

TEACHER GUIDE

2004 DOC. #4: Swift Boat Veterans for Truth TV Commercial

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Since the war in Iraq was a major focus of the 2004 presidential campaign, it was not surprising that the 30-year-old military records of both candidates drew the media’s attention. Once again the Vietnam War became an issue in a presidential election.

George W. Bush was a senior at Yale in 1968 when he volunteered for the Air National Guard. He served in the Guard until 1973. Some critics claimed that Bush used political influence to secure a spot in the Guard and avoid going to Vietnam. During the 2004 campaign, accusations were also made that Bush had not actually fulfilled his duties while in the Air National Guard. But even greater attention focused on Kerry’s military record when a political action group raised serious questions about the Senator’s military service during Vietnam.

As a senior at Yale in 1966, John Kerry enlisted in the Navy and served in Vietnam, commanding Swift Boats (relatively small but fast patrol crafts) on the Mekong Delta. Between November 1968 and April 1969, Kerry was decorated 5 times, earning a silver star, three purple hearts, and a bronze star. After his third battle wound he transferred to non-combat duty in the U.S. In 1970 Kerry became a spokesman for the group Vietnam Veterans Against the War. He helped to organize an antiwar rally outside the capitol building on April 23, 1971, during which he and other decorated vets threw their medals over the fence in protest. That same day Kerry testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee about “war crimes” committed by U.S. troops in Vietnam. Kerry’s antiwar speeches were bitterly resented by some Vietnam veterans.

In March of 2004, shortly after Kerry was nominated as the Democratic candidate for President, a “527” group calling itself Swift Boat Veterans for Truth was formed. In August the group began airing TV commercials attacking Kerry and his war record. As you watch the first and most famous of these commercials, pay attention to the accusations that are leveled against Kerry.

> **Play** the commercial.

QUESTION **What accusations are made in this commercial against John Kerry? What evidence is given to back up these accusations?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER Kerry lied about his war record.

2004 DOC. #4



Swift Boat Veterans for Truth “Any Questions?” TV Commercial

Video Clip
Length: 1 min.

Swift Boat Commercial Script
on next page

EVIDENCE quotes from Swift Boat Veterans:

Lieutenant Commander George Elliot: “John Kerry has not been honest about what happened in Vietnam”; Ensign Al French: “He is lying about his record”; Medical officer Louis Letson: “I know John Kerry is lying about his first purple heart because I treated him for that injury”; Gunners Mate Van Odell: “John Kerry lied to get his silver star, I know, I was there, I saw what happened”; Lieutenant Jack Chenoweth: “His account of what happened and what actually happened are the difference between night and day”; Rear Admiral Roy Hoffman: “John Kerry has not been honest”; Lieutenant Commander Grant Hibbard: “He lied before the Senate”

SUGGESTED ANSWER **Kerry dishonored and betrayed his comrades.**

EVIDENCE quotes from Swift Boat Veterans:

Lieutenant Larry Thurlow: “when the chips were down you could not count on John Kerry”; Lieutenant Commander Grant Hibbard: “He betrayed all his shipmates”; Lieutenant Sheldon White: “John Kerry betrayed the men and women he served with in Vietnam”; Lieutenant Bob Hildreth: “John Kerry cannot be trusted”

QUESTION **What are the key questions to ask about this, or any, political ad or commercial if one is to figure out the truth?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER (OPTIONAL – write these questions on the board)
-Who made—and who sponsored—this commercial, and for what purpose?
-What techniques did the commercial use to influence the viewer?
-Is the information accurate and believable?
-What is left out of this commercial that is important to know?

> Walk students through each of these questions while providing the following information from the suggested answers.

Swift Boat Commercial Script

speaker unidentified: If you have any question about what John Kerry’s made of, just spend three minutes with the men who served with him 30 years ago....

text: Here’s what these men think of John Kerry.

speaker unidentified: I served with John Kerry.

speaker unidentified: I served with John Kerry.

George Elliot Lieutenant Commander: John Kerry has not been honest about what happened in Vietnam.

Al French Ensign: He’s lying about his record.

Louis Letson Medical Officer: I know John Kerry is lying about his first Purple Heart, because I treated him for that injury.

Van Odell Gunner’s Mate: John Kerry lied to get the Bronx Star. I know. I was there. I saw what happened.

Jack Chenoweth Lieutenant J.G.: His account of what happened and what actually happened are the difference between night and day.

Roy Hoffman Rear Admiral: John Kerry has not been honest.

Adrian Lonsdale Commander: And he lacks the capacity to lead.

Larry Thurlow Lieutenant J.G.: When the chips were down you could not count on John Kerry.

Bob Elder Lieutenant: John Kerry is no war hero.

Grant Hibbard Lieutenant: He betrayed all his shipmates. He lied before the Senate.

Shelton White Lieutenant: John Kerry betrayed the men and women he served with in Vietnam.

Joe Ponder Gunner’s Mate: He dishonored his country, he most certainly did.

Bob Hildreth Lieutenant: I served with John Kerry.

unidentified speaker: John Kerry cannot be trusted.

V.O.: Swift Boat Veterans for Truth is responsible for the content of this advertisement.

text: Paid for by the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth and not authorized by any candidate or candidate’s committee. www.swiftvets.com
Swift Boats for Truth is responsible for the contents of this advertisement.

QUESTION **Who made—and who sponsored—this commercial, and for what purpose?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER Swift Boat Veterans For Truth is a small group of veterans who served on the U.S. Navy’s “Swift Boats” during the Vietnam War. The initial financial sponsor for the group was Houston homebuilder Bob Perry, the biggest Republican campaign donor in Texas (Factcheck.org). The purpose of the commercial was to publicize the group’s criticisms of John Kerry and to undermine his candidacy.

QUESTION **What techniques did the commercial use to influence the viewer?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER The commercial opens with Kerry’s running mate, John Edwards, telling viewers “If you have any questions about what John Kerry is made of, just spend three minutes with the men who served with him.” The commercial levels serious accusations of dishonesty and disloyalty against Kerry through first-person testimony by 15 Vietnam veterans, many of whom served with him. The music creates a dramatic and serious mood. The black and white photos give an historic air to the testimony.

SEE NOTE →

QUESTION **Is the information accurate and believable?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER There are many aspects of this video that lend credibility to the charges. Fifteen different veterans appear in the commercial, all criticizing Kerry. A number of the men state that they served with John Kerry and a few of them are shown near Kerry in a Vietnam-era photo, lending credibility to claims that they were there. It would seem from the video that many of the men who served with Kerry do not trust him. One of the speakers is also a Rear Admiral, a title that lends credibility to his statements.

NOTE

Although there are laws regulating “truth in advertising,” they do not apply to political advertisements or commercials, which are protected by the first amendment.

QUESTION

What is left out of this commercial that is important to know?

SUGGESTED ANSWER

The claims made by the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth were refuted by men who actually served on Kerry's boat, none of whom were shown in the commercial. A 2004 finding by the Navy's Inspector General concluded, "Senator Kerry's awards were properly approved and [we] will take no further action in this matter." Republican Senator and former prisoner of war in Vietnam, John McCain, said of the Swift Boat commercial, "I deplore this kind of politics. I think the ad is dishonest and dishonorable. As it is, none of these individuals served on the boat [Kerry] commanded. Many of his crew have testified to his courage under fire. I think John Kerry served honorably in Vietnam."

It is important to recognize the political context for this commercial. The Swift Boat commercials successfully shifted attention from the controversy over Bush's military record to serious accusations about Kerry's own record in Vietnam. The sponsor for these commercials was a leading Republican donor from Texas with ties to the Bush campaign. The commercials were carefully and skillfully crafted to damage Kerry's chances of becoming president.

QUESTION

How does one judge the credibility of a political ad or commercial and find out the truth?

SUGGESTED ANSWER

Examine the bias and credibility of the source. Look for alternative sources on the same subject. Evaluate one's own bias and point of view. Keep open to new information.

FURTHER QUESTIONS

Which is more important in political advertising, substance or impressions?

Do you think that John Kerry betrayed his comrades when he testified about war crimes committed by U.S. troops in Vietnam?

CONNECTIONS

(see thematic listing)

Attack

From the earliest presidential campaigns the military record of candidates has been a source of vicious attack ads. The 1828 Coffin Handbill, (doc. #3) for example, painted Andrew Jackson as a murderer and war criminal.

In 1988 (doc. #2) Republican organizations aired the famous Willie Horton attack ads that were credited with helping to defeat Michael Dukakis. The TV commercials were criticized for using polarizing racial imagery and words to unfairly attack Dukakis.

ADDITIONAL INFO

The Swift Boat commercial "Any Questions?" was shown in only three battleground states and would not have gained national exposure if it hadn't been picked up by news media across the country and run hundreds of times on network and cable news programs, with no cost to the Swift Boat campaign. Even when the news programs included commentary that some of the statements in the commercial were distorted and misleading, viewers were often left with the impression that Kerry might not be honest or loyal. Like the famous Willie Horton commercials attacking Michael Dukakis in 1988 (a Massachusetts liberal who was running against George H. W. Bush), the impression left from repeated news coverage of the controversial Swift Boat commercial might have been more important than the truthfulness of the commercial (see 1988 doc. #2).