

TEACHER GUIDE

1988 DOC. #2: Bush “Revolving Door” TV Commercial

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Since the earliest elections, campaigns have relied on racist beliefs to create fear about the opposition. In 1836 Martin Van Buren’s running mate, Richard Johnson, was viciously attacked for having lived openly with an African American woman. In 1864, Democratic candidate George McClellan warned that the reelection of his opponent, President Abraham Lincoln, “and the Black Republican Ticket” would bring on “Negro Equality...Universal Anarchy and Ultimate Ruin” (see 1864 doc. #3). Such racist attacks reappeared in George H. W. Bush’s campaign against Michael Dukakis in 1988.

Bush began his campaign seriously trailing Dukakis in the polls. His primary campaign strategy was to use a series of negative commercials focused on Dukakis’ positions on defense, taxes, the environment, and crime. These commercials were very effective in raising voter concerns about the relatively unknown Massachusetts Governor. After the commercials aired, Bush rose in the polls. These commercials proved once again that negative campaigning can work, as Lyndon Johnson and Ronald Reagan had demonstrated before with their “Daisy” and “Bear in the Woods” commercials.

Early on in the 1988 campaign, a highly controversial commercial was shown on a number of cable channels, which were just emerging as important marketing sites. The commercial was created by “Americans for Bush,” part of the “National Security Political Action Committee.” It showed the mug shot of an African American man named Willie Horton who had kidnapped and raped a white woman while on a weekend furlough from a Massachusetts prison during the time that Dukakis was Governor. The commercial was not put out by the Bush campaign, and the Bush team denied any part in its creation, although its underlying message was later reflected in their own negative commercials.

The news media picked up on the issue of negative campaigning and made it a top story during the 1988 election. Although most news reports were highly critical of the Bush strategy, the fact that the commercials were shown again and again on the nightly news had the effect of reinforcing voters’ doubts and fears. This occurred in part because the visual images in the commercials had been effectively designed to carry the message without any spoken words.

The commercial you will see is a Bush campaign commercial called “Revolving Door” or “Furlough.” A furlough is a temporary leave of absence, usually associated with brief leaves from military service. You will first see it without the audio track. Many voters might have also first seen this commercial on their nightly news programs in this way without the original voiceover.

Instruct students to pay attention to feelings and impressions that a viewer might have by watching these images without the script.

> **Play** the video clip, 1988 doc. #2a (commercial with no audio).

QUESTION **What emotions are stirred and which images stir them?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER Emotions of fear and anxiety are raised by the images.

EVIDENCE guards with guns; prison watchtowers; prisoners leaving through the revolving door; subtitles “268 escaped” and “many are still at large”

> **Explain** that they will now watch the commercial again with both sound and image. Listen carefully to the words.

> **Play** the video clip, 1988 doc. #2b (full commercial with audio).

QUESTION **What message is given about Dukakis’ record on crime? Give evidence from the narration to support your conclusions.**

SUGGESTED ANSWER Dukakis allows drug dealers and murderers to get out of prison to rape and kidnap new victims.

EVIDENCE quotes: “vetoed mandatory sentences for drug dealers,” “vetoed the death penalty,” “gave weekend furloughs to first-degree murderers,” “committed other crimes,” and “many are still at large”

QUESTION **What elements in the audio track and in the way the film was shot might add to viewers’ anxiety?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER The music is uneasy, the revolving door sounds as it rotates, and the film is shot in black and white giving it a stark appearance.

1988 DOC. #2a



Bush “Revolving Door” TV Commercial (No Audio)

Video Clip

Length: 30 seconds

1988 DOC. #2b



Bush “Revolving Door” TV Commercial (With Audio)

Video Clip

Length: 30 seconds

Commercial Script:

VO 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.

QUESTION **Who is the target audience for this commercial and why do you think so?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER The target audience is most likely racists, and voters who are worried about crime.

EVIDENCE guards are white and some of the prisoners leaving are men of color; many voters would associate the furlough program with the infamous Willie Horton

FURTHER QUESTIONS

Candidates who sponsor a campaign spot often have their photos projected in full screen at the end of the commercial. Why do you think Bush's photo was so small in this case?

How might people of color have interpreted this commercial? Why?

How might the independently-produced Willie Horton commercial have influenced the later creation of the "Revolving Door" commercial by the Bush campaign?

ADDITIONAL INFO

It was Al Gore, one of Dukakis' opponents in the Democratic primary, who first raised the issue of Willie Horton in a debate before the New York primary.

CONNECTIONS

(see thematic listing)

Attack

Fear

Race

Target Audience (fearful voters)