

# THE POLITICAL PUBLIC RELATIONS BATTLEGROUND: TACTICS AND IMAGES IN THE 2000 U. S. PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the public relations tools that Governor George W. Bush and Vice-president Al Gore used during the 2000 U. S. Presidential Campaign. It also draws some lessons from mistakes that both candidates committed.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The development of a presidential campaign is a relentless job because it can make or break a candidate's reputation. It is a moment when consultants, technicians and media strategists strive to build the candidate's credibility, confidence, charisma, goodwill and knowledge to fulfill the emotional appeal of the audience. This paper analyzes Governor George W. Bush and Vice-president Al Gore's public relations efforts during the 2000 Presidential Campaign. More specifically, the paper examines the public relations tactics that both candidates employed. The analysis is based on a review of various media content and expert opinions, and the authors' observations.

According to Dr. Patrick J. Flood, who participated in twenty-five political campaigns including three presidential campaigns, the campaigns do not actively try to recruit the undecided vote until a few months before the presidential election and up until that time they focus their efforts on strengthening relationships with opinion leaders and interest groups. However, a few months prior to the election each campaign increases its efforts in promoting its candidate through public relations (personal communication, 2001).

Advanced technologies and public relations tools dominated the 2000 Presidential Campaign. Behind the scenes were strategists who worked diligently to craft the candidate's image and sell it to the American voter like a marketed brand. Due to the negative tone of the race and the closeness of the race between the top two candidates, the greatest concern for all advisors was: Which candidate was going to be foremost in the minds of those undecided voters (Lester, 2000)? Therefore, the election race was one of images.

## II. PUBLIC RELATIONS VEHICLES

Gore and Bush's campaign developers used a myriad of public relations vehicles to heighten the public awareness and strengthen the capabilities of their candidates. These vehicles included: press releases, speeches, debates, interviews, personal appearances, news features of candidates' spouses, endorsements, websites, advertising, and national conventions.

**Press Releases.** Each candidate used press releases to notify the media of new campaign developments and to respond to statements and actions of his opponent. Bush's public relations campaign planners, for example, delivered over 200 press releases. A search of his official website reveals countless press releases

about Gore. The following are some of the headlines: "Al Gore's iffy tax scheme," "Al Gore's credibility continues to shrink," and "Al Gore's 'Squandered opportunities' tour: Day four" (Georgewbush.com).

A press release dated July 14, 2000 announced Bush's endorsement by several governors who served in farming states (Georgewbush.com). Bush's campaign continuously gathered public support on both local and national levels, while at the same time casting doubt into Gore's candidacy. One can assume that Gore's public relations practitioners did much the same. However, during the course of writing this paper, attempts to access Gore's campaign press releases and speeches proved fruitless. Two press releases from the Democratic National Committee dated June 15, 2000 and September 26, 2000 served to promote Gore and discredit Bush (Democrats.org). Although Gore's official website was no longer operational, passages from his campaign's press releases could be viewed on Issues2000.org.

**Speeches.** Gore and Bush relied on speeches as an essential part of their public relations campaign. Speeches served as a way to communicate the candidate's message and clarify his previous statements and behaviors. For example, Bush delivered a speech in response to a news story about his drunk driving arrest. He said:

*"It has become clear to America over the course of this campaign that I've made mistakes in my life, but I'm proud to tell you I've learned from my mistakes. And that's the role of a leader - to share wisdom, to share experience with people who are looking for someone to lead."* (George W. Bush, November 4, 2000).

**Debates.** Three televised debates occurred over the course of several weeks in September-October 2000. Each debate was structured around a different format to afford both candidates the opportunity to showcase their strongest delivery whether by traditional podium-style or that of a New England town meeting. These debates were helpful to public relations strategists because they were critical to image development and management. In the first televised debate, for example, Gore passionately defended his stances while simultaneously portraying Bush as someone who he was there to fight. However, to some observers, Bush's apparent helplessness during the debate worked in his favor, as Gore appeared overly aggressive.

The third debate served as a last effort for each candidate to shape his image and convince American voters that he was the winner. Gore promoted himself as a big man with big programs, ideas and information. Bush on the other hand, appealed to the public as a straight shooter with simple ideas and plain vocabulary. Bush read Gore's efforts to overshadow him and yet opted to make himself a little bit smaller, almost puppy-like (Berke, 2000).

Both candidates were heavily scrutinized during the previous two debates and received criticism from political analysts and media personalities. Although opinion polls showed that Gore led Bush in knowledge of issues, many Americans disliked Gore's perceived image as aggressor and bully. While Bush was perceived as incompetent, the public enjoyed his easygoing and polite manner (WashingtonPost.com).

**Interviews.** Some broadcast media outlets conducted interviews with both candidates. These included *The Today Show*, *ABC News - This Week With Sam Donaldson and Cokie Roberts*, and *Larry King Live*. Neither candidate made much of an impression. Both lived up to their media stereotypes of Gore being stiff and Bush being less than intelligent. However, the candidates' appearances on these shows were important as the public had a chance to see how they would react in an uncontrolled environment when confronted with aggressive journalists. An important media appearance for Gore was at a town hall forum conducted by *MTV News* (see MTV.com). Young people addressed issues important to them, such as Napster, censorship, and education. MTV reported that Bush had refused to participate in this session.

Both candidates gave interviews to traditional financial and political media publications including *Fortune*, *Forbes*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Time*, and *The Economist*. By granting an interview to *Rolling Stone* magazine, a music industry publication with a young audience, Gore tried to loosen up his image. The magazine featured Gore on the cover, which was a departure from its usual cover feature of the latest music superstar (see Ananova.com).

**Personal Appearances.** Gore and Bush made use of late night talk shows. Both candidates regularly appeared on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* and *Late Show with David Letterman*. Each one had a one-hour appearance on *Oprah* and *The Rosie O'Donnell* shows to reach daytime viewing audiences as well. Bush was able to reach women through the *Oprah* show - an important strategic move for him as Gore had the lead with women voters.

*"In front of Oprah's average daily audience of millions, mostly the women who Bush needed to win over to his side in the election battle with Democrat Al Gore, the governor said the defining moment in his life was marrying Laura Welch, which he did three months after they met at a barbecue in Midland, Texas. With tears in his eyes, he described the birth of his now 19-year-old twin daughters, Jenna and Barbara, which was difficult for Laura Bush, as 'an unbelievable moment our life.'"* (Yahoo.com)

**News Features of Candidates' Spouses.** The spouses of both candidates reached out to the public through broadcast and print interviews that focused on their backgrounds and viewpoints of their partner. For example, on NBC's *Today Show* Tipper Gore discussed her relationship with her husband, as well as his public persona:

*"If you are talking about the fact that the man is somewhat reserved, yes, he is," she told NBC's Claire Shipman. "That's part of his personality. That's the way he was when he was 17, when I met him. That was something I liked in him, handsome, sexy, a little reserved. Watch out, America"* (Salon.com).

Laura Bush was featured in numerous articles and broadcast interviews. She also made campaign appearances for her husband. The website Iowapulse.com stated,

*"While Mrs. Bush has been active on his behalf in Texas and has traveled the country with him, she was on her own for the first time*

*in a two-day visit to the state where precinct caucuses launch the presidential nominating season. . . In a few selected interviews with news organizations, she was cautious and leery of going beyond her prepared message” (IowaPulse.com).*

**Endorsements.** A standard practice of presidential candidates is to seek endorsements from organizations, unions, and media sources. Both Gore and Bush attempted to solidify the public opinion of their candidacy by seeking endorsements from opinion leaders and influential organizations. Historically, the National Rifle Association (NRA) endorses the Republican candidate and the American Federation of Labor - Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) typically endorses the Democratic candidate. The AFL-CIO is the largest union organization in the United States and actively shapes political elections through volunteer efforts, targeted financial contributions and the massive voting power of its members. While Gore's endorsement from the AFL-CIO went smoothly (Aflcio.org), Bush did not receive the direct endorsement of the NRA due to public criticism of the influential gun lobby group (dallasnews.com).

**Websites.** An increasingly important public relations tool during the 2000 Presidential Campaign was the Internet. Websites were a common feature with both candidates. Not only did each candidate have his own website but numerous unofficial websites were established. There were many pro-Bush and pro-Gore websites, as well as many anti-Bush and anti-Gore websites. The sites influenced voting among users. "Half of on-line election news consumers under age 30 reported that the information they received made them want to vote for or against a particular candidate" (The Pew Research Center, 2001).

**Advertising.** Advertising was perhaps the most controversial tool in the campaign. In one incident, Gore's team accused Bush of using subliminal messages in his latest advertisement. CNN.com noted, "Democratic presidential nominee Al Gore's campaign contacted news organizations about a Republican National Committee (RNC) ad in which the word 'RATS' appears briefly on screen in a spot that criticizes Gore's prescription drug plan. A spokesman for the Texas governor . . . brushed aside suggestions of subliminal advertising as 'bizarre and weird,' while the RNC had no immediate comment" (Crowley, 2000).

**National Conventions.** The conventions have increasingly become televised spectacles that provide the candidates' media handlers one more opportunity to craft a carefully sculpted message for the viewing public (Levine, 1995). Bush and Gore tried to appear politically 'moderate' rather than extreme to satisfy the general public and the majority of members of their parties. By relying on the help of invited celebrities from the entertainment industry as well as well-known and respected political figures, each candidate utilized the coverage of all major television networks to hook a large following of supporters.

### **III. PUBLIC RELATIONS MISTAKES**

In evaluating the public relations efforts of both candidates, it is important to highlight some major public relations artificial attempts that Bush and Gore made during the elections. Bush received much criticism when he made a disapproving comment about a *New York Times* reporter that was accidentally recorded and heard by the crowd. News media picked up the story. For example,

*MTV News* reported, "What both men did not know was that the microphone at the event was live and captured their remarks. . . A clip of the two was broadcast on all television networks. The gaffe once again meant that the Bush campaign found itself 'off message,' defending the remark instead of talking about issues crucial to the campaign's success" (MTV.com).

Gore found himself defending or reclarifying his statements that were labeled as exaggerations during the debates. These "exaggerations" may have resulted from attempts to give short answers on complex issues, such as his participation in the policy-making which made the internet available to the public. Mistakes such as these necessitated the use of various public relations tools to reshape the credibility of both candidates.

#### **IV. CONCLUSIONS**

Many public relations programs have a central message epitomized by a slogan or theme. In some cases, programs may have several messages, possibly one for each audience (Hendrix, 2001). The more unambiguous the message, the more impact it is likely to have on the intended audience. Ambiguous messages were delivered by both candidates. Although as Manier (1996) suggested, the messages of conservative candidates are less likely to appear ambiguous compared to their more moderate and liberal counterparts. Gore, for example, asserted throughout his campaign that Bush's tax plan only benefits the rich (Issues2000.org). During the presidential debate in St. Louis he cited numbers that were greatly disputed. The *New York Times*, for example, argued that Gore's assertions regarding who would be affected by Bush's Tax Plan were misleading if not wrong (Stevenson, 2000).

Both had their share of negative publicity. Bush had to respond to revelations of a drink-driving arrest in 1978, while Gore was accused of trying to reinvent himself. However, Bush and his team were generally more proactive than Gore. They positioned themselves as the lean, ambitious, and determined team that would do whatever necessary to attain their objectives. However, they often reacted with timely press releases, interviews and statements that salvaged Bush's campaign after the supposed subconscious messaging in one of the Republican commercials that spelled out 'RATS' (Reuters.com; Marketingclick.com).

The Bush team utilized the camera more effectively. They realized that images spoke a thousand words. While Gore and his advisors may be regretting that they didn't initially highlight Bush's inexperience and attack that point, Bush is enjoying his new position in the oval office. The story still remains: the most important battleground is the one that relates the candidate to the public.

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