

TEACHER GUIDE

2000 DOC. #4: Election Campaign Commercials

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Let the voters know who you are and what you stand for. Attack your opponent’s character and record. Show that you are the one to trust. These simple rules have often defined a winning strategy for the first 200 years of U.S. presidential election campaigns. In the political campaign ad wars of the 20th century, negative campaigning has become a primary tactic because it has been proven to work, especially since the advent of television as the primary medium influencing voters. President Lyndon Johnson successfully portrayed Republican challenger Barry Goldwater as a dangerous extremist in his 1964 campaign TV commercials (1964 doc. #2), and Goldwater lost by a landslide. Vice President George H. W. Bush attacked Democratic nominee Michael Dukakis mercilessly in his 1988 campaign commercials and was able to come from behind in the polls to win the presidency (1988 docs. #2 and #4).

The following documents are three political campaign TV commercials from the 2000 presidential campaign, one each supporting Bush, Gore, and Green Party candidate Ralph Nader. Pay close attention to both the style and the message of each commercial.

- > **Ask** some students to focus on the spoken words, others on the images, and others on the audio track.
- > **Play** the video clip, 2000 doc. #4a.

QUESTION **What is the primary message of this commercial?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER The Bush commercial communicates that the world is a scary place but that he will make the U.S. safer through military strength.

QUESTION **What words does Bush use to communicate this message?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER Bush communicates fear through words such as “terror, madmen and missiles,” “dangerous world still requires a sharpened sword,” and “blackmail.” He communicates strength via the phrases, “I will rebuild our military,” “missile defense,” “touch of iron.”

QUESTION **What images does the Bush commercial use to communicate that message?**

2000 DOC. #4a



Bush “Dangerous World” TV Commercial

Video Clip
30 sec.

FOR DOC. #4a:
Commercial Script:

BUSH “DANGEROUS WORLD” TV COMMERCIAL:

POLITICAL AD PAID FOR BY BUSH FOR PRESIDENT, INC.

Bush (VO) | Today we live in a world of terror, madmen, and missiles.

GOVERNOR GEORGE W. BUSH

(Continued on next page)

SUGGESTED ANSWER The commercial opens with the image of a little girl inside a desolate, fenced in, and windswept compound. This fearful image is followed by quick shots of missiles, night bombings, and a “Caution” sign. The tension is added with images of the little girl disappearing, a rock falling, and a safety cone tipped over. Bush’s confident expression and the soldier’s hand reaching out to the smiling girl communicate a hopeful image of strength.

QUESTION **What does the audio track contribute to the commercial?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER The opening music is deliberately ominous. An open chord with low bass, drums (reminiscent of guns) and an ostinato (a type of repeating rhythm) figure is a musical cliché for danger. This couples well with visuals of an innocent child surrounded by ominous fences. As Bush appears on the screen, the music turns more uplifting and hopeful through its ascending melody. Flutes also enter giving additional lightness and airiness to the message.

> **Ask** some students to focus on the images in the second commercial, others on the audio track, and others on the printed words (there are no spoken words).

> **Play** the video clip, 2000 doc. #4b

QUESTION **What is the primary message of this commercial?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER The commercial communicates that Gore is a devoted family man whom you can trust.

QUESTION **What images does the Gore commercial use to communicate that message?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER The video opens with scrapbook-like images and home movies documenting Al and Tipper’s marriage starting with when they were dating to when they were a young family, and together today. This is followed by images of his political work. The commercial closes with dramatic images zooming in on the candidate with children and other supporters.

Bush (VO) | Our military is challenged by aging weapons and low morale. Because a dangerous world still requires a sharpened sword, I will rebuild our military.

**STRENGTHEN MILITARY
RESTORE MORALE
INCREASE PAY**

Bush (VO) | I will move quickly to defend our country and allies against blackmail by building missile defense systems.

WWW.GEORGEWBUSH.COM

BUILD MISSILE DEFENSE

Bush (VO) | As president, I will have a foreign policy with a touch of iron, driven by American interests and American values.

**GEORGE W. BUSH
A FRESH START**

2000 DOC. #4b



**Gore “Happy Thanksgiving”
TV Commercial**

Video Clip
30 sec.
commercial has no voice over

QUESTION **What does the audio track contribute to the commercial?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER Use of horns at the beginning traditionally conveys a heroic sense, an uplifting and spiritual feel. The pentatonic melody used is the base scale of almost all Western folk music and Christian psalms. It is used to give a sense of country, pure Americana, and has an air of spirituality. It is designed to speak to traditional and American values. The soaring strings at the end are reminiscent of music one would hear in a Hollywood film.

QUESTION **What words appeared on the screen and what role do they play in crafting the candidate's image?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER The subtitles "29 years a husband," "26 years a parent," "20 weeks a grandparent," "23 years of challenges," "a family's love," "and the blessings and bounty...of one great nation" frame the images and narrate the story for the viewers. The ending title, "Happy Thanksgiving," gives the impression that this is a greeting from the Gore family to the viewers.

> **Ask** all students to look at the interplay of music in the third commercial, images, and text to communicate a message.

> **Play** the video clip, 2000 doc. #4c.

QUESTION **What is the primary message of this commercial?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER The commercial communicates that Bush and Gore are tied to big corporate donors, but that Nader is the one you can trust and that his presence in the debates will bring out the truth.

QUESTION **How do the creators of this commercial mix spoken words and images to give that message?**

2000 DOC. #4c



Nader "Priceless" TV Commercial

Video Clip
30 sec.

FOR DOC. #4c:
Commercial Script:

NADER "PRICELESS" TV COMMERCIAL:
(VO AND TEXT ON SCREEN ARE THE SAME)

VO: Grilled tenderloin for fundraiser - \$1000 a plate
Campaign ads filled with half-truths - 10 million dollars
Promises to special interest groups - over 10 billion dollars
Finding out the truth - priceless.
There are some things money can't buy.
Without Ralph Nader in the presidential debates, the truth will come in last.
Find out how you can help.
Go to Vote Nader dot com.
Vote Ralph Nader for President.

SUGGESTED ANSWER

The commercial opens with a photo of Nader looking at a video image of Bush at a campaign fundraiser. The narrator lists the costs of fundraising dinners, dishonest advertising, and alleged payoffs from special interest groups as the viewer sees grainy, stop action TV clips of Gore and Bush campaigning. The narrator lists the cost of “finding out the truth” as “priceless” and a blurry image of Nader appears working hard at a desk. The narrator says “without Ralph Nader in the debates the truth will come in last” as a quick collage of Nader images flashes across the screen accompanied by fast-paced drumming. The commercial ends with the narrator calling for viewers to get involved and vote for Nader. Contact information for Nader 2000 is printed on the screen.

QUESTION

What does the audio track contribute to the commercial?

SUGGESTED ANSWER

Opening theme “Hail to the Chief” is presidential by itself, but with images and commentary it becomes almost ordinary and commonplace. The halting of this music signifies a departure. The second theme is a synthesized contemporary beat used to show that Nader is modern and not tied to traditions that are musically represented by the old “Hail to the Chief.”

FURTHER QUESTIONS

Can you think of current political commercials that use fear, attack, biography, or trust to sell their candidate?

Are TV commercials a good way to get votes? Are they a good way to judge who to vote for? Why or why not? If not, how should voters decide who to support?

Does the amount and source of money spent on campaign commercials pose a problem for the democratic process? Why or why not?

CONNECTIONS

(see thematic listing)

Attack (Nader commercial)

Class / Labor (Nader commercial)

“Commoner” (Nader commercial)

Economic Issues

(Nader commercial)

“Family Man” (Gore commercial)

Fear (Bush commercial)

Foreign policy (Bush commercial)

- Consider and compare the Lyndon Johnson 1964 (doc. #2) “Daisy Girl” TV commercial with the Bush commercial. How are the messages, words, and images the same and how are they different?