

**Carroll College**

**The Power of the Media:  
Willie Horton and Negative Advertising**

**An Honors Thesis  
Submitted to:  
The Department of Political Science  
Professor Dennis E. Wiedmann, Chairman**

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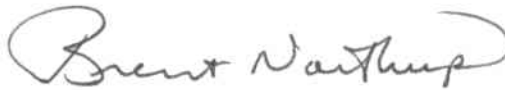
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Author's note: Because each chapter was a separate file on my computer, I was unable to get ascending page numbers to print. For this reason, each chapter begins with the number one.

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## Introduction

The original intent of this thesis was to discuss the media's role within the political process. Along the way, however, negative political advertising seemed to be a more relevant topic considering its proliferation within American politics. The parameters of this analysis stem from the disciplines of Political Science and Communications. The two are inextricably linked when discussing negative political advertising.

The primary medium for political communication seems to be television. Doris Graber states in Mass Media and American Politics that: "The average recent American high school graduate has spent more time in front of a television set than in school..."<sup>1</sup> The extrapolation that can be made lies within the fact that political ads are often inter-mixed with regular programming. To this extent, Graber's analysis seems to indicate that television is an important conveyance mechanism for a host of messages, political and otherwise.

The purpose of this thesis is to discuss the potential impact that negative political advertising has on the individual voter. In the first chapter, I will examine several models of communication. The objective is to formulate an explanation for the potential influence of non-positive political commercial; a criteria of sorts. The goal of this discussion is to preview how the communications process works.

In Chapter Two, I will define negative political advertising. In addition the goals of this advertising will be clarified. The definition will provide the reader with a solid foundation on which to base further analysis of the topic. Included will be a case study of a negative political advertisement, specifically, the Willie Horton commercial of 1988. An analysis, in the light of these models will follow. This will establish the potential influence of negative political advertising on the individual voter. Once this has been established, an examination of the political ramifications will ensue.

Based on the information gained, predictions for the future of negative advertising will be offered. Included within Chapter Three will be suggestions for reform.

The final objective of this examination is to learn the effects of negative advertising. Clearly, given its prominence in political campaigns, non-positive advertising deserves to be discussed. Hopefully, the reader will gain new insights into how negative communication can influence decision making. Related to this is the hope for increasing awareness as to the goals of these types of commercials.

Perhaps if the individual is able to recognize negative advertising as being patently negative, a greater need will arise; the need to seek information about political candidates and their positions.

**End notes for Introduction**

<sup>1</sup>Doris Graber, Mass Media and American Politics  
(Washington DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1980), 2.

## **Chapter One**

### **Communication Theories**

There are several theories within the field of communication that can be profitably applied to the messages contained in negative advertising. It is important to examine these models in that they allow the reader to gain an understanding about the potential influence of negative advertising. Without a grasp of how the communications process works, it is difficult to realize how these commercials attempt to shape thought.

The theories discussed in this chapter tend to be those that are common within the field of communication research. The list is, of course, selective. The reason for this is two-fold. As this thesis is primarily concerned with determining the political significance of negative media commercials, an excess in theoretical research would shift the focus. Secondly, many theories involve extremely complex methodology, analysis, and conclusions. Quite simply, such theories require much knowledge about the nuances in communication. To discuss each individual hypothesis would require a separate thesis in the field of communications.

#### **The Communication Situation**

The first aspect of communication that requires some

analysis are frequently termed elements of communication. This phrase simply refers to the nature of a communication situation. Hybels and Weaver, in Communicating Effectively, define six essential components to a communication situation: sender-receiver, message, channel, feedback, noise, and setting.<sup>1</sup> The sender-receiver, as the name implies, both sends and receives messages. According to Hybels and Weaver, this is a simultaneous process.<sup>2</sup>

The message is: "...made up of the ideas and the feelings that the sender-receivers want to share."<sup>3</sup> In a negative political advertisement, the main message conveyed is that Candidate X is less qualified than Candidate Y. It is important to realize that much of the message that an individual receives is made up of symbols. Karen Johnson-Cartee and Gary Copeland contend that: "People use symbols without questioning or thinking about their origin...We often accept...the symbols created by others without analyzing the merits..."<sup>4</sup> The underlying analysis within this passage is obvious; the messages, comprised mainly of symbols tend to be what the individual gains from a communication situation. Politics, in itself, is a symbol.<sup>5</sup> From politics, individuals may create a host of new symbols in order to appeal to their listeners. The symbolism aspect will be further developed in the case example found in Chapter Two.

The third aspect in Hybels and Weaver's analysis of a communication situation is the channel.<sup>6</sup> Quite simply,

the channel is how the message travels to the sender-receiver. It should be noted that these messages do not have to be verbal, they can be nonverbal as well. For example, the senses can be used in channel communication. How some looks, smells etc. can influence how well the message of that person will be received.

Feedback refers to:"...the response of the sender receivers to each other."<sup>7</sup> For the purposes of this thesis, this concept will refer to possible influence as to candidate choice. It should be noted that negative political advertising tends to be a mediated event. To this extent, immediate feedback to an ad sponsor may not be forthcoming. The feedback that a negative political advertisement attempts to achieve is shift in political opinion (and with it, the vote).

Noise applies in political communication only in that it affects accurate perception of negative political advertisements. Hybels and Weaver define noise as any type of:"...interference that keeps a message from being understood or accurately interpreted."<sup>8</sup> Political advertising tends to be relatively noise free if one does not consider the negative message contained within it. On the other hand, however, noise occurring between the presentation of the advertisement and the sender-receiver is possible. This may distort the message, in that it is not completely heard or comprehended. Noise also exists in the form of singular perception. Recall that the goal of a

negative commercial is to reflect poorly on a candidate's record. To this extent, the singular perception presented is the negative view of the opposing candidate.

Finally, the setting of the situation must be taken into account. The setting is simply where the particular communication takes place.<sup>9</sup> In the case of negative advertising, one setting must be examined: that of the advertisement. Essentially, if the setting is such that it is conducive to adverse influence, it must be taken into account as a possible factor.

The above analysis of communication situations illustrates the need to examine all aspects of a piece of communication. If one does not, it is possible that that individual is being manipulated by something more than words or images. With the factors discussed above in mind, it is necessary to begin an examination of communication theories. This will provide deeper insight as to the ability of negative advertising to effect the individual.

### **The Stimulus-Response Model**

The simplest communication model is based on the idea that people respond to stimuli within their own environment.<sup>10</sup> Hence it is termed, the stimulus-response model. This model assumes that with each communications event, part of that communication is internalized and/or acted upon. Disturbingly, this model relies on the fact that an individual will act upon a part of the communication

that is presented. Reasoning seems to be excluded from this model. What is not clear from this paradigm is whether or not the person will act upon these messages during or following the conclusion of the communication event.

The negative political commercial illustrates the above model. It seems as if another goal of the negative ad is to bombard the public with messages geared at providing a response against a particular candidate. At this point, they seem to be relying on the stimulus-response model. By negatively portraying a candidate, non-positive ads make the point that because of a certain position, this candidate is dangerous to the individual's interests. The expected response is basic: Elect someone who is not dangerous to your interests.

### **The "Click-Whirr" Model**

Social psychologist Robert Cialidini hypothesized that each individual has a set of response mechanisms for action based on fixed action patterns. This phenomena is termed the "click-whirr" response.<sup>11</sup> This idea is especially useful when studying methods of persuasion, specifically related to negative political advertising. The assumption embodied in this principle is that there are certain trigger features which cause the individual to behave in a certain manner. Cialdini indicates that these trigger features can be as simple as physical attractiveness or liking a person. This is not to say that a person is always persuaded by

these two factors. There are many others that may play a role such as setting, language etc. The point that this hypothesis makes is that when used effectively, these trigger features can influence decision making.<sup>12</sup>

A connection can be drawn between this hypothesis and negative advertising. When dealing with the public, politicians may use these techniques to try and influence the opinion of voters. Ludicrous as it may seem, much was made of Michael Dukakis' height as related to that of George Bush in the 1988 campaign. When this is analyzed in terms of Cialdini's theory, the possibility for this to become an influencing factor is very real. Admittedly, this is dependent on whether one is more inclined to believe that tall people make better presidents. If one believes that because of his height, George Bush appears more powerful or physically attractive, a trigger feature may activate. Again, like the stimulus-response model, these trigger features seem to preclude reasoning. Cialdini does suggest, however, that by becoming aware of each trigger feature, we will be better able to critically analyze the methods of those trying to persuade us.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Cognitive Dissonance Model**

In A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance, Leon Festinger hypothesized that "The existence of dissonance, being psychologically uncomfortable, will motivate the person to try to reduce dissonance and achieve consonance."<sup>14</sup> The

essence of this paradigm revolves around the fact that some messages are disturbing to each person's beliefs and attitudes. According to Festinger, those attitudes which cause consternation are dissonant or disruptive. Consonance, conversely, refers to ideas, attitudes, and beliefs that are in agreement with the individual's own ideas.

Festinger continues his analysis of cognitive dissonance by proposing that: "When dissonance is present, in addition to trying reduce it, the person will likely avoid situations and information which would likely increase the dissonance."<sup>15</sup> The theme is clear: The individual is more concerned with the preservation of his/her own beliefs and will avoid and/or reduce those beliefs that are contrary.

With the above knowledge in mind, Festinger proposes that what the person knows about him/herself, his/her behavior, and his/her surroundings (cognitions) tends to influence the opinions of that particular individual.<sup>16</sup> Festinger states: "A person does not hold an opinion unless he thinks it correct..."<sup>17</sup> The author also suggests that the above "elements of cognition" tend to relate in pairs.

According to Festinger, there are three distinct relationships that the pairs of cognitive elements can form: irrelevance, dissonance, and consonance.<sup>18</sup> Irrelevant relations are characterized by two elements having nothing to do with one another. Simply, one element has no bearing upon the existence of the other.<sup>19</sup> An example of this

relationship would be a person who knows that George Bush has been president since 1988, but by the same token knows that the moon has no atmosphere. The point is obvious--irrelevant ideas will not cause dissonance or consonance.

Dissonant relations, on the other hand, provide a completely different meaning. Festinger states: "Two elements are dissonant if, for some reason or another, they do not fit together."<sup>20</sup> Festinger gives several examples of how dissonance may occur. He cites inconsistency within logic, cultural values, difference in opinion, and past experience as major contributors to dissonance.<sup>21</sup> Applied to negative political advertising, one can clearly see that if a commercial can cause a certain level of dissonance within the individual, influence may be possible.

Consonance, by deduction, refers to any relationship that is not irrelevant or dissonant. That is any relationship between two cognitive elements that follows from one to another. Essentially, the consonant statement is in agreement with the cognitive elements of the individual.

The application of this theory was alluded to above. If candidates are able to manufacture advertisements that create dissonance, the potential to influence the voter tends to be greater. In trying to reduce the dissonance, the individual is faced with two overwhelming choices: accept what the negative commercial says about the favored candidate, or rationalize the ad away. This approach,

however, may be counterproductive. The astute individual, recognizing the presence of a negative advertisement may reconfirm his/her beliefs about the opposition. The same is true for the persuader. The persuader may use cognitive dissonance to reinforce previously held beliefs. For example, the persuader would create a feeling of dissonance within the sender-receiver by detailing the negative aspects of a certain viewpoint. Thus the sender-receiver seeks out his/her own views in order to achieve cognitive consistency.

It should be noted that there are no studies proving that the use cognitive dissonance in negative political advertising is effective. The point being made is that the use of this theory in conjunction with non-positive commercials has the potential to influence.

When dealing with the cognitive dissonance approach, it is important to remember the above analysis on the communication situation, particularly the use of symbols. It is possible that symbols can be applied to cognitions in such a manner that many of the individual beliefs could correlate. As previously stated, symbols tend to shape our images and beliefs. It should also stated that Festinger's theory seems to be somewhat hedonistic in nature. To this extent, when one feels dissonance, the natural instinct is to achieve consistency as soon as possible. At this point, we are avoiding pain and seeking pleasure (to a degree).

### **The Social Judgement Model**

The final communication hypothesis that merits discussion is social judgement theory. Formulated by Carolyn and Muzafer Sherif and Roger Nebergall, this concept focuses on how the individual perceives ideas that are in conflict with his/her own values.<sup>22</sup> The development of this theory relies heavily on how individuals perceive events. The authors of social judgement theory indicate that there are two distinct ways of changing a person's beliefs. First, as the name implies, a person judges opposing viewpoints in relation to a latitude of acceptance or rejection.<sup>23</sup> It is this latitude of acceptance or rejection with: "...a group of closely clustered positions that we find acceptable.." that is known as the anchor position.<sup>24</sup>

The second step in the social judgement theory is the actual attitude change. Based on the above comparison step, the individual either accepts or rejects the opinion stated. The degree to which an individual changes a belief, is largely dependent on the: "...degree of ego involvement" with the idea.<sup>25</sup> The difference between Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory and social judgement theory is fairly simple. Festinger's theory assumes, in a large part, that people merely react to a particular dissonant stimulus. This model, assumes the individual is capable of differentiating between separate ideas.<sup>26</sup>

Using the social judgement paradigm, one can easily apply this model to negative political advertising. Like cognitive dissonance, ideas that disturb the individual's cognitive attitudes are presented. According to this theory, instead of making a quick judgement, the voter stops to differentiate between the two competing ideas; he/she does not automatically react. Based on the latitudes of acceptance and rejection, a decision will be made to accept or reject the idea presented. The goal, therefore, is to make a decision not out of distress, but out of reason.

### **Conclusion**

Finally, the communication theories discussed above play a vital role in negative political communication. All, to some extent, have the potential to be influential if used properly. The case example, found in the succeeding chapter, will use these models extensively to demonstrate the potentiality of negative political advertising influence. A communications analysis based on the communications paradigms will be included. The end goal is to explore the the political ramifications that negative advertising could have upon the voter.

## End Notes for Chapter One

<sup>1</sup>Saundra Hybels and Richard L. Weaver, Communicating Effectively, 2nd ed., (New York: Randon House, 1986), 8.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Karen S. Johnson-Cartee and Gary A. Copeland, Negative Political Advertising: Coming of Age (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1991), 1.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Hybels and Weaver, Communicating effectively, 9.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid, 9-10.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid, 10-11.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid, 11.

<sup>10</sup>Don Stacks, Mark Hickson, III, and Sidney R. Hill, Introduction to Communication Theory (Fort Worth: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1991), 158-159.

<sup>11</sup>Robert B. Cialdini, Influence: Science and Practice (Arizona State University: HarperCollins, 1988), 2.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid, 196.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid, 264-265.

<sup>14</sup>Leon Festinger, A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), 3.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid, 3,9.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid, 10.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid, 9.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid, 11.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid, 12.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid, 12-13.

<sup>22</sup>C. W. Sherif, M. Sherif, and R. W. Nebergall, Attitude and Attitude Change: The Social Judgement-Involvement Approach (Philadelphia: W. B. Sanders, 1965), quoted in Don Stacks, Mark Hickson, III, and Sidney R. Hill, Jr., Introduction to Communication Theory (Fort Worth: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1991), 173.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid, 174.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid, 173.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid, 174.

## Chapter Two

### Negative Political Advertising: An Example & Analysis

#### Overview

The focus of this chapter is to discuss a case example of negative political advertising during the 1988 Presidential Election. Considering the 1992 Election is merely months away, this seems relevant for a number of reasons. First, the proliferation of negative advertising will most likely continue during the upcoming campaign. Admittedly, this observation is based on conjecture and retrospective analysis (this will be further discussed and supported in Chapter 3). Second, by assuming the above statement to be true, it is necessary for the voting age population to be aware of the potential influence of the aforementioned commercials. Third, public awareness of this phenomena may lead to a more issue centered campaign experience.

The case example to be discussed is that of the Willie Horton commercial. Simply, this example provides an opportunity to demonstrate the potential influence of non-positive political advertising through the use of the communication models presented in Chapter One. The analysis contained within this chapter will deal specifically with each model, as well as, the analysis provided by Hybels and Weaver on the communication situation. This will give the

reader a deeper understanding of the Willie Horton ad within a communication context, while exploring the political ramifications of non-positive commercials. Several conclusions will be formulated as to the influencing nature of these advertisements.

### **Negative Political Advertising: Definition and Goals**

Before an analysis of this example can commence, it is necessary to understand both the definition and the goals of negative advertising. Negative advertising can be seen from a variety of different positions. First, it is vital that a distinction is made between negative advertising and the mass communications industry. Negative advertising is certainly a piece of the aforementioned industry. It tends to be a "sub-field." To this extent, the term mass media will be excluded. Second, negative political advertising should not be confused with negative portrayal of candidates by the news media. This refers specifically to editorials, tabloid headlines, and newspaper reports.

There are no distinct definitions as to what exactly constitutes a negative political advertisement. For the purposes of this analysis, negative political advertising will be defined as any communication, written, oral, or visual (i.e. television) that tends to reflect negatively upon a candidate's behavior, political record, or personal life, with the intent to shift voter opinion to the alternative candidate.

The objectives that will be discussed relate to this definition. Johnson-Cartee and Copeland cite several objectives for the use of negative political advertising. First, among this list is the need to: "...create awareness of political candidates and their associated issues through dramatization."<sup>1</sup> The key word in this phrase is "dramatization." This word tends to imply that those making use of non-positive political commercials tend to exaggerate the issue stance of the opposing candidate. While this certainly provides information about where an office-seeker may stand politically, it does so from the position of singular interpretation. The motive, then, is to communicate with finality that this interpretation is the best interpretation of an opponent's political views.

A second goal of negative political advertising lies within the prioritization of political issues that reflect: "...the sponsoring candidate's record, public statements, positions..."<sup>2</sup> The analysis behind this statement indicates an attempt at the discussion of issues in a campaign. Remarkably, this type of advertising seems to accomplish its purpose (as will be seen later).

Johnson-Cartee and Copeland also suggest that negative political advertising may be used to advance public awareness, campaign interest, and media coverage.<sup>3</sup> This seems harmless enough, however, as the above analysis suggests, this may lead to singular interpretation of the issues surrounding the campaign and the candidates involved.

Of course, this factor is in the sponsoring candidate's best interest. The assumption being made is: The candidate that controls the issues being discussed has a clear advantage.

The final goal of a negative ad is: "...to ensure that voters' evaluations of the candidates become so polarized that their electoral choice becomes simplified."<sup>4</sup> Logically, this objective indicates that candidates wish to influence voters through non-positive political commercials. In order to do this, they must ensure that the singular interpretation of issues is maintained throughout the campaign. Further analysis suggests that in order to do this, candidates must stay "on the offensive" throughout the campaign. A final comment: It would seem that with the polarization of issues, the individual would not be given an objective (unbiased) view of the facts surrounding certain political positions. I am not suggesting that all negative advertising is untruthful, merely that it tends to be biased in favor of a particular candidate. This follows from the singular interpretation analysis found above.

The above goals tend to relate to the definition of negative political advertising presented in that to accomplish these objectives, candidates often present a negative view of their opponent's political record or positions. Simply, this seems to shift the focus of the advertisement to the individual, not the issue at hand.

### **The Willie Horton Advertisement**

When applied to the Willie Horton ad, the goals of negative political advertising are apparent. In the case of this ad, it should be noted that an independent agency created and distributed the commercial. In other words, the Bush campaign did not sponsor the advertisement. The group, known as "Americans for Bush" was part of the National Security Political Action Committee.<sup>5</sup> The creator of the media-spot, Larry McCarthy, had once been the senior vice-president of Ailes Communications (who was in charge of the Bush campaign).<sup>6</sup>

As a Republican, McCarthy believed that the Bush campaign would begin to distribute negative political advertisements about the Democratic challenger Michael Dukakis.<sup>7</sup> The reasoning behind this evaluation is not clear. Retrospective analysis (speculation) would indicate that McCarthy's perception was based on making George Bush appear to be a strong candidate with plans to improve America. The case of Willie Horton provided an opportune example of a failed crime policy in the state of Massachusetts. While on furlough, convicted murderer Horton apprehended an unassuming couple, assaulted the man and raped the woman. It should be noted that Horton had had ten previous furloughs; it was on his eleventh that the above incident occurred.<sup>8</sup> Obviously, this advertisement was following the objectives detailed above; it was attempting

to polarize the issue in such a manner that made Dukakis appear to be "soft" on the issue of crime.

The official Bush campaign, headed by Roger Ailes, had already used the Horton case to implant the idea that Dukakis supported ineffectual criminal policies. Ailes, however, did not use Horton's police file photograph. According to journalist Martin Schramm, McCarthy's decision to use the photo was based solely on whether Horton appeared to fit the image of a killer. McCarthy recalls: "This is every suburban mother's greatest fear."<sup>9</sup>

McCarthy produced two separate versions of the ad; one for cable networks (omitting Horton's file photo) and another for standard television which included the picture. Because McCarthy lacked the funds necessary to "run the ad", he delivered the "mug shot" video to the producers of The McLaughlin Group, which subsequently aired the commercial and discussed it.<sup>10</sup> After this, the major networks picked up the story and re-aired the advertisement in subsequent features about Campaign '88. Essentially, McCarthy manipulated the news media into doing his work; the networks ran his video for free!<sup>11</sup>

Ailes explains: "We very carefully elected not to show him [Horton] or mention him because we knew we'd be hit with racism."<sup>12</sup> Although the Bush campaign had been shrewd with its use of the Horton case, it is generally known that the campaign was labelled racist.

**Communication Analysis:**

Recalling the Hybels and Weaver analysis from Chapter One, it seems fairly clear that McCarthy wished to influence both the setting and symbolism of the commercial by using Horton's photograph. With regard to the setting, Horton's "mug shot" provides the audience with a stereotypical view of a convicted felon. Not only is Willie Horton an African-American, but he sports a full beard, an "afro" hairstyle, and a "criminal leer." The photograph is clearly accomplishes its purpose.

The symbolism contained within the use of the photograph tends to reinforce the above stereotype. Recall that the goal of the advertisement was to make Michael Dukakis appear soft on crime. Horton's police file picture certainly conveys this message in that he confirms McCarthy's prediction of every mother's nightmare. The symbolism is apparent: Michael Dukakis will allow this type of man to prowl the streets unchallenged.

The noise contained within the advertisement is that of singular perception alluded to earlier. Clearly, the case of one man's violation of furlough does not mean a crime policy has failed; merely that adjustments must be implemented. The channel of this message is also of importance. As indicated in the introduction, much political awareness evolves from the viewing of television. Recall Graber's analysis of each high school graduate

spending more time watching television than going to school. The point being made is that with television as a channel, it is likely to assume, based on McCarthy's distribution of the tape, that viewers were bombarded with this commercial. This type of repetition may have had some impact on the voter.

The feedback aspect of the Horton ad is unclear. The communication models presented in Chapter One provide a basis for examining what feedback may have occurred. It should be noted that no studies were available on the influence of the Willie Horton commercial, or viewers responses to it.

McCarthy's use of the Horton's photograph appears, on the surface to be a rather blatant use of the stimulus response communication paradigm. Consider McCarthy's explanation for the use of the photo; he wanted to reinforce the public's view of how a criminal looks. To this extent, he wanted to strengthen American stereotypes, with regard to crime and the criminal justice system. The analysis of the message above may be applied here as well. To reiterate, the rationale behind this approach is to cause Dukakis to appear "soft" on crime. By focusing the advertisement on Horton's photograph, McCarthy was able to appeal to the fears of the populace. The response sought is for voters to vote against Dukakis.

Cialdini's "click-whirr" mentality is also applicable to the Horton case. Horton's photograph may have served as

a trigger mechanism for the voting age population. Consider the stereotype McCarthy wished to perpetuate: that criminals have a certain appearance. If Horton's picture reinforced this "mind pre-set" the overall response may have been negativity displayed toward Michael Dukakis (ie not voting for him). By associating Horton with Dukakis, McCarthy shrewdly played to the anti-crime sentiment within society. At this point, the "click-whirr" phenomenon activates. The normal response to a trigger mechanism is to react. It is possible that some individuals were influenced to vote against Dukakis based on this ad. Unfortunately, there is no research to support this statement.

Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory can also be applied to the Horton scenario. This may be the most plausible theory with regard to the potential influence of negative political advertisements. Clearly, one of the goals in the Horton ad was to create a feeling of discomfort or dissonance. Consider the possible feelings generated by the Horton photo: revulsion, disgust, etc. This could certainly disturb an individual who has strong attitudes and beliefs in the Democratic Party. The analysis behind this point is, that, if the individual voter has strong ties to the Democrats and their approach to crime policy, the Horton commercial may be a direct challenge to those beliefs. Simply, the generalization that occurs is that since Michael Dukakis' crime policy failed, this is a reflection on the policies of the Democratic Party as a whole. Essentially,

this negative political advertisement may pose a challenge to the individual's belief structure. Quite clearly, a dissonant relationship has been initiated.

At a deeper level, the Horton ad certainly could cause feelings of consonance among conservative Republican voters. Because this commercial is highlighting the fact that Dukakis is soft on crime, these voters may see this as a reflection of their belief that George Bush is the best candidate for the position of President of the United States. Essentially, this ad has the potential to reinforce the mind pre-sets of Republican voters.

The reactions of each individual group would most likely be different. The Democrats, according to Festinger's theory, would tend to want to reduce and/or avoid the advertisement. To this extent, the most logical assumption of behavior would be to ignore the ad, or change the channel on the television. Republicans, on the other hand would more than likely watch the ad and applaud it as a reflection of their candidate's commitment to less crime. The independent voter, on the other hand, may respond in the manner of both Republicans and Democrats. By the same token, because independent voters are unencumbered by party affiliation, they may be more inclined to use the social judgement model of communication. Clearly, the elements of cognition that Festinger discusses are challenged by negative political advertising. The point being made is that communicatively, it is easy to see how a negative political advertisement could influence voters.

The social judgement paradigm works in conjunction with cognitive dissonance. As stated in Chapter One, the difference in this theory is that it assumes the capacity for rationality, meaning that an individual is able to differentiate between two competing viewpoints. Unlike cognitive dissonance, however, this model does not suggest that individual chooses to reduce discomfort or dissonance. Rather, the voter may view the commercial, regardless of party affiliation, and decide, based on the latitudes of acceptance and rejection whether the message presented is in conflict with his/her values.

If the Horton ad falls within the latitude of acceptance, it is possible to assume that the anchor position of that individual is near that of an anti-crime policy. On the other hand, if the individual rejects the commercial, it may be based on the knowledge that Michael Dukakis' crime policy did not entirely fail and that the Horton ad is an attempt to slur the Democratic party as being unable to deal with crime. This presents an interesting dichotomy. In the first case, the individual's anchor position is that of non-tolerance for crime. In the second case, the anchor position is the Democratic party. This apparent inconsistency is resolved by the individual perceptions of each voter (see Chapter One).

### **Impacts of Negative Political Advertisements**

During a hearing before the House Subcommittee on

Telecommunications and Finance, Federal Communications Commission Chairman Alfred C. Sikes stated: "Political advertising in its best form plays an important role in our overall electoral process. It strengthens our democratic institutions and provides important checks and balances."<sup>13</sup> To this extent, political advertising plays a vital role in the political process of the United States. The key to this statement lies with the idea that this only occurs when political advertising is in its "...best form..."<sup>14</sup> The extrapolation that can be made is that negative political commercials do not represent the best form of political advertising. Based on this notion, one could assume that negative advertising represents an anathema to politics; it provides no checks or balances, merely harmful, distorted rhetoric. It should be noted that all political advertising is, in a sense, distorted. This is due, in part, to the singular perception that is presented by the sponsoring candidate. If this is true, negative political advertising could be viewed as harmful to the politics of this nation.

According to Robert Erikson, Norman Luttbeg, and Kent Tedin, the climate of political advertising has been elevated to a glorification of a candidate's personal image.<sup>15</sup> This tends to correlate with the goals of negative advertising presented earlier in this chapter. The candidate wishes to promote his own view of politics and to do so, he/she must have a good personal appearance. To this

extent, the candidate must insure that his own appearance, both politically and physically, is superior to his/her opponent's.

To achieve the above result, the actual job of campaigning is transferred to the media consultant.<sup>16</sup> The final objective of this strategy is that politics tends to become image-based as opposed to issue-based. The danger in this type of advertising is clear; if one elects an individual based on a positive image put forth by negative political advertising, the result may be an incompetent leader in a high governmental office. Erikson (et al.) concurs with the above statement<sup>17</sup> It is at this point that Cialdini's "click-whirr" model may activate (recall that a possible trigger mechanism may be physical attractiveness). Essentially, instead of looking to a candidate's ability to govern, the public becomes more concerned with his/her power suit.

Another consequence of negative political advertising is the increasing costs candidates must pay for "air time."<sup>18</sup> Political Scientist Larry Sabato agrees with Erikson et al.'s opinion that costs of elections have risen. Sabato, however, attributes this cost directly to the proliferation of the media consultant.<sup>19</sup> Sabato furthers his argument by suggesting that the political consultant has a mutually beneficial relationship with the press. The implication of this argument lies within the power of the media consultant to influence political

decisions after the election is concluded.<sup>20</sup> The point Sabato seems to be making is that consultants present negative political advertisements. These commercials are analyzed by the media who in turn air them in stories about the negative ad. This was exactly the case in the Willie Horton ad. Sabato's solution to this problem is for a strengthening of the political party structure and increased regulation of and attention paid by the news media to the influence of political image consultants.<sup>21</sup>

Michael Schudson argues in Advertising, The Uneasy Persuasion, that advertising in general is a type of propaganda, designed to sell something (or someone) to the American public.<sup>22</sup> When applied to negative political advertising, one can easily see the correlation. The key to Schudson's argument is the word "propaganda." Essentially, this term connotes negativity in persuasion. The general idea is that the voter is being manipulated into believing what the negative ad wants him/her to believe. Again, this tends to violate Sike's idea that advertising is an important check and balance in society. Clearly, propaganda can distort even the best form of advertising.

There is evidence to suggest that negative political advertising is increasing. Curtis Gans, in a hearing before the Senate Subcommittee on Communications stated: "What is different is not the type but the volume...they are now the staple of all campaigns."<sup>23</sup> Congruently, Stephen Bates and Edwin Diamond suggest that the reason for this increase

stems from the need a candidate has for "media" exposure.<sup>24</sup> Essentially, these authors are indicating that candidates are relying on negative campaign advertising to make their message known. The previously discussed problem of singular interpretation again arises.

The very nature of the complex politics within the United States seems to make the proliferation of negative advertising all the more likely. As indicated above, in order for a candidate to get attention, he/she must advertise. It is my suggestion that the reason negative advertising exists in such a massive form is because it is simple to use. If one wants to win elective office, one way to beat an incumbent is to point out where the incumbent has failed his constituents.

Realistically, advertising is one way in which to reach individuals within the United States. Graber's analysis suggests that American high school graduates watch more television than they spend in class.<sup>25</sup> This fact alone would suggest that negative political advertising may be effective. Grass roots campaigning has been virtually forgotten. In its place, non-positive political commercials have arisen.

The above analysis indicates several political consequences of the continued use of negative advertising (ie image-based politics as opposed to issue-based politics). This one effect alone poses a challenge to the American voter. That challenge is to look beyond negative

political advertising and realize its possible effect upon each of us. Quite simply, the American public must shy away from these ads as a source of information. Perhaps instead these commercials should serve as an indicator to the issues voters need to address. The challenge of government is difficult. The process does not need to be complicated by a reliance on image based politics.

## End notes Chapter Two

<sup>1</sup>Karen S. Johnson-Cartee and Gary A. Copeland, Negative Political Advertising: Coming of Age (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1991), 25.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Martin Schram, "The Making of Willie Horton," The New Republic 202 (28 May 1990): 17.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid, 19.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Congress, House, Committee on Energy and Commerce, Campaign Advertising: Hearing before the Subcommittee on Telecommunications and Finance, 101st Cong., 2nd sess., 2 October 1990, 10.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Robert S. Erikson, Norman R. Luttbeg, and Kent L. Tedin, American Public Opinion: Its Origins, Content, and Impact (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1980), 140.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid, 141.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid, 140.

<sup>19</sup>Larry Sabato, "Political Influence, the News Media and Campaign Consultants," PS: Political Science and Politics 22 (March 1989): 16.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid, 17.

<sup>22</sup>Michael Schudson, Advertising, The Uneasy Persuasion: Its Dubious Impact on American Society (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1986), 5.

<sup>23</sup>Congress, Senate, Committee for the Study of the American Electorate, Campaign Advertising Act: Hearing before the Senate Subcommittee on Communications, 101st Cong., 1st sess., 2 August 1989, 61.

<sup>24</sup>Edwin Diamond and Stephen Bates, The Spot: The Rise of Political Advertising on Television (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1984), 360.

<sup>25</sup>Doris A. Graber, Mass Media and American Politics (Washington, D. C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1980), 2.

## Chapter Three

### Predictions for the Future of Negative Advertising

The preceding chapters have dealt extensively with the potential of negative political advertising to be an effective weapon of political influence. Based on the communication models, the possibility for influence was established. Following, the discussion of the political implications, specifically image based politics, provided an explanation of the political ramifications of non-positive commercials. These two factors, when combined present a fairly negative view of negative political advertisements. Essentially, the goal, based on the above indicates a predisposition toward persuasion through singular perception.

Considering the state of technological advance within the United States, negative commercials will, most likely continue to proliferate. This is largely due to the role that they play in providing information about possible office seekers. George Will commented: "...negative ads are infuriating precisely because they use something technically true in a fundamentally dishonest way."<sup>1</sup> Will's argument seems to support the definition offered in Chapter Two. The fundamental problem with negative advertising is that in order for politicians to take a stand and make their positions known, they must use these types of commercials.

The Election of 1992 is certain to see the continued use of non-positive political ads. Journalist Stuart Elliot writes: "...there is a widely shared belief that they [negative ads] work, based on their track record in 1988..."<sup>2</sup> Certainly the possibility of negative advertising to somehow affect the voter cannot be overstated. This is to say that the potential for influence, based on the models presented is significant. Sadly, this indicates that voters turn to negative ads as a source of information about campaigns and candidates. The crime of the matter lies in that the voters are accepting another's perception instead of formulating their own.

The question that arises is: Why use negative ads? Bill Hillsman, president of Northwoods Advertising, is quoted as believing that the reason for the increase of non-positive political commercials lies within the level of political satisfaction in society. "The less voters think of their elected officials, the more they respond to attack themes."<sup>3</sup> The rationale behind this statement implies that dissatisfaction tend to cause a vulnerability to negative advertising. The suggestion embodied here is that commercials that negatively portray candidates capitalize on the emotional nature of the average American voter. This relates to the stimulus-response, "click-whirr", and cognitive dissonance models presented in Chapter One.

Considering the placement of the two parties in the upcoming election, it is plausible to assume that much

negative advertising will originate from the Democratic party. Frankly, the Democrats have their own "wimp-factor" that they need to overcome. The Democrats have lost six of seven bids for the presidency, three have been consecutive. Essentially, the goal of the Democrats will most likely be to aggressively counter negative notions of their policy stances. To an extent, this may be considered reactive.

From the outset, this thesis has taken a primarily dim view toward the useage of negative advertising in the realm of politics. This is essentially based on the idea that advertising is biased, repetitious, and irritating.<sup>4</sup> The difficulty that recurs is that the proliferation of these commercials seems to stress image over substance. In The Media and the People, Brown and her colleagues indicate that advertising often confuses more than it clarifies, while focusing on "inconsequential values" and images.<sup>5</sup> With this in mind, a positive view toward these ads is difficult.

The reality, in spite of the negativity, is that advertising in general is needed to further a candidate's campaign. If one does not advertise, one risks not being able to provide a clear issue stance and thus having that candidate dismissed. The initial objective of advertising is certainly noble; however, as indicated by previous analysis issue discussion is replaced by image concerns. Lau, Smith, and Fiske conclude that if a politician is able to control information in such a manner that only his/her solution to a particular policy issue is publicized, that

interpretation has the potential to be persuasive "...regardless of their [voters] general political beliefs."<sup>6</sup>

Another query then manifests itself: If negative political communication has the potential to influence the decision making process, how does the individual voter circumvent this process in order to make a rational political decision? Lau et al. indicates that voters who "...actively think about the assertions offered them..." have an advantage over those who do not.<sup>7</sup> This statement tends to imply that actual thought about an issue helps overcome the views of politically biased advertising.

Essentially, the only way to overcome the limitations on knowledge is for the individual to research the issues for him/herself. This by itself takes dedication and time. To undertake this task is arduous, yet the end result is an informed choice. It should be noted that a clearly objective viewpoint is hard to find. The individual voter must sift through many interpretations of the same event in order to comprehend its meaning.

The Election of 1992 will be closely scrutinized. At issue is the continued leadership of the United States by a Republican incumbent. The economy, as of this writing, is in a recession and the national debt remains in excess of one trillion dollars. Certainly these issues present challenges to those in government. These issues will most likely be prominent in the next election, yet they require

serious instead of superficial discussion in order that proper solutions may be formulated.

At this point, it is necessary to re-evaluate the position of negative advertising within American society. First, regulation should be imposed that requires a candidate to focus on solutions to problems instead of belittling his/her opponent. This is not to say that a candidate may not disagree with his/her opponent's issues, merely that they may not transform a person's politics into a personal attack. Idealistic as this may seem, it would allow for a more objective evaluation of candidates based on their solutions and abilities. Essentially, instead of judging an office seeker on his/her image, the voter would be able to employ cost/benefit analysis on the issues presented.

A second solution to the negative advertising anathema would be to restrict advertising to members of the official campaign staff. As the Willie Horton commercial illustrates, the official campaign was blamed for the racist tactics of an independent agency. Blame should have been focused on the sponsors of the ad instead of the Bush campaign.

Perhaps the entire thrust of this thesis is a call for honesty within politics and its portrayal. This in itself is fairly unreasonable. Human nature precluded that this will ever be fully achieved. Objectivity when dealing with political issues is essential to making an informed

decision. The population needs to be challenged to re-examine their beliefs...to know why they hold those particular values.

Another contention embodied in this seemingly endless debate lies in the models of communication presented in Chapter One. Essentially, these are merely ideas about how individuals are influenced and persuaded. None of these theories has been proven to be absolutely correct. Each, in its own right, contributes to a deeper understanding of political communication, specifically, advertising. Until a model is found that is true for all communication situations and its participants, we must content ourselves with the only real fact of communication: We cannot not communicate.

Finally, it is apparent that negative advertising will remain an integral part of the American electoral process. Its versatility in reaching a wide audience makes its continued use not only profitable but (unfortunately) necessary. Until Congress adopts legislation to deal with this patently negative behavior, it will continue to exist. The relative dissatisfaction of the American voter perpetuates this process. If more people were interested in the politics of this nation, negative advertising would eventually die. Given our complex society, however, this does not seem likely.

### End notes Chapter Three

<sup>1</sup>George F. Will, "The Pollution of Politics," Newsweek 114 (6 November 1989): 92.

<sup>2</sup>Stuart Elliott, "Advertising: Negative Ads May Pave Road to White House in '92," The New York Times 141 (5 November 1991): 19.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Edwin Emery, Philip H. Ault, and Warren K. Agee, Introduction to Mass Communications (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1970), 141.

<sup>5</sup>Charlene J. Brown, Trevor R. Brown, and William L. Rivers, The Media and the People (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1978), 395.

<sup>6</sup>Richard R. Lau, Richard A. Smith, and Susan T. Fiske, "Political Beliefs, Policy Interpretations," Journal of Politics 53 (August 1991): 668.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

## **Conclusion**

This analysis has focused much attention, communicatively and politically, on the subject of negative political advertising. Interestingly enough, this phenomenon, is likely to continue unabated in election campaigns.

Through the use of communications models, I established the fact that non-positive advertisements have the potential to influence the individual voter. Frankly, each model gives the reader a bit more insight as to how the communication process works. It is my hypothesis that negative campaign commercials tend to make use of all four paradigms presented. The one that is least used, however, would appear to be the social judgement model. Simply, this model tends to imply that the individual has the ability to use his/her rational faculties in order to make a decision. To this extent, this model tends not to fully serve the purposes of negative ad sponsors. It should be noted that much of a communication situation is dependent on each person's perception of the event, so to, is the use of each model.

The accompanying examination of the political ramifications focused on the ability of the non-positive ad to shift away from issue discussion and concentrate on candidate image. As previously discussed, this may lead to incompetence in office. An interesting dichotomy arises

during this discussion. It is clear that negative advertising attempts to influence the voter, yet it also serves to inform the voter of the issue stance of the opposing candidates. Those who do not advertise risk having their campaigns labelled ineffective. The dichotomy is that these ads are necessary and negative at the same time.

The Willie Horton commercial represents one example of negative advertising. Because of its recent use, it serves as guide as to how future ads will appear. The unfortunate aspect of this commercial revolves around the fact its creators primary goal was to reinforce the stereotypes held by the populace. A large appeal to emotion was made...it is entirely possible that the Willie Horton ad had some effect on the American voter.

The future of non-positive advertising seems to be obvious: It will continue based on the perception that it works. The key to this statement is "perception." There are no studies that indicate that these commercials have any type of influence on the American voter based on the models presented.. It has been my contention throughout that the potential for such influence certainly exists. No studies are available to strengthen this analysis.

The beginning point for dealing with the aforementioned media device is for the voter to recognize the ability of a negative political ad to influence. With this knowledge, the individual may seek out independent sources of information to gain further clarification of campaign

issues. No source will be completely without bias; the challenge to the voter is to sift through various interpretations of the issues and make an informed choice based on his/her own interpretation. The end result, hopefully, is an informed decision.

Finally, negative political advertisements tend to capitalize on the emotions of the voter. Unfortunately, emotional decisions are not always rational decisions. It is my hope that voters will become more aware of negative commercials and their possible influence. Only then will those in politics discontinue their use, turn away from image and back to issues.

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