

TEACHER GUIDE

1972 DOC. #2: McGovern & Nixon TV Commercials

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The defining issue of the 1972 campaign was Nixon’s conduct of the war in Indochina. McGovern had received the nomination as a strong antiwar liberal. He was proud of the fact that he had been against the war since 1963, considering it a “dreadful mistake”(Boller 334) and “a tragic waste of human life” (Armstrong n. pag.). He promised that his first act if elected would be to bring the troops home. The Democratic platform pledged amnesty for those who had evaded or resisted the draft once U.S. troops and prisoners were home.

Nixon had run in 1968 promising a “secret plan” to end the war. Four years later there were still U.S. troops in Vietnam. He was also conducting a secret air war in Cambodia that didn’t come to light until after the election. His slogan in 1972 was “Peace with Honor” in which he promised continued peace talks while reducing troop numbers. Nixon had also made historic visits to the Communist leaders in China and the Soviet Union in an effort to lessen Cold War tensions.

The commercials you will see both deal with the issue of war and national security.

> **Play** the video clip: 1972 doc. #2a.

Commercial Script:

PAID POLITICAL ANNOUNCEMENT

VO (Child) | Does a President know that planes bomb children?

THE PRECEDING TAPE WAS PAID FOR BY MCGOVERN FOR PRESIDENT COMMITTEE

QUESTION | **What impressions does this commercial give about Nixon and his policies in Vietnam? Give your evidence.**

SUGGESTED ANSWER | This commercial suggests that Nixon’s Vietnam policies are immoral, that they have led to the deaths of Vietnamese children, and that Nixon must know this but doesn’t care.

EVIDENCE | visual image of a dead Vietnamese baby in its mother’s arms that appears to have been napalmed by U.S. planes; a child’s (innocent) voice asks, “does a President know that planes bomb children?”

1972 DOC. #2a



McGovern “Does a President Know...?” TV Commercial

Video Clip
Length: 45 seconds

QUESTION

What does this commercial imply about McGovern?

SUGGESTED ANSWER

It implies that he is outraged by this immorality and will not let it happen if he becomes President.

SEE NOTE →

FURTHER QUESTIONS

Why do you think the McGovern campaign chose not to air this commercial? What are the risks in running emotional, graphics or personal attack ads?

> **Play** the video clip: 1972 doc. #2b.

Commercial Script:

VO | the McGovern defense plan: he would cut the Marines by 1/3, the Air Force by 1/3; he'd cut navy personnel by 1/4. He would cut interceptor planes by half, the navy fleet by half, and carriers from 16 to 6. Senator Hubert Humphrey had this to say about the McGovern proposal: "It isn't just cutting into the fat. It isn't just cutting into manpower. It's cutting into the very security of this country." President Nixon doesn't believe we should play games with our national security. He believes in a strong America, to negotiate for peace, from strength.

DEMOCRATS FOR NIXON
THE PRECEEDING WAS A RECORDED ANNOUNCEMENT
PAID FOR BY DEMOCRATS FOR NIXON.

NOTE

While the McGovern campaign paid for this commercial to be created, they later chose not to air it on television.

1972 DOC. #2b



Nixon "McGovern Defense" TV Commercial

Video Clip

Length: 1 minute

QUESTION **What messages does this commercial give about McGovern’s defense policies? How is that communicated?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER This commercial claims that McGovern will make drastic and dangerous cuts in U.S. military preparedness.

EVIDENCE statistics about McGovern’s proposed military cuts and images of toy military being swept away; quote from Humphrey: “it’s cutting into the very security of this country”

QUESTION **What messages does this commercial give about Nixon’s position on national defense? How is that communicated?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER It claims that Nixon will bring about peace but still keep the U.S. strong.

EVIDENCE Nixon’s pledge for a “strong America” by “peace from strength;” images of Nixon as Commander in Chief reviewing naval ship with uniformed officers; sound of military drumbeat and music “Hail to the Chief”

QUESTION **Why did the Nixon campaign include a lengthy quote from Hubert Humphrey, a leading Democrat?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER Humphrey’s criticism helped to paint McGovern as an extreme liberal who lacked support even within his own party. The name of the sponsoring group, “Democrats for Nixon,” reinforces this message.

SEE NOTE →

QUESTION **Do political advertisements have to tell the truth?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER Political advertisements do not have to tell the truth, since they are exempt from “Truth in Advertising” laws of the Federal Trade Commission.

NOTE

This commercial is credited to “Democrats for Nixon,” but was actually created by the Republican Campaign to give the idea that McGovern was too far left for members of his own party.

FURTHER QUESTIONS

Both of these are “attack ads,” but McGovern’s commercial was considered too controversial to air even though it didn’t attack Nixon by name. What makes an effective attack ad and when can they backfire?

How are current attack commercials similar or different from these 1972 attack ads? What makes them potentially effective or ineffective?

How are more recent political commercials that deal with war and defense issues similar or different from these 1972 commercials?

ADDITIONAL INFO

McGovern complained that Nixon had vastly more campaign money to spend than he did. McGovern also found it frustrating that his record on defense was being criticized; he had been on the front lines as a bomber pilot in World War II, while Nixon had not served in the military. McGovern only began to run negative commercials late in his campaign when the polls showed him far behind Nixon.

Nixon’s commercials were produced by an all-star advertising team dubbed “the November Group.” Their positive commercials featured Nixon as a world leader and were shot in documentary style with behind-the-scenes looks at the Nixon White House. They attempted to show Nixon as a regular guy playing the piano and joking around.

CONNECTIONS

(see thematic listing)

Attack
Foreign Policy