

TEACHER GUIDE

2004 DOC. #1: Spin and Counter-Spin: Speeches, Articles, Ads and Web Sites

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The *American Heritage College Dictionary's* definition of the political use of "spin" is "to provide an interpretation of something such as a statement or an event, especially to sway public opinion." The term "spin doctor" ("a person who publicizes favorable interpretations of the words or actions of a public figure, especially a politician") was first coined in the 1984 presidential campaign. The actual practice of spin doctoring, however, is much older. In 1840 the managers of William Henry Harrison's campaign were able to take a remark that was reported in the opposition newspaper as a slam against Harrison and use "spin" to create the "Log Cabin and Hard Cider" theme that swept Harrison into the White House (see 1840 Doc. #2).

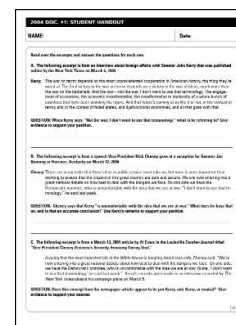
By the dawn of the 21st century the art of spin had become digital and instantaneous. The campaign "war rooms" turned the art of spin from a means of presenting positive views of one's own candidate to a rapid-fire means of presenting a negative interpretation of an opponent's words as soon as they were aired. In the process the truth often got bent and sometimes broken. Internet watchdog groups like spin-sanity.com and factcheck.org were started to keep track of deception on the campaign trail. This led to questions about truth: when does "spinning the story" move from offering a merely different interpretation to an outright lie? And what is the role of the media in reporting and questioning political candidates?

In this lesson you will read two sets of documents that were released in February and March 2004, early in the campaign season. The first set of documents relates to remarks that John Kerry made about international affairs. They include excerpts from an interview Kerry gave to the *New York Times*, a speech by Vice President Cheney where he spins Kerry's words, and a newspaper article that quotes Cheney. The second set of documents begins with an excerpt from a Kerry Internet ad criticizing the Bush administration for job losses, followed by a newspaper article and a posting on factcheck.org's website.

As you read each document look carefully for the work of spin doctors and consider the role of the media in reporting or questioning a candidate's assertions about his opponent.

- > **Distribute** the student worksheets. Have students work individually or in pairs.
- > **Discuss** their answers using the separate Teacher Answer Guide provided with the student handout.

2004 DOC. #1



2004 DOC. #1: STUDENT HANDOUT

FURTHER QUESTIONS

What sources might you use to check the accuracy of candidates' assertions and statistics?

Should the media's role be simply to report on what a candidate says or should it be to check on and to question the accuracy of political statements?

What might be the problem with drawing conclusions based on reading brief excerpts such as those in the handouts rather than the entire texts of the interview, ad, speech or article?

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Following the election the editors of spinsanity.com published a book entitled *All the President's Spin: George W. Bush, the Media and the Truth*. In it they alleged that the media had routinely failed to challenge the intensive spin of the campaign. They also suggested that the level and speed of campaign spin had reached new heights in 2004. "In speeches, media appearances, emails to reporters, Internet videos, and television ads, the candidates attacked and counter-attacked with a speed and ferocity that put the famed 1992 Clinton 'war room' to shame. As one high-ranking Bush campaign official put it, 'It's not just rapid response. It's rapid response six times a day'" (Fritz 222).

CONNECTIONS

(see thematic listing)

Attack
Media Bias
Foreign Policy
Economic Issues