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Kerry is So Very

November 01, 2004

By Barbara Lippert

It's all over now (except perhaps the counting). Regardless of the outcome, as a Democrat, I spent most of the election frustrated, wondering why John Kerry (and the DNC and various 527s) could not get out an ad message that resonated.

Even in the last week, when both camps went with evocative, symbolic imagery (animals!), the DNC faltered. The Bush campaign (and you-know-who approved the message) used footage of wolves as a metaphor for terrorists. Even though it was a defanged version of Reagan's "Bear," it still had power. So the DNC responded with an eagle and an ostrich, and unintentionally left viewers wondering which was which. For whatever reason, an eagle is usually thought of as a Republican bird—and Bush has a face like an eagle. (Plus, Fahrenheit 9/11 had that priceless clip of John Ashcroft singing "Let the Eagle Soar," a song he actually wrote.) Kerry, with his great height, would seem to be a taller bird.


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The Dems never seemed to have a strategy—they just kept changing tactics. Anybody remember "Let America be America"?

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This year, hundreds of millions of dollars were pumped into slice-and-dice, ripped-from-the-headlines, Photoshopped spots. The effect was a depressing sense of political strategists talking to themselves, with keywords taken from their polls and focus groups. Eventually, of course, sheer bombardment works, and some attacks stick. But at what cost? Because traditionally, the relentless attacks also just make viewers tune out.

This year, however, there was too much at stake for voters to remain that weary and cynical. Fresh efforts were made to reach single women and younger voters. (A guy on Comedy Central explained that P. Diddy's "Vote or die" slogan was slightly overdoing it and did not pack the punch of, say, "Vote or get your cable taken away.")

As a medium, is advertising at once too powerful and too flimsy to be used as a primary political tool? If so, what's the alternative? It's no wonder the networks have cut their coverage of the conventions—they've turned into Super Bowl halftime shows without the wardrobe malfunctions; there's no news. One hope is that the vigor of the debates this year will prompt the nets to expand that kind of political programming.

But during what little of the conventions was aired, Kerry erred right off the bat by focusing on "reporting for duty," his Vietnam experience and his swift-boat buds. The Republicans would inevitably attack—and Bush had already conceded that, by serving, Kerry was the bigger hero—so why go back 30 years? It provided a Republican 527 group the rope to make the most effective negative ads of the entire campaign—the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth spots. Then Kerry had to waste time defending his "patriotism."

We could go over the various ads, but they all seemed overly processed and by the book. That's why it's even more frustrating to know much better work did exist—call them the Greatest Kerry Ads Nobody Saw. Indeed, Errol Morris found a way to create surprising and persuasive political ads using just "the eloquence of ordinary citizens," as he puts it.

Morris, who had interviewed United Airlines employees after 9/11 and then gone on to do Apple's "Switchers" campaign, got the idea to do "Switchers" ads showing Republicans who planned to vote for Kerry. He interviewed dozens of people using the Interrotron, his own invention—basically a modified teleprompter with two mirrors and two cameras, so the subject looks at Morris as he or she addresses the camera. It's a very direct setup and one of the reasons The Fog of War was so powerful. The takeaway is that these people are smart and articulate and informed—impassioned about their opinions—and don't need to be hectored or preached to.

Bob Shrum, Kerry's main strategist, passed on the ads without even looking at them so that a 527 would be



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free to run them. MoveOn.org funded production, but in the end, for reasons unclear, three ran only once on Fox, and one ran in Ohio. That effectively neutered them—the strength of a campaign like this is in its collective power, with its subjects linked only by the feeling that Bush had abandoned them. (All 43 ads are up on ErrolMorris.com.)

The spot that ran in Ohio featured Kim Mecklenburg, a sharp-looking businesswoman. "We're in an era where to dissent is considered unpatriotic," she says. "And if there's ever a moment when I'm fearful that I'm going to lose my clients because I speak out about what I believe is right for me, then that's the time that we're in dire need of change. I'm a Republican, and I'm voting for John Kerry."

Another featured Sarah West, an evangelical. "I just don't see integrity," she says of Bush. "I don't see truthfulness. I don't see compassion. I don't see a desire to take responsibility. I'm a Christian. I am against abortion, but I'm voting for John Kerry."

Kenneth Berg, your classic middle-aged white man in a shirt and tie, speaks about Homeland Security: "Money has supposedly been allocated. But I don't see where. We don't have more personnel on the roads or patrolling our streets than we did before 9/11. We have not enlarged police forces. We have not enlarged U.S. Customs. Funding doesn't seem to come through to the states and local government. ... I voted for Bush in 2000. I'm voting for Kerry in 2004."

It's also a modular campaign—the footage can be recut to respond to topical issues, and multiples of one person can run, so the spots are never repeated. The result is proof that the typical pollster breakdowns and stereotypes are plain wrong. Indeed, the spots effortlessly express everything the Kerry camp was afraid to articulate during the campaign.

Imagine: Americans speaking to other Americans about their own lives, in their own words, uninhibited by what politicians worry about. We can only dream—on the soaring wings of ostriches.

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