

**TEACHER GUIDE**

# 2000 DOC. #12: Gore and Bush Intro to *Saturday Night Live*

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

Ever since the dawn of mass campaigning in the 1820s, presidential candidates have struggled with the need for broad public exposure and the desire to retain a dignified and presidential appearance. In the 1860 campaign, Democratic candidate Stephen Douglas sought public exposure by making the first campaign tour “on the stump” (1860 doc. #4). He was roundly criticized in the press and by his opponent, Abraham Lincoln, for being undignified. Thereafter he claimed that he was just on a long journey to visit his mother.

With the advent of television the same questions arose. In 1952 the advisors of Republican presidential candidate Dwight Eisenhower persuaded him to do the first TV commercials. He agreed reluctantly, saying, “To think that an old soldier should come to this..” (1952 doc. #3). Sixteen years later, in 1968, both major party presidential candidates saw that television appearances were in their own interest and it was even better if a candidate could get some free air time. That year Hubert Humphrey appeared on Johnny Carson’s *Tonight Show* and Richard Nixon poked fun at himself on the popular *Laugh-In* program. Bill Clinton later perfected the role of TV candidate with his 1992 appearances on *Arsenio Hall* (the first late night talk show hosted by an African American man) playing the saxophone, and on MTV answering the key question: “Boxers or briefs?” that referred to a current popular TV commercial.

In 2000 both Bush and Gore took to the talk-show circuit with the intention of spreading their images far and wide. They knew that polls showed younger voters got much of their political information from the monologues of late-night talk show hosts (Fineman 27). Both appeared with Oprah, Leno, and Letterman. Gore even enlisted Al Franken as a “comedy advisor.” For these candidates the risk of appearing too familiar was offset by the disadvantage of appearing too elite because of their prep school and Ivy League backgrounds. What better way to show that they were regular guys with a good sense of humor than hanging out with the folks on a favorite talk show?

The next clip that you will see is from a *Saturday Night Live* Comedy Special, “Presidential Bash 2000” which appeared on Nov. 4, just three days before the election. The man appearing at the end of the clip is the then-governor of Minnesota and former professional wrestler, Jesse Ventura.

> **Play** the video clip.

**QUESTION** | How does candidate Bush poke fun at himself in this clip?

**SUGGESTED ANSWER** | He mispronounces words and makes foolish comments.

**EVIDENCE** | “ambivalent” and “offensible”; “I’m Governor of our nation’s second largest state, which is bigger than every other state, except one”

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**Gore and Bush Intro to *Saturday Night Live***

**Video Clip**

Length: 1 Min. 30 Sec.

QUESTION **How does candidate Gore make fun of himself in this clip?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER He rolls his eyes and sighs as Bush speaks. He claims to be the first in all things.

EVIDENCE Gore frequently sighed and rolled his eyes when Bush was speaking during the actual debates; quotes: "You know I've always been a fan of *Saturday Night Live*," "I was one of the very first to be offended by material on *Saturday Night Live*"

QUESTION **Who is the target audience for this appearance?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER The main target audience is young people.

EVIDENCE younger voters were more likely to watch *Saturday Night Live* and to get their political information from late night and comedy TV shows

QUESTION **How do the candidates make reference to the risk of appearing undignified?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER "We can agree on one thing. For us to open the show with the usual catch phrase would be, in our opinion, 'unpresidential.'"

**FURTHER QUESTIONS**

Do you think a presidential candidate can risk becoming "too familiar" or too undignified through public appearances?

Do you think that this skit promotes one candidate over another? What is your evidence?

**CONNECTIONS**

(see thematic listing)

**Attack**  
**"Commoner"**

**Media Bias** (comedy portraits of candidates)

**Reaching voters** (comedy)

- Consider the Fireside Chat of Franklin Roosevelt in 1936 (doc. #1) and the "Nixon's the One" poster in 1968 (doc. #3) and compare these personality appeals to the SNL clip. Explain how each candidate used the medium of the day to target large groups of voters. Who were the target audiences and what was the message about personality for each candidate?