

TEACHER GUIDE

1984 DOC. #5: Reagan “Bear in the Woods” TV Commercial

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

There is a long tradition of using fear in U.S. presidential campaigns to persuade voters. From the Federalists’ attacks on Thomas Jefferson for his supposed attachment to French revolutionaries to the Democrats’ suggestion of mushroom clouds erupting under a Goldwater presidency, fear of the enemy has become part of campaign image-making. In 1984, the Reagan campaign team brought a new level of nuance to fear-based advertising.

President Reagan had been a die-hard “cold warrior” for his entire political career. During his first term he once referred to the Soviet Union as an “evil empire” and warned that it remained a threat to the United States. Many credit Reagan’s tough talk and increased military spending for speeding the downfall of Communism. He was slow to move on arms control, however, and his proposal for a space-based Strategic Defense Initiative, nicknamed “Star Wars,” caused some to worry about the start of a new, costly, and dangerous arms race. Mondale attacked Reagan’s positions on these issues, saying that he was creating more instability with his tough and threatening posture.

The commercial you will see, called “Bear in the Woods,” is regarded as a classic example of the use of simple symbols to attack an opponent without ever speaking his or her name.

> Play the video clip.

QUESTION What are the messages that this commercial communicates about Reagan’s policies? Give evidence to support your answer.

SUGGESTED ANSWER The Soviet Union is dangerous though some may not recognize this. It is best to be prepared with a strong defense.

EVIDENCE the Soviet Union is represented by the “Russian Bear”; the narrator says some “say it is vicious and dangerous” and some “don’t see it at all;” “isn’t it smart to be as strong as the bear?”

QUESTION What techniques are used by the producer to underscore the sense of danger?

SUGGESTED ANSWER The sense of danger is conveyed through the drum sounding like a constant heart-beat in the background, the extreme close-up on the bear’s claws, and the bear coming face to face with the man.

1984 DOC. #5



Reagan “Bear in the Woods” TV Commercial

Video Clip

Length: 30 seconds

Commercial Script:

VO There’s a bear in the woods. For some people, the bear is easy to see. Others don’t see it at all. Some people say the bear is tame. Others say it is vicious and dangerous. Since no one can really be sure who is right, isn’t it smart to be as strong as the bear? If there is a bear?

QUESTION

How does this commercial respond to Mondale’s concerns about overspending and the federal deficit?

SUGGESTED ANSWER

This commercial suggests that it’s better to spend money on defense than to be caught unprepared by a “vicious and dangerous bear” like the Soviet Union.

FURTHER QUESTIONS

Why might the metaphor of the bear be more effective than factual information about the Soviet threat in swaying voters?

ADDITIONAL INFO

Although Reagan’s “Morning in America” series of positive commercials were well received and are widely remembered, his overall campaign actually focused primarily on undercutting Mondale with attack commercials. Reagan’s campaign manager, Ed Rollins, said, “The decision was to go with two negative commercials for every positive commercial....Let me say that the commercials clearly worked, we drove [Mondale’s] negatives back up” (Kamber 100).

The Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. Reagan’s supporters later argued that it was his determination to up the ante that ended the Cold War. His critics argue that the U.S.S.R. was on the verge of collapse during the period in which Reagan perceived them as a real threat and that his policies only increased dangers around the world and economic instability at home.

CONNECTIONS

(see thematic listing)

- Fear**
- Foreign Policy**