

TEACHER GUIDE

1988 DOC. #3: Dukakis “Packaging” TV Commercial

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Dukakis at first decided to ignore the Bush attacks. He did not think that these commercials would hurt him and he felt that they might actually backfire on Bush. It was not until late October, just weeks before the election, that Dukakis decided to respond with his own commercials attacking Bush. Unfortunately for Dukakis, it was too little too late; the Bush commercials had already done their damage. Dukakis had not learned from previous campaigns that negative campaigning with powerful images and simple slogans can win an election for the attacker.

One of the major issues raised by the “revolving door” commercial was that of truth in political advertising. Dukakis pointed out that the furlough policy had begun under his Republican predecessor and that such programs were common throughout the country. He noted that serious crime was actually down in Massachusetts while he served as Governor. Although Dukakis criticized the commercial in speeches and interviews, he could not challenge it in court since “truth in advertising” regulations do not apply to political messages, which are protected by the First Amendment. It falls to the media to challenge the accuracy of political commercials.

Some news reporters did point out falsehoods in the Bush commercials, such as the fact that Willie Horton was the only one of the escaped prisoners who had committed rape and kidnapping after release. CBS reporter Leslie Stahl reported that “part of the commercial is false...268 murderers did not escape.... The truth is only four first-degree murderers escaped while on parole” (Adatto 36). Nevertheless, of the ten times that the revolving door commercial was shown on network news, only once was that false statistic questioned.

The real problem for Dukakis lay in the images of Willie Horton’s mug shot and of the revolving prison gate that remained in people’s minds, not the corrections. News reporters who attempted to challenge the truth of the Bush commercials fell into the same trap of reinforcing those images when they repeatedly showed the questionable commercials in their reports.

> **Explain** that you will now show a portion of the next commercial.

> **Ask students** to try to guess which campaign – Bush or Dukakis – sponsored this commercial.

1988 DOC. #3a



Dukakis “Packaging” TV Commercial - Edited

Video Clip

Length: 25 seconds

- > **Play** the video clip, 1988 doc. #3a (edited commercial, ending before the final frames identifying the commercial’s makers).
- > **Ask** for a show of hands as to how many thought it was a Bush commercial and how many a Dukakis commercial. Have a student with each opinion explain why they thought so.

QUESTION	Who made this commercial and for what purpose? Explain your thinking.
SUGGESTED ANSWER	The Dukakis campaign made this commercial to expose the Bush campaign’s manipulation of the facts in the “Revolving Door” commercial in order to mislead the voters.
EVIDENCE	the scene portrays a fictitious Bush campaign meeting demonstrating the cynical way that the Bush team manufactured its commercials by stretching the truth; quotes: “nobody reads anymore,” “let’s hope not,” and “How long do you expect to get away with this furlough thing?”; small text on screen: “paid for by the Democratic National Committee and authorized by the Dukakis-Bentson Committee Inc.”

- > **Explain** that you will now show the full commercial.
- > **Play** the video clip, 1988 doc. #3b (full commercial).

QUESTION	What does the narrator mean by “They’d like to sell you a package. Wouldn’t you rather choose a President?”
SUGGESTED ANSWER	The narrator means that the Bush campaign is trying to sell a package and they expect the public to fall for their manipulation. Dukakis, on the other hand, sees the campaign as too serious to use such techniques and he believes the voters will stand with him.

VERSION 3a:
Commercial Script:

THE PACKAGING OF GEORGE BUSH

Man 1 | Well I think we need another TV commercial on this furlough thing.

THURSDAY 3:55 PM

Man 2 | No way, they're beginning to write about Dukakis' real crime record.

Man 1 | Nobody reads anymore.

Man 3 | Let's hope not. Look, first of all, Dukakis changed that furlough program. Now look at this - more cops on the street, more drug offenders behind bars, crime down 13% in Massachusetts...

(TINY TEXT AT BOTTOM OF SCREEN):
PAID FOR BY THE DEMOCRATIC NATIONAL COMMITTEE AND AUTHORIZED BY THE DUKAKIS-BENTSEN COMMITTEE INC.

Man 2 | Just what I mean. How long do you expect to get away with this furlough thing?

Man 1 | How many more weeks until the election, Bernie? (laughter)

1988 DOC. #3b



Dukakis “Packaging” TV Commercial (full commercial)

Video Clip
Length: 30 seconds

VERSION 3b:
Commercial Script:

SAME AS ABOVE, PLUS:

VO | They'd like to sell you a package. Wouldn't you rather choose a President?

QUESTION **Could the information presented in this commercial also contain lies?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER Yes, because all political commercials are exempt from truth in advertising regulations.

QUESTION **Is this a positive, message-based commercial or a negative, attack-based commercial? Explain your answer.**

SUGGESTED ANSWER This commercial has elements of both.

EVIDENCE it's message-based in having the man in the bow tie explain the truth about Dukakis' record on crime; it is negative in its portrayal of the Bush team as out to fool the public

QUESTION **Polls show that the public does not like negative commercials. Why are they so prevalent during presidential campaigns?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER They are used because they are effective in swaying people to vote against the candidate being attacked.

FURTHER QUESTIONS

Some felt that this commercial was too subtle and could be confusing for voters. Do you think this is the case? Why or why not?

How can one know what is true and what isn't when commercials make statements about a candidate's record?

What role should the media play in assessing the accuracy of claims in political commercials?

Should political commercials be covered under truth in advertising regulations? If so, what about freedom of speech?

False statements reported in the press can have a big effect on public opinion, even when corrections are run. How can this problem be addressed?

SEE NOTE →

ADDITIONAL INFO

An additional problem for Dukakis was his campaign structure. Unlike the Bush campaign, which gave much freer reign to its advertising team, Dukakis wanted to approve all commercials before they were shown. This slowed the process of responding to Bush and caused many potential commercials to be scrapped. The result was the resignation of many of the commercial experts who had signed on to the Dukakis campaign.

CONNECTIONS

(see thematic listing)

**Attack
Media Bias**

NOTE

Note: After the 1988 campaign "ad watches" were instituted by newspaper and television media organizations to track and report on the accuracy of political commercials.