground by mugging the other person than by praising yourself. (Will, 1989, 92)

The 1988 campaign was only the most conspicuous, extended example of the effectiveness of negative ads. In off-year elections since then, the trend toward negativity has continued. In New Jersey's 1989 gubernatorial race, Democrat James J. Florio started the negative blitz by suggesting that his opponent Jim Courter was hostile to the environment--all because leaking drums of heating oil were found on Courter's property. Courter replied with an ad that charge that Florio was a member of the mafia--based on a contribution Florio received from a union that was later found to be corrupt. Each candidate ran an ad showing his opponent with Pinocchio's nose. (Florio won.) (Will, 1989, 92)

In the 1990 Texas gubernatorial race, advertising was especially nasty in the Democratic primary. Jim Mattox ran an ad claiming--without attribution--that his opponent, Ann Richards, had been addicted to cocaine. Richards turned the tables with an ad showing a cartoon caricature of Mattox throwing mud onto a photo of Richards. The mud was magically repelled and flew back onto "Mattox," while a voice-over explained that Mattox refused to make public his income tax returns. By attacking not only the opponent but also his negative strategy, Richards was able to win the primary. (Richards' spot was ironically similar to the "Funny" ad Dukakis had used to attack Bush. The difference was that Dukakis' commercial was too subtle, while Richards' ad wasn't subtle at all.)

Let's assume that we will experience a continuing invasion of negative ads that are flashier, glitzier and even more mean-spirited. How will this affect future elections? Certainly, negative ads will be used widely in the 1990 Congressional and state races, and will be a deciding factor in some of them. As for the 1992 presidential election, expect the eventual Democratic nominee to defeat his primary opponents with the help of negative ads. Mindful of the lost opportunity in 1988, Democrats will flood viewers with commercials attacking George Bush. With his built-in advantage as a popular incumbent, Bush won't necessarily need to use negative ads--but he will. Ailes and Atwater will again provide their services, to create anti-Democrat ads that are even more negative.

Some will undoubtedly wonder if all this is such a bad thing. After all, "mudslinging" is a tradition in American politics that dates back to Andrew Jackson, if not earlier. Aren't negative ads just the modern manifestations of that tradition?

The problem inherent in today's negative ads is that they consume an excessively large amount of our political debate and erode the democratic process. Negative ads force us to dwell on sometimes shallow, trivial issues. They also cause us to respond viscerally rather than rationally. Certainly the issue of prison furloughs is not trivial; but in widespread feelings of outrage about the Massachusetts case, no one questioned a similar furlough program in the federal prisons.

The cost of negative ads is apathy, lowered voter turnout and an avoidance of real issues facing the country, such as children, poverty, the federal deficit and a decaying infrastructure. "A tightening downward gyre has begun: as more politicians campaign negatively, more voters become cynical and increasingly resistant to positive campaigning, ready to believe bad news about everyone."

(Will, 1989, 92)

What can be done about attack ads? First, it must be recognized that negative ads gain more credibility through network news coverage, which this thesis has not attempted to analyze. If the attacked candidate complains that his opponent's commercial is unfair, and the networks replay the ad without questioning its claims, then the ad's message is confirmed in the minds of many viewers. Reporters should treat commercials as speeches, and debunk farfetched claims and distortions. If candidate X said that candidate Y favored a cut in Social Security benefits, then reporters would certainly check the truth of the statement. That standard should be applied to candidate X's commercial which makes the same claim.

Negative ads could also be curtailed if Congress were to pass a bill proposed by two senators, John Danforth, R-Missouri, and Ernest Hollings, D-Arkansas. It would require that candidates who want to run ads mentioning (which invariably means attacking) their opponents must do so in person, on camera, instead of relying on the voice-over of a disembodied announcer, faking deadly seriousness. "If candidates want to sling mud . . . the voters should be able to see the candidates' dirty hands." (Will, 1989, 92)

But until there is reform, there will be only the new, unwritten rule to govern future presidential elections: The candidate who takes the offensive and broadcasts the more vicious commercial, who better spreads deceptions and half-truths, will win. This was proven in 1988, when two uninspiring candidates with no burning big issues to confront them needed all the help they could get from television commercials to win. The election was a demonstration of what strong negative ads with good planning and execution can do, compared to the opposite. (Devlin, 412)

The hoary debate among political scientists about whether this is any way to choose a leader has long since been mooted. The strategic campaign question is now: Which side is doing the better job of producing telegenic images? In November 1988, 54 percent of the voting public gave its answer. (Diamond, 1989, 388)

A great many factors influence a presidential election: the record of the incumbent administration, news coverage of the campaign in print and on television, debates between candidates, even the weather on Election Day. But it is disturbing that the same format which sells detergent--the television commercial--also sells presidents. Only once each four years does the nation express its collective will. If that decision is made on the basis of a 30-second ad, then the vitality of our democratic system could be weakened beyond repair.

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