

TEACHER GUIDE

1988 DOC. #4: Dukakis “Tank Ride” Photo, and Bush “Dukakis Tank Ride” TV Commercial

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The ability of candidates to be strong leaders of a major military superpower has come up in every election since the Cold War began. This was the case in 1988 when George Bush questioned Michael Dukakis’ fitness to be Commander in Chief.

Several Bush commercials featured clips from a failed “photo opportunity” that showed Dukakis riding in an M1 tank at a defense plant in Michigan. This photo became a memorable example of a media event that backfired. It was shown 18 times on network television during the campaign as an example of the way that Dukakis had failed to control his image.

> **Project the document.**

QUESTION What message do you think the Dukakis campaign was trying to communicate when they set up this photo op?

SUGGESTED ANSWER Dukakis is strong on defense and comfortable with the military.

EVIDENCE he is shown riding in a tank, has a helmet on, and is smiling

QUESTION Why do you think this photo op backfired?

SUGGESTED ANSWER Dukakis is wearing a tie and has his name written on the front of his helmet, and the tank isn’t traveling on an actual battlefield.

> **Explain** that you will now show a Bush campaign commercial that uses video from this same Dukakis media event.

> **Play** the video clip, 1988 doc. #4b.

1988 DOC. #4a



Dukakis Tank Ride Photo

PowerPoint Slide

1988 DOC. #4b



Bush “Dukakis Tank Ride” TV Commercial

Video Clip
Length: 30 seconds

QUESTION **What message is the Bush campaign offering about Dukakis? Give evidence.**

SUGGESTED ANSWER He has opposed new defense and weapons systems and he has been critical of past military campaigns. He is therefore unfit to become Commander in Chief in a dangerous world.

EVIDENCE the listing of the defense and weapons systems that he has opposed; quote: "America can't afford that risk"; Dukakis in the tank looking absurd and un-presidential

QUESTION **Does this commercial relate to Dukakis' qualifications for the presidency? Why or why not?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER Some elements of the commercial relate to his qualifications and others don't.

EVIDENCE Dukakis' stand on national defense and weapons systems relates to his qualifications to become Commander in Chief; the image of Dukakis in the tank has little bearing on whether or not he would be a good decision-maker regarding defense policy

FURTHER QUESTIONS

Often much is made about a single slip-up by a candidate. Consider Muskie's supposedly tearful press conference in 1972, or the Howard Dean "screaming" scene that helped knock him out of the 2004 Democratic race. Should a candidate be judged by a single failed media event like this? Why or why not?

Should a candidate's image, or ability to successfully craft and control his or her image, be a major factor in an election?

Does a candidate's support for specific weapons systems indicate his or her ability to be a strong leader in defense of the country? Why or why not?

Commercial Script:

VO Michael Dukakis has opposed virtually every new defense system we developed. He opposed new aircraft carriers. He opposed anti-satellite weapons. He opposed four missile systems, including Pershing II 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 on Libya. And now he wants to be our Commander in Chief. America can't afford that risk.

ADDITIONAL INFO

Dukakis claimed in his own commercials that the Bush allegations were inaccurate. The Bush campaign then ran another commercial on the same topic with the same footage of the tank. This commercial ran just eight days before the end of the campaign, giving Dukakis little time to respond. This commercial, entitled "Tank 2," showed a caricature of Mount Rushmore with the faces of losing Democratic candidates George McGovern, Jimmy Carter, and Walter Mondale alongside Dukakis.

CONNECTIONS

(see thematic listing)

Attack
Foreign Policy