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# Republican Narrative in Presidential General Election Campaigns Since 1984

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Running Title: Republican Narrative in Presidential General Election Campaigns Since 1984

Republican Narrative in Presidential General Election Campaigns Since 1984

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment  
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# Chapter 1

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## **Narrative- The Broadest Element of Political Communication**

Political narrative is an abstract concept. Political parties or organizations never publish or explicitly communicate them. Rather, these groups implicitly hint at narratives that they build over time (Skworonek 1993). Political narratives are more or less explanations of the world and the political order. They attempt to communicate the general nature of politics and governance. They affirm policy attitudes and political commitments in light of values, held by individuals in the party or political movement they are coming from, that are posited to represent the most important, positive, and historically deeply held values of society. Narratives also commonly contain an appeal to membership by recruiting likeminded individuals. Those who agree with what the narrative represents are compelled to join the ranks. This type of call to join also provides a line of distinction. It allows the polis to identify a party with certain things, and not others. If they do not agree, members of the populace are free to choose other parties. Since the goal of a narrative is to compel the largest number of people possible to join a cause, broadness is a necessity. All together these factors seem to be necessary elements of narrative.

Despite their practical intangibility, political narratives are palpable. They can be identified when trends in messaging are critically analyzed as a whole. This process is necessarily controversial because its product cannot be undisputedly proven to exist. Despite this shortcoming, an attempt at defining political narratives must be made to gain deeper understanding in many facets of political communication and, in this context, campaign communication. In this endeavor, the intellectual leap must be made at present in regards to the American Republican Party narrative that has been utilized, for all intents and purposes, since

1980. This narrative will serve as a basis of this work. In all, it seems that the Republican narrative that affirms the identity of the Party with respect to values can be summed up in a few sentences. In abstraction, it follows something like this: “The Republican Party, its constituents and candidates, represent a few guiding principles. It believes in limited government. This comes from the conviction that the individual is at the center of American success. Individuals, including those not yet born, tend to be hardworking, virtuous, based on their traditional (read Judeo-Christian) values, and the creators of innovation in the economy and positive development in communities. This has been shown throughout American history in its points of growth. A government that is too large, invasive, or expensive in either of these realms unnecessarily burdens the individual, and thus discourages innovation and positive change. Thus, Republican government seeks to allow individuals to be free in the market and their community to encourage their success. The Party also represents pride in America. The party recognizes that America is a special place (read favored by God) of economic and social meaning. Thus, the Party, and its attached persons, have a deep commitment to America’s symbols (the flag, Pledge of Allegiance, the Constitution, etc.) and ideals (freedom, liberty, etc.). These concepts represent what it is to be American and are thus sources of great pride. The Party supports protecting these symbols and ideals both at home and abroad. At home, this means promoting certain legislation that limits government and encourages personal and economic growth. Abroad, this involves taking proactive steps to protect American interests, and acting decisively to help people aspiring to be free to reach their goal.” This, like all successful narratives, is necessarily broad. It seems to be able to explain the Republican position in most realms of political discourse. The economy, social issues like civil religion, abortion and free speech, and foreign policy are all covered in blanket terms by this narrative. It also has crucial appeals to historic and traditional values of the

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American people. Comparative judgments of this narrative are also important, specifically in relation to a Democratic narrative. It has been argued that Democrats have no defined narrative. This will not be argued here, but there is near universal agreement that any Democratic narrative is far weaker than the modern Republican narrative described above. With a clearly established narrative that encompasses all political commitments, the Republican nominees for president stand as ideal case studies in observing how narrative shows itself, through complicated means, in campaign communication.

### **Theme- A Narrower Realm In Political Communication**

Narrative has a very real impact on politics in the United States. Of most importance in this work, political narrative stands to inform broad campaign themes utilized by candidates for president during their general election campaigns. These broad themes vary for each candidate and can be numerous, but they are all essentially born of narrative. Candidates create themes by extracting sections of the narrative that they can spin in ways that fit their specific personal beliefs, convictions, résumés, electoral conditions, etc. Themes will explain aspects of the political world as the candidate sees it. Candidates create themes that, when they are compelling, are married to the narrative in important manners like history, values, and terms of identity. Compelling themes may also include the candidate's personal story into their enumeration. Like narratives, themes are also implicitly drawn. Finding a candidate's broad themes takes knowledge of the overall communicative effort of the campaign. In addition to positively reinforcing the candidate, themes can also subtract from the opposition candidate by utilizing the lines of distinction the narrative implicitly provides. Themes can go negative in this way by arguing that Democratic candidates do not embody the values that Republicans represent. Essentially, these broad themes are one level of greater specificity than the narrative they are

based on. For Republican presidential candidates, these themes represent their selection of parts of the narrative that they wish to enumerate in their own, more specific terms.

## **Messaging Objectives and Constraints- The Next Step**

From these themes flows the next level of specificity in campaign communication. Here, this level will be referred to as “messaging objectives.” They are essentially topics that the campaign will focus upon. These messaging objectives are chosen early on based on the political climate, the themes available, and personal dispositions of important players. There are only three real realms in which messaging objectives exist: ideology, issues and character (Benoit 2006, 28). Though somewhat related, and often confused, messaging objectives are conceptually separate from themes. Messaging objectives simply indicate an argument the campaign will try to make. In 2004 for example, the Bush campaign tried vigorously to show that George W Bush was a better wartime leader than John Kerry (Institute 2006). The selection of this as a messaging objective does not necessarily assert, as a theme would, any argument about the nature of the political world. Messaging objectives simply indicate major points of emphasis for campaign messaging. While messaging objectives certainly can, and if they are to be compelling should, be linked to theme, they are necessarily separate. Messaging objectives may be impacted by the current political order around the candidate. The campaign will want to borrow from common messaging objectives of politicians generally (Skworonek 1993, 4). Another guide to the selection of messaging objectives is the role a candidate will attempt to fulfill. If the candidate is running on a reconstructive basis, he will offer a break with the past and attempt to change policies and actions in a significant manner. If they are attempting to succeed an unsuccessful president from their party, candidates can take a role of disjunction. In this mode, they will offer a tweak of the current party policies. Candidates may also take on a messaging

objective of articulation if they are coming after a successful president of their own party. They will keep in the messaging objectives of the old order but attempt to innovate them. A preemptive messaging objective can be taken up when a candidate is in the party opposite of that in power. They will communicate that the country is headed in the wrong direction and that direction must be changed (Skworonek 1993, 39-43). Messaging objectives are enumerated throughout the campaign in all communication but are most often and obviously conveyed in events like stump speeches and convention acceptance speeches (Benoit 2006, 88). In these events, the candidate is attempting to build support in broad and overarching terms. The candidate also has time to speak and will not be cut off.

The messaging objectives available to the campaign are constrained by several factors. The creativity and preference of campaign advisors and the candidate plays a key role in the early decision-making. Messaging objectives will not be chosen if people like the candidate, the campaign manager and heads of advertising and media relations are dead set against them. The media agenda and willingness has a similar effect. If the messaging objective will not play in the media, then it is not really worth it for the campaign to go in that direction. Moreover, if a messaging objective is gaining high amounts of media coverage, the campaign may emphasize it to a greater extent. Surveys of voters also carry significant weight in the selection of messaging objectives. Campaigns will choose messaging objectives that are salient to voters, that will impassion them. The opponent's willingness to talk about the issues is a final constraint. Though the scholarship is not completely clear on this, it seems that this could have divergent effects. Maarek argues that without an opponent to respond to messaging objectives and cits of communication, there is no point in conveying them (52). However, if an opponent does not respond, the campaign can continue to harp on an unresolved issue. The law and order

messaging objective (embodied in the prison furlough issue) in 1988 was continually ignored by the Dukakis campaign. This allowed the Bush camp to undermine him more and more over time.

There are some potential dangers in messaging objective selection that seem to be meaningful. If the candidate is too aloof to the selection of messaging objectives, it may undermine his genuine qualities in expounding them. If the candidate seems disinterested in a major messaging objective, it will turn voters off. Candidates thus should hold the ultimate veto in messaging objective selection. Campaigns must also ensure that the number of messaging objectives is low and that they are harmonized. Voters need to be able to see that a candidate stands for a small collection of suggestions. If the messaging objectives are disjointed, then the candidate seems to stand for nothing at all (Maarek 2001, 53). Messaging objectives must also be framed properly, particularly to voters that could vote either way. Framing is executed by using logically equivalent words to make a policy seem different in a superficial way (Druckman 2004, 671). Frames essentially serve as bridges between the elite who select the messaging objectives and the target populous. The campaign must use framing to compel voters to see messaging objectives in light of certain considerations that make the candidate more viable (Nelson et al 1997, 227). If the campaign does not actively make sure the messaging objectives are understood in terms useful to the campaign, there is a risk that they can be construed in a deleterious way.

Clearly this level of campaign communication is far more specific. Messaging objectives come in a variety of forms. Most importantly, they are not necessarily tied to themes, and by association the narrative. Messaging objectives are things that the campaign wants to sell to the electorate through repetition. Integration of themes that connect to the narrative will also be very helpful for the campaign in pitching these objectives. Themes are the best way to ensure that the enumeration of messaging objectives is compelling. If campaigns can tie its messaging

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objectives to theme, thus the narrative, voters can see the arguments the campaign is making in broad terms of American identity, history and values.

## **Strategy- A Constraint All Its Own**

Important to consider while formulating messaging objectives is the way that they fit into strategies that the campaign believes will give the candidate an edge in the election. There are several very general strategies that are important to consider when selecting and distributing messaging objectives and bits of communication. Different types of messaging objectives may be useful to executing each of these strategies successfully. The first broad strategy is to “increase the election day turnout of voters who prefer that candidate” (Benoit 2006, 51). This is otherwise known as mobilizing the base. This strategy focuses on getting every known supporter to the polls. This is one type of “maintenance communication” to keep supporters involved (Maarek 2001, 46). This can be accomplished through any number of messaging objectives and specific forms of communication. The campaign can acclaim their candidate to stress the importance that he be elected to lead the country. Attacking the opponent can also serve to mobilize the base. If the campaign can successfully argue, for example, that the election of the opponent would result in an inept person in office, or that a policy suggested would undermine the economy, then the base of support will mobilize. More broadly the campaign may cast the election in stark terms of direction for the country. If the base is convinced that the opponent is advocating for a deleterious turn to the country, those voters will come to the polls based on the high stakes communicated. The ability of the campaign to integrate themes into these messaging objectives will obviously vary. Candidate acclaims can be connected to theme if the campaign is skilled at utilizing theme. Character attacks are not well suited for thematic emphasis because of their very specific nature. Attacking candidate policy can be connected to theme in this

strategically significant way if the campaign can relate his policy to themes against Democratic values provided in the narrative's lines of distinction.

The campaign may also choose to go for purely undecided voters. This strategy will actually be what most campaigns focus on due to the relative ease of getting these voters and the common statistical necessity of doing so (Benoit 2006, 51). Most of the time, these independent voters are actually those least interested in politics. Thus convincing them to choose the desired candidate and to actually vote is a challenge. In messaging, it seems there is no set formula to getting these votes but a few strategies seem relevant. Focusing on messaging objectives of the economy has worked in the past because improving economic conditions is a bipartisan aim. Thus, if the campaign can convince the electorate that their candidate is better with the economy and focus on themes of their beliefs, they can capture many of these voters (Maarek 2001, 46). Thematic integration will actually be important due to the low interest of these voters. If the messaging objective is understood by voters in broad terms of American identity, provided in the theme, it becomes much more compelling. Playing on character may also be important. Since these voters are generally disinterested in politics, they may not be interested in the issues. Further, some argue that people now choose a candidate based on how much they seem to feel the voter's pain (Medhurst 1996, 23). Thus if the candidate can connect to these independent voters on a personal level, they may have success in capturing their votes. This will force the campaign to focus on and develop themes that include a personal story and fit them into the broader narrative in the areas of American success and values.

Some part of campaign strategy may also revolve around capturing votes from the opponent's party. Those with lukewarm support for their party's candidate can actually constitute a sizable portion of voters ranging from 14 to 27% (Benoit 2006, 52). This is a

difficult task because people tend to vote within their party unless there is a compelling reason not to. Messaging objectives that focus on character may be effective here. If the opponent is cast as an unfit leader due to character defects, some may decide to vote outside of their party. As has been discussed it is difficult to integrate theme into this type of messaging objective. The opponent's "vision for America" may also be helpful to capturing voters from his party. If he is too far on the fringe of his party, a play could be made by the campaign to get these voters to select their more moderate candidate. This will necessitate broad policy and past action messaging objectives. Thematic integration is possible in these types of messaging objectives.

The campaign will also have to undertake strategy to prevent the defection of voters from their own party in order to nullify the strategy just described (Benoit 2006, 52). This is also a form of maintenance communication. In this strategy, the campaign may choose messaging objectives that enforce party images to remind lukewarm voters of their party commitments and the principles that entails. The connection with theme and narrative is clear in this type of messaging objective. The principles of the party come directly from the narrative and the theme the campaign chooses to expound on it. Also, if the candidate is too far on one end of the spectrum, they may move to more centrist messaging objectives. This will keep those close to the middle from jumping ship. These too must be tied to themes that argue the principles of the party. Along these lines they may want to cast the opponent as someone on the fringe of the opposite side of the spectrum. This will make the candidate seem like the more moderate candidate. In order to accomplish this, the campaign will have to focus again on themes of broad policy and will be well served by thematic integration.

One final strategy that can be undertaken is to decrease the turnout of voters for the opposition. This is a controversial strategy because it discourages participation (Benoit 2006,

52). However, it can be effective, particularly for incumbents because presumably, the challenger must build a coalition and get the votes that an incumbent has already successfully assembled once. As long as the incumbent has not alienated his coalition, the success should hold if his opponent's supporters are discouraged from voting. Not only is this strategy morally questionable, but also it is quite difficult to do. If the literature is correct, in order to discourage voter turnout, the mudslinging would have to be on a massive scale on both sides, and must not bear any regard for the truth. Even if this is done skillfully, it is difficult to ensure that the voters who do not vote will be those who would have voted for the opponent. As discussed, negative campaigning can have the effect of turning voters away from the polls on both sides and backfire on the candidate. Overall, this strategy is both difficult and highly controversial. Character attacks will probably be the most effective means of discouraging turnout. These can not very easily be tied to themes as already discussed.

### **Specific Communication- The End Products**

In order to utilize theme in enumerating messaging objectives that fulfill strategy, the campaign must use carefully crated bits of communication. These can take many forms. Each specific messaging effort will, in some way, touch upon a messaging objective. For example, in 2004 Dick Cheney often argued that John Kerry's election would make another terrorist attack more likely. Each of these messages embodied the larger messaging objective of the Bush campaign on national security. Long term, they wanted to create the belief that George Bush was better fit to keep the country safe (Mark 2006, 143). Though the Bush campaign did connect this messaging objective successfully to a theme, it must be noted that the connection was not intrinsic. The process of specific message creation includes numerous tangential dynamics and is thus extremely complex. It is important to note that messages can really only come in three

forms. Targeting voters is really the first consideration in creating messages. The process of campaigning is sometimes characterized as one of restriction (Didion 2001, 22). The organizations attempt to narrow the focus of messages to a certain group (large or very small) to increase their effectiveness. Some theories create a dichotomy to targeting. Broad swaths of targets may be directly appealed to in the hopes of making an impact on voter choice. The other type of target serves as a relay. The intention is to send them a message so that they will convince others to vote for the candidate (Maarek 2001, 42-3). Voters are segmented based on characteristics like race, gender, income level, religious affiliation, etc (Maarek 2001, 44). The campaign will also tend to focus on getting votes where they matter geographically. Bits of communication in Ohio will be greater developed and segmented than those in New York because it is a swing state. In fact, targeting sometimes occurs on a micro level in modern campaigns. Not only are advertisements chosen very specifically, but the places they appear are increasingly narrow. Some shows, like soap operas and those on the Lifetime Network, are used to display messages to women. Others, like those on ESPN or Spike TV, are selected to specifically target men (Mark 2006, 232). The tenants of framing will also help to govern targeting to some extent. It is rather agreed that those sophisticated on the issues are less likely to be persuaded by specific communication efforts than those that are less knowledgeable because the sophisticated voters already know the information being relayed (Nelson et al 1997, 227). This must be taken into careful consideration when campaigns are deciding on messages they will create. They are thus encouraged to go after voters that are less knowledgeable on the issues. Targeting calculations also hinge on the messaging objective the campaign is attempting to transmit and any themes that help to make the objective more compelling. Targeting of these specific bits of communication depends on the strategy that the campaign is attempting to fulfill.

Strategy plays a large role in governing the messaging objectives and implicated themes. All of this stands to have a big impact on the targets of specific communication.

One major consideration in crafting specific communication is the medium of transmission. Television makes up the main sector of messaging. Thirty-second advertisements are the main method of messaging for a campaign. These are important because they give information to voters who may not go out of their way to get it. These messages can range in messaging objective and strategic aim, but they do have impacts on voters. News stories are also a method of television exposure. However, these are tricky because the candidate cannot completely control the messages the news will emit. Also the average sound byte for news stories is less than 10 seconds. This is hardly any time to explain an objective of messaging or connect it to a theme (Benoit 2006, 66-7). Debates are another important forum for television exposure. The messages here will contain more policy suggestions than other types of exposure. This is due to the fact that the candidate has time to talk and suggest specific policies based on the questions asked. There will also be more defenses in debates because the candidate will have to respond to whatever the opposition insinuates about his position (Benoit 2006, 88). Talk shows are a minor mode of candidate exposure. In these situations the messaging will likely be positive and based on character. These spots tend to soften the candidate up in the eyes of voters (Benoit 2006, 89). Nominating convention acceptance speeches are a one-time type of exposure that is nonetheless very important. These are extremely positive; acclaims make up more 75% of the speeches. The speeches are comprised of just over 50% policy topics (Benoit 2006, 82-4). This is a perfect time for candidates to pursue messaging objectives that connect to themes and are strategically significant. They have a lot of time to expound upon their messaging objectives as broad or as narrow as they like. They will be uninterrupted in their attempts to connect their

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messaging objectives to broad themes, and by association the narrative. They can use all the powerful, emotional, value-driven aspects of the narrative and slightly more specific themes that the campaign has decided upon. Overall, television represents the most important medium of exposure in this period of study.

The Internet and social media is the major growing medium of campaign communication. The Internet is useful because it contains all the different forms of media (video, text and pictures). It is also somewhat less expensive to transmit messages on the Internet. Furthermore, there is no filter on Internet communication. Journalists cannot temper or limit time of the message, allowing for more complex messages to be communicated. Candidates may also respond quicker on the Web. Targeting is also incredibly accurate. IP addresses provide location and access to web history allows specific tailoring of messages. The Internet is also the most interactive medium available (Benoit 2006, 79). Messaging on candidates' actual websites is largely positive and covers policy more than character (Benoit 2006, 81). Social media has provided the most interactive mode of connectivity to voters. Constant streams of messaging can be conveyed on sites that millions visit multiple times per day. This media can expose those looking for information as well as those who are not. Active participants can like pages and visit sites. Those who are not active can be reached by paid advertisements on sites like Facebook and Twitter. All of this allows campaigns to incorporate themes into their messaging objectives on the Internet in a strategically significant manner if it is necessarily skilled.

Direct mailers still serve an important purpose for messaging in campaigns. In this medium, targeting is pretty much an exact science. The addresses of registered voters are known so distribution of messages can be divided by the voter's party and geography. This is a largely positive medium with 77% acclaims. It is also largely based on policy (Benoit 2006, 85).

Radio spots also still make up a major medium of political communication. This, like TV, gets messages to people not actively seeking it. This medium is one of the most freewheeling. Campaign messages on the radio are not subject to truth scrutiny present in television ads. Policy is focused on and there are more attacks than acclaims in radio messages. This is the only type of communication undertaken by the candidate-affiliated organizations that has this characteristic negativity (Benoit 2006, 89).

There are several distinct types or phases of messaging. These each relate directly to themes and messaging objectives already established by the campaign. The first type builds an image of the candidate along with name and face recognition (Benoit 2006, 69). This will relate to a personal messaging objective that may be established by the campaign. It is one of the most time consuming and unpredictable types of messaging. The candidate must be sold in a way that matches his past credentials. The image, like the messaging objective must be quite simple and easy to identify with. Incumbents have a leg up in this area because pretty much all voters know them (Maarek 2001, 180). They will therefore look upon their past actions positively and encourage retrospective voting. In fact, incumbents generally acclaim and defend more than challengers (Benoit 2006, 110). It is a slow process because the image must be reinforced over the course of a campaign. It is also subjective. Voters may see the selection of messages that those in the campaign believe will portray a certain image differently. The process is also relatively complex. The combination of all the messages that the campaign puts out regarding image may combine in the minds of voters in unexpected ways (Maarek 2001, 48-9). This is a multi-faceted process and not only has to do with speeches and words, but the candidates clothing and inflection, the crowd assembled, and the backdrop. Although the campaign tries to control this as much as possible over the course of enumerating a messaging objective over time,

total control is impossible. This type of communication allows for thematic integration only if the candidate has inserted himself into his theme. If he cannot become a part of his narrative-based theme, the theme cannot be used.

The second main type of messaging is known as non-specific “argument spots”. These are arguments that tell voters what the candidate is all about. The broad themes and messaging objectives are obviously touched on very often here. These messages are mostly policy oriented and are acclaims. They may advocate lowering taxes or investing in education. Specific policy suggestions may be hinted at, and comprehensive plans of action given. This specificity notwithstanding, thematic integration is still possible. If the campaign is skilled enough, specific policies can be made immensely more compelling by connecting them to broad themes that capture aspects of the political world and societal progress that connect to messaging objectives (Benoit 2006, 69).

The third type of message is that which attacks opponents. (Benoit 2006, 69). These can be policy based, ideologically based, or founded in character. If they are broad the campaign can cast the direction for the country that the opponent has advocated for in a negative light. This will allow for the use of themes that relate to the lines of distinction given in the narrative and fit into important messaging objectives. The messages can be more specific and attack the voting record of an opponent or their past policy actions. In terms of theme usage, this type of attack is tricky. If a campaign can utilize a theme against rival conceptions of government, based on lines of distinction given in the narrative, they may be able to tie these bits of communication to theme and messaging objective. Campaigns may choose to attack the character of an opponent saying that they are unfit for duty as president because of personality. In '88, the Bush campaign even insinuated that Dukakis had mental health issues (Forbes). Character assaults prove to be

the hardest to connect to theme because they are ad hominem in nature. Themes are too broad to include the actual character of a political opponent. Messaging objectives however, may be enumerated in this type of communication. Negative messaging must be undertaken as a complete strategy to be successful. All mediums (speeches, mailers, debates, etc.) must be used to reinforce the negative messages (Mark 2006, 4). Like all messaging, the themes must be low in number and consistent. Too many topics of negativity will cloud the minds of voters. Attacks can have numerous benefits for campaigns. If done preemptively, they can keep the opponent on their heels and force them to respond rather than pursue their own messages and themes (Mark 2006, 9). It can also play into strategies like discouraging voter turnout, mobilizing the base, or keeping the opponents supporters away from the polls. Negative messages also can come from non-affiliated organizations like PACs and 527 groups. Since these groups cannot officially support candidates they are dedicated to negative tactics. They are also generally less committed to bringing up truthful issues that the actual campaign (Mark 2006, 152).

There is major disagreement over the use of negative messaging. Some claim that voters are generally turned off by attacks and will universally be driven from the polls by negative messaging (Benoit 2006, 69). However, others claim that the picture is more complicated. While it is true that some will be alienated by the negativity and stay away from the polls, some voters actually appreciate the issues being raised. The positive acclaims are not enough to truly inform voters. They need to hear what the candidate will not talk about (Mark 2006, 11). However, holders of this view do recognize the danger of straying too far from the truth. If the attack is not presented in a factual manner, it undermines the campaign's legitimacy to deliver reliable communication (Mark 2006, 9). It seems that this is the case because negative campaigning has been shown to mobilize some voters while discouraging others (Benoit 2006, 69).

The final type of message that may be selected is future visions for America. They indicate a pattern or general direction the candidate will set for the country if elected. These will involve high arching themes and are rhetorical in nature. The famous “Morning in America” ad from Reagan ’84 fits this profile. It lets the voter know that the country should head in the direction it is already set in because things are good and getting better. These types of messages are usually reserved for broad appeals to large swaths of the population. Thematic emphasis is clear here. Using theme makes these types of messages much more compelling. Messaging objectives may also be pursued in this type of communication

Once all of these aspects are formulated, the messages must be disseminated. In addition to the selection of TV and radio spots, and the production of mail products, there is a tremendous amount of work that must be done in the field. Press attachés and media relations officials are key to the discrete relaying of messages. They work to manage the press in ways that will give the campaign the desired coverage. These people not only ensure that the media is where they want them, but they also orchestrate the release of information to the press. They must be close with members of the press and determine when and when not to allow them access. They often drop leaks to media outlets they feel will be friendly in their reporting (Maarek 2001, 201). These types of relationships constitute a major means of distributing specific communication that enumerates messaging objectives that may or may not utilize a theme. If done incorrectly, the message will be weakened or worse reported in a way that is undesirable to the transmission of the messaging objective. If access is not given at the appropriate time, the message is in danger of not being reported on at all.

In a similar way, the general reporting of campaign events may affect messages. Thus, professionals in the campaign must make sure events go off without a hitch. The field offices

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across the country are responsible for the setup and execution of campaign rallies and events. These people work with the traveling road crew in order to ensure that everything is set. This includes making sure the event is well attended and there are no technical issues. They also set up photo opportunities for the candidate (Maarek 2001, 205). These can take a ridiculous level of effort. For example in 1988 it took hours of setup for a Mike Dukakis photo opportunity of him throwing a baseball. All the setup was for about two minutes of tossing a baseball on an airport tarmac (Didion 2001, 37). This one photo opportunity to make the candidate more relatable took up a great amount of time and effort, but the campaign felt it was important to enumerating a messaging objective. It is events like this that show the process of delivering specific communication through campaign events that transmit messaging objectives that can be tied to theme.

## **Identified Trends**

While avoiding case-by-case specificity, this chapter has outlined the general workings of campaigns and how campaign communication is crafted through a series of steps that increase in specificity. The literatures assessed here hold very important assertions about the consequences of these contemporary campaign practices. They range from impacts on the discourse, to changes in political parties. The first major growing trend in campaigns is that of spectacle. Campaigns nowadays tend to fit all activities into a theme the campaign is pursuing. They are a bit like a movie set. Everyone involved has a role to play and speaks according to a script (Didion 2001, 28-30). This is largely fueled by media coverage. They portray the campaign as a horse race with every event being a major happening (Medhurst 1996, 37). In the electronic age, the time of sound byte, as discussed is tiny. Thus, campaigns must boil all messages down to tiny utterances. This has the tendency propose simple solutions for extremely complex issues (Mark 2006, 11).

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This erodes true contemplative discourse of policy in campaigns. Candidates are not really explaining what their plans are, but are attempting to pursue messaging objectives and tie them to themes.

Furthermore, the media is incredibly fast and constant in reporting due to the rise of the Internet and all day news stations. This forces campaigns to respond quickly. Hesitation can cast doubt in voters' mind (Medhurst 1996, 43). This has further ramped up the trend of politicization of all actions. Because the candidate must respond to issues all the time, everything they say is a political statement (Medhurst 1996, 45). Off the cuff comments are reported as official positions. This has added to the spectacle and eroded the discourse further because the media are not always reporting on the established messaging objectives of the campaign, but simply what came to the candidate in the spur of the moment. This type of approach has a significant effect on the selection of talking points and messages and can often make campaign messages and candidates come across as more vicious and angry. This seems to have been the case when George Bush gave an extremely aggressive interview with Dan Rather in 1988. The campaign did not want any of his comments to be construed in a negative light so they took a very offensive tone. The media can also play into the in selection of advertisements. In 2004, the Bush campaign purposely distributed a controversial 9/11 advertisement in order to get free plays on news programs (Institute 2006, 109).

Developments in campaigns have also led to changes in the role of political parties in election processes. While some argue that partisanship is up, it is not actual loyalty to the party establishment. It is more a commitment to polarized ideology. Policy today covers, or has been depicted as covering, more cultural territory. For example, with a rise in religious mobilization, issues like abortion and gay marriage cause more people to become highly mobilized along lines

that the parties have drawn (Brewer 2008, 4). In all it seems that traditional partisanship is down in presidential elections. The changes in conventions to a mere formality have structurally weakened the role of the party establishment. However, there are other developments that have further minimized the importance of parties even in general elections. Presidential politicians are necessarily bad partisans. Each candidate seeks to leave a lasting impact on politics that is outside of party ambitions (Skworonek 1993, 50). Support in campaigns is not drawn from parties, but is directed toward the polity at large (Skworonek 1993, 53). The media is helpful in explaining this as well. It does not take much for a campaign to get on the news. It is not extremely hard to book a spot for a television ad. Thus, campaigns do not need party structure to disseminate the messages they want to convey on a broad scale (Maarek 2001, 232). Also campaigns are now incredibly well funded. This means that they have their own means of producing and distributing messages, especially in light of the Internet and rise in technology. In this way, campaigns go over the heads of the party. They are relying on their own organizations and not party structure (Tulis 4).

As described earlier, vote choice has become increasingly hinged on personal affect. Thus, rhetorical ability is extremely important in appealing to people personally (Tulis 177). This encourages candidates who are particularly flashy and independent minded. Ronald Reagan for example, had a much different personality than say, Chester Arthur. In 1992 George Bush's dislike for rhetoric and thematic communication seems to have cost him dearly. The success of these flashy politicians furthers the trend because those watching understand that rhetoric and theme are what work. All of this stands to deformalize the process and discourse. Without having to use formal party channels and stressing personality, campaigns can define issues on their own

and establish platforms and suggestions independently while doing so in a ways that oversimplifies issues.

These trends seem troubling. Along with the rise of negative campaigning, the changes in the media, and the decrease of party importance seem to have deleterious effects on the discourse. Together, they encourage easily relatable and simple theme-driven that takes away from substantive discussion of the issues. Candidates are incentivized to play up issues that will simply play in the media and in the minds of voters, and downplay those that may be meaningful but are unimportant in these respects. These trends are also very difficult to break. As Skworonek puts it the “political universe” is becoming overcrowded due to the media and mass appeals where each voter is now entrusted with an excess of information (Skworonek 1993, 213). Thus, an ever-increasing number of minds must be changed to break the cycle. Skworonek warns that this signifies a waning of “political time” (213). The improbability of change is mounting and change may soon be impossible. This work will confirm these trends but also allow for evaluation of each campaign’s contribution to the trends over time.

## **Outline of the Work to Come**

This work will follow a rather uniform structure throughout many of the chapters. The campaigns of Ronald Reagan in 1984 and George Bush in 1988 and 1994 will be broken down and analyzed qualitatively in chronological order with in depth analysis. The first bit of analysis will define the political climate present at campaign time. This includes changes in technology, the media, the economy, foreign affairs, incumbency etc. The players will be the next piece of analysis. As noted, the personalities and styles of, the candidate, management, and major figures in each campaign have profound impacts on all of the communication activities undertaken by campaigns. Next, the chapters will cover the themes that each campaign created and worked to

integrate. The work will then turn to the strategies of each campaign. Strategies undertaken will be governed largely by political climate and candidate personality. Strategy will then work in concert with personality and political climate to dictate the messaging objectives that the campaign will select. These will be the next point of emphasis in the proceeding three chapters. Several examples of specific bits of communication will next be given in each case to highlight the methods the campaign used to distribute these messages, including targets, messaging objectives pursued and relevant thematic integration. With this analytical work done, each chapter will conclude with global comments on the campaigns' communication efforts. Summary will be made and lessons that can be taken will be suggested. The fifth chapter of this work will cover the Republican presidential candidates in each general election from 1996 to 2012. Essentially this chapter will contain the same type of analysis as the previous three with less attention given to personality and specific communication. A concluding chapter will follow assessing the process described in this work and giving predictions for use of narrative in the upcoming 2016 presidential election.

This work is unique in its comprehensiveness. Most of the literature above, and all the literature on campaigns, takes a piecemeal approach to analysis. Rather than track the use of narrative in campaigns through theme over time, previous works simply point to certain campaigns to highlight a certain point they are trying to make. This discounts important differences in political climate as well as casual factors of campaign organization, personality, and their effects on communication. In taking a somewhat uniform approach in each Republican general election campaign, this work will be able to highlight subtle differences that ended up having a big impact on messaging in relation to theme. Furthermore, tracking the lessons that can be taken from each campaign will provide important insight into campaign calculations.

## Chapter 2

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### Introduction

The election of 1984 stands as a perfect starting point for this, or any work on narrative in campaign communication. The skill exhibited by both Reagan himself and his campaign team is, for better or worse, a sterling example of the practice of weaving of themes borne from the broad Republican narrative outlined in the first chapter and messaging objectives into various levels of communication. Both the man and the campaign machinery displayed, at every level, clear mastery of connecting the election of a candidate to themes concerning the essence of American identity. The themes, messaging objectives, and their connection to even the most basic units of campaign communication were the result of a perfect alignment of political climate, candidate personality, staff ability, and strategy. The results of this fateful arrangement, in many ways, solidified the trends identified in Chapter One and still present today. Though the success of this campaign, both in the realms of theme and pure electoral dominance, proves to be impossible to replicate, it is clear that Republicans have adopted many of the practices of message emphasis perfected by the Reagan-Bush 1984 campaign

### Themes

It is not extremely controversial to say that the broad themes that Ronald Reagan's reelection campaign employed in 1984 were some of the clearest and well articulated in recent memory. They were intimately connected to the Broad Republican narrative outlined in the first chapter of this work. Tulis argues, "building a political ethos is continuous, complicated and absolutely compelling". He adds, "Reagan was amazingly good at it" (Medhurst 1987, 45). Though the broad themes developed and employed by Reagan were several, a few common

attributes are shared by nearly all the broad themes used by the Reagan campaign in 1984. One of these commonalities was the style of the themes. Reagan, and his writing team, liked to cast issues in black and white terms. They used the simple but effective rhetorical tool of antithesis (Weiler 1992, 127). Reagan, or “the people” as was often said, represented one side of an issue. His opponents, in any context, represented the opposite. Reagan’s way was characterized as the way forward. It was his way that would continue the long American tradition of success. Casting themes in this light not only made them compelling, but also made counterargument difficult. Opponents certainly did not want to take on the role of the antagonist in these themes as they were cast as enemies of progress. This characteristic of Reagan themes made them all the more effective.

Along with this characteristic was Reagan’s commitment to history and populism in his themes. No matter what the theme explained or advocated for, Reagan wanted to give historical evidence that the explanation was valid. Most of the time, this evidence would come from the founding fathers, though other sources like “the People” of bygone eras could be used. In themes that advocated for action, these men and women of the past shared the values of Reagan and the modern conservative movement. They were on the good side of history. They rose up to move the country forward against their enemies on the other side of history. With the history established, Reagan’s themes then turned to a call to action for the audience. They needed to make their will known by participating in their government (Weiler 1992, 19). This participation came in the form of votes or activism. Reagan gives “the People” credit for things like lowering taxes and interest rates. It was up to the citizens to stake their claim and move the country ever forward. Here, Reagan’s views about the “Reagan Revolution” seem to aid in the patterns of

theme described here. In ways that will be described in detail, his personal attributes aided this aspect of theme.

Several explicit themes can be identified that were used widely in the 1984 election. Each of these came to be important to messaging and/or strategic commitments of the campaign. The first and most foundational theme that undergirded all of Reagan's politics could be characterized as a "people versus government" theme. This theme explains how greatness is achieved in America. It also explains how that greatness may be lost. This theme not only applies to economic growth, but takes on tangential forms to cover societal progress and civil religion as well. Overreaching government was the enemy and antithesis of progress. According to Reagan, this government was that envisioned by the Democratic Party. A bloated government puts unnecessary burdens on people in all facets of society (Weiler 1992, 22). Industry suffers regulations that limit growth. Reagan utilized the history of the pre-New Deal era to make this point. Long before the New Dealers (excluding Franklin Roosevelt) America was a land of free opportunity. Our founders, especially Thomas Jefferson, saw America as a land where people could work and be free. Businesses should not have to worry about paying exorbitant tax rates or complying with complicated regulatory machinery. In order for our nation to grow, business had to be able to adapt to run efficiently according to the free market. A government that taxes or regulates too much kills the entrepreneurial spirit of America. Thus, Americans interested in economic growth cannot let the Democrats follow through on their plans and must support Reagan and others who believe in limited government.

This theme also took on a slightly different enumeration to advocate action and explain the world in terms of societal progress. Utilizing the same "American spirit", a tangential theme for societal progress emerged. Reagan argued that only those (like the American worker) who

stand on their own feet, and are resilient and wholesome, embody the vision of America and should be allowed to prosper (Weiler 1992, 80). This is the spirit of America for Reagan. Going out and making it on one's own was the only formula for success. It seemed to Reagan that the welfare state was helping those who did not deserve it. The bloated government was enabling people to slip through the cracks and achieve success without putting in the necessary work to build our country. They were taking without giving, thanks to the Democratic or liberal conception of government. In order for our society to progress, people had to get rid of the Democrats and their societally regressive policies. This theme was very useful in capturing the voters that were against government programs like welfare, which was a part of the strategy in 1984.

In a third deviation, this theme also encapsulated Reagan's views on civil religion. Again, the history element is important. According to Reagan, although Article I of the Constitution denies an establishment of religion, our founders had a deep commitment to politics guided by faith. It is how we have always identified ourselves, informed our morality, and moved the country forward (Weiler 1992, 25). It was not until the New Dealers rose to power that this notion was questioned. With the court decisions of the 1960's striking down prayer in schools and other "religious freedoms," liberals had started the process of expelling our religious commitments. Reagan not only called these actions "intolerant," but suggested that this too was deleterious to American progress (Youtube 2011). Our commitment to religion was a central facet of our progress and government because it serves as the moral foundation of everyone. The liberal Democrats sought to further strike down religion in civil society. Thus, they wished to slow our progress as a nation. The people needed to support Reagan because he would ensure

that religion continued to be an integral part of civil society. This theme was particularly useful to emphasize based on messaging choices and strategy in 1984.

These themes, under the “People versus government” heading were compelling for a few reasons. First, they all have both of the common characteristics described above. They paint the Democrats, with their high taxes, coddling government programs, and attacks on religion, as the antagonists to American progress. These themes created a fundamental divergence from what was characterized as the growing welfare state (Weiler 1992, 21). Many voters in the 1980’s had grievances in all the areas that this theme covered. With a Democratic party that had arguably been unchanged since 1968 (when Nixon implemented the Southern Strategy), these themes stood to explain the world, and give a radically different vision for the future. The Democratic way was conceptualized as being simply deleterious to American progress. These themes also have the historical and populist elements. The great men that founded our country agreed with Reagan. Now, the voters had to cast their ballots to protect their vision that made the country great. This is a great tool in appealing to massive swaths of the population. It does not matter if one is a potato farmer or a Wall Street banker, one still wants to make America great and protect the “American dream.”

Secondly, and more important to the reelection effort, people had been experiencing the vision of these themes for nearly four years. Times were good. The economy and wealth were growing; government spending was on the decline (excepting defense spending); and religion was regaining strength in society. Reagan’s themes were apparently playing out in positive ways. Results like this would make any theme more compelling. Thus the political climate helped to make the theme more compelling.

Reagan's own personal flare to these themes also made them significantly more compelling. Reagan depicted his early life as one of struggle and strife. According to him, his childhood and early days as an actor were tough. However, Reagan persevered, worked hard and rose to become a successful actor, governor, and finally president of the United States. Reagan was able to make the themes more compelling by casting his own life as proof of his themes. His hard work had resulted in a better life for him and his family. He was living proof that his themes explained how the world worked. This angle was undoubtedly helped by his status as somewhat of a cult figure. People like Ed Rollins, who revered Reagan as an incredible leader, were all over the country. To hear that the man they revered had lived the American dream reinforced the very theme that he was now describing would increase their belief even more. In this way, Reagan's ability to weave his personal story into his themes and his status as a major political figure strengthened the theme.

Though the collection of themes just described undoubtedly accounted for the bulk of Reagan's thematic force in 1984, there is another important theme in the realm of foreign policy. This theme centered largely around principles and deterrence. In approaching the Cold War, Reagan once again used an appeal to American values and history. Reagan believed that Americans were, by their nature, peaceful. However, throughout American history, Reagan stated, war had never come about due to an abundance of strength. War came as a result of America's lack of defensive might. Thus America needed to exude strength and achieve military superiority in order to remain peaceful. Furthermore, when it becomes necessary, America will step up and deliver a blow to defend freedom and democracy. In accordance with this principle, Reagan held, it sometimes became necessary for America to help out people that were fighting for freedom around the world (Youtube 2014). Every ally lost to communism threatened the very

idea of freedom in the world. Democrats who want America to stay out of such endeavors, Reagan implicitly posits, threaten the idea of freedom. People thus need to support Reagan's policies of deterrence and action when necessary based on our foundational principles. As will be described in the section on political climate, foreign policy was a marginal part of the campaign. However, this theme will be shown as useful because of an apparent paradox of Reagan's politics in his support of increased defense spending.

The themes described in this section make up the thematic cluster that Reagan had at his disposal for the 1984 campaign. The political climate proved to be friendly to these themes. Through their adaptability, they cover essentially all of the messaging objectives that the Reagan reelection effort would decide to employ. Besides this, the themes also played perfectly into the various strategies that the Reagan team would take up to defeat Walter Mondale. As will be seen, this collection of themes is definitely the most effective and well articulated in this period of study.

## **Political Climate**

In a presidential election with an incumbent, the nature of the political climate and current conditions must be considered extremely important even in discussions of thematic usage. The political climate and order in 1984 certainly had a large impact on the selection of messaging objectives, emphasis of certain themes, and adoption of strategy. Though there were some potential points of vulnerability for the Reagan campaign, the political conditions overwhelmingly aided the incumbent in his pursuits of appealing to themes and messaging objectives.

One major factor of the political climate that is central to a discussion of this campaign's use of theme was the state of the American economy at the time of the election (Moore 1986,

xv). Interest rates were lower and inflation was down (Youtube 2006). Taxes had also been lowered for many people (Youtube 2014). Compared to the troubled American economy of the later 1970's, the growing economy of the early 1980's was an extremely important development to voters. The optimistic economic outlook had a very considerable impact on the communication of the Reagan campaign. As will be discussed, several key messaging objectives were selected and themes integrated based, at least in part, due to the strong economic conditions.

Another important facet of the political climate that impacted the running of the general election was the lengthy and hard-fought Democratic nomination process. The nomination for the democratic candidate for president lasted well into June 1984. The important impact for this work is the psychological effect such a long process can have on voters. Mondale could not win sufficient support until very late in the primary process. This, if properly framed, can cast doubt on the strength of the candidate. Clearly, the Reagan campaign used this point of vulnerability to choose messaging objectives and integrate themes of leadership and character.

The state of the media is always important to consider in a presidential election. In general, the press behaved in this election as was described as typical in chapter one. The media was constant and demanding. The coverage was based around the horserace and proved easy to manipulate. Fitting further with chapter one's characterizations, the media focused largely on issues that had little to do with governance and policy (Moore 1986, xii). The media in this election was also characteristically interested in short sound bytes and quick imagery (Moore 1986, xvi). All of these conditions stood to encourage the Reagan campaign's commitment to theme in messaging. In weaving the broad themes into short messages, the Reagan campaign was able to play perfectly into the media's agenda of distribution.

The conditions of the political party system were also an important, if typical, sector of the political climate that impacted the themes, messaging objectives, and strategy of the 1984 election. Fitting the pattern described in chapter one, there was an evident weakness of the party machinery (Moore 1986, xv). With the resignation of the nominating convention to a status of formality, the Reagan campaign was able to go directly over the head of the Republican Party. In the strategies section, it will be argued that the campaign took up strategies that were directly deleterious to general Republican goals. These strategies were tied to populist messaging objectives and themes that were central to the campaign. The waning power of the Republican Party thus had a large impact on the communication of the Reagan campaign.

In a related way, the dispersion of those who identified as independents was key to the selection of strategy, themes, and messaging objectives by the Reagan campaign. At the time of the election, 35 to 40 percent of the electorate identified as independent voters (Moore 1986). This has an enormous impact on strategy. Winning, and winning decisively, in such an environment would have to be predicated on winning more votes from independents than the opponent. As discussed in chapter one, the strategy of courting independents calls for the emphasis of certain themes and selection of certain messaging objectives. The Reagan campaign clearly acknowledged this and worked on messaging and themes pursuant to this strategy. This once again demonstrates the interconnected nature of theme, strategy, and messaging objectives.

There are also important international considerations that affected the thematic emphasis of the campaign. Though the Cold war was winding down, the USSR still stood as America's archenemy. They represented the antithesis to individual and market freedom that America was based on. This type of antithetical conception would aid the Reagan campaign in its foreign policy theme and in delivering related messages about national defense.

Perhaps the most important consideration of political climate in 1984 was the political movement embodied in, and centered around, Ronald Reagan. Numerous books have been written on this subject, and a full treatment of the movement certainly cannot be given here. However, at least some attention must be given to what could be called the largest American political movement in the second half of the twentieth century. As Skowronek argues, Ronald Reagan stood as a great repudiator to the New Deal era (1993, 409). He advocated for a reconstruction of the political order (Skowronek 1993, 415). Rising to prominence in 1980, Reagan represented a break with the existing and dominant political order. He embodied divergences in governance and future visions of America that contrasted starkly with the New Dealers. Whether or not Reagan was the only man who could do this is rather disputed (Medhurst 1987, 225). However, the fact that there was in fact a movement cannot be discounted. As we shall see, the presence of this movement was ubiquitous in the Reagan campaign's selection of messaging objectives and utilization of theme. The campaign sought to ride the wave of the "Reagan Revolution" as far as possible.

As expected, the political climate in 1984 was a major factor in calculations of strategy, theme, and messaging objectives for the Reagan reelection campaign. All of the factors described here encouraged and reinforced a campaign that was committed to messaging that was deeply connected to broad themes and simple messaging objectives. From the media, to the economy, to the ongoing political movement, it seemed that the Reagan campaign recognized that the environment they inhabited seemingly begged for a theme-driven campaign that they were more than equipped to provide.

## **The Players**

It is often argued that personal characteristics cannot be overemphasized in analyzing the course of history. In any discussion of Ronald Reagan, this argument seems to ring particularly true. Certain personal qualities of our fortieth president undoubtedly aided his ascension to political success and utilization of theme. These qualities most certainly demonstrated themselves in extreme clarity in the 1984 presidential race. Many of these important qualities stem from Reagan's professional background, general disposition, and beliefs regarding political movements and governance. These personal affectations will be demonstrated as central to Reagan's skill in weaving themes into his campaign communication.

One important personal factor to consider when discussing Ronald Reagan's thematic skills is his professional background as an actor. The importance of this occupation is not simply something that scholars have identified as central to his success as a speaker. Reagan himself acknowledged the connection of his acting credentials and political skills. By all accounts, Reagan truly enjoyed speaking and soaking up the limelight (Weiler 1992, 117). He conceptualized the tasks of campaigning and even governing as acting jobs. There was a clear set and a clear script. He knew that to be successful in pitching himself, he needed to commit to the words and grand ideas that made up his speeches (Didion 2001, 94). This conceptualization allowed Reagan to truly believe in his speechwriters. Avoiding micromanagement of speeches would definitely allow people like Peggy Noonan to produce clear messages that successfully weaved broad themes into speeches.

Reagan's acting background further informed his skills in his knowledge of the nature of television. Reagan had a foundational understanding that he was really invading living rooms and speaking directly to people at home. This led his speaking to become even more casual and even "conversational" (Weiler 1992, 115). This kind of understanding undoubtedly reinforces a

belief in grand themes. In order to connect to these people on a personal level, Reagan understood that themes of American identity would be necessary in all communication.

Another important facet of Reagan's personality that was crucial to his success in thematic communications was his view of the political movement centered around him. Much evidence supports the claim that Reagan did not see himself as the prime mover of the "Reagan Revolution". Rather, he conceptualized himself as a "sub element" of leadership simply interpreting the will of the people (Moore 1986, 183). This belief held incredible benefits for the Reagan thematic machinery. Reagan was thus able to earnestly place himself on the side of the people in important themes regarding American identity. He could sincerely cast himself as a "common man". For populist themes and messaging objectives that were so common in the campaign, this quality was indispensable.

Though Reagan's personality and beliefs are of utmost importance in this analysis, personal characteristics of many others are also important to consider. Walter Mondale, Reagan's opponent in 1984, had some personal characteristics that seem to have played directly into the hand of the Reagan campaign. His personal inclinations may well have served as important foundations for messaging objectives and themes utilized by the Reagan campaign regarding leadership and trustworthiness. Comparatively, the oratory abilities of nearly anyone would pale in comparison to those of Ronald Reagan. However, Mondale was particularly poor at incorporating broad themes into his campaign communication. A brief example seems to best illuminate this point. At the end of the 1984 Democratic National Convention Mondale rose to give his acceptance speech. As explained in chapter one, these speeches are crucial points of the campaign where candidates can use broad acclaims and appeal heavily to themes. These speeches can inspire and ignite the electorate with grand visions of American identity and values.

Mondale undoubtedly failed in this capacity. One section in the beginning of his speech displays Mondale's ineptitude in communicating broad themes. He says:

“When we speak of family, the voice is Mario Cuomo's. When we speak of change, the words are Gary Hart's. When we speak of hope, the fire is Jesse Jackson's. When we speak of caring, the spirit is Ted Kennedy's. When we speak of patriotism, the strength is John Glenn's. When we speak of the future, the message is Geraldine Ferraro.”

The intention here was to demonstrate that all the wings of the Democratic Party were together.

However, these lines show a complete lack of thematic force. Not only does Mondale fail to assert his own themes about such important American challenges, he does not even take time to explain the themes that the people he mentioned may represent. Mondale thus shows both a lack of original themes that he can present to America, and any kind of commitment to explicitly relating themes that are available to him. This example shows the persistent inability of Mondale and his campaign to incorporate theme into important forms of communication.

This work also must discuss some of the apparent personal beliefs of Reagan campaign manager, Ed Rollins. Though seemingly tangential, it is important to capture the mindset of at least one senior Reagan official. His personal beliefs seem emblematic of those of the Reagan team generally. This mindset may help to explain the commitment and abilities of the campaign to integrate themes into messaging. There are three important facets of Ed Rollins's personal background that are of importance to this work. One such element of his personality pertains to his beliefs about Ronald Reagan. Throughout the 1984 Presidential Campaign Decision Making Conference, Rollins's comments are filled with an underlying sentiment of what may be called respect or admiration for the President. In his closing thoughts, Rollins says, “the bottom line is that Ronald Reagan is the most dominant political force in this country and in the world today” (Moore 1986, 250). Important is Rollins's commitment to the embodiment of the movement. Where Reagan saw himself as more of a mouthpiece, Rollins saw Reagan as the prime mover.

He could not laude the President enough on his leadership skills and transformative power. From the comments of several other Reagan officials at the aforementioned conference, it is clear that this was a commonly held set of beliefs. This frame of mind would clearly have an impact on the campaign's commitment to theme and selection of messaging objectives. If they conceptualized this movement as a "dominant political force", it is clear that the campaign would seek to connect Reagan, and his policies, to broad themes of American identity and values.

One other set of personal beliefs that Ed Rollins, and others in the Reagan campaign, held that is of importance here is their conception of presidential campaigns. At one point in the 1984 conference described earlier, Rollins stated simply "there's no ground rules how you run for President" (Moore 1986, 182). This attitude is of incredible importance. This implies that there was no issue that the campaign would not touch, or strategy it would not pursue, if it stood to increase the chances of success. The commitment to theme and selection of certain strategies that the Reagan campaign would go on to display seems to be directly related to this notion. The campaign saw the advantage of utilizing broad themes and took it.

Another personal belief that Rollins and others close to the Reagan campaign held that is of importance here was their certainty that Ronald Reagan would win in 1984 (Moore 1986, 173). This earnest belief led directly to the selection of a geographic strategy that will be discussed at length later. This strategy, founded from a firm belief in inevitable success, would have deep impacts on the messaging objectives selected and themes emphasized by the Reagan campaign.

The bottom line here is that the personal attributes of these major players of the 1984 campaign would have immeasurable impacts on the themes and messaging objectives that the Reagan campaign was to focus on. Whether it was the Reagan's life as an actor and man of the

people, Mondale's anemic approach to theme, or the deep-seated conceptions of those who ran the President's campaign, very personal factors seemed to have played a large role in producing the theme-based communication that will hereafter be described in detail.

## **Strategy**

With the above factors of political climate, personal traits, and available themes established, the Reagan campaign had to decide upon strategic objectives for victory that would take advantage of the position of the candidate in these realms. Most fundamental to the Reagan strategy was the conviction within the campaign that the incumbent would undoubtedly win reelection. To Rollins, and every other Reagan official present at the 1984 Decision Making Conference, Reagan simply would not lose the election if the campaign were even somewhat effective (Moore 1986, 173). This conviction led the Reagan team to adopt a strategy of complete domination. The Reagan campaign wanted to win all fifty states (Moore 1986, 100). This overarching strategy is extremely bold. As we shall see, most campaigns race to the necessary 270 electoral votes, and would be happy with scraping by. This strategy of total victory resulted in several important minor strategic calculations. The most important result of this overarching strategy was the decision to attempt to capture independent votes. As described in the political climate section, around 35 percent of the electorate identified as independents. In order to achieve the dominance the Reagan campaign strived for, or to win at all, independent voters were of utmost importance. Reagan's team segmented the independent voters into even smaller groups. Lee Atwater argued that the people in the middle could be described as either populists or libertarians. It became the goal of the Reagan campaign to bring the conservative populists and conservative libertarians to their side (Moore 1986, 240). This strategy, as

discussed in the first chapter, compels the campaign to consider taking many actions.

Independent voters decide largely on issues of the economy and character due to the bipartisan nature of each of these issues. The Reagan campaign seems to have realized this and, as will be demonstrated in the section on specific messaging, emphasized these areas heavily using the rather favorable economic outlook and bipartisan themes at their disposal. In all, Reagan's position in the realms of political climate, personal attributes, and available themes definitely helped him in building the coalition that Atwater described. Due to the growing economy, personal appeal of Reagan, and the conservative nature of his themes, Reagan was able to execute the strategy brilliantly through messaging objectives and specific messages laced with theme.

A second implication of the Reagan strategy of total domination was the adoption of a geographic, regional approach (Moore 1986, 173). Like the conquest of independents, this geographic emphasis is not entirely uncommon in presidential campaigns. However, the way that the Reagan campaign approached this strategy had distinct impacts on specific communications that will be described in more detail later. Important regions to the campaign were the South, the West, and the Northeast (Moore 1986, 164). These regions all dictated that certain themes and messaging objectives be emphasized at different times to gain their support. Social conservatives in the South would be interested in the civil religion and limited federal government themes. Independents in the Northeast, would probably be interested in continuing economic growth. Also important in the campaign's regional effort was the media exposure they strived for. In each of the designated regions, the campaign strove to be covered by local and regional outlets, not national news networks (Moore 1986, 173). This allowed the targeting to be even better defined and the messaging objectives and themes emphasized to be more specific to the region.

Another result of the strategy of total domination taken up by the Reagan campaign was to ignore the legislative elections coinciding with the presidential election. This too held important consequences for the thematic and messaging emphasis of the campaign. The campaign decided that, because they would be attempting to gain votes from independents, a group made up partially (according to the campaign) of “soft Democrats,” they would not focus on the legislative elections. The campaign reasoned that the voters they were trying to capture outside of the Republican Party might have desired a Democratic Congress to keep a check on the President. In order to avoid alienating these voters, the campaign would not touch the legislative elections. This fits in perfectly with the weakening of parties described in the political climate section. In order to achieve the total domination desired, Reagan would ignore broader party aims. This gave the campaign the ability to be even more freewheeling with their thematic emphasis and messaging choices. The campaign could focus on whatever they believed would help them to win all fifty states by capturing independents and Democrats.

These constituted the major strategic considerations for the 1984 Reagan campaign. As a whole, the strategy fit almost perfectly with the political climate and available themes. The conditions were ideal and Reagan had the tools to execute a strategy of total dominance. The voters that the campaign would attempt to capture would undoubtedly be open to the themes that Reagan had at his disposal because of the growing economy under his first term. This conquest was made even easier when the Reagan campaign freed itself from working with the legislative elections. The campaign was now able to choose any messaging objectives that would emphasize the themes available and result in electoral domination.

## **Messaging Objectives**

With strategy determined, the Reagan campaign could choose messaging objectives specifically tailored to the 1984 campaign that would utilize the strong populist and bipartisan themes as well as the friendly political climate. The 1984 Reagan campaign was quite unique in its ability to choose messaging objectives. The first chapter lays out the constraining factors of selection of messaging objectives. In most of these areas, the Reagan campaign was unfettered. The creativity of campaign officials was certainly not an issue. As already demonstrated, Ed Rollins was willing to take on almost any messaging objective that would put Reagan over the top. Furthermore, the media was not an issue. As discussed, the media in 1984 was largely open to manipulation. Also, the regional news outlets that the Reagan campaign specifically targeted would be even less able to resist the management of its coverage by the campaign. Surveys and voter salience were also not at issue for Reagan. The incumbent was never trailing in the campaign and his messaging was almost always well received by voters due to his oratorical skills and skilled speechwriters. Reagan's personal background seemed to aid his display of genuine concern. Because of his acting background and public communication skills, Reagan was always able to seem completely committed to his messaging choices. Framing was certainly not an issue. With Reagan's broad and clear-cut themes, the frame was always clear: which direction would America go? Toward progress or toward ruin? All of the favorable conditions allowed the Reagan campaign to select messaging objectives that were low in number and complexity. There were really only three major messaging objectives in the 1984 campaign.

One objective was that of limiting the government to continue economic growth and protect individual rights in the increasingly liberal America. The Reagan campaign vowed to continue lowering taxes and easing regulation. This would be useful in appealing to the "conservative libertarians" the campaign was looking to capture. This would also be helpful

geographically in places like the Northeast where independents were interested in further economic growth. Protection of religious freedom was also a major part of this objective. Civil religion would be encouraged under another four years of Reagan. This would, as stated, be useful in places like the South where religion was a major issue.

A second and related objective was that Reagan had had a better vision for the future than his opponent. Basically, Walter Mondale, and liberals like him, saw all of these problems in America and were eager to criticize it. The Reagan campaign wanted Americans to be proud again. The United States was still a “protector of freedom” and a “pioneer of new frontiers” (Moore 1986, 248). People needed take pride in being American and be confident in the future. This messaging objective was clearly tailored for independent voters. Its non-partisan overtones appeal directly to not only the character of Reagan, but of our country as a whole. It is a message of optimism.

A third and closely related objective was that Reagan had been an excellent leader as president and would continue to inspire people and lead the country in the right direction. This message was essentially the classic “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it”. While this objective certainly highlighted Reagan’s embodiment as a revolutionary figure, it also insisted that Reagan was simply a mouthpiece to the will of the people. He could not be the revered leader voters knew him to be if “the People” had not voiced their will in the last election. This messaging objective had important uses in appealing to populism and strong leadership. The strong leadership messaging proved important in the conquest of independents because of its character-based nature.

It should be noted that the overlap of many of these messaging objectives and broader themes in this campaign is uncommonly high. It is not an accident that major messaging

objectives seem to be reiterations of Reagan themes. The campaign specifically didn't bring in many specific issues. They opted rather, for broad messaging objectives related to the direction of the country and American identity (Moore 1986, 230). These objectives also perfectly played into both the geographic and independent conquest strategies. In fact, the way that themes were integrally weaved into the messaging objectives of 1984 stands as a glimmering example for any campaign interested in effectively combining theme and messaging objectives.

## **Specific Communication**

The ability of the Reagan reelection campaign to tailor messaging that positively emphasized theme and messaging objectives was absolutely exemplary. In all the different phases of messaging and modes of transmission utilized in 1984, the Reagan team was able to create a very clear messaging arc utilizing themes. This work will now analyze three different instances of campaign communication from the 1984 reelection effort that showed the mastery of thematic integration that has been argued to exist in this chapter.

Any student of campaign communication is undoubtedly familiar with the "Morning in America" advertisement released by the Reagan campaign in 1984. While this ad does demonstrate very skillful integration of theme and messaging, a lesser-known ad entitled "Train" demonstrated integration of theme into a messaging objective that was just as well done. This ad features the same narrator as in "Morning in America". It begins with very ordinary people closing up their shops early to watch a train carrying the president pass through their town. The narrator tells us that the train brings with it

"a new spirit of accomplishment, and optimism, and pride because in the past three and a half years, things have been looking up in the country. Today the economy is up. Taxes and inflation are down. Americans are working again, and so is America. So, while some folks might have come so they can tell their grandchildren they saw President Reagan, most of them just stopped by to say thanks... President Reagan: leadership that's working (Youtube 2009)."

At first glance, this advertisement brings up the same feelings as “Morning in America”. There was certainly a lot to look forward to in this country and we should reelect a man who helped it get there. However, closer analysis of the words and images in the ad, with the themes above in mind, reveal true proficiency in thematic emphasis to pursue messaging objectives. The ad is also very useful in accomplishing facets of the Reagan reelection strategy, specifically in appealing to independent voters.

One major thematic connection in this advertisement is in its emphasis of the people versus government theme (particularly the populist elements of it) while connecting with various messaging objectives like pride in America and Reagan’s leadership. From the beginning of the ad, the populist elements of the theme are stressed. With the images of everyday people doing everyday things, the ad stresses that working people are the spirit of America. This populist appeal is very subtle but very effective in transmitting the theme of American identity.

Even subtler is the use of the train. This mode of transportation has important historical connotations that stress the theme of American hard work. This country grew and developed because of trains. Our greatness came from hard work and ingenuity that created the steam engine and the tracks zigzagging across the country. This mode of transportation encouraged industrialization and allowed for an incredible economic boom. Choosing a train is again a subtle but effective historical and populist appeal toward the theme and messaging objectives of free economic innovation and American identity.

A third thematic appeal emphasizes further the limiting of the government theme and connects to the campaign messaging objectives of confidence in America and continuing the success of the administration. The “accomplishment, and optimism, and pride,” directly, refer to the theme of pride and confidence in America. This appeal is made not only from the words but

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also with the symbols in the ad. Throughout the spot, there are American flags everywhere. Even the train is draped in star spangled banners. In a more complex way, the “accomplishment, optimism, and pride” are implicitly connected to the theme of limiting the government to grow the economy. These three feelings are attributed to the lower taxes and interest rates. By referencing these impressive economic conditions this message tells the voters that the government shrinking policies have worked and made the country stronger. Reagan’s theme has essentially proven itself to be correct. In order to keep these things moving in the right direction the voters should support Reagan. The ad further affirms this theme when the slogan “leadership that’s working” appears on screen. It explicitly tells the voter that Reagan can keep all the positivity going. In this way the thematic appeal of limited government helped this advertisement get at the messaging objective of pride in America and Reagan leadership. It connects the two in an ingenious way.

Another important populist appeal comes with those who “just stopped by to say thanks.” This is directly related to not only the populist elements of the “limiting the government” theme, but also the campaign messaging objective of Reagan as a sub-element of leadership. According to the ad, the people who came out to see Reagan were not there to worship him or idolize him. They came out to say thanks. This is such a simple little phrase. It is an everyman word; something you would say to your barber after a haircut. It implies that Reagan is a man of the people. They are happy with the lowered taxes and falling interest rates he has helped create. Nonetheless, he has a job to do and is responsible to the people. They are the deciders and Reagan is the chosen delegate. All of these facets of the advertisement emphasize the populist elements of Reagan’s people versus government theme, and connect to messaging objectives like American pride, continuing to limit the government, and Reagan as a strong leader.

This advertisement is, in all, extremely effective. In the course of its one minute run time, it manages to hit several major messaging objectives of the campaign. The ad is made more compelling through its utilization of a couple of very deep and positive themes of American identity and limited government. The relaxing music, American symbols, and calming narration add to this positivity and really compel the voter to believe that Reagan is taking the country in a desirable direction. Strategically, this advertisement is quite useful. By using very broad and positive messaging objectives of economic growth, strong leadership, and American pride, the ad should be well received by independent voters who find these messages appealing. The ad does not discuss partisanship or controversial issues. Rather, it addresses things that every American can be happy about. The “Train” advertisement is an exemplary case of weaving extremely broad themes into messaging objectives that are strategically useful.

Besides advertisements such as “Morning in America” and “Train,” the Reagan campaign also displayed incredible skill in thematic emphasis to touch upon messaging objectives in the President’s prepared speeches. These speeches were also very useful in fulfilling the strategies of the campaign. One particularly interesting example of this was a speech given at an Ecumenical Prayer Breakfast in Dallas in August of 1984. This is interesting for several reasons. First, it is a rare example of Reagan explicitly delving into social issues. It was a major goal of the campaign to focus on the economy and leadership, avoiding social issues (Moore 1986, 241). Secondly, this speech has a very clear link to the unique geographic strategy of the campaign. Most importantly though, Reagan’s remarks at this event give an absolutely clear theme regarding civil religion in America that he then connects directly to his limited government messaging objective. It is an exemplary case of the type of thematic incorporation that Reagan is known for.

Reagan begins his address by clearly explaining the role of religion in American society. He follows his typical pattern of theme creation. He references history. He argues that our founding fathers knew that religion was the basis of morality for our country. He cites the verbiage in the Mayflower Compact and the Declaration of Independence that reference God. He mentions the Chaplain that served the members of Congress and the oaths of office that reference God. He then sets up his classic antithesis. He relates the failure of France's purely secular post-revolutionary government. Reagan then says that both he and George Washington believe that "the city of man cannot survive without the city of God. He goes on to argue that the abolitionist and civil rights movements had deep ties to religious morality. Reagan then jumps to modern times where the Supreme Court has struck down religious practices in public schools. Court cases have ensued that have sought to take "under God" out of the pledge of allegiance and strike down things like voluntary prayer in public schools. In all, he argues that religion has lost its "special place" of respect and fondness in America. He claims that religion needs "defenders against those who care only for the interests of the state (Youtube 2011)." Reagan implies that he and those listening are those defenders. This is an utterly classic pattern of theme for Reagan. It is full of history that supports his conclusion. It draws clear lines of antithesis between right and wrong. It has the all-important populist call to action, to defend this sacred American value. It is indeed difficult to find another speech from this campaign that so explicitly outlines a full thematic arc.

This speech utilizes the clear theme to touch on the important campaign messaging objective of limiting government in order to advance our society. Reagan argues that those striking down religious practice are doing so in the name of tolerance. He states that these people are ironically behaving intolerantly. He argues, "they refuse to tolerate its [religion's] importance

in our lives.” These courts should not be meddling in religious affairs at all according to Reagan’s interpretation of the Constitution. The liberal judges who have struck down prayer in school are overreaching their authority and doing so in a way that is deleterious to progress. Reagan asks: “If all the children of our country studied together, all of the many religions in our country, wouldn’t they learn greater tolerance of each others beliefs?” The rulings of the court have thus violated a sacred value and created greater intolerance (Youtube 2011). Reagan, a defender of religious freedom, must thus remain in office to turn the tide in this war against religion and move the country forward.

Through a classic pattern, this speech drew a compelling theme and then utilized it to transmit a messaging objective to its audience. It showed mastery in these oratory elements. However, this speech also used theme and messaging objectives to skillfully execute the geographic strategy of the Reagan campaign. This speech was not only aimed at its immediate audience, but the entire southern region of the US as well as Catholic voters in the Northeast (Moore 1986, 185). The campaign was uneasy about discussing social issues because it was attempting to capture independents. However, Lee Atwater argued that it was a move to hold the South firmly for Reagan. They hoped to get the religious independent voters and Democrats that cared about, and were in favor of, prayer in schools (Moore 1986, 184). Furthermore, Ed Rollins believed that this speech helped Reagan’s likability and leadership appeal to these voters. Thus, this speech demonstrated mastery in inclusion of theme to explain a messaging objective in a way that was strategically beneficial.

Reagan’s acceptance speech at the Republican Nominating Convention in 1984 is another piece of communication that shows high levels of skill in incorporating theme to hammer home major messaging objectives in a strategically significant manner. Convention speeches, as

discussed in the first chapter, are one of the most important forms of communication in any given campaign. It is a time to use broad appeals and acclaims that will get voters excited about the election. Reagan's hour-long speech fills the criteria of a successful convention speech to a tee. In this speech, Reagan sketches a couple of the major themes used by the campaign. He uses these themes to inform many of the messaging objectives listed above and advocate for his reelection in accordance with the strategies decided upon by the campaign.

The theme of limiting government shows up in order to discuss many of the messaging objectives in the campaign. In many cases, this theme is used in tandem with other themes to make them even more compelling. The expulsion of the government from the economy is the most dominant form of this theme. From the beginning of the speech, Reagan uses his characteristic style of theme. He draws a clear line of distinction. He claims that in 1984, the voters have an electoral choice that represents a divergence in the vision of government. Reagan's vision is one of "growth and freedom," evidenced by the high economic growth, low taxes, and low inflation of his administration. The Democratic vision of government is one of "fear and limits." They want to impose regulations and burdens that would stop the growth of the American economy. Reagan cleverly states that they "never met a tax they didn't like or hike (Youtube 2014)." Reagan goes on to argue that the terms "left" and "right" do not apply to this election. The correct terms are "up" and "down". The Democrats wish to descend into the Welfare State. Reagan wants to go up to "the dream conceptualized by our founding fathers." This distinction sketches the theme clearly. A conception of limited government was the way of economic growth. The Democratic vision was the way to economic ruin.

This theme was then used to appeal directly to several of the campaign's messaging objectives. The most obvious is the limiting government message. This appeal is included in the

flushing out of the theme and reference to the positive economic outlook. This theme additionally aided in the transmission of the “continuation of leadership” message. The country was experiencing the good economic conditions that, according to Reagan, arise from the limiting of the government’s role in the economy. If Reagan were not there to put policy in place that the people desired, these conditions would not exist. He argues that together, the people, not the government, have put the economy on the right track. Reagan also vows to continue this trend of freedom and prosperity in the future. The speech makes the connection more explicit by referencing policies that Reagan has enacted that have helped the economy grow. In this way, the theme also helps to explain the future vision message of the campaign. Reagan’s vision for the future has created prosperity and a thriving economy. Reagan vows to continue the movement of freedom and prosperity in the future. Moreover, the country can once again be proud of its place as a leader in the world. The US, Reagan argues, is a beacon of freedom in the world. Thus, this speech used one theme to hit several major messaging objectives of the campaign in a compelling way. The messaging objectives of limiting government, continuing the economic growth, Reagan’s unique form of populist leadership, and pride in America are made compelling by the casting of the election in broad, black and white themes about the nature of government in the economy.

Strategically, this aspect of the convention speech was very useful. Once again, the broad appeals were very palatable to independent voters. The economic outlook drawn by Reagan is very appealing to those not affiliated with the Republican Party. Moreover, Reagan’s likability and character ratings would be aided by his objectively brilliant oratorical skills and positive nature of his theme regarding the nature of government. Reagan’s conviction and earnestness truly connected with voters. It seems impossible not to find goose bumps on one’s arms when

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Reagan speaks so highly of the values that we hold dear and our proud history. In all these ways, the speech's clear thematic connection with messaging objectives seems very effective in capturing independent attention.

In a much more minor way, the Reagan theme regarding foreign policy was used in the convention speech to illuminate the campaign's messaging objective of continuing the progress made and being proud of our American values. It is important to analyze this aspect of the speech because foreign policy was a very tangential part of the campaign, and it is in this speech that the theme is very clearly sketched. As stated above, Reagan explains that Americans are peaceful. Peace only comes from strength. Furthermore, as Americans, we are compelled to protect freedom and democracy around the world. This theme is compelling because it gets to the heart of our values of democracy.

This theme is used in this speech to expand on a couple of the campaign's messaging objectives. The most obvious is the connection to continuing the success of Reagan's leadership. Reagan argues that since he took office, "not one inch of soil has fallen to the communists." He credits the increased investment in the military with bringing this phenomenon about. The actions we took in Grenada, according to Reagan, were very important. They let the world know that the United States would not sit by and let a country fall under the "yoke" of communism (Youtube 2014). Thus, in order to remain powerful and peaceful, Reagan must be reelected in order to continue outfitting the military with the best weapons possible. Furthermore, this theme implicitly connects with the "pride in America" messaging objective of the campaign. By going out into the world and protecting freedom, we are reaffirming our faith in our values. Reagan knows that this is important to our country and leads to success as a nation. In these

ways, the theme on foreign policy helped to touch upon an important messaging objective of the campaign.

In terms of strategy, this facet of the speech was quite useful. Again, the broad theme about American identity and message about patriotism and pride would be useful in capturing independent votes. Moreover, this part of the speech was useful in the regional strategy. Reagan makes explicit reference to remaining close with the state of Israel. Regionally, this would aid the campaign with Jews in the Northeast who cared very deeply about Israeli statehood. In both of these ways, the incorporation of these themes and messages into the convention speech aided the campaign strategically.

By, most any measure, Reagan's convention speech in 1984 was a very successful bit of communication. Reagan and his writing team showed incredible skill at outlining broad themes about government and American values, and incorporating them into messaging objectives of the campaign. The speech was also very impressive in its strategic mindedness. Like all of the communication analyzed here, campaigns could take a lesson about incorporating theme into objectives of campaign messaging.

## **Conclusion**

The presidential election of 1984 is exceptional in a number of ways. The economic climate was particularly warm to the incumbent. Unique to this campaign, the incumbent himself was at the center of a massive political movement. Reagan was also personally disposed to allowing his very skilled campaign officials prepare most facets of the campaign. Furthermore, the themes that Reagan and his advisors had at their disposal were also uniquely clear and accessible. All of this is to say that perhaps the most unique and important manner in which this campaign is distinctive is in how all of the above factors aligned in such a way to allow the

Reagan-Bush 1984 campaign to use theme in incredibly effective and interesting ways in its messaging. All of the factors highlighted in this chapter interacted in irreducible ways to create theme-driven messages that connected to messaging objectives and fulfilled the strategies of the campaign.

In terms of trends in this type of thematic integration, this campaign set many. Though a profound mixture of a great number of factors contributed to the success of theme in this campaign, the impression was that theme was a true driver of all messaging. In order to make the messaging objectives compelling, campaigns in the future would have to tie them inseparably to broad themes about American identity and progress. To employ these types of themes that cast issues in black and white, every election would have to represent the “clear divergence” in the direction of the country that Reagan had alluded to in so much of his communication to make messaging objectives more compelling. Because of his success and the movement that was created, Republicans in future campaigns would look to Reagan to draw inspiration for their thematic genesis as well as selection of messaging objectives. They would attempt to avoid specific policy suggestions as major messaging objectives because, as the Reagan team had, they saw the inherent challenges of connecting specific policy to major themes.

## Chapter 3

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### Introduction

In Stephen Skowronek's influential work *The Politics Presidents Make* George H.W. Bush's administration is characterized as one of articulation. Throughout his time in presidential politics, Bush attempted to manipulate the commitments left by Reagan "the repudiator" to make them his own (Skowronek 1993, 41). This characterization is quite true in Bush's 1988 campaign. In the realms of theme and messaging objectives, the Bush campaign took cues from the previous president and put minor twists to make them unique and more germane to the political climate in 1988. This climate was marked by a very strong economy, but more important, the aftermath of the Reagan administration. In terms of personality, this campaign featured some important considerations. George H.W. Bush had many personal attributes that presented challenges for the utilization of themes in messaging. Michael Dukakis' personal disposition however, made many aspects of the Bush thematic and messaging approach much more effective. Lee Atwater is by far the most interesting figure of this campaign and probably of the entire period of study. His personal characteristics had tremendous impact on the themes, messaging objectives, and strategy of this campaign and all campaigns to follow. The strategy selected was logical and simple enough: partially reassemble the Reagan conservatives. This time though, the campaign simply wished to win the election through the mathematics of the Electoral College. In all, this race is very important in analyzing how the successor, with suboptimal thematic skill, of a very popular incumbent may gain election not through a supremely effective theme-driven strategy, but one that is logical and married to messaging objectives.

### Themes

As argued in the last chapter, no other campaign in this time period had a collection of themes as clear and well articulated as Reagan in 1984. However, the Bush campaign was able to implicitly lay out a couple of identifiable themes that would be used to illuminate central campaign messaging objectives. There are a few common patterns to many of Bush's themes that worked to undermine their effectiveness. The most important of these patterns is the lack of antithesis in theme (Medhurst 2006, 24-5). Bush could not seem to always create the enemies of progress that Reagan was so skilled at doing. Though he may highlight the "virtuous people" in America, or the obstacles to progress, he had trouble tying them together in the same theme. This not only weakened the themes, but also made them somewhat more pessimistic. A theme of a societal ill with no hero to redeem it would inevitably lead to a message of negativity. As we shall see, this turn to negativity occurred quite often in the campaign messaging.

Furthermore, there was a noticeable lack of historical appeal to Bush's themes. Reagan was very skilled at relating his themes to the past. This allowed him to create themes about the concrete aspects of American identity. Bush struggled to make this clear connection. Without the appeal to the past, Bush's themes lacked force in asserting the validity of his themes. There was no evidence given that Bush's explanations of the world were correct. This lack of historic appeal also meant that Bush could not create a solid message of American identity. Because there was no full story of American progress, Bush could not outline the values that brought America to where it was. This resulted in a weakening of the themes that Bush conveyed.

Related to these patterns was the lack of a strong, uniform, and explicit appeal to populism. Reagan saw this call to action as completely necessary in any compelling theme. Though one of Bush's themes to be discussed was largely populist, it lacked the impetus to action that was ubiquitous in Reagan's discourse. This problem stemmed from the fact that there

was no direct antithesis. Because the forces of good and evil were not drawn together in one theme, there was no impetus for action, no explicit need for his election (Medhurst 2006, 25). Here the lack of antithesis compounded the anemic nature of the populist appeals. Also, with the lack of history in the themes, there was no direct explanation that “the People” were the vehicle of change in America. Thus, the lack of the historical appeals further weakened the ability of Bush’s themes to be convincingly populist. Together, all of the characteristics that weakened Bush’s themes worked in concert to create themes that were less compelling than they potentially may have been.

All of this notwithstanding, a couple of major themes emerged in 1988. One of the most important themes for the Bush campaign was that liberals were weak and dangerous to American progress (see appendix). The economic elements of this theme related to raising taxes and increasing government spending. However, in this campaign the economic consequences were much less explicit than the social and foreign policy consequences. In the area of social progress, liberals are dangerous because they are soft. They coddle those who simply do not deserve it. This applies implicitly to programs like welfare, and explicitly to issues of law and order. Bush argued that liberals are soft on crime. They oppose the death penalty where it should be applied. The death penalty, to Bush, was important to our morality and the protection of justice. Liberals were also in favor of programs that gave criminals certain amenities, specifically “weekend passes” from prison. These programs were not only bad because they betrayed the value of justice, but because they actually allowed criminals, who have broken our laws, to walk the streets. In foreign policy, liberals were also weak. Their policies of cutting military spending and weapons systems demonstrated this weakness. America’s enemies like the USSR were not to be trusted and weakness would provoke them. Disarming would put America and its freedom in

danger of attack. Finally, in the area of religion, liberals are more than willing to abandon our commitments in the name of some form of political correctness. A commitment to religion is a basic part American civil society and should not be changed. The liberals also have no pride in our American symbols. They want to change things that we hold dear like the Pledge of Allegiance. This social area of the theme is quite possibly the most compelling because it had a clear assertion of value and led to very strong emotional response from voters. This collection of themes was useful for the Bush campaign. The ties to the Republican narrative are somewhat clear. The weakness of liberals stems from their identity that exists outside of the Republican Party provided by the narrative. Republicans represent the true values of America while liberals work to destroy them. These themes were used to emphasize messaging objectives like law and order, government spending and taxation, defense, and commitments to civil society. Also, they fit well into the strategies the campaign decided upon including reconquering the conservatives that voted for Reagan (Runkel 1989, 34).

This collection of themes is not particularly weak or particularly strong. They certainly provoke emotions of fear. People certainly want to avoid the disastrous consequences of liberal rule. The characteristics that weakened Bush's themes are clear. The themes contain no clear path of action, simply a path that we want to avoid. Though clearly implicit, there is no clear hero. Neither George Bush nor "the People" are called directly to combat the liberal menace. The solutions to the problems posed by these themes would thus have to come from the more specific messaging objectives. Furthermore, in sections on messaging objectives and specific communication, it will become clear that these themes took on a very negative tone because of its one-sided description. With the liberal messaging, messages could only come as negative characterizations of the left. There is also a clear lack of appeal to history. Once again, it is

implicit that our history supports these conclusions. However, explicit mention of founders or historic values is not readily available. Because of all of these deficiencies, the themes that result have serious weaknesses. It definitely gives an explanation of the way that liberals think and the way their policies would be deleterious. However, there is not a lot of backing to the explanation. Neither historical evidence, nor a specific path forward are given explicitly. Thus, although this theme certainly stimulated emotion, it did less to guide votes than the Reagan themes did.

Although the themes described above made up much of the thematic force in the 1988 campaign, there was another, distinct theme that Bush utilized. This was the theme of citizen activism, volunteerism, and individualism. This theme is, at its heart, a tweak on Reagan's limited government theme. It posits that the people are at the heart of national progress. Working in their communities, people and small organizations, not the government, are responsible for moving America forward. These people sacrifice and serve their communities in any way that they can. Individuals like this are the unsung heroes of America. Church groups, charities, and NGO's hold the reins of government because they represent the interests of everyday Americans. The government should not impede their work. Rather, it should be accountable to their interests and further their aims. This theme is populist in its praise of the individual (Medhurst 2006, 24). It was a useful theme for appealing to conservative independent voters because of its bipartisan optimism and conception of limited government.

Though this is an optimistic theme that stood as a centerpiece of ideology for the campaign, there are some clear weak points that fall in line with the general characteristics enumerated above. First, it does not show an explicit threat to the individual. Though one can imply that a large and restrictive government would hurt the individual, there is no specific mention of this in the campaign's communication. Secondly, there is a lack of history here.

Though the organizations are made clear, Bush fails to mention their role throughout American history or periods where they were repressed. Lastly, though Bush praises the individual, he never really articulated the ways that they were virtuous. Compared with Reagan's explicit characteristics of "wholesome" individuals, Bush's praise seems impotent. Thus, though this theme was powerful and positive, it lacked the enormous potential of the limited government populist appeal that was demonstrated by Reagan in 1984. This weakness explains, in part, the reason the Bush campaign could not produce messaging with strong connection to this theme.

## **Political Climate**

In this chapter, there are three sets of aspects of political climate that are important to the analysis of theme in messaging. One important set is the ever-present economic outlook. By all accounts, the US economy was thriving and continuing to grow during the campaign.

Unemployment was continually lowered, and manufacturing was on the rise (Cacy, Roberts 1988, 3-6). This strong economic outlook boded well for Bush as he was running on a similar economic platform as his predecessor Ronald Reagan. This positive economic outlook led the Bush campaign to select messaging objectives and undertake strategies that would reinforce the idea that he would continue the economic policies undertaken by Reagan that had led to this success.

The second set of conditions of political climate of importance in this work is the nature of the media covering the 1988 election. Like the characterization in the first chapter and in the 1984 case, the media was very easily manipulated. Lee Atwater was an absolute wizard with the press. He was incredibly good at controlling the information the press received and the resulting reports. His skill at media manipulation will be discussed at length later. However, it is important to note that the state of the press at the time allowed Atwater to release communication that

fulfilled messaging objectives and was strategically useful, and sometimes successful at emphasizing themes.

The final, and most crucial feature of the political climate at the time of the 1988 election relates to the political order in America immediately following the Reagan Administration. As discussed previously, the “Reagan Revolution” was the largest political movement in the second half of the Twentieth Century. He stood as a political icon to many people. This stood as both a problem and an opportunity for George Bush in 1988. Skowronek argues that those who follow repudiators, as Bush was following Reagan, often have a hard time governing because they are forced to pick up the pieces of a shattered political order (1993, 34). This seems as though it could be true of campaigning in a post-Reagan America as well. Bush had to acknowledge the incredible movement that had elevated his predecessor to political preeminence. In order to have success, Bush would have to tie himself to the Reagan movement. However, this alone would not allow Bush to win the presidency, as it is an office that relies so heavily on character and uniqueness. Thus, the Bush campaign would need to strike a balance between being the “faithful son” of the Reagan Revolution, and having a unique personality and vision for America (Skowronek 1993, 430). This impetus of balance caused the Bush campaign to select several messaging objectives, emphasize certain themes, and take up certain strategies that would touch upon both of the electoral necessities outlined above.

## **The Players**

To say that personality had a large impact on theme, messaging objectives, strategy, and the interplay of the three in the Bush 1988 campaign is an understatement that truly subtracts from understanding the dynamics of the entire campaign. George H.W Bush is overall one of the most interesting Republican candidates of the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Many of his personal traits had a

profound effect on both the 1988 race and the 1992 reelection bid that will be discussed in the next chapter. These attributes included Bush's views on the very nature of political campaigns, preference of communication, and personal disclosure. These personal convictions had both positive and negative impacts on the use of theme in messaging and also dictated strategy to some extent.

The most foundational aspect of Bush's personal affectation to this work was his personal thoughts on political campaigns. Bush believed that campaign activities were "narrow and self-interested" (Medhurst 2006, 10). He got absolutely no enjoyment out of running a campaign. This type of distaste of course limits the potential of the candidate to truly throw himself into the difficult task of weaving theme into campaign messaging objectives. It seems that here the candidate held back the thematic potential of the campaign. Bush's cynical thoughts about campaigns were not all bad however. Bush saw a clear dichotomy between governing and running for election. Campaigns were just the means to the end of governing. This led Bush to believe that campaign communication had little bearing on what the public expected the incoming administration to do. He believed that people generally understood that circumstances that elected officials find themselves in force them to betray some campaign promises (Medhurst 2006, 4). It is not difficult to see the potential for theme and freedom in message choice that comes with this kind of belief. Bush would have been open to a large number of messaging objectives because he did not believe that they represented any real expectations once election had been gained. Although this belief had the potential to undermine the much-discussed "genuine" qualities in the campaign communication, it seems that Bush already may have been lacking in that area given his distaste of campaigning. Thus, in this campaign Bush's views on

the nature of political campaigns hurt the potential for thematic integration in one sense and helped it in another way.

Bush's preferred modes of communication also constituted a very influential personal attribute that impacted the ability of his campaign to emphasize themes in messages that were set as objectives and were strategically useful. First and foremost, Bush did not enjoy speaking publicly (Medhurst 2006, 4). He was much more comfortable with personal interaction and persuasion than large-scale communication (Medhurst 2006, 10). This in itself has serious consequences for theme integration. If Bush did not like communicating with a large audience, how could he be expected to effectively espouse broad themes of American identity and tie them to messaging objectives? Not only would it be strange to do such thematic weaving on an interpersonal level, but strategically it is an impossibility. Furthermore, Bush also was not fond of flowery language or rhetoric. Successful theme emphasis depends on a mastery of rhetoric. When people are being told what it means to be an American, or what type of government to believe in they are not hoping for logical arguments, they are looking to be emotionally moved. Bush also resisted reading prepared speeches. He would often change many words in his speeches because they were not his. Where Reagan allowed his speechwriters to exercise their considerable skill, Bush impeded them. The micromanagement of speech material would stand to undermine the coherent themes that speechwriters like Peggy Noonan (a writer during both the Reagan and Bush campaigns) were very proficient at producing (Medhurst 2006, 9). These preferences of communication put Bush out of his element and handicapped the campaign when attempting theme driven communication.

A third character trait of George Bush that impacted his ability to weave theme and messaging objectives in a strategically significant way was his commitment to personal privacy.

Bush felt personally violated when he was forced to speak about what patriotism, America, and duty meant to him (Medhurst 2006, 13). Once again, comparison with Reagan is useful to illustrate the limiting effects of this character attribute. When Reagan could place himself in his themes on American identity they became especially compelling. The themes were proven to be more legitimate. This also served to show the positive aspects of his character. Since Bush lacked this ability, his themes were far less compelling and his character was not addressed. Refusing to become a part of his explanations of American society, Bush left the audience wanting to know more. With less compelling themes, not only is it tougher to weave them into objectives of messaging, but strategically it is less effective. People will not react as strongly to positive messages about American identity if the candidate cannot relate to them. This may have, to a minor extent, influenced the choice of themes and messaging objectives that were more negative in nature. Since Bush was not the centerpiece of these themes and messages, it was easier to connect the two. In a similar way, it may have accounted for the types of specific advertisements that the campaign produced to touch upon these negative messaging objectives. In this way, Bush's refusal to insert his personal beliefs into his themes had an impact on those emphasized, the messaging objectives selected, and strategies chosen.

Bush's opponent in 1988, Michael Dukakis, also had many personal attributes that impacted the Bush themes, messaging objectives, and strategy. There are two important facets about Dukakis's personal characteristics that are of importance here. The first and less important facet was his belief in group consensus in campaign decision-making. Dukakis surrounded himself with a large number of advisors. Each had a say in the running of the campaign, but there was not really a leading advisor (Runkel 1989, 83). This organization fell under the "horizontal" structure of campaigning. The common obstacles of this organizations were present in the

Dukakis campaign. They were often slow to respond and their messages were not unified and coherent because they were forced to go through many channels to make decisions. This was very beneficial to the Bush campaign's commitment to always be "on offense." They could control the discourse because the Dukakis campaign had to go through many institutional steps to get a message out. Thus, Dukakis's convictions in campaign organization boosted the Bush campaign's ability to emphasize the themes and messages they desired based on strategic utility.

The second and more important character attribute of Michael Dukakis in the realms of theme and messaging objectives was his personal commitment to run a positive campaign. Dukakis firmly believed that running a "cleaner" campaign was not only morally commendable, but also strategically beneficial. He believed that voters would see through the wild accusations and negative messaging of the Bush campaign and chose to vote for him (Runkel 1989, 200). In the documentary *Boogie Man*, Dukakis plainly states that his campaign "wasn't going to respond" to things like the prison furlough debate, his mental health, or the accusation of his wife burning an American flag (Forbes 2009). Though commendable, this approach was quite naïve and gave the Bush campaign even more autonomy in controlling the messaging agenda. Free from retaliation, Lee Atwater and the Bush team were able to select any message, emphasize any theme, and pursue any strategy they believed would help them.

This stands as a logical segue to a discussion of Lee Atwater's personal characteristics. What needs to be said about Lee Atwater's contributions, good and bad, to campaign communication could take up an entire volume on its own. In the opinion of this writer, there has not been nearly enough literature produced to measure the effects (positive or negative) this man has had on presidential campaigns. However, some length will be devoted here to describe a few of the ways Lee Atwater's personal traits impacted the themes, messaging objectives, and

strategy of the 1988 Bush campaign. The attributes that will be focused on here are his commitment to winning at all costs, his ability to identify salient issues and messaging objectives among various populations, and his incredible skill in dealing with the media.

Atwater's competitive nature is the most foundational of the personal aspects identified above. From his youth, Atwater took any opportunity to succeed. He became a Republican because in his home state of South Carolina it was the less populated power, giving Atwater more potential for advancement. Many participants in *Boogie Man*, the documentary chronicling his life, spoke often of his competitiveness. Losing made Atwater "physically ill." Atwater himself made many comments about never accepting defeat. He said of his political career simply, "If you're on the other team I'm gonna try to beat you (Forbes 2009)." This commitment to victory allowed Atwater to be very unfettered in his decisions regarding campaigns. If he believed that a theme, messaging, or strategy would help his candidate, he would pursue it. He conceptualized campaigns as open season where anything goes. He referred to it as "making sausage." Atwater realized that to put the heat on the other candidate made the opposition angry and kept the heat off his candidate. This approach had many impacts on the 1988 campaign. Atwater took up a strategy to "stick it to them first," control the agenda and play offense that will be discussed in detail later (Forbes 2009).

A second major personal attribute of Lee Atwater that is important here was his uncanny knack for finding the "sticky issue" that would elicit emotional and visceral responses from certain groups of voters. Atwater fully understood that people vote based on "their fears, not their hopes," and that anger is a very powerful political motivator (Forbes 2009). Coming from a poor town in the South, Atwater understood the contempt that Southerners and lower income people had for liberals. They were seen as the elite and were conceptualized as "people who

thought they were better than you are (Forbes 2008).” The connection with the Bush theme on liberal leadership is very clear here. The generation of this theme for 1988 was undoubtedly influenced by Atwater’s acknowledgment that this was a very sizeable and useful group of voters for Bush. Furthermore, Atwater realized that appeals to patriotism and non-materialistic values could be more effective than economic interests. Some messaging objectives like the pledge of allegiance and prayer in schools were selected based on Atwater’s ability to find the issue that would spark controversy and emotional responses among conservative voters.

The final personality attribute of Lee Atwater of importance here was his arguably unmatched ability to manipulate and deal with the media. Contributors to *Boogie Man* all agreed that Atwater was magic with the press. He was able to become friendly with members of the press. The close personal ties he fostered enabled him to manipulate their work in important ways. He would offer exclusive stories to reporters that he knew would be friendly to Bush’ messaging objectives. Most fundamentally, Atwater was excellent at staying on message and emphasizing major messaging objectives and themes at every opportunity. He not only embodied this skill, but demanded it of the candidate and all involved with the campaign (Forbes 2009). Atwater was also very in tune with the press. He knew exactly what he could get away with, what they would cover, and how to influence the stories that they would write (Forbes 2009). It was said that the “press spoke the Republican talking points without even getting them (Forbes 2009).” Obviously, this skill with the media had profound impacts on the communication of the Bush campaign. With the ability to make almost anything play to his favor in the media, Atwater would be free to choose messaging objectives and messages that were controversial and uniquely helped Bush. This would also be important strategically in staying on offense and appealing to conservatives.

It should be noted that the conditions for theme driven communication are much murkier than they were in 1984. Weakness has already been identified in the themes that Bush had available for emphasis. The political climate also held its own set of dangerous conditions. The picture becomes even more clouded with this discussion of personal disposition. Several personal convictions of George Bush clearly put the campaign at a disadvantage in utilizing theme. However, Bush's personality has been shown to not be a total loss in the realms of messaging and strategy. Michael Dukakis's personal beliefs also seemed to have aided the Bush campaign in their strategy and messaging pursuits. Most of all though, the Bush campaign was aided by the personal affectations of Lee Atwater. He serves as an embodiment of a manager who will do anything to win. His contributions to the campaign in realms of messaging objectives and strategy were immeasurable. However, his personality could really only do so much to aid Bush in utilizing theme as his commitment to strategy and useful messaging objectives overrode any other commitments.

## **Strategy**

With all of the factors already described, it seems that George Bush had no guarantees of effectively utilizing theme and messaging objectives together, much less winning election. With a less than optimal outlook, a premium was placed on choosing a strategy that would allow the Vice President to succeed Reagan. With the man who was the center of the Reagan Revolution out of office, there was both a challenge and an opportunity present for the Bush campaign. Continuing to claim the Reagan coalition would undoubtedly ensure election for Bush. The challenge for the Bush team was preventing the loss of votes from the coalition in 1984. Confronting this challenge was the absolute center of all strategic decisions that the Bush campaign took. It led directly to two strategic aims in 1988 that are of importance in this work.

The first was ensuring the support of the conservatives in the electorate by both remaining close to Reagan and creating Bush's own intellectual space. This included both Democratic and Republican conservatives. This perceived strategic necessity also led to the conviction of the Bush team to stay on offense and "control the agenda (Runkel 1989, 88)." Both of these strategic aims, guided by the most basic impetus of recapturing Reagan's coalition, would have large impacts on messaging objectives, the themes utilized to espouse them, and specific messaging.

The first strategic calculation of appealing to conservatives in the electorate was the more basic of the two. This strategy was informed by a couple of perceptions held by Lee Atwater and others. The first perception that led to this strategic aim was the worry that Bush's image was weak. There was a feeling in the electorate that George Bush was not as committed to conservatism as Reagan was. He would not be an authoritative supporter of limited government as Reagan had been (Runkel 1989, 31). This worried the Bush campaign in appealing to conservatives who valued limited government. This calculation would lead the campaign to select certain messages that would build an image of George Bush as a committed conservative.

This strategy of continuing Reagan also held a sub-aspect of strategy. Bush had to show how he was measurably different from Michael Dukakis. Atwater was worried that early on the candidates seemed too similar to each other. Atwater also believed in a cyclical view of the electorate. After eight years under a Republican president, some people may simply wish to give the other party a try. This would especially be the case if voters could not see a clear divergence in the candidates (Runkel 1989, 112). This being the case, The Bush team took very large steps to ensure that differentiation was achieved and Bush was seen as the conservative. These steps included selecting messaging objectives about divergence of character and governmental conception between the two candidates. The messages selected from this calculation would

attempt to paint George Bush as a strong conservative, and Michael Dukakis as a tax and spend liberal who implemented programs that were bad for America. These messaging objectives would be wrapped into the theme regarding liberal leadership.

The second major aspect of strategy important to this work is the Bush campaign's goal to play offense as much as possible. There were many facets to this strategy that had an impact on the use of theme in messaging objectives. One was making Dukakis a major issue of the campaign. This was done through specific messaging objectives to be detailed later. However, strategically it involved constantly bringing new information to light about Dukakis. The Bush team was organized in order to execute this facet of the strategy. Atwater described the structure of the campaign as five people with "a lot of turf (Runkel 1989, 92)." Everyone involved in the high levels of campaign messaging were entrusted to make quick decisions. According to Atwater, the messaging team met every day in order to formulate a messaging strategy for that day (Runkel 1989, 91). Because of the intimate and constant environment this created, the messaging was at once consistent and dynamic. The resultant messaging would be very connected to messaging objectives. The major players in the campaign organization, led by Atwater's commitment to staying on message, would be looking daily to take new information and fit it into the messaging objectives. This would be good for the enforcement of messaging objectives. However, the ways in which it could be tied to the broad themes was mixed. If the messages are very specific and are emitted daily, it is difficult to weave them into broad positive themes. Furthermore, with character assaults on Dukakis, it seems harder to connect themes of American identity although the liberal theme could be used. Due to the nature of themes as broad explanations of the political world, they are not well suited for specific character attacks. This area is reserved for the realm of messaging objectives, as it is more specific to the election.

However, where the Bush campaign could connect Dukakis to general liberal policies, the theme could be tied in. This was obviously complicated and resulted in mixed effectiveness of thematic integration. On the whole though, it is easy to see how this would make the resultant messages negative in nature.

The insistence of the Bush campaign to stay on offense also took on a meaningful role in impacting theme driven messaging in the way it dictated the Bush response to attacks on his character. Throughout the campaign, several negative rumors regarding Bush's character came to light. The most telling of these was an allegation of an extramarital affair by the Vice President. In order to remain on the offensive, Atwater chose to go after "the dirty trickster putting out the rumor (Runkel 1989, 49)." The Bush campaign did have George W Bush deny the rumor. However, the response was more focused on going after the source of the rumor. Instead of defending, the response attacked. As discussed in the first chapter, defending can sometimes be useful in acclaiming the candidate. Not only did the campaign not use the opportunity to emphasize the messaging objective of character, but the also could not tie it to a theme because of Bush's inability to place himself in themes. Through this example, it is clear that staying on the offense could have some negative impacts on the use of themes and messaging objectives in messaging.

In general, the strategies taken by the Bush administrations had measurable impacts on theme driven messaging. In the strategy to reassemble the Reagan coalition, a strong theme of American identity could have been useful. However, due to Bush's personal distaste of placing himself in thematic arcs, the campaign could not inject Bush's personal fulfillment of a theme of identity as Reagan did. In the sub-strategy of differentiation messages and themes could be mixed with success into the messaging of the campaign. If the theme about dangerous liberal

leadership could be accessed, it would prove useful. However, with the constant and Dukakis-character based nature of the messaging no theme was really useful in integrating. In responding to attacks, the Bush strategy of remaining on offense at all times, combined with Bush's aversion to personal disclosure, seemed to subtract from the potential of weaving themes into messaging objectives.

## **Messaging Objectives**

As can be expected, every factor described above had considerable impact on the messaging objectives that the Bush campaign would choose in the 1988 campaign. In most cases, a mixture of factors combined to result in the choice of messaging objectives. Unlike the Reagan campaign, some of the messaging objectives selected in 1988 were linked weakly to themes. This trouble of connection came from several factors. The themes that the campaign had available was a major factor. Bush's personality cannot be discounted either in this respect. His unwillingness to use theme effectively was a major reason certain messaging objectives lacked connection with themes. Strategy also played a role in limiting the synthesis between theme and messaging objectives. Because the campaign both wanted to remain intimate with the Reagan movement and stay on offense, certain messages that could connect with Bush's theme may have been shrugged off for strategic reasons. Contrastingly, the many of the limiting factors of message selection discussed in the first chapter were not an issue for the Bush campaign. Atwater's desire to win and creativity would enable him to select any messaging objective necessary. Also, because of Atwater's abilities to handle the media, it would certainly not be difficult to obtain coverage and frame messages correctly. Lastly, Dukakis's unwillingness to engage actually made message selection easier and more effective. The major messaging objectives that emerged out of these calculations were that George Bush would continue the

work of Ronald Reagan as a strong conservative, George Bush was a strong personality and capable leader, and Michael Dukakis was a weak tax and spend liberal. Some connections with theme are obvious and will be analyzed in detail here. However, what is truly striking in this collection of messages is their intimate connection with strategy. Every messaging objective here is intricately tied to one or more facets of strategy, most notably the sub-strategy of differentiation.

The first major messaging objective to be addressed is the conscious effort of the Bush campaign to link the Vice President inseparably from his predecessor and promote his conservative credentials. Bush himself recognized the utility and importance of this messaging objective (Runkel 1989, 91). Early on in the campaign, the decision was made to ride the wave of the Reagan Revolution. The Bush campaign was careful in its teasing out of this messaging objective. Bush asserted that he was not Ronald Reagan. He did not have the incomparable leadership skills or command of rhetoric. This recognition was useful because it nodded to the Reagan movement. No one could compare with Reagan's strong leadership according to those who believed in the revolution. George Bush was thus depicted as a loyal son of the Reagan movement. He vowed to continue limiting government and protecting the individual. The campaign decided that Bush needed to be extremely strong on both taxes and communism. This would save him from attacks on the right that he was not a true conservative (Runkel 1989, 34). Attacks like this could break up the coalition of conservatives that had voted for Reagan. Also important in this message of conservative commitments was Bush's commitment to American Pride. Atwtaer's creativity was responsible for this selection of messaging objective. He saw that this was an emotional issue in what was an issueless campaign (Runkel 1989, 35). Bush argued that things like the pledge of allegiance and the American flag were sacred emblems of the US.

They held a special place in our society. It is clear how this messaging objective was chosen due to its strategic significance. Not only did this serve to gather the Reagan coalition under Bush's belt, but it also set up the strategy of differentiation from Michael Dukakis. As part of this messaging objective, Bush also vowed to be tough on crime. Strict enforcement of drug offenses was important to protecting honest hard-working Americans. Tying Bush to Reagan and acclaiming his conservative credentials was the most logical and obvious way to capture the conservative Democrats and Republicans that Reagan had done so successfully. Also important to consider in the strategic impacts of selecting messaging objectives like American pride in the flag and pledge of allegiance was their uniqueness. Though Bush would undoubtedly need to be deeply connected with Reagan, the campaign recognized that their candidate would also need to have his own unique set of issues. This was important in the political climate of a post-Reagan America. Simple reuse of Reagan's issues would not be sufficient to activate conservatives for George Bush. This also served to draw attention from Bush's ambiguous economic plans. Strategically, this messaging objective was very well thought out.

Less obvious and effective is this messaging objective's connection to any theme. Though this messaging objective contains implicit ties to the praise of the individual present in Bush's theme, it is not completely cogent. Because Bush could never really be explicit about what was so great about the individual, or what it meant to protect them, the theme could not be used in any meaningful way. In this example, the chosen message was married perfectly to strategy. However, in terms of powerful appeal to theme, it was lacking severely.

Creating an image of George Bush as a strong leader and personality was another major messaging objective of the campaign. As mentioned earlier, the "wimp factor" was a major worry of the Bush campaign. If he was not seen as a strong leader, the campaign could very

easily lose the confidence of conservative Democrats and Republicans. To enumerate this message, the campaign took many steps in everyday campaign events as well as specific messaging. Bush's tone was harsh; his messages were clear and authoritative. One of the most interesting and humorous messages that sought to touch upon this messaging objective came at a press conference. Bush exclaimed, "don't let them tell you I'm not Texan." He then proceeded to put his foot up on a barrier and raise his pant leg to expose a cowboy boot embroidered with a Texas flag (Forbes 2008). The campaign wished to paint Bush not as the wealthy man born in New England that he was, but a down-home rancher. The cowboy boot was meant to indicate strength and hard work. This messaging objective also dictated arguing that Bush was a qualified and capable leader. In advertisements and speeches the Bush campaign argued that their candidate was qualified to make tough decisions. Once again, this messaging objective played perfectly into the strategy of the Bush campaign. In order to appeal to conservatives who cared about strong leadership, Bush would need to show his strength of personality. Also similar to the previous messaging objective though is its lack of strong connection with a theme. Because Bush refused to put his own life into a theme about American identity, his story and personal accomplishments could not be attached to a broad and compelling theme.

Painting Dukakis as a weak liberal was probably the most central messaging objective of the Bush campaign in 1988. This messaging objective was directly informed by strategy. In order to stay on the offense at all times, Atwater knew that the opponent had to be a major part of the communication. Also, this was an opportunity to weave the theme about liberal leadership into campaign communication. The list of issues that the campaign used to enumerate this messaging objective is extremely long. Some major topics included Dukakis's veto of a law requiring teachers to lead the pledge of allegiance in classrooms, Dukakis's prison furlough program, his

cuts on military spending, and his stance on gun control. The Bush campaign aggressively discussed these topics and framed them as dangerous to American society. If we do not appreciate our symbols, punish our criminals, protect our country, and keep our freedoms, America is destined for destruction. The connections to both strategy and theme are strong with this messaging objective. Strategically, this would make Dukakis look very unattractive to the conservative voters that were fearful of liberal government. In this same vein, this messaging objective had deep connections with the liberal government theme used by the Bush campaign. If Dukakis had his way, he would pursue policy that harmed the safety and precious individual freedoms that conservative Americans held dear. Dukakis's fitness as a leader was also important to this objective of messaging. The Bush campaign attempted to show that Dukakis was out of touch and could not confront challenges. This was done through essentially calling Dukakis out for not responding to troubling rumors. Because he would not respond to the rumors, the Bush campaign implied that he could not face tough issues in the campaign or in his potential administration. The Bush campaign also leaked rumors suggesting that Dukakis was mentally unstable (Forbes 2009). Here Dukakis's personal attribute of not responding to negative tactics aided the Bush campaign in espousing the message of Dukakis as a weak leader. At its core, this messaging objective promotes negative messaging. The painting of Dukakis as a liberal could in no way be positive for the Bush campaign.

Taken together, the major messaging objectives of the Bush campaign showed a weak connection to theme. While the "strong Reagan conservative" message had a tangential connection to Bush's theme regarding the individual, only the "liberal Dukakis" message could truly be weaved intricately into the theme on liberal leadership. This was a result of strategy, personal disposition, and political climate. It is clear though that these major messaging

objectives were married to strategic calculations. Appealing to conservatives was something that each of these messaging objectives did successfully at every turn. Also, when assembled together, these messages would very effectively pursue the strategy of differentiation. George Bush as a Reagan conservative and a strong leader contrasted perfectly with Dukakis as a Northeast liberal that was not a leader. When combined, these messaging objectives formed a compelling messaging arc in terms of strategic utility. They were however, not particularly well suited to thematic integration.

## **Specific Communication**

With the nature of the available themes, personality, strategic plans, and selections of messaging objectives, the Bush campaign faced great obstacles in weaving theme into messaging objectives. In the analysis of specific communication from 1988, it will become clear that the Bush campaign had limited success in thematic integration due to the above conditional factors. Though some specific messaging objectives did have important ties to theme, much of it was more concentrated in weaving messaging objectives into elements of strategy. Both the successes and failures of advertisements, interviews, and speeches in these areas will be assessed.

The Bush campaign, because of its aggressive and constant media onslaught, relied heavily on very small interactions, usually led by Atwater, with members of the press. These types of interactions served as major venues of messaging for the Bush campaign. This, though now commonplace, was a bit of a game changer. Though the interactions are too numerous to recount fully, some highlights deserve attention here. One such example of importance came when Lee Atwater decided to touch on the messaging objective of Dukakis as a liberal. Gathered in front members of the press Atwater yelled:

“The question I really want to hear him (Dukakis) answer is: Why in the world did he veto this bill calling for the pledge of allegiance to be said in our classrooms? Can you imagine that? Get down here Dukakis and answer that question (Forbes 2009).”

This type of indictment was incredibly common in the 1988 race. In a few short sentences,

Atwater touches on important messaging objectives and themes. With the accusation that

Dukakis is dodging the question because he will not answer it, Atwater touches upon the

messaging objective inept leadership. The messaging objective about sacred symbolism and

Bush’s commitment to conservatism is expounded with the reference to the pledge of allegiance

and the forceful “Can you imagine that?” The sort of lack of pride in America also ties

tangentially to the theme regarding liberals. Unlike Bush, they are willing to abandon important

symbolic aspects of American civil society. Clearly, this would play into the strategy of going

after conservative voters in the electorate. Many of the interactions with the press like this were

just as useful. This is why the campaign utilized them so heavily. Because Bush was personally

averse to theme, it fell upon people like Atwater to provide messaging objectives that were

strategically significant and connected somewhat to themes.

Aside from this type of press conference communication, it is also important to evaluate the strength and weakness of the Bush campaign in the realm of television advertisements.

Several very advertisements that proved useful for the Bush campaign are of importance here.

Each of them emphasizes a major messaging objective. The strategic calculations in each are

very clear and connect with the selected objective of messaging. Only a few though are

successful in connecting to themes. However, even in the advertisements that connect to a theme,

the connection is not very explicit or strong.

The first television ad of interest here is entitled “Solemnly Swear.” The ad opens on Bush taking the oath of office for the vice presidency. Charlton Heston then begins narrating the commercial. He outlines many of Bush’s credentials. His service in the Navy, his building of a

company, his service in Congress, his ambassadorship to the UN, his time as emissary to China, his time as director of the CIA are all listed with photos and videos from the past. Hesston then says, “the more you learn how George Bush came this far, the more you realize that perhaps no one in this century is better prepared to be President of the United States (Youtube 2011).” This ad is characteristically weak on thematic integration but strong on messaging objective focus and strategy. Once again, because Bush had no connection of his personal story to a theme, his list of accomplishments is really just a résumé. Thus, there is no real thematic connection in this ad. However, the connection to the messaging objective is clear. This ad’s only true purpose was to prove that George Bush had strong leadership skills and, judging by his heroic service in the Navy, he was certainly not a wimp. Strategically, this ad was obviously aimed at the conservatives that valued strong leadership. In all, this ad was unsuccessful in appealing to theme to display a message, but it was a successful message, according to the objectives, that fulfilled strategy.

While the “Solemnly Swear” advertisement was positive, a great number of the Bush campaign ads were negative as dictated by the strategy of playing offense and the “Dukakis is a weak liberal” message. One of these negative advertisements was entitled “Tank”. It starts with a tank being driven around a field. A narrator says, “Michael Dukakis has opposed virtually every defense system we developed.” A scrolling list rolls as the narrator outlines all of the defense systems Michael Dukakis opposed. As the ad comes to a close the narrator says, “and now he wants to be our commander-in-chief.” As he does so, Dukakis appears riding in the tank. He is wearing a helmet and smiling. The image is less than flattering. The narrator says, “America can’t afford that risk (Youtube 2011).” This ad is one that is actually effective in utilizing theme, to pursue a messaging objective and strategy. The message of Dukakis as a weak liberal and

inept leader is clear. He not only opposed defense initiatives in typical liberal fashion, but riding in the tank he does not appear as a strong commander. Rather, he looks quite like a child riding a roller coaster. The message is also implicitly tied to the theme regarding liberals. His opposition to defense measures puts America directly at “risk.” This is a consequence of liberal policies and should be avoided. Strategically the success is also clear. The conservatives in America not only saw Dukakis looking like anything but a strong commander-in-chief, but the policies that would weaken America’s defense. This message was one that used a theme to enforce a messaging objective and was useful strategically.

The last ad that will be analyzed here was known as “Revolving Door.” Like the previous message, this was an attack on Dukakis that implicitly hinted at themes to instruct a messaging objective and pursue strategy. The ad shows scenes of a prison. A narrator explains, “as governor, Michael Dukakis vetoed mandatory sentences for drug dealers. He vetoed the death penalty. His revolving door policy gave weekend furloughs to first-degree murderers not eligible for parole.” As he speaks, men in prison uniforms walk around a revolving door and a graphic saying “268 escaped” is displayed on the bottom of the screen. The narrator goes on to say that many crimes, “like kidnap and rape,” were committed when these convicts were out of prison. He adds that many are still at large. The narrator continues, “now Michael Dukakis says he wants to do for America what he has done for Massachusetts. America can’t afford that risk (Youtube 2012).” The theme-message weave is again clear. Dukakis is a liberal: messaging objective. The liberal policies he favors put America at risk: theme regarding liberals. Ending this ad in the same way as the last reinforces the connection to the messaging objective. This message is so strong because it suggests that criminals are on the loose as a direct result of the liberal prison furlough policy. This fulfills the theme about liberal leadership perfectly. What is more

dangerous than violent criminals being free to run the streets? Strategically, this again targets conservatives. The death penalty and mandatory sentencing were important to those conservatives who agreed with the war on drugs. Also, the messaging objective of Dukakis as a weak leader is touched upon. Dukakis not only passed a bad program, but the fact that criminals are at large calls into question his ability to administer programs. In all, this ad is a successful one in terms of strategy, messaging objective, and thematic integration.

Considering that the Bush campaign faced serious obstacles overall in weaving themes into messaging objectives, the realm of television advertisements seems to be an area where the Bush campaign excelled in doing so. Two of the three ads analyzed here had some success in transmitting messaging objectives with the help of theme. However, further analysis is useful. Look at the advertisement that was unsuccessful in thematic integration. It was about the candidate. Now, notice that the two that were successful were about Michael Dukakis. The elements of personal attributes and strategy seem to be most important in acknowledging the discrepancy. Bush was so averse to placing himself into themes that his campaign was unable to do it even when Charlton Heston was discussing his accomplishments. However, the Bush campaign could take a short video of Dukakis looking silly in a tank and connect it somewhat effectively to themes of liberal leadership. This is because Lee Atwater was so good at playing offense and his team was strategically committed to doing so. Thus, in the case of television ads, an important pattern seems to emerge. The attacking messages seemed to be more effective in thematic integration as a function of personality and strategy.

The acceptance speech at a nominating convention is a form of communication that stands apart from these smaller bits of communication. In 1988, a premium was placed on George Bush's acceptance speech. As described earlier, these speeches stand as an opportunity

for the campaign to nail down messages with strong thematic ties and go after the voters upon which their strategy depends. George Bush's attempt at doing this served as an admirable one. His speech was able to touch all the major messaging objectives by appealing to themes in a limited way. Elements of strategy were also clear throughout the speech. Considering all the handicaps that plagued the Bush campaign, and Bush personally, in utilizing theme, this was an exceptional effort. However, the theme connection was less compelling than it may have been.

The first and most pervasive element of message running throughout the speech was the connection to Ronald Reagan (while acknowledging Bush's inferiority). This message was clear throughout the entire speech and also tied in strategy. From the beginning, Bush gives the nod to Reagan. In one of the first sentences he thanks his "friend" Ronald Reagan. Later he claims that Reagan "did not ask for but did receive (Bush's) loyalty," and anyone that heard "the simple truth in his words understands (his) loyalty all these years." The strongest appeal to the Reagan movement came in a discussion of missions. Bush explained, "I'm a man who sees life in terms of missions. Missions defined and missions completed... and the most important work in my life is to complete the mission that we started in 1980." Bush later drives at this messaging objective even more. He argues, "When you have to change horses in midstream. Doesn't it make sense to switch to one who's going the same way?" Tying his success with the Reagan movement in these ways was an extremely effective way of enumerating message that connects Bush to Reagan. Importantly, the speech also recognizes that Bush is not Ronald Reagan. Bush agrees that he is quiet, ineloquent, and awkward. This humility is important in acknowledging to the believers in the Reagan revolution who believed that Reagan was incomparable. These words are a clear attempt to hammer home the "faithful son of Reagan" messaging objective. In a very indirect way, these aspects of the speech connect to the Bush's conception of limited government.

However, they lack a direct connection to theme because there was no theme available to emphasize this message effectively. Strategically though, this was necessary to assemble the Reagan coalition.

Bush also showed that Michael Dukakis was a liberal throughout the speech in accordance with the messaging objective. This often tied in with strategy and, at times, theme. Near the beginning of the speech Bush says, “The differences between the two candidates are as deep and wide as they have ever been.” He goes on to say, “My opponent’s view of the world is a long slow decline for our country and inevitable fall mandated by impersonal historical forces.” Bush’s view is that “America is not in decline America is a rising nation... America is a unique nation with a special role in the world.” Here we see the use of the message informed slightly by theme, and influenced heavily by strategy. The message that Dukakis is a liberal is implicit. Theme comes in now to explain the messaging objective. Being a liber, says the “liberal” theme, Dukakis is willing to sit back, undertake deleterious policies, and watch America decline. Dukakis is not proud of America’s accomplishments or place of preeminence in the world. Strategically, this section fills the differentiation strategy perfectly. The words draw a perfect line of differentiation between Bush and Dukakis. Important to note, as to not to contradict earlier statements in this chapter, is that the theme did not set the lines of antithesis. What made the lines clear was the message and structure of the remarks. Regardless this was a compelling way for Bush to use theme to explain a messaging objective in a strategically meaningful way.

In a couple of sections of the speech, the message painting Dukakis as a liberal also worked in tandem with the messaging objective regarding Bush’s commitment to conservatism. Theme was also partially useful in explaining the message in these sections. Strategic concerns were also ubiquitous in these examples. At a couple of points Bush makes lists filled with

distinctions between himself and Dukakis. In one listing, Bush claims at length that liberals want to take opportunity from young people, economic empowerment from women, and social security from the elderly. After describing that the liberals want to take each of these things, Bush says of all three, “I won’t let them take it away from you.” A second list comes up later in the speech. Bush calls attention to the pledge of allegiance, the death penalty, voluntary prayer, gun ownership, sanctity of life in the womb, not allowing weekend furlough, and lowering taxes. In a similar way to the first, Bush brings up each of these and says, “my opponent says no, and I say yes.” Two messaging objectives are present in each of these. Bush is a conservative, and Dukakis is a liberal. Bush is able to touch every issue that is wrapped up in his messaging objectives. Two themes are also implicit here. The liberals want to take economic freedom away because that is the nature of their politics according to the theme. George Bush however, applauds the individual and will not take these freedoms away in accordance with his theme. Notice that the thematic connection is there but it is tangential and weak. Where voters could not miss Reagan’s themes, Bush’s is easy to overlook. The strategic influence in this is clear and two-fold. First, Bush wants to appeal to the conservative voters. Second, he wants to draw a clear line between Dukakis and himself. In both of these ways the two sections of the speech identified here are successful.

The final and greatest triumph of the speech in weaving theme and message together in a strategically useful way is Bush’s identification of America as “a thousand points of light.” Bush argues that his opponent sees America as a small collection of interest groups in Washington. The nation waits while these groups decide its fate. Contrastingly, Bush sees the individual as “the bright center” of America.

“And radiating out from him or her is the family... to the community then on out to the town, the church and the school. And still echoing out to the county, the state, and the

nation; each doing only what it does well and no more. And I believe that power must always be kept close to the individual.”

Bush goes on to say, “Government is part of the nation of communities. It’s not the whole just a part.” The message is clear: Bush is a conservative. The theme is crucial to explaining this. Since the individual is precious and the communities are at the heart of American life, Bush believes in limited government guided by “the People.” This serves as perhaps Bush’s best integration of positive theme with message. The theme makes the conservative message immeasurably more compelling by serving as an explanation of the political world. The strategic significance here is also great. By giving a compelling account of limited government, Bush is attempting to reach the conservatives that Reagan had assembled so proficiently.

Again, based on all the disadvantages the Bush campaign faced in utilizing theme, Bush’s convention speech was a rather successful effort. He was able to use theme to instruct messaging objectives to fulfill strategy. These appeals were weak and implied for the most part however. Unlike Reagan, Bush could not fully and unmistakably enumerate all his messaging objectives using theme. Also, even with the strong points addressed above, it is important to address some failures in theme. Though the “thousand points of light” section was undeniably populist, most of the speech lacked such appeals. For example, Bush missed serious opportunities to appeal to populism by constantly referring to himself. In the beginning he says, “I mean to run hard, to fight hard, to stand on the issues and I mean to win.” A person who is skilled at appealing to populism would have made this much more collective. “We” could be used here to refer to all the individuals and small communities that represented conservative interests. This would have tied in the theme of activism that was powerful. Even when Bush does use the pronoun “we” he refers to himself and Ronald Reagan. At the very end of the speech, a place reserved for the strongest rallying cry, Bush asks, “Who should sit behind that desk? My friends I’m that man

(CSPAN 2008).” Where Reagan used we (signifying the “true” America) constantly while outlining his accomplishments and ambitions, Bush used I. This was probably informed not only by a lack of theme that was populist in this was, but also because of the strategic need to build George Bush as a strong leader. Whatever the case may be, it is clear that Bush missed an opportunity to truly incorporate the powerful tool of populist theme in his acceptance speech.

If the picture was cloudy before this section, it may be no clearer now. It seems that Bush’s overall communication was a mixed bag. At times, the campaign was able to weave theme into messaging objectives while at other times they were not. It seems that the campaign had an extremely hard time connecting Bush’s image as a strong leader to any theme because he refused to be placed in such a situation. Contrastingly, because of the care taken to construct a theme of liberal government, the campaign seemed to be somewhat proficient at connecting theme and message when Dukakis was the target. In all cases though, the connection to theme is tangential and almost always implied. Compared to Reagan, Bush truly had a harder time of relating messaging objectives inseparably with theme. However, in messaging objectives, the Bush campaign was very successful at strategic emphasis.

## **Conclusion**

The 1988 presidential election is sometimes considered one of the dirtiest in history. More important to this work, the race stands as an interesting case of the combination of many causal factors. Its political climate was entirely unique. The Reagan Revolution had shaken the foundations of American electoral politics. The Bush campaign needed to find a way to ride the wave while seeming unique. The themes that Bush constructed were on the whole much weaker than Reagan’s. They lacked clear antithesis, direct populist appeals, history, personal connection and compelling explanatory power. In terms of personality, the race is exceptional. Bush had

severe misgivings about using theme and disclosing personal attributes. However, Bush's unique conception of campaigning left him willing to take on a variety of messaging objectives. Dukakis had reservations about responding to certain messages that turned into an enormous advantage for Bush. Lee Atwater is incomparable for his incredible competitiveness and brilliance in selecting messaging objectives and strategy, and working with the media. The strategies the campaign decided upon were incredibly logical to an almost cynical level. The messaging objectives selected were very closely related to each other and married inseparably not to theme, but to strategy. The campaign had a hard time connecting the character of George Bush to their available themes, but was much more successful in thematic connection when discussing its opponent. Through the analysis of specific messaging, this trend is identifiable. In negative messages attacking Dukakis, the campaign was at least able to implicitly tie in themes about liberal governance. Bush's convention speech stood as the most successful attempt by George Bush of tying theme to messaging objectives in a strategically meaningful way. This is evidenced by the cutting of the speech into not one, but two ads used later by the campaign.

The take away in theme-driven messaging from this campaign is perhaps even more difficult to assess than the campaign itself. However, for the sake of this work an attempt must be made. A lot has to be said about political climate. The momentum of the Reagan revolution was something that the Bush campaign ended up utilizing. However, the political climate cannot account for too much here because Bush was behind in the polls by a significant margin at one point (Runkel, 1989). He could have quite easily lost the race. Strong themes were also not the focal point of this campaign as evidenced in the superficial connection of theme to messaging. Personality and strategy are very likely the most important considerations in this race. The strategy was simple enough: win a sufficient bloc of the conservative coalition that Reagan had

assembled. The personality referred to here is Lee Atwater's. He knew that Bush would most likely lose the race if the issues were not actively defined by the Bush campaign. His ability to find salient messages for conservatives that played well for Bush like the pledge of allegiance and the prison furlough were important. His ability to control the media to make these issues those that defined the later part of the campaign is what probably saved Bush from defeat. The race turned from one about the economy to one about other tangential issues. These messaging objectives however, were not something that Bush had powerful encompassing themes to handle. This is why the connection of messaging objectives to themes was mostly tangential. However, Atwater saw these issues as the only path to victory and so the campaign adapted. Thus, the strategy that Atwater chose to win, compounded by Bush's aversion to theme and the inherent weakness of the themes he did have at his disposal created a messages that were faithful to strategy and message, but not necessarily theme.

Moving forward it seems campaigns could learn a few things. First, that it really helps to appeal to Reagan or other popular Presidents leaving office. Second, going negative could work incredibly well under certain conditions. One condition was having an opponent that was both slow and emotionally hesitant to respond to attacks. The second condition was to choose attacks that both the media and the electorate would find controversial and reference them constantly, resulting in "free play" of a message. Lastly, and most important to this work, was that playing offense, defining the agenda, and being creative about what messages would assemble a coalition and motivate the electorate could overpower an anemic collection of themes. George Bush admitted himself that he was not a charismatic individual. However, because Atwater was able to find "sticky issues," harp on them incessantly, actively combat criticism with ad hominem attacks, and control the agenda, Bush proved victorious. Theme was no doubt still important in

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elections moving forward. However, the lesson was that if you could not win with positive Reagan-like themes, victory could still be achieved through ruthless strategy and carefully selected messaging objectives.

## Chapter 4

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### Introduction

George H.W. Bush's reelection effort was plagued with difficulty from the outset. The political climate, the candidate's personality, the strategy selected, and even his White House staff worked against Bush gaining a second term. These same factors also doomed any effort Bush may have made to incorporate theme into his messaging objectives to fulfill strategy. In the end, this election serves as a reminder that incumbents are not guaranteed anything in presidential elections. Without dedication and focus of resources and time, not only is reelection out of reach, but so too is the ability to utilize theme in messaging.

### Themes

For all intents and purposes, the collection of themes that Bush had at his disposal in 1992 was the same as it was in 1988. Still present, yet implied was Bush's theme on the individual and limited government. More importantly, Bush still clung to the theme against liberal government and the dangerous policies they pursued in areas like the economy, crime, foreign policy, and religion. This religious theme did take on a somewhat new tone in 1992. Bush's stance on abortion became a more important part of his thematic reserve. Though not clearly argued by the campaign for a number of strategic and political climate issues to be discussed, the theme seemed to argue that from the moment of conception, life was sacred. Except in cases of rape or health of the mother, terminating a pregnancy should not be allowed. The sacredness of life in this theme is a common appeal and comes from religious convictions. This particular theme was meant to be strategically significant. As will be seen, this theme was not incredibly useful to the strategy of the Bush '92 campaign. The same can be said for the

themes Bush had at his disposal generally. For reasons of personal disposition, weak strategy and execution, and selection of messaging objectives the Bush campaign was incredibly ill suited for utilizing themes to pursue theme-driven messaging.

There was also a new theme that Bush used in 1992 outlining his own convictions on foreign policy. Bush argued that in the post-Cold War world, America had a duty to defend freedom abroad and take necessary action to ensure that democracy is the government of choice in the developing world. This theme is essentially an adaptation of Reagan's foreign policy theme for a new post-Soviet era. It is born from the Republican narrative's assertions about foreign policy. The Republican was the strong leader in the defense of American interests and values abroad. This theme was actually quite important for the Bush campaign in messaging objectives. Though the theme was rarely explicit, it stands as a guiding principle for Bush's messaging objectives of leadership and foreign policy credentials. However, this theme was weak in its lack of antithesis. With no archenemy in the form of the Soviet Union it seemed as though democracy and freedom were not really in mortal danger. Despite this weakness, this theme and related messaging objective were important for strategies undertaken by, though not necessarily effective for, the Bush reelection effort.

This account of the themes available to the incumbent may seem very anemic. However, it is a true reflection of the strength of thematic appeals Bush had in his arsenal. If the 1988 campaign struggled with thematic integration, the 1992 campaign was helpless in the pursuit. Characteristics of the political climate, the players, strategy, and the selected messaging objectives combined in a way that made successful utilization of theme nearly impossible for the Bush campaign.

## **Political Climate**

The political climate at the time of the 1992 presidential election made the use of theme difficult for the Bush campaign. It also served to limit their selection of messaging objectives and aspects of strategy. The most important aspect of the political climate to this work is the economic conditions at the time. There was a noticeable economic recession in 1992 (Hall 2006, 171). This downturn was inescapably bad for Bush. First, it made the economy the most salient issue in the upcoming campaign. James Carville put it best when he claimed: “It’s the economy stupid” (Hall 2006, 174). With 44% of people believing that the recession was a result of federal policies, the Bush campaign could not run on economic credentials (Hall 2006, 174). Furthermore, for Bush to salvage any potential for positively discussing the economy he would essentially have to say, “I feel your pain (Hall 2006, 171).” This presented enormous problems for the campaign. First, it would be admitting that his stance on the economy was wrong. Thus, his credibility in the economy would decrease even more. The campaign would be unable to control the agenda and play offense with the issue of the economy (Royer 1994, 109). This would also hurt Bush’s ability to utilize the tangential implied aspects of his theme that advocated for limiting government in the economy. Where Reagan’s theme on the economy had fulfilled itself with economic growth, Bush’s had proven itself to be wrong. This would make any thematic appeals to the economy impossible. The media actually made the problems the Bush campaign had in approaching the economy even worse. The media aided in the perception that the economic downturn was a result of federal policies. When Bush broke his “read my lips” promise and raised taxes, the media was there to remind the public of the inconsistency. This was not a conspiratorial decision on the part of the media. The blatant disconnect of Bush’s actions from his proclamation was irresistibly low-hanging fruit. Such a clear case of broken promises is

difficult to find and thus very advantageous for news outlets to highlight. Furthermore, the rise of all-day news stations made this reinforcement all the more prevalent. This killed Bush's credibility not only in the economy, but in nearly all his comments and commitments. (Royer 1994, 109). In all, the economy was the most salient issue of the 1992 election. What was troubling for the Bush campaign was that it was a negative for them in almost every way. Of particular importance in this work, the state of the US economy in 1992 negatively impacted the ability of the Bush campaign to utilize the already weak theme about limiting the government's role in the economy.

As already discussed, the collapse of the USSR and the end of the Cold War was an aspect of the political climate that would impact the ability of the Bush campaign to utilize theme. Since the threat of global communism was essentially gone, it seemed that democracy had triumphed as the dominant form of government. Though there would be issues of foreign policy (like the Gulf War), they were not the grand issues of bipolar antithesis the US had known for the previous forty plus years. As Mary Matalin, the political director of the Bush campaign said, the end of the Cold War "had taken defense and foreign policy off the table more than the Gulf War had put it back on (Royer 1994, 112)." This would harm the Bush campaign in integrating its foreign policy theme into messages of the same nature. Although America would be called upon to help nations fighting for freedom, the danger to peace and freedom was far less imminent than it had been a short time ago. Thus, the theme and messages would be far less compelling as a reason to elect Bush.

There were other minor issues of political climate that had an impact. One was Lee Atwater's conception of an electoral cycle (Royer 1994, 20). Republicans had been in power for nearly twelve years by 1992. The electorate seems as though it may have had an impulse to

simply try something new. This would undoubtedly be tied to the poor economic outlook during the campaign. This issue would injure the campaign in its selection of messaging objectives as predicted in the first chapter. With limited messaging choices, the campaign would be unable to choose those that would have strong appeals to theme. Another issue was Bush's job approval and right track wrong track ratings. By the time of the campaign, Bush's job approval rating had plummeted by forty points to the lowest it had ever been (Royer 1994, xiv). Furthermore, by campaign time more than seventy percent of the electorate believed that the country was on the "wrong track" (Royer 1994, 112). These types of numbers would limit the selection of messaging objectives and emphases of themes even further.

From the political climate, it is clear that the Bush campaign would have trouble not only utilizing theme, but simply winning reelection. The ability to control the agenda regarding the economy stood as a giant obstacle for the Bush campaign. Not only was the outlook negative, but all of his credibility had been destroyed in light of the economic numbers and broken promises. He could not use his weak theme of limited government because it had seemingly not been working. The Bush campaign was also limited in the realm of foreign policy. Without a strong antagonist, Bush's preemptive foreign policy theme and related messages were not as compelling as one would hope. Bush's approval ratings were a further limiting factor of political climate. He did not have freedom in selecting messages and themes in light of public opinion. Overall, the political climate was a serious issue for Bush's use of theme and reelection.

## **The Players**

For the 1992 case, there are a host of players that are important to consider for this work. George Bush's personal dispositions are of course central. Also important here is the "player"

that is composed of more than one person. The nature of the Bush White House was actually an important player in the 1992 race. The dynamics between it and the campaign held major consequences for the use of theme, selection of messaging objectives, and the execution of strategy. Also certain personal aspects of Bill Clinton served as important geneses of campaign messages. Ross Perot is also important in the disruption he created in the 1992 campaign. Certain aspects of Ross Perot's personality made this disruption even greater and had a profound impact on strategy and messaging objectives. All of these players' personal dispositions served in some way to constrain the ability of the Bush campaign to select messages, take effective strategic measures, and utilize theme in messaging.

Like the section on theme, it is important to revisit Bush's personal affectations in the way they uniquely impacted this race. Most fundamental to this analysis is Bush's unshaking conviction that governing ought to be separate from campaigning. This underlying issue had several distinct impacts on the campaign. Throughout his administration, Bush refused to play politics. He would not discuss his accomplishments in a politically meaningful way. Resultantly, the public was largely unaware of the positive steps his administration may have taken domestically (Royer 1994, 19). This made defining the agenda even more difficult. This would affect the selection of messaging objectives and the use of theme in those messaging objectives. Bush's unwillingness to act politically also affected the campaign in his resistance to begin campaign activities, and reluctance to campaign throughout the period. Bush knew that while he was campaigning, he could not govern (Jones 2006, 162). Since Bush enjoyed governing much more than campaigning, his commitment to reelection would be lower than necessary. This aloof attitude would not allow the campaign to be committed to theme. As discussed in the first chapter, a candidate that is emotionally removed from the messages of the campaign comes off

as much less genuine. This was a major issue for the campaign. A final way that Bush's detachment from campaigning impacted his reelection effort was his breaking of the "read my lips" promise. It was Bush's belief in the violable nature of campaign promises that led him to make the promise in the first place. With no internal commitment to the promise, Bush did not mind breaking it. As discussed, he believed that people would understand that compromises had to be made. This clearly came back to bite Bush. People seemed to care that he had gone back on his promise. As just discussed in the political climate section, it largely ruined his credibility. This severely undermined the campaign's ability to select messaging objectives and utilize theme. Bush's belief in a separation of governance and campaigning clearly had profound impacts on his reelection effort.

Bush's distaste for rhetoric and inability to place himself in themes are other personal characteristics worth revisiting for their impact in 1992. Because Bush did not wish to partake in rhetoric, his campaign was unable to effectively use theme to connect to a number of messaging objectives including leadership and the economy. He approached these messages coldly. He could not effectively feel the voters' pain in the economy (Hall 2006, 181). Without an emotional appeal to theme, his empathy did not seem genuine. With messaging objectives of leadership, the problems were two-fold. As in 1988, Bush could not insert himself in themes to prove his leadership skills. This was particularly harmful because a major messaging objective of the campaign alleged that Bill Clinton was a draft dodger that could not lead. Bush could not connect his service in the Navy to strong leadership in comparison to Clinton's lack of such qualities. In these ways, Bush's distaste of theme put his campaign at a disadvantage in utilizing theme in messaging objectives.

All of these personal attributes of Bush were compounded by the culture of his White House staff that actually constituted what this work would consider a player. In March of 1990, Lee Atwater was diagnosed with a brain tumor that took him off the political scene, and soon after, claimed his life. Immediately, the political communication from the Bush White House began deteriorating (Royer 1994, 108). John Sununu, the White House Chief of Staff, (with the backing of Bush) began erecting a wall between governing and politics (Royer 1994, 115). This was a major problem for the campaign because the White House still wrote Bush's speeches for the campaign. There was little strategic coherence to communication coming from the White House. For example, the White House wrote Bush's convention speech with no guidance from the campaign staff (Royer 1994, 217). This obviously had tremendous impact on the ability of the campaign to select messages, use themes, and execute strategy. Because they had little input into Bush's written material, they were at the mercy of the White House staff. Because of the wall erected between governance and politics, the White House would be paying less than full attention to the polling numbers, strategic aims, and messaging objectives selected by the campaign. Without full attention, the messages often lacked coherence to messaging objectives and strategy. The "player" that was the staff of the White House clearly created massive problems in the campaign communication for Bush in 1992.

In these two "players" we see that the possible seeds of destruction from '88 bloomed in '92. Bush's personal issues that could have killed the campaign in 1988 would haunt him in his reelection effort. His staff at the White House who, like their boss, did not commit to major campaigning activities that would involve the use of message and theme to pursue strategy compounded these problems. What is the explanation for this? It seems two factors are important to consider. First, in 1988 Bush did not have the ability to govern because he was seeking the

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office for the first time. Since he was now the president, he could distract himself with governing. The mere existence of this distractive power may have account for some of the lack of commitment. Also important to consider is the absence of Lee Atwater. He demanded that everyone be committed to the messaging objectives, specific communication, and strategies of the campaign. He had a strong personality and a lot of skill. Without him, the Bush campaign may have been unable to demand this kind of control from the White House. Regardless of the cause, the lack of commitment to campaigning activities clearly had an effect on the Bush reelection effort in utilizing theme.

Bill Clinton is an extremely interesting political figure. His personal life has been the subject of much investigation and interest. For the purposes of this work, there are only a few features personal background that are important. Each has to do with his past. The first important feature of Clinton's past was his actions to avoid the draft. He did actively attempt to avoid conscription by asking an ROTC officer to excuse him from service (Royer 1994, 310). This served as an important personal fact that informed part of the Bush messaging objective of distrust for Bill Clinton due to his hesitation in admitting it. Similarly, it became known that Clinton made a trip to Moscow during the Cold War. This was implicitly connected to the Bush message of Clinton's trustworthiness because he initially failed to admit it (Royer 1994, 270). Furthermore, Clinton had admitted to having extramarital affairs. This stood as an important attack point for the Bush campaign in the trust messaging objective. It also stood to be part of the strategy for the reelection effort. With the selection of trust as a major messaging objective for the Bush campaign, Clinton's personal past became an important point of emphasis in communication.

The final player to be analyzed here is Ross Perot. He was able to achieve something unique in modern American politics. As an independent, he received nearly twenty percent of the national vote. This served as a major disruptive force to the political establishment. Ross Perot's personal dispositions increased the disruption of his candidacy for the Bush campaign. First, Perot had a grassroots appeal. He gained a very diverse group of supporters. His main message was that Bush did not care about domestic issues (Royer 1994, 29). Perot was also very wealthy. He had the ability to essentially stay in the race in a relevant manner for as long as he wished. This made the disruption even greater. Perot staying in the race was not the greatest problem for the Bush campaign however. He actually seemed to take votes from Clinton due to his anti-Bush stance. Since the Bush campaign believed they could not reach a true majority in the electorate, they preferred Perot remain in the race. However, Perot did drop out for a time just before the Republican Convention. Because Perot was a very insular person, he advised no one of his decision. The Bush campaign was not ready for the announcement. They did not prepare for a two-candidate race (Royer 1994, 167). This left the Bush team with a strategy that was obsolete. Furthermore, Perot's leaving gave many of his votes to Clinton. Even though Perot later rejoined the race, many of his supporters did not return and stayed with Clinton (Royer 1994). The complicated nature of this series of events serves to denote the impacts this had on the Bush campaign. The Perot saga left the Bush campaign with strategies that had to be drastically changed more than once. With Perot being in, then out, then in again, the Bush campaign had to reevaluate huge aspects of strategy. The strategies necessitated different messaging objectives. This erodes the coherence of the messages. With this lack of coherence it is even harder to apply messaging objectives to broad themes. In this way, Perot's personal attributes and actions had an impact on all facets of Bush's communication.

## Strategy

The strategy for the Bush campaign in 1992 is difficult to track. Like many aspects of the campaign it was somewhat incoherent and not incredibly thought out. Though there was some emphasis on geography, like nailing down support in states like Wyoming and Montana, the strategy was essentially guided by the conviction that there was still a conservative majority in America (Royer 1994, 214,279). Seizing the conservative majority was the only way the Bush campaign believed reelection was possible. This was a big problem for the Bush campaign because at the outset of the campaign, around one third of Republicans did not support George Bush. This was aided on the right by the early candidacy of Pat Buchanan, and towards the middle by Ross Perot. The conviction led to two major issues of strategy. First was solidifying the right wing of the Republican Party. There seemed to be much distrust of Bush on the right (Royer 1994, 221). In the economy, he had raised taxes after vowing not to. His loss of credibility cannot be discounted. However, Bush also was distrusted in social issues. Throughout his administration, Bush had lost the full support of many social conservatives in the Religious Right. Bush believed that abortion was acceptable in the cases of rape or health of the mother. This was not a conservative enough position for the Religious Right that largely believed that abortion is not permissible. Also, Bush had invited gay leaders into the White House. This implicit condoning of homosexual lifestyles angered many in the Religious Right (Jones 2006, 150). These problems of conservative distrust led the Bush campaign to move to the right, particularly on social issues due to the lack of a method for discussing the economy positively. This actually caused the campaign to select a pro-life messaging objective that ended up becoming awkward and further undermined the effectiveness of the campaign communication. This also aided in the selection of the Clinton distrust message that was central to the campaign.

The other strategic impetus was getting the conservatives that Perot had toward the middle. These people were primarily concerned with domestic issues, especially the economy. One superficial sub-strategy to accomplish this was to tell the electorate not to waste their vote on the unviable Perot (Royer 1994, 174). This did not really work well and added to the populist appeal of Ross Perot as an outsider. Thus, the Bush campaign had to try to approach the economy. This led them to the selection of two messaging objectives. They would attempt to show Bush's strong leadership in foreign policy, and then pivot to the importance of this skill for the economy. This was a very difficult strategy because it depended on three things. First, that the voters were aware of "domestic policies" and "past achievements." Second, that "the president would get credit for foreign policy achievements." Lastly, it depended on the recovery of the economy (Royer 1994, 18). It is not difficult to see that only one of these things would end up happening. The first requirement would not be met because the White House had been unskilled at outlining Bush's accomplishments and would continue to create his communication. The third requisite also did not end up happening, which was largely unlucky for the campaign. The second requirement did happen, due to the commitment of the campaign and Bush to outlining this messaging objective. However, without the other two, this strategy was doomed to fail. It will be shown that efforts were made to pursue this strategy. However, with all the problems of theme use and general communication that plagued the Bush campaign, this was not done successfully.

The overarching problem with this strategy is quite apparent. The campaign had committed itself to both moving to the right and the middle. The strategy is more divergent than coherent. Of course, the campaign had a hard time with the dynamic nature of the Perot candidacy. However, with the Bush campaign expecting and hoping that Perot would remain in

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the race it seems they were committed to the divergence. With such an incoherent strategy, it follows that the messaging objectives selected would either be scattered or ignore one half of the strategy. It seems that the Bush campaign would end up favoring the “going right” approach. This would probably be guided by their belief that Perot staying in the race would allow them to win without any type of majority. Regardless of the reasoning, the strategy committed to by the Bush campaign would have impacts on the messaging objectives selected and themes they would weakly attempt to integrate.

## **Messaging Objectives**

With all of this said, it is not difficult to imagine that the messaging objectives selected by the Bush campaign were highly constrained and not easily tied to themes. In terms of political climate, the Bush campaign was forced to try to adopt an economic messaging objective and abandon a positive theme regarding foreign policy. With the personality of the candidate and the nature of the White House staff, the campaign could only truly pursue a few messaging objectives. Of all the campaigns discussed to this point, this one seems to be the most constrained in selection of messaging objectives. The selection of messaging objectives and their emphasis in 1992 really took place over time. The campaign had planned to roll out different messaging objectives in phases, which is not uncommon. However, the rollout of messaging objectives was disrupted several different times.

The campaign planned to begin with Bush’s leadership credentials in the Gulf War. Bush was portrayed as a strong leader that defended freedom abroad. This was a good messaging objective for the Bush campaign because it seems to be the one messaging objective that Bush himself enjoyed talking about (Jones 2006, 161). He saw this as the shining moment of his administration. For reasons already briefly mentioned this was not an incredibly strong

messaging objective overall. Due to the political climate (the recession and the collapse of the USSR), voters were much more concerned with the economy than foreign policy. The Bush campaign could possibly try to make this the main issue of the campaign, but the weakness of the theme on foreign policy prevented this from happening. Without the enemy of the Soviet Union, people were not incredibly concerned with issues of defense. For these reasons of political climate and weak theme, the foreign policy messaging objective proved to be much less useful than the Bush campaign might have hoped.

The next messaging objective that the Bush campaign wished to move to was in Bush's ability to turn around the economy. This took on two different points of argument. The first was that Bush's abilities to positively impact foreign relations would improve the economy. With the new allies and democracies Bush was attempting to create abroad, the US would get access to new markets for products and trading partners (Royer 1994, 18). This seems to be a good argument for the strength of an export economy. However, the Bush campaign still could not control the agenda on this issue. The voters and Bush's opponents demanded a domestic economic plan not an argument that hinged on foreign policy. The inability to define the agenda again undermined Bush's ability to articulate a positive message. Thus, the messaging objective of strengthening the economy took on its second enumeration. This part of the messaging objective involved Bush admitting that the economy was not performing well and proving that he had a plan to revive it. Bush had to show "that he had a connection with people's problems, and that he had a plan (Royer 1994, 108)." He had to simultaneously admit that the country was on the wrong track and argue that he was the man to bring it back. The awkwardness of this message is obvious. However, it was not a guaranteed failure if the campaign tread carefully. Unfortunately though, the articulation of this messaging objective also proved to be weak and

incomplete (Royer 1994, 183). The first issue was that Bush's plan was released relatively late. This seemed to stem from the problems of communication between the White House and the campaign. The White House was responsible for enumerating the plan; but, as has been shown, the White House constantly dragged its feet on campaign activities. Secondly, and also as a result of the "wall" between the White House and the campaign, the messaging objective was not consistent. After a speech at the Detroit Economic Club, at which the President said that he would lower taxes and decrease regulation, the messaging objective was not consistently reinforced (Hall 2006, 186). Since the White House did not commit to the campaign, they did not stay on the economic messaging objective. To the dismay of the campaign, it simply could not convince the White House to reinforce Bush's positive economic message due to its preference of the foreign policy theme. Without repetition, it was impossible to explicitly integrate the theme regarding limited government in the economy. Furthermore, the inability of the Bush campaign to deliver these positive economic messaging objectives due to both the political climate and issues of communication forced it to drop the economy as a major messaging objective. Strategically, this is obviously a major problem because the economy was the most salient issue of the 1992 election. Without a strong conservative messaging objective on the economy, the Bush campaign was severely handicapped in tapping into the conservative majority they believed to exist in the electorate.

With the economic messaging objective essentially disposed of, the Bush campaign was forced to turn to a messaging objective that espoused Bush's conservative view on social issues (Royer 1994, 216). This was guided by the strategy of assembling a conservative voting bloc while not focusing on the economy. In the end, the adoption of this as a messaging objective proved to be very subtractive for the Bush campaign. Due to the campaign of Pat Buchanan, the

Bush campaign felt that it must move right on social issues to eliminate the one third of Republicans that did not support Bush. The most important aspect of this messaging objective was the stance on abortion. For the official platform, the campaign met with members of the Religious Right. They decided on a “big tent” solution that incorporated the views of the right wing of the party (Royer 1994, 213). William Kristol of the Bush campaign admitted that they did not know how to “handle” the base on the abortion issue (Royer 1994, 221). The messaging objective ended up becoming awkward for the Bush campaign, as Bush had previously argued that abortion should be permissible in the cases of rape and health of the mother. Bush did not really appear genuine in his espousal of this message. The distrust of Bush from the right was not really mended and the messaging objective was somewhat avoided in the communication.

Without explicitly arguing for this messaging objective, it clearly could not be tied to themes regarding the sanctity of human life. Exit polls seem to suggest that religious voters were not compelled to vote for bush as a result of these weaknesses. In 1988, Bush had collected 63.9% of the Mainline Protestant vote and 69.4% of the Evangelical Protestant vote. In 1992, Bush received only 40% and 55.1% from these respective groups. This outcome represented a fracturing of the normally very solid voting bloc of social conservatives for Republican candidates (Djupe, Olson 2003, 370-1). This messaging objective was thus not very strategically significant, nor could it be explained strongly with a theme.

With all of these possible positive messaging objectives untenable, the campaign was then forced to take on negative messaging objectives regarding Bill Clinton (Royer 1994, 191). This messaging objective took on two aspects for the Bush campaign: “taxes and trust (Royer 1994, 281).” The “taxes” aspect of this messaging objective consisted of attacks on Bill Clinton’s record in Arkansas. The Bush campaign argued that Clinton had raised taxes in Arkansas and

increased government spending on programs like Welfare. This messaging objective would seem to be strategically significant. If the Bush campaign could effectively argue that Clinton would raise taxes, it would rally the conservative majority to the polls. In thematic integration, this messaging objective could also prove useful. If the Bush campaign could connect this messaging objective to the theme opposing liberal government the message would be all the more compelling. However, this could not be accomplished. As has been argued, the Bush reelection campaign simply could not incorporate broad themes due to personal and institutional forces. This forced the campaign to espouse this messaging objective using statistics and numbers. The campaign soon found that this type of evidence was not compelling to the electorate. Voters were confused by the numbers and did not know what to make of it. Thus, the inability of the Bush campaign to utilize theme effectively took this aspect of messaging objective off the table.

The “trust” aspect of this messaging objective was that which was most heavily utilized by the Bush campaign. It seems that this came about of pure necessity. Like in 1988, the Bush campaign could not assert a positive theme-driven message and was thus forced to rely heavily on negative character attacks. The character attacks on Bill Clinton came in numerous forms. The main and explicit form of attack was based on Clinton’s objection to the Vietnam War and subsequent evasion of the draft. The story is complicated and Clinton was never charged with any wrongdoing. Essentially, Clinton had demonstrated disagreement with the war throughout his years at Oxford. Clinton then attempted several tactics to avoid fighting in Vietnam. This included joining and then disaffiliating from an ROTC program so that he would not have to enter combat and an apparent attempt by his uncle to put him in the Navy Reserves. Regardless of what truly happened, the Bush campaign attempted to argue that Clinton was being dishonest about his past (Royer 1994, 192). The Bush campaign demanded answers and claimed that

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someone who had lied about their past and may have avoided serving their country had no business becoming commander-in-chief. In a similar attack, the Bush campaign found that Clinton had lied about traveling to Moscow while abroad. The campaign questioned his motives for lying again. These attacks from the Bush campaign were also implicitly linked to other issues regarding Clinton's character. Though the campaign never explicitly mentioned Clinton's infidelity or use of marijuana, the issues of trust that they raised were undoubtedly tied to his overall character. Strategically, these messaging objectives could be useful in capturing conservatives. Since all of these attacks insinuated a non-traditional lifestyle, social conservatives may be compelled to flock to the polls to ensure that Clinton did not get elected. However, the messaging objectives were not very compelling. The political climate dictated that the economy was the most salient issue in the election. Character attacks, though highly covered, did not have a lot of impact on vote choice. Furthermore, the Bush campaign could not make this message more compelling because no themes were readily available to make Clinton's character a major factor. To truly motivate the social conservatives, the Bush campaign would have had to connect Clinton's character to broad themes. There was no such theme available and the White House was uncommitted to campaigning. These factors made the Clinton attacks less compelling than they may have been.

There are several important aspects to consider about this collection of messaging objectives as a whole. First is the way they came about. Each subsequent messaging objective came as a result of the failure of the previous one. The foreign policy was tossed because it was irrelevant to voters and could not be made relevant because of the political climate and inability of Bush to incorporate broad themes to make it salient. The resultant economic objective of messaging was disposed of due to the lack of reinforcement by repetition and strong theme. The

last effort at a positive messaging objective came with social issues. This too proved ineffectual due again to the salience of the economy and lack of explicit connection to a deep theme given by Bush. It was an awkward message for the campaign to approach. With a lack of options in the positive realm, the campaign went negative against Clinton to rally conservatives. The more substantive and policy-based attacks against Clinton failed due to the inability and unwillingness of Bush and the White house to provide coherent and theme-driven communication. With all other options exhausted, the campaign went after Clinton's character. This messaging objective unavoidably had no connection to theme and was brushed off by the electorate in preference of economic concerns. In all, the arc of messaging objectives used by the Bush campaign devolved over time with less and less potential to appeal to theme.

## **Specific Communication**

With the disheveled nature of the Bush campaign described above, it is clear that their communication would face serious issues in coherence and connection of messaging objective to theme in a strategically useful way. A few specific examples of communications are illustrative of the different types of issues the Bush campaign faced in espousing messaging objectives with theme to aid in strategy. Two 30-second television ads display two different ways the Bush campaign struggled in this type of communication. Also evident of Bush's issues of thematic integration into messaging objectives was a uniquely awkward question-and-answer interaction in one of the debates. Furthermore, like the previous two chapters, the acceptance speech at the RNC will be analyzed. In this case, Bush exhibited his common problems in utilizing theme and also touching on appropriate messaging objectives that would be useful. These problems most likely came from the problems of communication between the White House and the campaign.

In all the specific communication attempts outlined here show the overall weakness of the Bush campaign in thematic integration.

The first piece of communication to be analyzed here was a 30-second television ad that will be referred to here as “Breakfast.” It opens with the words “Breakfast, St. Louis. After the Debate” appearing on screen. Then, the commercial turns to several different patrons of a restaurant giving their reactions to the debate. The first three patrons speak of the confidence they have in Bush, and that he is necessary to check a Democratic Congress. The next says, “I don’t trust Clinton.” The next: “The man says one thing and does another.” Another says, “First he denies it then he says: ‘well maybe it happened.’ You can’t trust him.” The ad cuts to another saying, “If Clinton gets in what we’re going to see is more taxes.” The ad cuts a final time and a man says that he supports Bush because he “remember(s) what happened the last time we did things the way Bill Clinton wants to do them (Youtube 2008).” This ad is deeply symbolic of the general problems that the Bush campaign had with communication in 1992. In thirty seconds, the commercial covered all of the campaign’s major messaging objectives. Strategically this is useful because it attempts to assemble the conservative majority against taxes and Clinton’s character. However, the manner in which the commercial accomplished this was incredibly ungraceful. The bustling restaurant takes away from the clarity of the message. The constant cutting to different people makes the disjointed nature of the jumps in messaging objectives even clearer. In terms of messaging objectives, the commercial fails to develop them using theme and simply goes through a list. The themes cannot be touched upon because the sound bytes used are so short. Furthermore, the attacks against Bill Clinton’s character have no corresponding themes. Since they make up a majority of the advertisement, thematic connection is impossible. The only statement in the commercial that has a chance to appeal to theme is the final one. The man’s

condemnation of Democratic leadership implicitly ties to the theme regarding dangerous liberal leadership. However, this is undercut due to the time devoted to this man's view and the manner of the shot. The man is on camera a total of seven seconds. He is unable to give any specific negative aspects that Democrats bring to national government. Furthermore, though all of the video segments in the advertisement are shaky, this is the shakiest and most poorly shot. During his seven seconds of air time the camera literally moves away from the man's face more than once and dramatically loses focus. This movement distracts from whatever point the man may have been making. In all, this commercial showcased the larger issues of the campaign's communication. Its messaging objectives were numerous and lacked coherence and strength in repetition. This was pretty much an issue of the campaign on the macro-level. The ad largely ignored theme because it focused on the messaging objective attacking Bill Clinton. The one time it could have seized upon strong themes, the attempt was cut short and distorted. This too was a common occurrence throughout the campaign due to the lack of commitment and communication between the White House and the campaign.

Another television ad that shows the weakness of the Bush campaign in communicating messaging objectives was entitled "Governor Doublespeak" (Royer 1994). It opens with a "Welcome to Arkansas sign." A narrator says, "To pay his increased spending in Arkansas, Bill Clinton raised state taxes, and not just on the rich." It goes on to list some of the taxes Clinton established or raised while videos of things like cash registers, mobile homes, and motel signs. In between some of these videos a sped up video of Clinton signing a bill with an applauding audience plays in the background. The advertisement goes on to say, "Now, if elected President, Bill Clinton has promised to increase government spending by \$220 Billion. Guess where he'll get the money?" In terms of messaging objectives, this advertisement is very coherent. It is

clearly an attack on Bill Clinton's record on taxes. Again, this works to collect votes from conservatives that dislike taxes. However, the commercial completely ignores appeals to them. The increase of taxes has a tangential place in Bush's theme against liberals, but the commercial largely ignores the connection. It does not argue why the taxes are dangerous to America in any way. All that this really implies is that people would rather keep their money than lose it. The lack of thematic appeal combined with the bluegrass music in the background and some comical visuals makes the commercial less compelling and serious. In all, the advertisement is really just a list of taxes Clinton has increased. This again seems to be symptomatic of the campaign on a large scale. Because there was no way for Bush to assert a positive message, the campaign had to turn to messaging objectives that it could not implicitly connect to themes.

One interaction during a debate seems to show the problems Bush had with connecting theme to messaging objectives. During the second debate, an audience member asked Bush how the national debt "personally affected" his life. She continued "if it hasn't how can you honestly find a cure for the economic problems of the common people if you have no experience in what's ailing them?" Bush begins by saying "I think the national debt affects everybody. Obviously, it has a lot to do with interest rates." The asker interrupts saying "you on a personal basis, how has it affected you?" He says, "I'm sure it has. I love my grandchildren I want to think that they're going to be able to afford an education." Bush then says that he does not understand the question. He asks if she is "suggesting that if somebody has means, the national debt doesn't affect them?" The asker restates her question. At this point Bush looks very confused. Eventually, he says,

"you ought to be in the White House for a day and hear what I hear... I was in the Lomax AME Church...and I read in the bulletin about teenage pregnancies about the difficulty that families are having to make ends meet. I talk to parents. You've got to care;

everybody cares that people aren't doing well. I don't think its fair to say, 'you haven't had cancer; therefore you don't know what its like (Youtube 2007).'" This exchange evidences perfectly the problems Bush had with incorporating theme into messaging objectives. The question clearly prompts a response regarding the economy. As described and evidenced here, Bush could not effectively feel the voters' pain with their economic woes (Medhurst 2006). The question was extremely hard for Bush to answer. As a very affluent man, the national debt (what the asker really meant was the recession) could not affect him in the ways that it would common people. Thus, the majority of this interaction was spent by Bush fumbling around with the semantics of the askers wording. What resulted was an awkward, and less than genuine answer to a question that demanded an emotional and thematic appeal. If Bush could have tied his response to a broad limited government theme, he may have successfully pursued the economic messaging objective. However, this interaction showed a complete lack of ability to do this on Bush's part.

As in all presidential campaigns, the convention speech was an important moment for the Bush campaign in 1992. Like all the examples of communication outlined in this chapter, it showed the problems the Bush reelection campaign had with communication. Theme-based messaging that fulfilled objectives were few and weak due in some cases to the unwillingness of Bush to use theme, and in others because of the lack of thematic connection. The writers at the White House that penned the speech overemphasized messaging objectives that were largely irrelevant to the electorate. Other messaging objectives were approached awkwardly. In all, the speech fails in delivering messaging objectives in strategically useful ways that are informed by theme.

The first and most obvious weakness of Bush's acceptance speech in the realms of messaging objectives and theme was Bush's emphasis on foreign policy. The speech seemed to

revolve around international issues. Approximately the first half of the speech deals directly with issues of national security. He talks for a while about his mission aimed at “defending our security and promoting the American ideal abroad.” He spends a few minutes outlining his accomplishments, focusing largely on the Gulf war. He argues “we did what was right and what was necessary. We destroyed a threat, freed a people, and locked a tyrant in the prison of his own country.” He does connect this to American improvement saying that “a safer world means a stronger America.” He says that his method of improving the economy is to “look forward, to open new markets, prepare our people to compete, to restore our social fabric, to save and invest so we can win.” This clearly references the Bush campaign’s messaging objective of strong foreign policy spurring economic growth. Throughout this section he also outlines Democratic and Clintonian opposition to these positive actions. He says that during the Cold War, Democrats advocated for a “nuclear freeze.” They wanted to negotiate and appease dictators.

This is a moment where Bush actually connected theme with an objective of messaging. He compares his strength in foreign policy to Democratic weakness. The weakness of Democrats is a direct tie to his theme about dangerous liberal leadership. Though this is a strong point in that regard, the larger picture shows its weakness. As discussed extensively, the electorate did not care to hear about the foreign policy messaging objective. The economy was at the front of their minds. Bush quips, “In his acceptance speech he (Clinton) devoted just 65 seconds to telling us about the world.” This was not a mistake by Clinton. It was his campaign’s recognition that domestic issues dominated this election. Thus, though this part of the speech demonstrated relatively strong thematic integration, strategically it was a waste. Clinton did not err in spending a short amount of time on the issue. The mistake was Bush’s for wasting half of his speech on an irrelevant messaging objective. The communication issues between the campaign and the White

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House, coupled with Bush's commitment to the foreign policy messaging objective undoubtedly caused this waste of precious speech time. Thus, factors of organization and personality caused this strategically insignificant message to be overemphasized, even if it had a connection to theme.

Talking about the Democratic congress was another completely incoherent message that Bush spent an inordinate amount of time on in his acceptance speech. This message was not a major messaging objective of the campaign. It was featured in some communication to explain why Bush had taken certain actions, specifically his breaking of the "read my lips" promise. However, the campaign had no comprehensive engagement with this message. Bush spends more than a couple of minutes talking about the gridlock in Washington. He laments that he could not pass a balanced budget amendment or a line item veto. He talks about the commitment he would have to the incoming members of congress to protect them from special interests. Although this does have a connection with Bush's themes about limited government and the importance of the individual, all of this is completely disconnected from any strategy or messaging objective that the campaign decided to focus on. Again the organizational wall between the White House and the campaign seems to account for this. Talking about pursuing legislation shows the commitment the White House had to governing over campaigning. Again, the White House speechwriters who penned the acceptance speech disrupted the campaign communication negatively by wasting time on an irrelevant messaging objective.

Aside from the two above messages, attacks on Bill Clinton in the areas of "taxes and trust" were the most prevalent part of the speech. In the "trust" area, Bush made several quick references to character. In the very beginning of the speech Bush asserts that the election is in some part "about character." He also made a light reference to the trust issue when discussing

his foreign policy achievements. He claims that if he predicted the way the world looked in 1992 during his first campaign the voters would have said: “George Bush you must have been smoking something, and you must have inhaled.” This is an allusion to Clinton admitting that he tried, but did not inhale, marijuana. It quickly touches on the trust messaging objective because Clinton had been hesitant to admit it. Strategically this could be a tad useful in gaining conservative votes from those adamantly opposed to drugs and those who cared about trusting leaders. However, it is much too quick to be really useful. Bush again hits the “trust” messaging objective when he discusses Bill Clinton’s views on the Gulf War. Clinton had said that he was not really in support of it but would have voted for it in a close vote. He says that this was reminiscent of the “slippery when wet” road sign. It implied that Americans could not trust Clinton to make the tough decisions. Bush got at this messaging objective more when he talked about a balanced budget amendment. He argues that Clinton is “for balanced budgets. But he came out against the amendment. He's like that on a lot of issues, first on one side, then the other. He's been spotted in more places than Elvis Presley.” This remark implies that Americans cannot trust Clinton on the views that he holds. All of these “trust” statements were strategically useful. They may have helped to assemble a conservative bloc that cared about leadership. However, thematic connection is missing. Because they are essentially character assaults, they are too specific to connect to broad themes. Though clever, these quips are not extremely compelling because they do not connect to any theme.

Bush also took Clinton to task on the “taxes” messaging objective. These attacks also lacked connection to broad theme. He spends a moment outlining Clinton’s plan to increase government spending and implement “the biggest tax increase in history, \$150 billion.” This is a legitimate area of disagreement that Bush could exploit. He could outline why, in accordance

with his themes on limited government and the liberal, this is dangerous to progress because it puts too much burden on the individual. However, Bush chooses to make the argument much more superficial. He jokes, “You've heard of the separation of powers. Well, my opponent practices a different theory: the power of separations. Government has the power to separate you from your wallet.” The crowd laughs loudly and the joke is clever. However, making a serious policy into a lighthearted joke makes the argument much less compelling. As has been shown, Bush did not enjoy weaving theme into messaging objectives. This is probably the reason that this strategically significant and objective-driven message lacked any connection to theme.

As mentioned in the section on messaging objectives, the abortion issue was an awkward message for Bush to approach. However, it was strategically imperative that Bush push right on this message to reconcile the great distrust of him on the right. The convention speech failed miserably in making this a strong message and connecting it to any theme. While discussing the importance of the family Bush says, “I happen to believe very deeply in the worth of each individual human being, born or unborn (Miller Center).” This is literally all that Bush says on the subject of abortion. He does not outline any policy suggestion or plan of action to protect unborn children. Furthermore, he does not explain why he believes this by utilizing a broad theme about the importance of preserving life. Thus, Bush awkwardly skirts around the messaging objective that could repair his relationship with the Religious Right. This failure undoubtedly came from the inability of the campaign to “handle the base” on this issue. They did not know how to comprehensively pursue the messaging objective in a strategically meaningful way, so they simply dropped a token sentence regarding the issue into the speech.

In all, Bush’s 1992 convention speech showcases the issues that the campaign had with communicating messaging objectives in a coherent, strategically significant way with connection

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to theme. Unimportant messaging objectives like foreign policy and the Democratic Congress were incredibly overemphasized due to the convictions of the White House staff that refused to be responsive to the campaign. The speech also could not incorporate attacks on Clinton's character because they do not easily mesh with any broad theme. Bush's distaste of theme kept him from connecting attacks on Clinton's fiscal policy to the theme regarding liberal leadership. The messaging objective on social issues took on a characteristically awkward form in the speech. Because the campaign did not know how to effectively approach the issue, the speech included only a solitary sentence regarding abortion, a major facet of the social issues messaging objective. All of these factors combined to create a speech that failed to integrate theme into messaging objectives to effectively pursue strategies.

A pattern is clear in the specific messages assessed here. The issues visible in the messaging were symptomatic of macro-issues of the campaign. The inability to commit to and fully articulate messaging objectives using theme was a problem that plagued each of these messages and the campaign's communication. The problems were brought on by the previously described issues of campaign organization, personality, political climate and strategy. The nature of the messaging objectives constrained the use of theme. Messaging objectives had to be changed quickly because none of them could be fully articulated. The White House's uncommitted attitude left the campaign helpless in asserting the messaging objectives it desired in a theme-driven manner. In effect, the problems described throughout this chapter played out in entirely logical ways in specific communication.

## **Conclusion**

The issues of the Bush reelection effort are perhaps best encapsulated in a comparison. If the stars seemed to align for Reagan in 1984 to poise him for success, they seemed to align to set

Bush up for disaster in 1992. While Reagan was well disposed to perfectly utilize theme in messaging objectives that pursued strategy, Bush seemed destined to fail in such a pursuit. Bush's collection of themes was weak from the outset. He was forced to run for reelection in the midst of an economic downturn. The foreign policy foe of the Soviet Union had vanished. He was seeking to commit the country to sixteen years of uninterrupted Republican presidency. The candidate himself was reluctant to stop governing and begin campaigning. He also had an innate dislike of rhetorical practices. His White House staff was equally uncommitted to campaign activities and would not coordinate with the campaign. The incumbent's strategic outlook was less than optimal. He had move to the right, while appealing to the Perot coalition from all over the spectrum.

These factors constrained the campaign in its selection of messaging objectives. They preferred to start with foreign policy and use it to get at the economy. This did not work as the electorate was concerned with domestic economics. Bush's economic message was late and not well articulated. He tried to use social issues to find a useful, positive theme but this proved awkward. With no other option the Bush campaign took to attacking Clinton on "trust and taxes." Though the messaging objectives were numerous, they all had a common lack of thematic appeal due to the force of pretty much every factor discussed in this chapter. The resultant communication was as disjointed as would be expected. The campaign could not put together coherent, theme-driven messages, and the heavy hand of the White House staff ensured that the convention speech would fail in the same ways and waste time.

It is often a sin in academic work to attribute the occurrence of an event to "everything." However, it seems that this may be appropriate in assessing why the Bush campaign failed to utilize theme in 1992. This notwithstanding, there seem to be a couple of factors to note. It is

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useful to analyze differences between the two Bush campaigns. Bush was still the same Bush. He hated rhetoric and campaigning. Bush was not the President in 1988 however. He did not have the distraction of his administration to prevent him from committing to the campaign. Also missing in 1992 was Lee Atwater. Aside from his skills in manipulating the media, his commitment to staying on message, which he demanded of all involved in the campaign, was missing. If he had enforced this commitment with the White House, the communication could have been more coherent. This can also be formulated without reference to Lee Atwater specifically. Atwater, or someone like him, may have also been able to manipulate messaging objectives to be more compelling and fit into themes in some way. If someone was able to commit the White House to the campaign, define the agenda, connect themes more effectively to the messaging objectives, and find a way out of the paradoxical strategy taken by Bush '92, the campaign may have been successful. However, no such force arose. Essentially, where the Bush campaign in 1988 was able to save their candidate from himself by taking complex strategy, choosing innovative messaging objectives, and producing useful messages, the 1992 campaign was unable to do so. The lesson here is somewhat simple. With a candidate and White House staff that is uncommitted and unhelpful in integrating theme into messaging objectives, incumbents with issues in the political climate, issues of personality, and issues of strategy cannot win reelection.

## Chapter 5

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### Introduction

Departing from the format of the previous three chapters, this chapter will take a more surveyed approach to each of Republican presidential general election campaigns from 1996 to 2012. The analysis will be of a similar focus. Namely attempting to identify narrative-based themes that were used in campaign messaging. The factors that will not be as deeply analyzed in this chapter include personality and specific communication. Though not as in depth, this analysis is important in discussing the ways that each candidate has extracted themes from the available Republican narrative and uses them to espouse messaging objectives that were strategically useful.

### 1996

The election of 1996 is, in all, not a compelling case study in the realms of concern in this work. All told, less than half of all eligible voters cast a vote in the election. Bob Dole faced numerous obstacles to unseat Bill Clinton who was a popular incumbent. Dole was able to form an optimistic theme regarding the individual. However, factors of political climate, Dole's image, the nature of his opponent's campaign, the strategy decided upon by his campaign, and the lack of execution in strategy and messaging resulted in a very election effort overall. The campaign was especially unskilled in integrating theme into messaging objectives.

Bob Dole had essentially one broad theme at his disposal in 1996. Much like George H.W. Bush's theme, it centered around protecting the individual and the family. However, Dole's theme had more specific assertions regarding the basis of individual greatness and morality. Dole's theme argues that doing the right thing is what the individual does so well. Good people in America act on the concepts of God, family, honor, duty, and country. These

people are what make America great. They start families and raise children in effective ways. Dole asserts that his life is evidence of this theme. He grew up poor with parents that worked hard and made it on their own. From their dedication he was able to live the life he did. The theme then posits that there is an enemy to these individuals: Democrats. Dole argues that in the past, the individual was allowed autonomy, but the Democrats have since corrupted it in pursuit of material wealth. They have violated the commitment to morality over economic success. They extract too much from the worker in taxes in order to fund their government programs. They also take away the ability of the family to raise children effectively by taking away educational choices (CNN 1997).

In all, this theme is somewhat strong. It contains the values, history, personal appeal, and antithesis that were so useful to Ronald Reagan and are available in the broader Republican narrative. The Democrats clearly pose a threat to all of the positive things that the individual does in society. Dole's vision would bring back the shining liberty of the past. This theme really only falls down in its lack of specificity. Where Reagan could go on about what the values that defined America meant, Dole seems to simply list them. Any definition of what duty, honor, or sacrifice truly mean to him are missing from his exposition of the theme. This weakness aside, the theme seems to have a decent amount of explanatory power. Certainly, compared to Bush's themes, this is more compelling. Where Bush's issues of thematic integration stemmed, in large part, from their intrinsic weakness, Dole's came from other factors that must now be discussed.

Several factors of political climate hampered Dole's ability to integrate his theme usefully into messaging objectives in the general election. Of overriding importance in this respect was the state of the US economy. The economy was performing extremely well. Inflation and interest rates were low (Broder 1997, 12). The Dole campaign recognized that this 1996

election would unavoidably be a referendum on Clinton (Broder 1997, 12). The economy was, as it almost always is, the most salient issue in this campaign. With a strong economy, the Dole campaign would have to find a unique way of arguing that their candidate would handle the economy more effectively than Clinton had already done. It will be shown that this led to select a specific economic messaging objective. Whatever the economic messaging objective would posit, it would likely be ineffective. As it was with Reagan in 1984, it is difficult for an incumbent to be reproached on the economy when it is successful. This made the messaging objective somewhat ineffective even if it could be tied to a broad theme.

Dole's image was another limiting factor of thematic integration into messaging objectives in the general election. Dole was largely seen as old, mean and out of touch (Broder 1997, 179). He was not a very outgoing man and seemed aloof. For instance, he was famously quoted saying that tobacco was not addictive (Broder 1997, 190). Comments like this reinforced the perception of Bob Dole as a backward, old candidate. The perception of Dole as a grumpy old man made it difficult for the campaign to espouse its messaging objectives using the positive theme regarding the individual because of his perceived demeanor. He seemed unable to talk about reclaiming the future for the individual since because of his image (Broder 1997).

The Dole campaign was also limited in its use of theme in messaging objectives due to way the Republican primary transpired. Dole had been through an unprecedentedly long primary season. This left the campaign with an empty checkbook. More importantly, this gave Clinton (who was uncontested) the ability to define the agenda for the general election. Clinton was able to make strategic moves to constrain messaging objectives in anticipation of the upcoming election. In the legislative session in 1996, Clinton had taken immigration and welfare off the table through calculated moves. He also moved his politics toward the center. These moves

further forced the Dole campaign to focus on the economy (Broder 1997, 11). As described, this was a messaging objective that would be extremely difficult for the Dole campaign to use effectively even if it could incorporate a theme. Furthermore, Clinton was able to portray the Republican Party, and thus Bob Dole, as extremist. Because Newt Gingrich had brought the Contract With America to Congress, the Republicans seemed far more right wing than they had been. The lack of primary challenge allowed Clinton to sell the image of Republicans as ultra-rightist. This definition of agenda and image was something that would subtract from the Dole campaign's ability to select messaging objectives that would emphasize themes in an effective way.

Considering all this, the Dole campaign saw a few strategic imperatives. Because they knew this was to be a referendum on Clinton, the campaign knew that it had to differentiate itself from Clinton, and convince voters that there was a good reason to change leadership (Broder 1997, 12). In ways that have already been described, both of these aims were difficult. First and foremost, the economy was very robust. As described, this always makes it difficult to unseat an incumbent. Also, with Clinton's centrist policies, drawing distinctions would be more difficult. The campaign could not effectively polarize the race because of Clinton's moderate tendencies (Broder 1997, 12). The Dole campaign was also handicapped in differentiation because of Dole's image. Because Dole was seen as a mean old man, the campaign was very worried that negative messaging defining Bill Clinton as a liberal would not be well received (Broder 1997, 174). In all these ways the Dole campaign would be limited, not only in its selection of messaging objectives, but also in their effectiveness.

Several messaging objectives were selected by the Dole campaign in light of these considerations. The most important messaging objective for Dole was his economic plan. In his

convention speech he argued that he wanted to pass a balanced budget amendment, a fifteen percent across-the-board tax cut, a fifty percent cut in capital gains taxes, tort reform, estate tax reform, and decreased regulation. Another messaging objective was the policy suggestion of education reform. Dole argued for greater school choice with government scholarships. Dole also selected legal reform as another minor messaging objective. He wanted to end parole at the state level and get rid of liberal judges. Dole also wished to continue the war on drugs. Attacking Clinton, though difficult for Dole, was also a messaging objective. He took issue with Clinton's stance on abortion. He also claimed the Clinton administration was weak on drug enforcement. Overall he tried to paint Clinton's policies as overwhelmingly liberal. This was, in all, a very predictable Republican economic platform. Upon analysis, it appears that this collection of messaging objectives connects well with Dole's theme of individualism. He wanted the government to interfere less in people's lives. People would have more autonomy in raising their children with lower taxes and more education options. His messaging objectives also cast Democrats, specifically Clinton, as the enemy. In these ways, the messaging objectives of the Dole campaign meshed quite well with his theme.

With effective thematic overlap of messaging objectives, it is surprising that the campaign overall was ineffective at thematic integration. There were several reasons for this failure. Most important was the ability of the Clinton campaign to define the agenda. Not only did this make the economy, a difficult issues for Dole, the main messaging objective, but Dole campaign officials also lamented that they were unable to craft a cohesive messaging program. This seemed to come from the campaign's inability to stick with a messaging objective. They felt that they had to respond to the Clinton campaign's moves. For example, the Dole campaign was in the early stages of fully enumerating the crime messaging objective. However, they stopped

the messaging of this objective after only one week and switched to the tax messaging objective. This seemed to happen quite frequently (Broder 1997, 193). The Dole campaign bounced around in their emphasis of messaging objectives. These messaging objectives then, were not gaining sufficient resonance with voters due to a strategic calculation. In terms of theme, this choppy approach would not allow broad themes to be integrated. If the pursuit of messaging objectives was not disciplined, themes could not be utilized. On a tactical level, the campaign was also limited in its ability to utilize theme. The commercials that the campaign produced were not compelling. Officials within the campaign even acknowledged their weakness. One official said that their commercial following the convention simply showed “tax cuts, balloons, confetti, Bob Dole and Jack Kemp (Broder 1997, 194).” There was no substantive message, and certainly no tie to theme. These factors, combined with issues of political climate and image prevented the Dole campaign from effectively espousing messaging objectives that seemed to be rather well connected to the available theme.

The takeaway from this campaign is somewhat incoherent. It seems that this campaign was severely limited in thematic utilization through a number of factors. Of particular importance was the existence of a popular centrist incumbent. This made differentiation very difficult. The Dole campaign attempted to show differences through economic policy, educational issues, and crime. The campaign also made attempts to paint Clinton as a big government liberal. In the end, the Dole campaign could not create an effective reason for voters to unseat the opponent. They were also unable to use Dole’s positive theme regarding individualism. This was due to their inability to stick with a messaging objective. Tactically, the Dole campaign was also unskilled in creating messaging that fulfilled objectives. In all, a popular

Clinton and weaknesses of the Dole campaign staff seemed to do the most in limiting the use of theme in pursuing objectives of messaging.

## **2000**

The 2000 presidential election is unique in this period of study thus far in that it did not feature an incumbent candidate. While the 1996 election was less than compelling, the 2000 race featured a very interesting mix of personality and strategy. Also interesting in this race was the unique theme that Bush employed to prevent Al Gore, the embodiment of the continuation of Clintonian policy, from becoming president. The campaign was very skilled in weaving its broad theme into messaging objectives that were significant to strategy. This allowed the Bush campaign to distract from the strong economy created by the Clinton-Gore administration and define the agenda in messaging objectives that were beneficial for Bush.

The theme Bush employed was somewhat related to earlier Republican themes, but contained important differences. While implicitly arguing for limited government that was a central part of the broader Republican narrative, the main thrust of Bush's theme was an anti-Washington sentiment. This theme claimed that politics-as-usual was having an incredibly negative effect on the country. It argued that the morality of leaders was continuously declining. A large basis for this appeal was the impeachment scandal of Bill Clinton (Edsall 2007, 193). The nation was in need of a leader that was wholesome and virtuous. Furthermore, this theme argued that the politicians in Washington did not care about confronting actual issues. They simply cared about looking better in "the next news cycle" (Institute 2000, 195). Because of this, nothing was being done to improve education or lower the tax burden. In and of itself, this theme is strong in several ways. First it captures a socially conservative sentiment that the Clintons and the Washington establishment were leading America into moral ruin. This group of voters would

be important for Bush strategically. This theme is also useful in its distraction from the economy. Although it is the guiding theme of the Bush campaign, it is based more on morality than economic well-being. This allowed the campaign to only tangentially center its messaging around the economy. Unlike the Dole campaign, Bush was able to skirt around the issue of the economy and focus on principled leadership.

The Bush campaign was able to calculate strategy that allowed it to utilize its broad theme very effectively. The entire campaign was predicated on the beliefs that Bush would be the nominee and that the general election would be extremely close. These beliefs led to a few important strategic calculations that would guide the entirety of the campaign. First, the campaign largely did not engage its primary opponents. Karl Rove was able to solidify the Republican leadership in support of Bush, allowing him to focus on general campaign messaging objectives throughout the primary (Institute 2003, 109). This made the messaging overall more cohesive and reinforced, which was a major goal of the campaign (Institute 2003, 117). The conviction that the general election would be a close race also led to the intensely focused nature of the campaign. Karl Rove argued that suburban voters were the key demographic to the Bush 2000 effort. These were the people he believed would care about the moral decay of national leadership and other Bush messaging objectives (Institute 2003, 228). Furthermore, the Bush campaign decided to focus most of its effort in geographic areas that would result in the necessary 270 Electoral College votes. This resulted the Bush campaign focusing on a small number of counties in places like Florida, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Washington (Institute 2003, 229). These were also areas where the theme and messaging objectives selected by the Bush campaign would be strategically significant.

The messaging objectives that were decided upon based on the available theme and strategic choices provided voters with a cohesive vision containing both positive and negative messaging objectives that were connected to Bush's anti-Washington theme. The most fundamental messaging objective involved transmitting to voters George Bush's values. The campaign officials saw George Bush as "approachable, folksy and likeable, with an inclusive spirit" (Institute 2003, 20). He was displayed as a different kind of Republican. He believed in faith-based initiatives and "compassionate conservatism" that valued individualism (Institute 2003, 130). The tie to the theme is quite obvious. Bush was to shown to be radically different from the politicians of Washington. His campaign commercials would often depict Bush as a down-to-earth guy in a quarter zip displaying a friendly smile. He cared much more about getting things done than coming out on top in the news. This positive messaging objective about Bush was strategically imperative based on the decisions of the campaign. Displaying Bush as a Washington outsider and "different" Republican was important in obtaining the target suburban voters that were perceived as being concerned about the moral decay of government. In this case, the inextricable link to theme made this messaging objective more compelling in a way that was strategically useful.

The second major messaging objective for the Bush campaign in 2000 involved directly tying Al Gore to the deleterious politics of Washington described in the theme. Because he was following in the footsteps of Clinton, the Bush campaign tried to show that Gore was just as committed to the argumentative politics of the past eight years. Gore represented the hyperpartisanship that disregarded the desires of voters. This messaging objective was directly and obviously connected to the Bush anti-Washington theme. Gore was part of the administration that had done nothing to improve education or lower taxes. This messaging

objective was not only argued for by the campaign, but was also reinforced by some of Gore's actions. He had a reputation of being exaggerative (Institute 2003, 198). For example, Gore once claimed that he "took the initiative in creating the Internet" (Youtube 2013). Gore obviously had not created the Internet. Comments like this aided the Bush campaign in espousing the messaging objective regarding Gore's commitment to media-obsessed Washington politics. This messaging objective was strategically useful in the same ways that the previous messaging objective was. If the targeted suburban voters in the swing states could be persuaded that Gore was a typical example of deleterious immoral Washington politics, they could be convinced to support Bush rather than Gore. The anti-Washington theme made this messaging objective more compelling in directly tying Al Gore to the harmful politics of Washington.

Another important messaging objective for Bush was the policies that he hoped to implement in office. These did not appear separately but as a cluster. Economically, he was in favor of an across the board tax cut, a child tax credit, and cuts in capital gains and corporate taxes (Institute 2003, 128). He also believed in devolving power to state governments, reforming education, and increasing government funding to faith-based initiatives (Institute 2003, 130, 147). Though not as direct as the other two messaging objectives, this objective was connected to Bush's theme. It implicitly argued that these were issues that would not be dealt with by Al Gore. Because he was committed to the partisan politics of Washington, he would not tackle these legitimate issues. Thus, the theme was used to explain the reasons why these issues were not dealt with in terms of the broader theme. This thematic appeal made the normally dry policy objectives more compelling. The policy messaging objective held the same strategic utility as the other two messaging objectives. However, instead of convincing swing voters in the target states

to vote for Bush due to leadership issues, this messaging objective aimed to persuade them on policy connected to leadership issues.

In all, the Bush campaign in 2000 was successful in integrating theme into messaging objectives for several reasons. First, they had a compelling theme that played very well for their candidate and took advantage of the political climate. The political scandals of Clinton's second term had produced a considerable amount of angst with political leadership in the population. Karl Rove was an expert at tapping into these sentiments (Institute 2003, 53). In a very Atwater-like way, Rove was able to solidify the anger people felt into votes for his candidate (Edsall 2007, 53). The campaign was able to convince people that Gore was simply another Clinton. In a lengthier work, the career of Karl Rove would be a major topic of discussion in the contributions he made (positive and negative) to the running of presidential elections in America. Furthermore, being a governor, Bush could earnestly play the Washington outsider. He could put himself on the side of the average person because his political power was not based within the Beltway. Strategically, the campaign also made decisions that allowed them to utilize theme effectively. First, the focus on suburban swing voters allowed them to use the morality issue to their advantage. Rove and his team were able to see that the deterioration of morality in Washington, and its resultant lack of issue tackling in education and taxes, would produce an effective appeal for these people. Furthermore, the geographic specificity was somewhat unprecedented. The campaign had narrowed its activity to a surprisingly small number of counties in swing states. This allowed the Bush campaign to even more specifically constrain its messaging objectives while tying them to themes. This is evident in Bush's support of faith-based initiatives and education reform. These were issues that were salient and could only be addressed by a Washington outsider. Choices of messaging objectives made by the campaign also lent

themselves well to the use of Bush's theme. Bush was the outsider; Gore the insider. Bush would tackle the political issues that Gore's Washington politics would not allow him to.

So, what is the take away? It seems that the campaign here was very active. Where Dole was unable to define the agenda, Bush was able to shift the race from the issue of the economy. Where Dole's team was incompetent, Bush's had political minds like Karl Rove, who were absolute experts at selecting unique messaging objectives and strategies that would benefit their candidate. None of this would have been possible though without the unprecedented level of funding the Bush campaign received from donors. Though not directly related to the use of theme, the incredible amount of money spent by the Bush campaign helped them to do all that they did in defining the agenda and finding the geographic areas they could push their messaging objectives. These factors seemed to work together to allow Bush to utilize theme in pursuing messaging objectives in a compelling and strategically significant manner.

## **2004**

The term "a complete 180" is often difficult to use appropriately in politics, particularly when discussing campaigns. However, it seems that in comparing the Bush 2000 campaign to his reelection run, the terminology is appropriate. Everything from the themes created, to the strategies undertaken, to the messaging objectives selected were radically different for the second presidential campaign of George W Bush. These changes were motivated by changing political conditions, and vastly different strategic commitments held by officials within the Bush campaign. Despite these radical changes, the 2004 campaign was still able to weave its broad themes into objectives of messaging in ways that fulfilled strategic commitments.

The themes that Bush employed in his reelection bid varied drastically from the one utilized in his first presidential campaign. The divergence in theme makes logical sense. Since

Bush had now been elected president, he could not be considered a Washington outsider. He was now at the center of national politics, so casting Washington leadership in a negative light was not feasible. Two themes were used by the Bush campaign in 2004. The first dealt with foreign policy. Bush claimed, as his father did, that Democrats were weak on national security. The link with the Republican narrative is clear in this theme. While the challenges of terrorism demanded an active strategy, Democrats had been hesitant. Bush had been proactive in establishing the Department of Homeland Security and, more importantly, in waging the war on terror and invading Iraq. These actions were necessary in keeping America safe. The Democrats that opposed these actions were weak and posed a threat to American security. This theme had ties to history. Bush's father had been active in the Gulf war and had protected America while some Democrats opposed him. Thus, as the broader narrative implies, Republicans were better at using force to protect American interests than their Democratic counterparts (Edsall 2007, 179). It also displayed clear antithesis and personal connection. This was a theme that informed a major messaging objective of the campaign that was crucial to strategy.

The second theme that Bush utilized was much more subtle but was also important. It was essentially an argument that values in America had been eroded and that conservative had to push back. Implicitly, this tied to things like welfare, no-fault divorce, abortion, and gay marriage (Edsall 2007, 53). According to this theme, the leftist media was increasingly advocating for the implementation of these deleterious policies (Edsall 2007, 101). These increasingly liberal commitments had led to weaker families. Republicans like George Bush were committed to turning the tide on these issues. Bush would push back against the liberals and the media in order to keep traditional family values in tact. This theme was much less central to the campaign in 2004 than the foreign policy theme. However, this theme was critical for

making the messaging objective regarding gay marriage more compelling. The thematic integration of this messaging objective also proved to be important to strategy.

Strategically, the calculations of the Bush campaign in 2004 contrasted from the 2000 campaign in perhaps the most significant manner possible. In 2000 the entire strategy of the Bush campaign was predicated on receiving support from swing voters. In 2004 the opposite was the case. The Bush campaign was committed to motivating their base and receiving as many conservative votes as possible. This strategy came as a result of findings from Bush's chief pollster Matt Dowd. He found that a campaign could lose swing voters and still win the election if that campaign's base was larger than its opponent's (Edsall 2007, 64). Essentially, going after swing voters is difficult. Receiving votes from the base is relatively easier (Edsall 2007, 71). This changed commitment led to important decisions regarding strategy that had an impact on the use of theme and selection of messaging objectives. First, the Bush campaign sought to increase the size of its base. They attempted to target Latinos, African-Americans, and further solidify the Religious Right. The campaign also sought to polarize the election. Dowd characterizes the difference between the two approaches of the Bush campaigns as "crunchy versus squishy". In 2000, the Bush camp had attempted to "blunt" the differences between the candidates in order to appeal to swing voters. In 2004, the campaign attempted to highlight the differences between the candidates in order to activate the base (Institute 2005, 137). This too would have important consequences in the selection of messaging objectives and the emphasis of themes.

With this new strategy decided upon, the Bush campaign chose messaging objectives that would fulfill this strategy and utilize the themes available. The most important messaging objective of the 2004 campaign was that regarding national security. This messaging objective

involved depicting George Bush as a strong wartime leader while, at the same time, arguing that John Kerry would not be effective in the same respect. From the outset of the election, the Bush campaign was able to make this messaging objective the number one item on the agenda. As early as February 2004, the campaign was airing commercials regarding 9/11 and lauding actions the president was taking (Institute 2005, 109). Furthermore, the RNC taking place in New York City further served to highlight the importance of the war on terror (Institute 2005, 109). The Bush campaign argued that people may not always like Bush's position, but they always knew where he stood. He would unequivocally do anything he saw necessary to end the threat of terrorism (Institute 2005, 131). The campaign also argued in its messaging that Bush had gone to war for the right reasons (Institute 2005, 191). This part of the message had clear ties to Bush's foreign policy theme. Being a Republican, Bush was effective in using force to protect American interests. This connection to a broad theme makes this part of the messaging objective more compelling. Strategically, this unapologetic and partisan message would have invigorated the base. Bush cared about protecting America and was less concerned with contemplation than action.

The second phase of this messaging objective that painted Kerry as a weak wartime leader was equally important. The Bush campaign was chiefly concerned with calling into question Kerry's fickle record toward the war in Iraq and his disposition toward war generally. The Bush campaign called attention to the fact that Kerry had flip-flopped several times on his support of the Iraq war and increasing the funding to support troops (youtube 2006). This was meant to question his convictions in direct contrast to Bush. The Bush campaign also made a point to diminish Kerry's military service in Vietnam. Bob Dole, stumping for the Bush campaign, argued that his allegations of war crimes committed by the US disrespected veterans

(Institute 2005, 40). This kind of contempt for the troops was meant to undermine Kerry's potential as a wartime leader. This part of the foreign policy message is also implicitly connected to the foreign policy theme. Being a Democrat, Kerry was soft on defending American interests. This explains his changing opinions on the war in Iraq. The theme helps to explain this part of the messaging objective. Strategically, this part of the messaging objective is very useful. Since the strategy was predicated on making sure the Republican base showed up to vote, suggesting that Kerry would put America in danger due to his weakness would compel them to vote for George Bush on Election Day.

Social issues also made up an important messaging objective for the Bush campaign in 2004. Though abortion was an important issue for the campaign, gay marriage was by far the most salient social issue (Edsall 2007, 60). Bush argued that liberals were attempting to make gay marriage legal. Bush would fight to ensure that this would not happen. This messaging objective was not a huge thrust of the campaign but was clearly connected to Bush's theme regarding conservative pushback. Bush would stand up for the conservative values against liberals and the mainstream media. The strategic importance of this messaging objective is rather obvious. It served to appeal to socially conservative Latinos, thus expanding the base. More importantly, this message appealed to the Republican base. If they were sufficiently worried that liberals would attempt to enact these morally perverse policies, they would show up and vote for Bush.

It is clear that the 2004 Bush campaign was radically different from his previous presidential campaign. Instead of going after swing votes, Bush simply attempted to get the larger Republican base to the polls. This strategic aim deeply impacted the messaging objectives chosen and themes emphasized by the Bush campaign. While the 2000 Bush was a

“compassionate conservative” and a “different kind of Republican,” the 2004 Bush was a strong wartime leader with strong convictions on social issues. The turnaround is notable. The divergences in the two campaigns seem to suggest that an incumbent can radically change all the facets of his campaign and achieve success if the numbers (meaning strategic calculations) are correct. More importantly, this election proved that candidates can win elections by committing completely to the base of their party and ensuring they turn out to vote. In any case, despite the radical changes, the Bush campaign was able to successfully integrate theme into messaging objectives that were strategically significant.

## **2008**

The McCain campaign in 2008 seems to be a unique case in this period of study. It was the second race where no incumbent was up for reelection. However, in this election a Republican was leaving his second term. Furthermore, unlike the strong economy in 2000, one of the largest financial crashes in American history occurred during the most heated time of this campaign. The percentage of Americans who believed that the country was on the wrong track rose above ninety by Election Day (Institute 2009, 89). All of these factors severely hampered McCain’s chances of electoral success. More important to this work, the factors of political climate along with other issues, severely limited the ability of the McCain campaign to utilize theme in pursuing messaging objectives.

McCain essentially had one theme that was not espoused in very specific terms. Essentially, McCain believed that America’s defining characteristic was standing up for what is right (Institute 2009, 89). This seems to incorporate all levels of American life. Everyday people stand up for what is right based on their values and commitments. This sentiment is clearly taken from the Republican narrative. Furthermore, McCain argued that those who are good at

governing do the same. Good government is not about partisanship or rank-and-file membership; it is about doing what is good for constituents. McCain embodied this theory of governance. He had a reputation for bucking his party as a long-time senator. He was portrayed as a maverick that was “everyone’s worst enemy” in congress (Institute 2009, 6). This theme certainly has some compelling force. It shows a values-based theory of governance that was connected to American identity. This moral leadership was a part of the values outlined in the Republican narrative. It also depicted McCain as a prime example of the validity of the theme. This theme would come to be central to one of the McCain campaign’s major messaging objectives. This would also be useful in attempting to fulfill the strategy of differentiation that was key for the campaign.

The strategy for McCain had two important facets that must be discussed here. The first strategic aim of the McCain campaign was to create a large organization with a grassroots feel (Institute 2009, 6). This strategic aim was embodied in the campaign’s use of Internet messaging. This election had a hereto historically large place on the Internet. Although social media had not yet truly taken off, the Internet was a very important asset to both campaigns. The McCain campaign tried to reinforce its grassroots aims on the Internet. It attempted to distribute messages that they could spin to large audiences. This was meant to drum up large numbers of supporters for McCain (Institute 2009, 101). This would encourage the selection of a messaging objective regarding McCain’s differentiation from George Bush that would emphasize his theme regarding moral leadership.

The second tenant of McCain’s strategy was to go after swing voters in the form of suburban voters and women (Institute 2009, 188). The method of attracting these voters was to define the Republican Party on McCain’s terms. This would further influence the selection of

two major messaging objectives. One was that differentiation from Bush that was rooted in McCain's theme. This would distance McCain from the unpopular Republican mainstream and attract swing voters. The other messaging objective this gave rise to was that of an economic message that would appeal to those swing voters whose primary concern was the economy.

With these factors guiding it, the McCain campaign selected three major messaging objectives. The first argued that McCain was very unlike George Bush and the Republican establishment. McCain pointed to his record and argued that his career was defined by his rejection of partisan politics. On numerous occasions, McCain voted against his party based on his commitments to his constituents. He had a history of working with Democrats to craft legislation (Institute 2009, 169). This was directly linked to the theme regarding moral leadership. McCain did not vote based on party identification. He voted based on what he believed was right. This messaging objective was used as motivation for the selection of Sarah Palin. She had gone after her own party in Alaska on corruption (Institute 2009, 170). She too embodied the ethical government that McCain was committed to. Strategically, this is a clear attempt to gain votes from swing voters. McCain unapologetically put country before party. As president, he would not let party politics get in the way of doing what was right. This is a message the McCain campaign hoped would be appealing to swing voters who were angered by partisan politics.

The second major messaging objective of the McCain campaign was his plan to improve the economy. This message became particularly important in the late stages of the campaign when the financial collapse occurred. The McCain campaign made some serious missteps in enumerating this messaging objective however. When the collapse first began to unfold, McCain claimed that the fundamentals of the economy were still sound. In contradiction to McCain's

belief, the crash continued to worsen. This cast doubt on McCain's ability to guide the economy as he had argued (Institute 2009, 191). McCain also flip-flopped on his stance of bailing out AIG when it collapsed. This further eroded confidence in his economic credentials (Institute 2009, 194). McCain made a final error when he suspended his campaign to work out a bailout package in the Senate. He was unable to close a deal while his campaign was suspended (Institute 2009, 198). His economic credentials were further questioned with this failure. In all, McCain's enumeration of the economic messaging objective was not successful. Voters were not sure if he could handle the economic troubles to come due to the several missteps in enumerating the messaging objective.

The final messaging objective for the McCain campaign attempted to "disqualify" Obama as a potential president (Institute 2009, 168). The McCain campaign called into question Obama's experience and qualifications. Not only was he a first term senator, but his popularity could be characterized as a cultural phenomenon. The campaign released an advertisement entitled "Celeb" that compared Obama visually to Britney Spears and showed him in front of a gigantic crowd in Germany (Institute 2009, 177). This was meant to call into question Obama's abilities to actually lead rather than be a cultural phenomenon. This messaging objective does not seem to be directly connected to McCain's theme. Furthermore, this was largely insignificant in terms of strategy. Swing voters were worried about serious issues regarding the economy less than Obama's character (Institute 2009, 177).

From the outset, the McCain campaign had a steep mountain to climb in order to win election. They faced a very hostile political climate. He was a member of an extremely unpopular party. McCain also faced serious obstacle in effectively utilizing his theme. The main appeal of his theme was that it represented a change in politics. McCain was largely beaten to the

punch on this type of appeal. Change became a major slogan of the Obama campaign. McCain lost by 31 percentage points on the change issue (Institute 2009, 168). This seems logical, as McCain was one of the most senior members of the Senate. With a theme that was deeply connected to change, and a candidate that could not be seen as an agent of change, it is not surprising that targeted voters did not find the arguments compelling. In the economy, McCain made many mistakes in his reaction to the crash that occurred during the campaign. His attempts to discredit Obama also fell short. This campaign is rather exceptional in the economic crash that occurred during the heart of the campaign. It seems that political climate had a large role in this race. McCain would have been hard pressed to effectively convince that his party could effectively lead the country in a different direction despite his theme that displayed his distaste of partisan politics and his distance from Republicans.

## **2012**

The 2012 presidential election is in some ways extremely different from any election that came before it. Technological advancements had more impact in this election than perhaps in any other during this period of study. Twitter and Facebook had grown to be major sources of information for millions of voters. This allowed the dissemination of information from both the campaigns and the media to be immeasurably faster. Furthermore, the methods that campaigns, particularly Obama's, used to recruit volunteers and target voters were unprecedented in their depth and mathematic sophistication (Institute 2012). Traditional methods of polling via phone were also proven insufficient due to the large number of voters, particularly the young, who used only cell phones. Record amounts of money were spent by both campaigns and by independent PACs and Super PACS (Institute 2012, xviii). With these vastly different conditions, the Romney campaign would attempt to unseat an incumbent with an economy that was not as

improved as many Americans hoped following the recession beginning in 2008. Many, strategic calculations and decisions on messaging objectives were made to provide voters with a different economic vision for the future. In terms of thematic integration, the Romney campaign made a successful effort to connect the economic vision to a broad political theme. However, the successful use of theme in pursuing messaging objectives was not strategically useful and could not garner election.

Mitt Romney employed one broad theme to explain his views on the nature of economic growth in America. The theme is perhaps the only one in this work that comes with a confirmed title: “We Built It”. This theme was constructed in response to comments President Obama made during the campaign. He said that people who are successful in business are not necessarily smarter or more hardworking than anyone else. Obama claimed that if someone has a successful business, they did not build it; “Somebody else made that happen.” The government was essential for the prosperity of business. Romney’s theme claimed that this was a completely flawed conception of business. Individuals that are smart and hardworking are in fact the sole causers of their success. For Romney, suggesting that the government makes successful businesses “isn’t just foolishness; it’s insulting to every entrepreneur, every innovator in America, and it’s wrong”. In Romney’s view, Obama “attacks success,” and therefore is less success is had (Youtube 2012).

This theme is somewhat difficult to assess. It certainly contains antithesis. Obama is the enemy of economic success. The proposed differences are very stark. Where Obama sees the government as a catalyst of success, Romney sees it as an inhibitor. The theme has clear narrative connection in its advocacy for limited government involvement in the economy. This theme is also deeply tied to American identity. Business owners are clearly the backbone of

America for Romney. They are virtuously hardworking and intelligent. The theme also had some personal elements to it. Romney was someone who had spent much of his career in the private sector. He learned how to run businesses efficiently, and understood the dedication and hard work it took to manage a business. However, this was a dangerous theme in a number of respects. The most fundamental danger of the theme is its possible ad hominem pitfall. It is targeted specifically against Obama, and only implicitly tied to liberal or Democratic conceptions of government. It is narrower than one may want a theme to be. This does not doom the theme, but does make it appear eerily similar to a messaging objective. Furthermore, it does implicitly advocate for a somewhat narrow conception of governmental attitude toward business. It argues for a laissez faire type of government; not one that provides subsidies to businesses in need. This was a dangerous angle for the theme due to the mood of the electorate. Surveys found that voters were more inclined to support a candidate that advocated for small business subsidies and other forms of aid (Institute 2012). This theme implicitly suggests that the government should let businesses live and die by their decisions. This, along with the personal aspects of the theme, hurt Romney strategically in combatting a harmful image that will be discussed later. In all, this theme clearly had some elements of strength, but would prove to contain some aspects that would injure the Romney campaign in certain respects of messaging objectives and strategy.

The Romney campaign made several strategic calculations that proved to be important to choices of messaging objectives and thus thematic integration. Most fundamentally, the Romney campaign targeted voters that it believed would allow its candidate to be successful. The chief demographics of importance for Romney were Latinos and women. The campaign believed that these groups could be coopted if the correct messaging objectives were selected (Institute 2012, 189). It seems that the Romney campaign chose mostly to focus on the economy to win the

support of these voters. The reasoning behind this escapes full analysis but it seems that explanations in the first chapter seem valid. Because the economy is a non-partisan issue, it is useful when targeting those who may vote for either party. Because of the universal appeal of an improved economy, and the somewhat disappointing state of the economy in 2012, the Romney campaign may have chosen to utilize it to gain votes from these voters.

More important than the demographic strategy for Romney was a focus on geography. The Romney campaign figured that it had to win in Ohio, Florida, North Carolina, and Virginia in order to get an Electoral College victory. They also needed one more win in places like Nevada, New Hampshire, or Wisconsin (Institute 1012, 226). This strategy obviously meant a difficult task for the selection of messaging objectives. These were very diverse states with different populations. They would have to be brought to Romney through one messaging objective. Once again the Romney campaign would choose to focus on the economy. This seems logical based on the universal appeal of the messaging objective and the less-than-ideal state of the American economy already described.

With these strategic calculations, it is quite clear what the main messaging thrust of Romney's campaign would be. Though there were other issues of foreign policy and social issues that the Romney campaign would utilize, a great deal was riding on its ability to convince voters that Romney had a plan that was better for the economy than Obama. To sell this messaging objective, the campaign started very early. Despite a hotly contested primary, the Romney campaign began attacking Obama on jobs and the economy even in primary debates. The economy was considered Romney's "wheelhouse". As soon as the nomination was assured, Romney began laying out a plan to turn the economy around and cut spending. This led to the release of a series of "Day One, Job One" advertisements (Institute 2012, 36). This messaging

objective is clearly connected to Romney's "We Built It" theme. He wanted to get government out of the way so that businesses could prosper. At first glance, this messaging objective seems to be strategically significant as well. Bettering the economy was something that the Romney campaign believed the target voters cared about. However, the way that Romney argued this messaging objective flew in the face of the mood of much of the electorate. As mentioned, large sections of voters preferred a candidate that would use the government to help out businesses and encourage growth actively to stimulate the middle class. The Romney theme and economic message seemed to advocate for a flourishing private sector that benefitted big business and allowed the market to behave freely. Voter surveys confirmed that Romney was not fully able to convince middle class people that his economic vision was friendlier to them than Obama's (Institute 2012, 180). In all, the messaging objective of the economy was one that the Romney campaign successfully made more compelling with a broad theme. The issue though, was that the vision it created was antithetical to the desires of a majority of Romney's targets.

The second messaging objective of importance here was one that was thrust upon the Romney campaign. Throughout the primary, an unopposed Obama was able to define Romney as an out-of-touch aristocrat that did not truly care about the middle class. His time at Bain Capital was marked by the destruction of businesses and American jobs (Institute 2012). The Romney campaign realized, through the aforementioned surveys, that convincing the electorate of empathy for the middle class was important to their strategy of capturing their target demographics. The "We Built It" theme was important in arguing this messaging objective for Romney. The campaign argued that casting a negative light on Romney's experience at Bain was a war on capitalism (Institute 2012, 98). This was typical for Obama, as explained by the theme. The campaign argued that Romney of course cared about people of all classes and about

American jobs. This seemed to be a somewhat strong response that was connected to Romney's theme. Although the theme was not incredibly useful strategically, the campaign's response was coherent. However, any potential progress was undone largely by a video of Romney speaking at a fundraising event that was leaked on September 18, 2012. He claimed that forty seven percent of Americans are dependent on the government and thus would not vote for him (Institute 2012, 253). This was an external event that would prove to make this messaging objective of positive image much more difficult for the Romney campaign to espouse. The comments essentially discounted nearly half of the population from Romney's calculations. Of course, nearly all campaigns make these types of mathematically driven judgments. However, with Romney's continuing image as an out-of-touch millionaire, this leaked private comment reinforced his cold millionaire image. There was not much that the campaign could do at this point to fix the image problem. Thus, even though the Romney campaign had a messaging objective that tied strongly to a theme, events outside of the campaign's control seemed to undo any potential they had on selling it effectively.

The Romney campaign overall seems to be an interesting case. It had a clear, albeit not incredibly strong, theme. It was able to tie this theme to its main messaging objectives regarding the economy and Romney's image. However, in both cases there was a difficulty of palatability. Romney's vision called for a government that was, in spirit, disconnected from the economy. It wished to let the market act freely, to destroy, create, and innovate in its natural way. Public opinion polls showed that Americans, particularly those that Romney had strategically targeted, favored a government that would actively support small businesses and the middle class. Both Romney's economic and image messaging objectives seemed unable to convince voters that he

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cared about bolstering the middle class. In all, the theme was clear; but it, and the messaging objectives it helped explain, were not strategically useful for the Romney campaign.

## Chapter 6

With so much deep analysis, a step back must be made to assess the points made in this work. First, the general pattern of campaign communication that has been argued for must be recounted for clarity. Then, it seems appropriate to make some assertion about the role and importance of the use of narrative, through its complicated process of inclusion, in campaign communication as it relates to electoral success. Lastly, this chapter will attempt to speculate as to the ways in which the Republican narrative may be utilized in campaign communication in the 2016 presidential election.

The process of narrative inclusion in campaign messaging must first be revisited. In general, it seems that steps of increasing specificity must be made to create messages that connect to the Republican narrative. First, themes must be derived from the narrative. These say something about the candidate or his opponent: the values they hold dear, the broad direction of policy they advocate for, etc. In one way, themes are constrained by the personal disposition of the candidate. Reagan and his team were incredible at creating themes. By contrast, George H.W. Bush had limited skill at doing so. In another way, themes are constrained by political climate. If the economy is booming an incumbent can focus on his economic beliefs to a positive effect. Again, Reagan did this very well. In this vein, a challenger candidate can use his economic theme if the economy is not growing at a satisfactory rate. This was Romney's approach in 2012. Both of these limiting factors manifest themselves in innumerable forms. However, whether their effects are positive or negative, it is clear that they impact the ways that theme, and by extension the narrative, may come to be in campaign communication.

Messaging objectives represent the next level of specificity in campaign communication. In this stage, campaigns select the messages in the realms of ideology, issues, and character.

Messaging objectives are arguments the campaign tries to make regarding what the candidate, or his opponent, will do in office. George H.W. Bush's infamous "read my lips" pledge was the embodiment of a messaging objective of not increasing taxes. In some cases, messaging objectives can be made more compelling if they are connected to themes. In the "read my lips" example, the thematic connection was to that of limited government that respected the individual. Like themes, messaging objectives have numerous constraints. Most central of these constraints is strategy. With any strategy, certain messaging objectives will be selected to appeal to the target voters.

From these messaging objectives, the campaign will create bits of specific communication. This is the most specific element of campaign communication. Each of these messages, if done remotely correctly, will serve to espouse a messaging objective of the campaign. The forms for these bits of communication are numerous. The most common are commercials, press conferences, and prepared speeches. If the campaign is skilled, themes can be integrated in these bits of communication that develop messaging objectives in a strategically meaningful way.

With this complicated mechanism explained, it seems appropriate to assess the importance of campaign communication that is tied, through themes, to the Republican narrative. This assertion is difficult due to lack of hard statistical evidence on the subject. Because this conceptualization of narrative and its inclusion in campaign communication seems to be novel, no quantitative evidence exists to prove narrative's utility. At present, it seems that a candidate skilled at the process described here can use narrative-based themes to make messaging objectives and specific communication more compelling. Looking at the cases of Reagan in 1984 and Bush in 2000, it seems that their ability to use theme helped them, at least in some way,

electorally. Reagan won by one of the greatest electoral margins in recent memory. His ability to identify with an overwhelming majority of Americans through his themes regarding identity seems to have helped him in this accomplishment. Bush was able to stop a Democratic successor of an administration that was in power during a thriving economy. Bush's ability to use his anti-Washington theme to change the focus from the economy to moral leadership and tangential issues like education and faith-based initiatives may have resonated with Americans and been a factor in his win.

This being said, there is no way that themes could be said to be decisive in determining electoral success. Though the themes may have made the messaging objectives more compelling for these candidates, there is much more at play. For Reagan, the economic boom that took place in his first term seems to have been much more influential in his big win than his skillful thematic usage. The political climate was thus extremely friendly, almost to a determinative degree, for Reagan. In 2000, political climate and strategy certainly explains a great deal of Bush's success. Al Gore was trying to convince the American people commit to twelve years of uninterrupted Democratic executive control by representing an administration that had faced impeachment hearings. Bush also had a fierce strategic operation headed by Karl Rove. His organization's ability to compile the necessary Electoral College votes by narrowing down the race to several counties was rather unprecedented at the time. The intensity of this strategic calculation is evidenced in Bush's loss of the popular vote with a victory in the election. In each of these cases, strong thematic integration seems to have played only some role in electoral success. Reagan's theme served as an explanation of the economic success of the time. Bush's theme played into people's frustration with the Clinton administration. These themes seem to simply be tools in making the messages broader and more emotionally appealing

The case of Bush in 1988 gives further evidence that theme is not an entirely determinative factor. It has been argued exhaustively that George H.W. Bush was unable to effectively integrate theme as a candidate. Yet, a fierce strategy, skillful selection of messaging objectives, and a mostly friendly political climate seem to have given him the victory in 1988. All of this suggests that other factors can override the ability to integrate theme and end in electoral victory. This illustrates that thematic integration is essentially a useful tool that makes messaging objectives more compelling.

With the role of theme defined in this precarious way, it is interesting to speculate ways in which the Republican candidate will utilize theme in the 2016 general election. Being perhaps the most fundamental element of constraint on theme, political climate seems to be a logical start for guessing at thematic usage. It seems likely that the economy will continue to be strong by the time of the election. This does not bode well for an emphasis on economic themes for a Republican. Since the economy has been growing under a Democratic president, the argument that a change to a Republican president, who supports the limited government conceptualized in the narrative, is needed for economic growth will likely not hold water. Thus, an economic theme should be downplayed because of its lack of utility.

Adding some candidate speculation, the picture of possible thematic use becomes more interesting. If Hillary Clinton were to become the Democratic nominee, the electoral situation would become rather analogous to the one in 2000. The connection to her husband's scandals, coupled with the controversy over the Benghazi attacks, can give a Republican candidate ammunition to select themes and messaging objectives related to moral leadership and issues unrelated to the economy. Hillary Clinton may be painted as a Washington insider who acts in shady ways. Joe Biden, another potential candidate, is vulnerable to similar criticism as a

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member of an Obama Administration that has been accused of overstepping authority and utilizing executive orders controversially. Jeb Bush, a potential Republican candidate that would make the analogy even more complete, could take on the same role as his brother as an outsider who has never served in national politics. He could argue that his would be a transparent and morally upstanding government. Other potential candidates like Scott Walker and Ben Carson could also potentially play this outsider role and select themes and messaging objectives espousing limited government, transparency, and principled leadership.

Bush could also take on an interesting theme regarding American identity that would help his approach to a very pertinent immigration issue. Since Jeb Bush has a wife who immigrated to the US, he could create interesting themes regarding American identity that are unique. His stance on immigration, which is somewhat divergent from that of the Republican Party, coupled with his personal backstory, could make for interesting selections of messaging objectives and theme. Marco Rubio also holds some potential in bringing an interesting stance on immigration as a candidate, being of Cuban descent. It is unclear how this will shake out, but the potential is certainly interesting with the growing importance of immigration issues.

In terms of themes regarding social issues, 2016 certainly holds some potential for Republicans. Some states have passed laws making it harder to get abortions, and allowing or forbidding same sex marriage. A recent Supreme Court decision upheld private companies' ability to withhold coverage to certain treatments based on religious objections. These developments have been both in favor and against the Religious Right. However, these developments have undoubtedly served to make these issues increasingly salient. With the increased prominence of these social issues, Republicans will have to take on some themes and messaging objectives that explain their stance on them in a strategically significant way.

Different Republican candidates will certainly look to accomplish this in various ways based on their positions and beliefs. Some may choose to emphasize themes and messaging objectives advocating for states' rights to determine issues like abortion and same sex marriage. This may come across as either somewhat of a dodge or a true stance. A vehemently argued theme of states' rights could make this position seem more believable and compelling. Other candidates would clearly take a clear Conservative stance on these issues at the federal level. They would create themes that emphasize the sanctity of life referred to in the narrative. Regardless of what precisely happens, social issues will likely be more important than ever in 2016.

Overall, it is not entirely clear what role the narrative will play in the upcoming presidential election. If the last two Republican candidates are any indication of the role narrative-based themes will play, it seems there will not be much emphasis. However, things are different this time around. The economy will likely not be a point of emphasis for the GOP. When talking about less strident social issues or immigration, theme could be useful. It offers a greater degree of separation from the Democratic Party and more emotional appeals. In all likelihood, another Reagan will not appear. No Republican candidate will be able to heavily utilize theme at the level of effectiveness that the fortieth president did. However, as it was in 2000 for Bush, theme will most likely be a useful tool to make messaging objectives that the candidate believes to salient and strategically useful more compelling.

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