

Daisy: The Dawn of Campaign Ad Slandering

Ad Analysis by Paseo Douglas, English 102

Have you ever seen a commercial for an innovative product, promising customer satisfaction? Like advertisers, politicians have relied on television advertisements to essentially “sell” themselves to fellow Americans by marketing everything from their beliefs and moral values to their political agendas and former achievements in politics. As technology increasingly influences our lives, politicians understand that media outlets can be a powerful and persuasive tactic in gaining voters’ attention, both positively and negatively. Accordingly, politicians devote a significant amount of their budgets to funding such ads, purchasing time slots as to when their target audience is likely to be watching (“Analyzing Media”).

Presidential candidates have long utilized political advertisements in their campaigns. Early ads consisted of a flyer or poster depicting a candidate as being like the average American and a leader of the people. As time progressed, radio announcements served as the new forum for communicating the ideas and changes that politicians wished to achieve. Even so, as more Americans obtained televisions, the concept of television ads was born, giving candidates the opportunity to broaden their audiences. Contenders were able to deliver their views on several specific topics within a sixty-second time span. However, as the fight for the oval office grew over the years, so did trickery and character defamation. Candidates began to slander the credibility and capabilities of their opponents, and campaign ads transformed from Dwight D. Eisenhower’s light-hearted “I Like Ike” into vicious attacks on character such as the “Sellout” ad that was broadcast to degrade presidential candidate John Kerry.

In the election of 1964, the democratic presidential candidate, Lyndon B. Johnson, battled republican Barry Goldwater. During the 1960s, the war in Vietnam was degrading the morale of the American people (Mann 37). The threat of entering into such a conflict was ridiculous to some Americans, while others supported the war, hence the names doves and war hawks. As the election neared, nuclear warfare became a leading cynosure within both campaigns. Goldwater, a reactionary, believed that America should bomb any country who dared to threaten war with us, a concept that ironically contradicted his nickname of “Mr. Conservative” (“Daisy”). Goldwater’s views prompted Johnson and the Democratic National Committee to create “Daisy Spot,” an ad aimed at establishing Goldwater as a war hungry radical who did not have America’s intentions at heart. The ad aired only once on September 7, 1964, at 9:50 p.m. during NBC’s Monday Movie Night showing of “David and Bathsheba” (“Analyzing Media”). Although the advertisement was ultimately pulled because of its controversial nature, the damage was done to Goldwater’s campaign, and he lost the election.

The ad, formally called “Peace Little Girl,” begins with a young girl, between the age of three and four years old, in a meadow of grass plucking petals from a daisy. As the girl removes the petals systematically, she counts to ten, counting out of sequence and repeating some numbers twice. Before she is able to reach the number ten, an ominous male voice interrupts with a military countdown as the lens zooms into the eye of the little girl. When the male reaches zero, a catastrophic explosion occurs, producing a mushroom cloud of fire and debris. The ad ends with presidential candidate Lyndon Johnson pleading for Americans to vote for him on November 3rd.

Within the ad, both visual and auditory elements help convey the message. Although there was no color television in the early 1960s, the black and white images were still capable of producing their desired effects. The little girl stands in a quiet meadow reciting numbers from one to ten, creating an atmosphere of peace and tranquility. Conversely, when the camera zooms into the dark pupils of the young girl’s eye, the peacefulness of the ad is disrupted by the harsh tone of a man and the detonation of a nuclear bomb. The contrast between the calm and serene meadow and the loud and destructive explosion increases the effects of Johnson’s short yet subtle message that Americans should fear a Goldwater presidency.

Pathos is the primary rhetorical element in this ad. The stern words of candidate Lyndon Johnson, along with the nuclear explosion in the background help create an atmosphere of chaos and a feeling of fear in Americans. The age of the young girl, her lack of knowledge, and the daisy symbolize the innocence, purity, and beauty of America. Johnson implies through this advertisement that if the Republican candidate Barry Goldwater is allowed to take office and enforce his radical

and irrational policies, Americans will be faced with constant threats of nuclear war. Johnson insists that the United States needs a conservative leader who will consider every reasonable possibility before declaring war, while simultaneously ensuring that Americans will retain their trust and love for their country.

Responding to the powerful “Daisy Spot,” Barry Goldwater’s campaign released the “Nikita Khrushchev Ad” later in 1964. This one-minute ad begins with a teacher and her students entering into a classroom from opposite sides, uniting in the middle to stand before the American flag. They all place their right hands over their hearts and proceed to recite the Pledge of Allegiance. As the pledge is said, video of the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev is incorporated. Khrushchev declares phrases such as “We will bury them!” and “Your children will be communists!” The advertisement ends with candidate Barry Goldwater establishing his platform of defending America at all costs and requesting the vote of Americans on November 3rd.

Images and visual text dominate this advertisement. Once again, this is a black and white video due to the lack of color television in the 1960s. The ad depicts a classroom of all Caucasian children of different ages coming from opposite sides of the room to unite underneath the American flag. The images of the “all-American” classroom are interspersed with video of Khrushchev’s speech. Khrushchev is depicted as an authoritative and frightening leader, surrounded by men of lesser rank. The American recitation of the pledge contrasted with the Russian speech of Khrushchev allows Goldwater to convey his message of defending America and making our intentions clear, so clear that they need no explanation—just respect.

Like Johnson, Goldwater utilizes pathos in this ad. He strategically has the students enter into the classroom from opposite sides to illustrate the uniting of American people as one nation. The American flag creates feelings of patriotism and loyalty to our country. The images of Khrushchev establish feelings of fear in Americans, who are determined not to be controlled by leaders of Khrushchev’s caliber. Ethos slightly lightens Goldwater’s radical policies by appealing to the fear of dictatorship and establishing himself as a man whom Americans can trust with all matters, especially their freedom. Yet, his argument was not enough. Johnson ultimately won the election, and “Peace Little Girl” became one of the most famous political ads in US history.

The influence of advertising plays a significant role within political campaigns. In spite of Johnson’s victory over Goldwater, his political legacy was littered with complaints of allowing the U.S. to enter the conflict in Vietnam, a war that forever altered the lives of those involved. Like the products sold on commercial advertisements, politicians wish to sell Americans an ideal candidate, not a realistic one.

Works Cited

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