

**DECIPHERING KARL ROVE'S PLAYBOOK:
CAMPAIGN TACTICS AND RESPONSE STRATEGIES**

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Overview

Much of George W. Bush's political success can be attributed to his chief political strategist, Karl Rove. Often referred to as "Bush's Brain," Rove has orchestrated each of Bush's successful political campaigns—beginning with in the election for governor of Texas against incumbent Ann Richards (1994), and then in the presidential contests against Al Gore (2000) and John Kerry (2004). After the 2004 election, Donna Brazile,

who had managed Al Gore's campaign, conceded, "(Rove) is the master of the game." Mark McKinnon, part of Rove's team, agreed: "Karl lives up to his fiction. I think people tend to ascribe a lot of wisdom and genius to Karl, and a lot of it is true."¹

Although Rove's days of shepherding George W. Bush to election victories are over (due to the presidential two term limit), he continues to wield considerable influence. In February 2005, Rove was appointed to the post of White House Deputy Chief of Staff, which means that these "Rovian" campaign tactics have been introduced into the day-to-day operations of the White House. In addition, there has been speculation that Rove will play an active role within the Republican National Committee,)

But while these Rovian campaign techniques are certainly inventive, they are hardly new. Although the particulars of the three races may have differed, the tactics employed in each campaign have remained constant. Indeed, the choice of opponent doesn't matter significantly; Rove's campaign tactics can be tailored to any candidate. Remarkably, however, the Democratic opposition has been caught flatfooted in each campaign. Unprepared for these tactics, they do not know how best to respond.

Given Rove's record of success, it is safe to assume that future campaigns will continue to feature variations of these same political tactics. Thus, becoming acquainted with the Rovian "playbook" is a critical first step for opponents as they devise their campaign strategies.

It is also important for the public to recognize these tactics, so that they will be in a position to form independent judgments about candidates and issues. Richard Paul and Linda Elder, authors of *The Thinker's Guide to Fallacies: The Art of Mental Trickery and*

¹ Purdum, Todd and David D. Kirkpatrick, "Campaign Strategist is in Position to Consolidate Republican Majority," *The New York Times*, 5 November 2004, sec. A.

Manipulation observe,

(The public's) goal should be to recognize fallacies for what they are – the dirty tricks of those who want to gain an advantage. You will withstand their impact more effectively when you know these fallacies inside and out. When you are inoculated against fallacies, your response to them is transformed. You ask key questions. You probe behind the masks, the fronts, the fostered images, the impressive pomp and ceremony. You take charge of your own mind and emotions. You become (increasingly) your own person.²

This article identifies the fifteen tactics that comprise the Rovian campaign strategy.

The discussion of each of these tactics consists of the following three sections:

- ✓ Describing the Rove campaign tactic
- ✓ Illustrating the use of these campaign tactics in the Bush campaigns
- ✓ Identifying Strategic Responses that counter these campaign tactics

The Rovian Playbook: Campaign Tactics

Tactic #1: Take the Offensive

The Bush campaigns have been characterized by an aggressive approach that establishes the agenda of the campaign, while putting their opponent on the defensive. Using the analogy of a track meet, the Rove team gets off of the starting blocks first to take control of the race. The opponent then spends the remainder of the contest recovering from this initial burst, trying to catch up. This approach throws Bush's

² Paul, Richard and Linda Elder. The Thinkers Guide to Fallacies: The Art of Mental Trickery and Manipulation (Foundation for Critical Thinking, 2004).

political opponents “off message,” so that he/she cannot get their message across to the public. In addition, a candidate who is on the defensive generally makes a poor impression on voters, who are looking for positive and assertive leadership.

Strategic Response

A great deal of a candidate’s campaign strategy must be decided upon *before* the first shot is fired. As Jerry Geisler celebrity attorney in the 1950s, once observed, “The reason I’m so good is that I always prepare the opposition’s case first. I don’t even think about what I’m going to do until I know what the other side is planning.”³

The focus of this preliminary phase of a political campaign should: 1) identify the tactics in the Rovian playbook; 2) anticipate how these Rovian tactics might be used against their candidate; and 3) develop effective strategic responses. The campaign will then be in a position to set the agenda from the outset of the campaign, in the following ways:

- * Establish the public perception of their candidate
- * Establish the major issues of the campaign
- * Influence the public perception of the opponent
- * Throw the Rove team off of their divisive, distracting message, so that they will be forced to address the real, pressing issues.

Tactic #2: Attack Your Opponent’s Strengths

According to conventional wisdom, the first objective of a political campaign is to call attention to the weaknesses of your opponent. However, Rove’s tactic of attacking an opponent’s *strengths* forces his opponent to back away from the very qualities that makes

³ Server, Lee. “Robert Mitchum: Baby, I Don’t Care” (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2001), 181.

him/her an attractive candidate.

To illustrate, during the 2004 presidential race, John Kerry, a decorated military hero, opposed Bush, who faced serious questions about his own military record. Consequently, Bush's surrogates (see Tactic # 11) raised questions about Kerry's status as a war hero, so that his service in Viet Nam diverted attention from the issues Kerry wanted to raise.

Strategic Response

It is imperative that a campaign be prepared to promote the strengths of its candidate from the outset of the campaign and be ready to refute any attack from the other side without delay. Indeed, these attacks could serve as a linchpin for an attack of their own, focusing on the dirty tricks of the opposition.

In addition, the candidate should *embrace* the issue by inviting public discussion on the topic. For instance, in the above example, Kerry could have responded, "The Bush campaign has raised an important issue—one's commitment to the ideals of this country through military service." He could then have called for a public discussion, giving both candidates the opportunity to clarify questions surrounding their service. This counterpunch, of course, is exactly what Bush would like to avoid, drawing attention to Kerry's strength and Bush's weakness.

Tactic #3: Accuse Your Opponent of What He/She is Going to Accuse You Of

This is another preemptive tactic, in which Bush has launched his campaigns by accusing his opponent of his *own* weaknesses. Paul and Elder explain,

When under attack and having trouble defending them, manipulators turn the tables. They accuse their opponent of doing what they are being accused of. 'You say that I don't love you! I

think it is you who does not love me!' Manipulators know this is a good way to put their opponents on the defensive. You may want to up the ante by accusing your opponent of doing something worse than what he is accusing you of. 'How dare you accuse me of being messy? When was the last time you even took a shower?'⁴

Even when these accusations are outlandish, they serve to disarm the opponent, reducing him/her to a defensive "Am not" response. The Swift boat incident provides a good example of this tactic. Not only did the accusations about Kerry's military service undermine his perceived strength as a decorated war hero, but it led to a "draw" with respect to Bush's own undistinguished military record.

This tactic was also employed in 2005 as part of the Republican strategy to defend Congressman Tom DeLay, Texas Republican and former House majority leader, as he faced indictment for conspiring to violate Texas election law by contributing corporate money to candidates for the Texas Legislature in 2002. This case study furnishes other effective responses to this technique.

DeLay and the Republican machine staged a relentless campaign to vilify Ronnie Earle, the Texas District Attorney, as a "rogue district attorney," a "fanatic" and "an unabashed partisan zealot." DeLay's lead lawyer, Dick DeGuerin of Houston, alleged, "Tom DeLay changed the state of Texas. Nobody can deny that, and Ronnie Earle wants to destroy him because of that."

Earle's response strategy consisted of the following steps:

- * Earle put the into perspective for the public, saying, "I find they often accuse others of doing what they themselves do."

- * The District Attorney chose to discuss the tactic in terms of how it denigrated the political process and, ultimately, the voters. "This is about protecting the integrity of our

⁴ Paul, Richard and Linda Elder. The Thinkers Guide to Fallacies: The Art of Mental Trickery and Manipulation (Foundation for Critical Thinking, 2004).

electoral system and I couldn't just ignore it.”

*Earle took a humorous approach, so that he wasn't thrown off-stride by the attacks.

"Being called vindictive and partisan by Tom DeLay is like being called ugly by a frog."

Strategic Responses

* Before the campaign is officially launched, it is important to identify the weaknesses of the opponent. Be prepared to lead off the campaign with media ads that associate that candidate with these weaknesses before Rove pins them on you.

* Earle put the into perspective for the public, saying, "I find they often accuse others of doing what they themselves do.”

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*Earle took a humorous approach, so that he wasn't thrown off-stride by the attacks.

"Being called vindictive and partisan by Tom DeLay is like being called ugly by a frog."

Tactic #4: Go Negative, Then Cry Foul

It is a truism in sports that in a scuffle, it is often the second, retaliatory blow that draws the attention of the referee. Karl Rove has moved this principle into the political arena. The Bush campaign typically “goes negative” early in the campaign, using scare tactics or lifting comments out of context (See Tactics #12 and #14). Once the opponent retaliates, the Rove camp calls public attention to their “dirty” campaign tactics. During

the 1994 gubernatorial race, the Bush campaign initiated a series of negative campaign tactics, distorting Texas' crime statistics to manufacture a divisive issue that confused voters (See Tactic #10). Ann Richards was advised by her campaign staff to fight back so that she wouldn't appear weak. However, when Richards called Bush a "jerk," she left an opening for the Bush campaign. Bush spokesperson Reggie Bashur declared, "Today apparently marks a significant departure for Governor Richards, as she and her advisers have decided that negative campaigning is their lone hope to attempt to reverse her political troubles. George W. Bush has run his campaign on the issues and has offered reforms for fundamental change and meaningful policies and programs."⁵ This tactic cast Richards in a negative light and put her on the defensive throughout the remainder of the campaign.

Strategic Response

Make the issue of negative campaigning a central theme from the outset to bring it to the attention of the public. In that way, the campaign will not be perceived as whining about a particular attack. Instead, the campaign can then maintain an informative tone, simply pointing out the Rovian negative campaign tactics as they appear.

Tactic #5: The "Big Lie"

Although people are often dubious when politicians tell "small" lies, they tend to believe them when they make outrageous claims. Ironically, it is the very magnitude of a "big lie" that makes it believable. The response of the voters can be summarized as follows: "Well, there must be some truth in the assertion, or they wouldn't be able to say it. Where there's smoke, there's fire." The effectiveness of this approach is dependent on a

⁵ Hatfield, J. Fortunate Son (Brooklyn: Soft Skull Press, 2002), 131.

politician's ability to "sell" the lie by boldly asserting its validity in the face of the facts. The Big Lie is then accorded even more legitimacy once it is covered by the media (for more discussion of the media See Tactic #9).

Thus, many people who voted for Bush in 2004 believed the following Big Lies:

- * There was a relationship between Saddam and Osama bin Laden
- * There were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq
- * The world is a safer place since the beginning of the War on Terrorism⁶

Strategic Response

Accusing an opponent of lying can easily backfire on a candidate; people see this as mean spirited, negative, and disrespectful. Consequently, a more effective approach is to *show, don't tell*; that is, in campaign spots, present media documentation that expose the Big Lie.

Another strategy to exposing the Big Lie is humor; capturing someone in the act can make the person look ridiculous. To illustrate, in October 2004, the news broke that 380 tons of conventional explosives were missing from one of Iraq's former military installations.

After Kerry cited these reports as evidence of the incompetence of the Bush military operation, the administration went into spin mode, raising questions about whether the explosives had been removed *before* or *after* the American invasion. On the campaign trail, Bush declared that people should not trust a potential commander in chief (Kerry) that makes wild allegations before ascertaining the facts (Videotape footage of the invasion later confirmed that the explosives were at the site at the time that the first

⁶ Outfoxed, dir. Robert Greenwald, 75 min, 2004.

wave of soldiers entered the city). The *Daily Show*'s host John Stewart first showed a video clip of Bush making his accusations about Kerry's "baseless allegations." This was followed by footage of Bush announcing that there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and then a speech by Cheney proclaiming that there was a direct link between Saddam and Al Qaeda. This clever segment made its point about The Big Lie without damaging the messenger—in this case, John Stewart.

Tactic #6: Appeal to Moral Values

Since the events of 9/11, many Americans have turned to the government for spiritual guidance and direction. Much of Bush's success in the 2004 presidential campaign has been attributed to its appeal to moral values. At campaign events, Bush openly discussed his "faith-based" approach to government, declaring that his religious beliefs were at the core of his political decisions. In his acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention (held in September, 2004), Bush set his political policies within a religious framework. Bruce Lincoln notes,

In his closing paragraph, Bush quoted Ecclesiastes 3, 'To everything there is a season,' but quickly departed from the Biblical text. 'A time for sadness,' he began, with reference to 9/11, then 'a time for struggle' - Afghanistan and Iraq - and finally 'a time for rebuilding.' This pattern of loss followed by recovery recurred in passages devoted to the economy, the war against terrorism, the national mood, and the state of morality since the 1960s.

In all cases, Bush described losses overcome through hope, steadfastness, and faith. Only when he reached his culminating example did he name what he saw in them all. 'For as long as our country stands,' he proclaimed, 'people will look to the resurrection of New York City and they will say: Here buildings fell, and here a nation rose.' Resurrection. Lower Manhattan may be a case in point, but it was not the point of the story.

Two of these beliefs were meant to justify his wars as holy. The first – 'I believe that America is called to lead the cause of freedom in a new century' - prompts a question: Called by whom? The second helps

answer that query: 'I believe freedom is not America's gift to the world, it is the Almighty's gift to every man and woman.' And, a bit later: 'Like generations before us, we have a calling from beyond the stars to stand for freedom.'⁷

Indeed, George W. Bush has been positioned as an instrument of God. Bob Jones III, president of the fundamentalist college of the same name, wrote a letter to the president on November 3, 2004 (the day after the election) telling him,

Christ has allowed you to be his servant (so he could) 'leave an imprint for righteousness' (by appointing conservative judges and approving legislation) defined by biblical norm. In your re-election, God has graciously granted America -- though she doesn't deserve it -- a reprieve from the agenda of paganism, 'Put your agenda on the front burner and let it boil. You owe the liberals nothing. They despise you because they despise your Christ.'⁸

Thus, although Kerry's campaign emphasized issues which the majority of Americans supported, the Bush campaign's faith-based rhetoric was, ultimately, more persuasive. Twenty-two percent of voters polled said that the issue of moral issues mattered most in deciding how to vote for president. Of those 22 percent, 80 percent voted for President Bush.⁹

Strategic Response

Coming up with an effective strategic response to this appeal to morality presents a challenge. One approach is to denounce this appeal to moral values as a hypocritical ploy, which exploits religion in order to gain power. However, this will offend a large

⁷ Lincoln, Bruce. "How Bush Speaks In Religious Code," The Boston Globe 12 September 2004, sec. D, 12.

⁸ Dowd, Maureen. "Slapping the Other Check," The New York Times 14 November 2004, sec. 4, 11.

⁹ Townsend, Tim. "Moral Values Vote is Far from Simple," St. Louis Post Dispatch 7 November, 2004.

segment of voters, who sincerely think about the world—and the government—from a religious point of view. As Kerry senior advisor Mike McCurry observes, “We know that Americans are a very faithful people; the vast majority believes in God and worship. Over 70 percent tell pollsters routinely that they want a president who is deeply grounded in faith and speaking to those issues.”¹⁰

Another strategy is to jump into a competition for which party is the most religious. However, this response has several drawbacks. First, it is a diversion from the critical issues facing America—issues that are Democratic strengths. In addition, it again puts the Democrats in a defensive position. And most importantly, a “morality contest” further blurs the distinction between church and state in the United States. Winning an election at the expense of this important principle would be detrimental to the country.

Perhaps the most effective response is to embrace this moral conversation by re-framing the notion of “morality” within the context of the Democratic tradition. Key political issues such as poverty, income inequities, homelessness, the environment, and the war in Iraq, can easily be discussed as moral issues. Significantly, according to a May, 2006 poll, fifty percent of respondents said Democrats came closer to sharing their moral values, compared with 37 percent who said Republicans did.¹¹

A good example of this occurred briefly in October 2004, when John Kerry appeared at the pulpit of the Mount Hermon A.M.E. church in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

¹⁰ Halbfinger, David and David Sanger. “Kerry’s Latest Attacks on Bush Borrow a Page from Scripture,” New York Times 25 October 2004, sec A, 17.

¹¹ Dowd, Maureen, “Father and Son Reunion,” New York Times, May 10, 2006, 24A.

Kerry declared that his political agenda—caring for the sick, housing the homeless, feeding the hungry and stopping violence—were rooted in the teachings of the Bible: “(Bush) didn’t choose the least among us, they chose the most powerful among us. They keep on thinking it’s the most powerful who deserve the most, some kind of entitlement.”¹²

Indeed, the Democratic Party has already adopted this strategy in anticipation of the 2006 midterm elections. Shortly after the 2004 election, John Kerry sent an email to supporters, thanking them for their efforts and establishing a moral platform reframing policies into morality issues:

And we must fight not only against George Bush's extreme policies -- we must also uphold our own values. This is why on the first day Congress is in session next year, I will introduce a bill to provide every child in America with health insurance. And, with your help, that legislation will be accompanied by the support of hundreds of thousands of Americans.

There are more than eight million uninsured children in our nation.

That's eight million reasons for us to stay together and fight for a new direction. It is a disgrace that in the wealthiest nation on earth, eight million children go without health insurance.

Normally, a member of the Senate will first approach other senators and ask them to co-sponsor a bill before it is introduced -- instead, I am turning to you. Imagine the power of a bill co-sponsored by hundreds of thousands of Americans being presented on the floor of the United States Senate. You can make it happen. Sign our ‘Every Child Protected’ pledge today and forward it to your family, friends, and neighbors.¹³

Tactic #7 Sell the Bush Persona

Much of the success of the Rove campaign strategies involves their ability to sell the Bush persona to the American public. Many voters like and trust George W. Bush

¹² Halbfinger, David and David Sanger. “Kerry’s Latest Attacks on Bush Borrow a Page from Scripture,” New York Times 25 October 2004, sec A, 17.

¹³ John Kerry, November 19, info@johnkerry.com; jk4p-002Qr07ypn@mail.johnkerry.com

even though they disagree with his policies.

The Bush persona, which borrows heavily from the image of Ronald Reagan, is made up of the following elements.

* *Bush, the Man of the people*

Despite his privileged upbringing (he is the son of a millionaire who attended prep school at Andover and Yale on a “legacy” admission), Bush has a populist appeal. Voters see “Dubya” as the type of guy they would like to have a beer with. In contrast, John Kerry appeared too standoffish. This touch of populism also contains an anti-intellectual strand. During the 2004 campaign, he railed against the “East Coast Liberals” and “Hollywood” elite who were out of the mainstream.

* *Bush the Macho Man*

The Bush persona presents the image of a rugged individualist, in the mold of John Wayne, the Marlboro Man, and Ronald Reagan. His 2003 “photo op” flying a fighter plane onto an airline carrier, announcing “mission accomplished” in Iraq was a demonstration of this image. Indeed, that week *Newsweek* featured a photo of Bush on its cover, wearing a flight jacket and positioning his hand in the “thumbs up” signal. The photo carried the cut line, “Top Gun.” During the 2004 campaign, Bush played up his Texas cowboy façade remarking, “People say that I swagger. In Texas, that’s known as walkin.”

The approach of the Bush administration is predicated on macho posturing. The moral relativism—or “nuance” of liberals is portrayed as weakness. Indeed, the language used to describe liberals can be characterized as homophobic. Thus, environmentalists are characterized as “tree huggers.”

An elemental part of the code of the Macho Man is never to show weakness. Rove recognizes that people want a strong, resolute leader, even if they disagree with his/her policies. This attitude is manifested in the following modes of conduct:

- *Never Apologize* - Apologies are equated with weakness. Thus, when asked at a press conference if he had made any mistakes during his first term, Bush could not come up with any. And when pressed about this question during the presidential debates, Bush replied that he had made a few hiring mistakes—a rather mild admission.

- *Stay the Course* - For Bush, sticking with his original position is a sign of strength and character—no matter how disastrous the results. Indeed, any inconsistencies in the positions taken by an opponent are regarded as weakness. One of Bush's early charges against John Kerry was that he was a “flip flopper” who changed his position on issues and therefore could not be trusted.

* *Bush the Dimwit.*

Like Reagan, described as an “amiable dunce,” Bush is regarded as not terribly bright. Notably, Bush often feeds into this persona, noting in public speeches how he often mangles the English language. Although on the surface this aspect of the persona is a criticism, it is actually integral to his success. As Bush himself has noted, people often tend to “misunderestimate” him, taking him lightly. To illustrate, before the first Bush-Kerry debate, Bush's handlers lowered the public expectations of the president's performance noting that Kerry was a champion debater, while Bush struggles to make himself clear. As a result, the Bush team was able to claim a victory in the debate for even coming close to the challenger's performance.

In addition, this dimwit persona is used to absolve Bush of responsibility when

things go wrong. An anecdote may help illustrate this point. In 2001, one of the authors was approached by a firefighter who asked him to sign a petition protesting governmental efforts to dismantle his union. When the author commented on Bush's role, the firefighter shook his head. "That guy's so stupid, he doesn't even know what's going on." The firefighter's rationale was that Bush's ignorance somehow exonerated him from any role in the union-busting policy.

Strategic Response

One response is to take the offensive by pointing out the limitations of the Bush persona. For instance, it could be argued that Bush's stubbornness has led to problems, including relations with allies and U.S. foreign policy.

Another strategic response is to select a candidate who offers an alternative persona—a leader who behaves like an adult. Atticus Finch, protagonist of the novel/film *To Kill a Mockingbird* is an excellent illustration of this persona. The adult persona provides reassurance, direction, and inspiration. The "adult persona" accepts responsibility for his/her decisions. The adult persona embodies the following qualities:

- Leadership
- Wisdom
- Compassion
- Warmth/Empathy

This adult persona also embodies what political scientist James David Barber refers to as an active/positive personality type, which is based upon his or her levels of *activity* (Activity/Passivity) and *enjoyment* (Positive/Negative affect):¹⁴

¹⁴ Barber, James David. *The Presidential Character*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1972, 13.

-The *Active/Positive* personality is distinguished by an industrious nature, combined with the enjoyment of this level of activity. This pattern, typified by Thomas Jefferson, indicates a high level of self-esteem, success in relating to his environment, and achievement orientation.

According to Barber, presidents with an Active/Positive personality type have achieved a high level of performance. For example, Bill Clinton's dynamic personality and charisma—he was forever reaching out to his constituents—enabled him to establish a relationship with the public that withstood a furious assault from the right. Further, Roger Streitmatter found a correlation between a president's character type and the type of media coverage he receives. "Robust" presidents (those who fell within Barber's Active-Positive character delineation) received at least 50 percent more newspaper coverage than presidents exhibiting less attractive character traits. Active/Positive presidents also received 87 percent more "personal news coverage" related to their daily activities and family.¹⁵

Barber regards presidential style as an extension of internal presidential character patterns. Barber links style to performance--the way in which the president will perform his/her duties. However, the emerging role of the media suggests a modification of Barber's theory. Style is no longer a reflection of character but instead is a carefully cultivated *image* designed to appeal to the American public and, as Streitmatter suggests, attract favorable media coverage as well.

Finding candidates who present a compelling persona points out the importance of candidate selection. Because most politicians are not actors, the persona that is present

¹⁵ Streitmatter, Roger. "The Impact of Presidential Personality on News Coverage in Major Newspapers." *Journalism Quarterly*, Spring 1985: 66-68.

to the public must, to some degree, be genuine.

Tactic # 8: Sell an Adolescent Worldview

The Rove campaign machine sells an adolescent worldview that resonates with the American public. The cumulative messages found in American advertising provide perspectives into this adolescent worldview.

** An uncomplicated world*

_____ This world offers simple solutions to complex problems: all issues can be resolved by purchasing the right product. The world of ads is populated by people who find fulfillment through laundry detergents and car wax.

** A world of immediate gratification*

A sense of urgency permeates the world of advertising. In commercials, people cannot postpone their gratification for more than thirty seconds. To rewrite an old adage, “Nothing worth having is worth waiting for.” This is a direct world, defined by action (as opposed to diplomacy).

** A self-absorbed world*

In this narcissistic world, satisfaction does not stem from helping others. Instead, pleasure comes from helping yourself to as many products as you can afford. Why buy L’Oreal hair coloring? “Because I’m worth it.” Why spend your money at McDonalds? Because “You deserve a break today.” A pre-Christmas radio spot for The Cheese Place asks, “Don’t we owe ourselves a little self indulgence? So why not be a little selfish before the gift giving begins?”

This worldview appeals to the adolescent sensibility of the American public. Like adolescents, the American electorate is unwilling to sacrifice anything to obtain what

he/she wants. With this knowledge, the Bush administration proposes policies that are popular because they require no sacrifice on the part of the American people. With respect to its foreign policy, the Bush team understands that they have a great deal of latitude, so long as there is no military draft. In like fashion, the economic policy consists of accruing a large debt, so that we can live well, at the expense of future generations. This adolescent sensibility is simplistic and is defined by absolutes: Good Guys verses Evildoers. Right verses Wrong, With Us or Against Us. Thus, within the context of this worldview, decisions facing the nation are clear and simple. All issues are framed in black and white. Issues of gray are presented as “waffling.”

In reality, however, issues such as the conflict in Iraq are complex. Charles Pena, director of defense policy studies at the Cato Institute, explains,

Iraq is a complex problem, Our problem is that we keep leading people to believe that there are simple solutions. Our military action creates other problems that our military cannot solve,’ he said. ‘And we haven't been very good at fixing what we broke in Iraq.’¹⁶

Strategic Response

Admittedly, it is hard to compete with this tactic. The need to raise taxes or institute the draft are not messages that adolescents like to hear. It is difficult for people to envision the future ramifications of these policies. And further, the candidate who conveys these realistic messages to the public can be painted as a “pessimist” and doomsayer.

One way to appeal to this adolescent sensibility is to learn from principles of

¹⁶ Wong, Edward. “Pivot Points in the Middle East,” The New York Times 14 November 2004, sec. 4.

advertising; 1) Reduce the number of themes; make them easy to remember; 2) personalize the message by pointing out how various policies will affect people on a personal level. To illustrate, abstract discussions about the national debt has little impact on young voters. However, if they understood how this will affect them, they would become more engaged in the discussions about this issue; 3) and finally, emphasize the benefits of the candidate's platform to the consumer/voter.

Tactic #9: Exploit the Media

One key to a successful campaign strategy is an efficient use of the media. Rove's grand media strategy takes several forms.

** Exploiting the capabilities of the media*

In crafting their political message, Rove's production staff realizes that every detail must contribute to the intended political message. Michael K. Deaver, Ronald Reagan's chief image-maker, declared, "They understand the visual as well as anybody ever has. They watched what we did, they watched the mistakes of Bush I, they watched how Clinton kind of stumbled into it, and they've taken it to an art form."¹⁷

To illustrate, at a speech promoting Bush's economic plan in May 2003 at Indianapolis, White House aides instructed the affluent, well-dressed people in the crowd behind Mr. Bush to take off their suit coats and ties so they would look more like the working class people the president claimed would benefit from his tax cut.

** Denouncing the Media*

One of the most damaging Big Lies perpetuated by conservatives is that the American media are liberal. In reality, right wing ideological media has emerged

¹⁷ Bumiller, Elizabeth. "Keepers of Bush Image Lift Stagecraft to New Heights," The New York Times 16 May 2003, sec. A.

as a powerful presence in the U.S. However, this charge provides a way to discredit unfavorable news reports.

** Controlling the mainstream media through intimidation*

Early in Bush's first term, the White House abolished the longstanding tradition of allowing reporter Helen Thomas to ask the first question at press conferences. This was a strong signal to the press corps that critics of the administration would be penalized. Other journalists have had their access to the president restricted as well. In an interview on National Public Radio, Maureen Dowd revealed that the White House had not renewed her press card, which had expired.¹⁸

** Imposing limits on "unscripted encounters" with the media.*

President Bush rarely participates in press conferences or other forums that would expose him to questions from the press. Instead, the administration requires that journalists submit their questions in advance and using assigned seating to pinpoint friendly questioners.

** Cultivating a network of influential media commentators and media outlets that supports the Bush agenda*

Over the past ten years, the far right has established a network of print and broadcast media that promote their ideological agenda. Talk radio hosts like Rush Limbaugh and media outlets such as Fox news cable television reinforces Bush's political agenda. Indeed, a survey found that regular viewers of Fox news were more likely to hold certain misconceptions, as compared to consumers of other mainstream media channels:

- Did we find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq?

¹⁸ Dowd, Maureen. "Slapping the Other Check," The New York Times 14 November 2004, sec. 4, 11.

- Yes- 33% of Fox viewers
- Yes- 11% of PBS/NPR audience
- Were there links between Iraq & Al Quida?
 - Yes- 67% of Fox viewers
 - Yes- 16% of PBS/NPR audience
- Does world opinion favor the US invasion of Iraq?
 - Yes- Fox viewers 35%
 - Yes- NPR/PBS audience- 5%¹⁹

Strategic Responses

Successful candidates have learned how to use the media to their fullest advantage. Elements of a comprehensive media strategy include the following:

* *Exploiting the capabilities of the media*

Like Rove's team, an opponent's campaign strategists must use the characteristics of the media to their fullest advantage. For instance, television is a visual medium, which does not easily lend itself to detail. Instead, the combination of visuals and sound/music touches people on an emotional level. Thus, television ads are most effective when they focus on *themes* rather than issues. Thus, television is an ideal medium for a candidate to lay out his/her vision for the future.

This is not to say that some campaign spots cannot focus on issues. However, issue ads must also take advantage of the capabilities of the medium. Rather than overwhelming the viewer with a flood of information, these ads should focus on *one*

¹⁹ Outfoxed, dir. Robert Greenwald, 75 min, 2004.

issue in depth.

Using popular music as campaign themes is also an effective strategy. In 1992, the Fleetwood Mac hit “Can’t Stop Thinking About Tomorrow” conveyed a positive, upbeat campaign message and played a significant role in the Clinton-Gore victory.

Because individuals relate to media on such a personal level, campaign songs must be selected with care. Preferably, the campaign can select a song, which spans different groups of voters. Taking a cue from advertising, the campaign song can also be re-recorded in different musical genres (e.g., a rock, country, and hip-hop flavor) to appeal to different generations and sub-cultures.

In addition, the *style* of campaign advertisements must be engaging in order to compete with entertainment media programming. Production elements can also reinforce messages or even send independent messages. For instance, the “MTV style,” relying on hand-held cameras and quick cuts, sends a message that the candidate is dynamic, innovative and energetic.

** Popular culture can serve as a valuable resource for campaign strategy*

Films, television programs, and advertising furnish perspective into the interests, concerns, and preoccupations of the American public. Consequently, trends appearing in the media can be a valuable resource for developing campaign strategies. To illustrate, the emergence of the NASCAR subculture after 9/11 would have made it worthwhile to examine the common attitudes, values, and beliefs of its audience.

Media campaigns can also borrow from the successful elements of popular media programming. For instance, political commercials are so predictable that the audience

tunes them out the moment they appear on television. However, an ad campaign could be designed with an eye on popular media programming:

- *Reality Show Genre* - Showing the candidate “on tour” could have tremendous entertainment appeal. The campaign tour would provide a narrative structure through which the American public could become introduced to the candidate. Speeches could be interspersed with “backstage” footage of the candidate, interviews with the candidate, along with comments by his/her family, friends, and supporters. The campaign appearance could be accompanied by visuals that dramatize the issues, as well as reaction shots of the audience. In addition, the Rovian tactics such as the use of surrogates and straw issues could be incorporated into the “plot” as they occur, with the opponents being cast as villains.

- *Music Videos* - This genre offers an effective way to reach the intended audience. To illustrate, one ad campaign might feature the Woody Guthrie song, “This Land is Your Land.” The segments would begin with Arlo Guthrie singing his father’s song, segue into Bruce Springsteen, singing, and then Harry Belafonte. During the song, visuals would be inserted, consisting of the faces of different types of people (e.g., older adults, members of labor unions, African Americans, celebrities, and the candidate) to reinforce the message of community. This music video conveys an inclusive message: this country belongs to all of its citizens, and all of us should enjoy its benefits. And at the same time, this message is delivered in an entertaining format that wears well with the audience when they see it for a second or third time.

* *Cultivate ideological media*

In response to the emergence of right wing media organizations and journalists,

progressive media outlets such as “Air America” have been established.

These ideological media can expose the opponent’s smear tactics and help to discredit them. In addition, they can explain complex issues to the public and provide context for events.

** Political campaigns must take advantage of the vast potential of the Internet*

As Howard Dean demonstrated in 2004, the Internet can be a tremendous tool for galvanizing campaign support and contributions. In addition, political messages can be tailored to the specific interests and concerns of the individual. Finally, the Internet combines graphics, video, and audio in a way that captures the attention of the audience. In that regard, it is advantageous to take full advantage of the production capabilities of the medium.

** Developing a media awareness campaign empowers voters to develop independent judgments about candidates and the political landscape*

The goal of a *media literacy* campaign is to encourage individuals to develop a critical distance from what they receive through the media. Such a campaign equips voters to become aware of the virtual omnipresence of spin and selectivity of political coverage in the media.

Tactic #10: Create Straw Issues

The Bush campaigns manufacture minor (but emotionally loaded) issues in order to divert the attention and allegiance of voters. Paul and Elder explain,

Suppose that a manipulator can't refute the reasoning of his opponent. He doesn't bother trying. Instead, he throws in an emotionally charged issue that will distract the audience from the

reasoning of his opponent.

Manipulators know that a good way to distract most people (if it looks like they are losing the argument) is to insist loudly on some minor point. Because most people think superficially, few will notice that the point is minor, especially if they are emotionally attached to it.²⁰

Faced with a raft of problems in 2004, including the economy and the war in Iraq, Rove raised wedge issues, including same sex marriage, gun control, and abortion. As Nicholas D. Kritof points out, these red herring issues divided people who would otherwise have been united in their opposition to Bush:

(The Democrats) should be feeling wretched about the millions of farmers, factory workers and waitresses who ended up voting -- utterly against their own interests -- for Republican candidates.

One of the Republican Party's major successes over the last few decades has been to persuade many of the working poor to vote for tax breaks for billionaires... Democrats peddle issues, and Republicans sell values. Consider the four G's: God, guns, gays and grizzlies.

“The Republicans are smarter,” mused Oregon's governor, Ted Kulongoski, a Democrat. “They've created ... these social issues to get the public to stop looking at what's happening to them economically.”

“What we once thought -- that people would vote in their economic self-interest -- is not true, and we Democrats haven't figured out how to

²⁰Paul, Richard and Linda Elder. The Thinkers Guide to Fallacies: The Art of Mental Trickery and Manipulation (Foundation for Critical Thinking, 2004).

deal with that.”

Otherwise, the Democratic Party's efforts to improve the lives of working-class Americans in the long run will be blocked by the very people the Democrats aim to help.²¹

Strategic Response

In order to contend with the appearance of straw issues, a candidate to be prepared from the outset of the campaign to clearly define the dominant issues of the campaign. Identify issues that are areas of strength for the candidate and consider strategies that will keep the voters focused on these themes.

Another effective response is to *embrace* the issue by exposing the red herring as an issue of minor importance. Jim Dwyer and Jodi Wilgoren recount an example that occurred when the Rev. Jesse Jackson campaigned with John Kerry at an African-American church in October 2004:

Scores of hands went up when Mr. Jackson asked whether parishioners had relatives dying of cancer or in jail, whether they faced job discrimination or studied in second-class schools. But the pews fell silent when he wondered who had a family member wanting to marry another person of the same sex.

‘Well, then how did that get in the middle of the agenda?’ Mr. Jackson demanded. ‘If your interests are cancer, and Medicare, and education, and jobs, and Social Security, and decent housing, then how did someone else put their agenda in the front of the line?’²²

²¹ Kritof, Nicholas. “Living Poor Voting Rich,” The New York Times 3 November 2004, sec. A, 19.

²² Dwyer, Jim and Jodi Wilgoren. “Gore and Kerry Unite in Search for Black Votes,” New York Times, 25 October

This response must be reinforced through repetition. The candidate and all those who are involved in the campaign must stress the legitimate issues and point out that the red herring issues actually has little personal effect on the people.

Tactic #11: Employ Surrogates

One of the risks of campaigns “going negative” is that voters may turn on the messenger. Consequently, the Rove/Bush team learned early to use surrogates to do their dirty work. As a former staff member explained, “The advantage of speaking through a surrogate was that we could say sulfurous things about our opponent and put that on record without our candidate taking personal responsibility for it.”²³

Sometimes these surrogates remain anonymous. During the 2000 Republican presidential primary, Bush was locked in a tight contest with Senator John McCain. Beginning in November 1999, a “whisper campaign” began appearing in the national press, suggesting that McCain’s experience as a POW during the Vietnam War had left him emotionally unstable:

Now that McCain is gaining a bit of ground, stories are being written about his temper, and a *whisper campaign* (italics added) has seemingly emerged from nowhere questioning whether his experience as a prisoner –of-war for five years in Vietnam affected him, making him unfit to run the country. - *Minneapolis Star Tribune*²⁴

Seeking to put to rest questions about his temperament and

2004.

²³ Hatfield, J.H. *Fortunate Son*, Brooklyn: Soft Skull Press: 2002.

²⁴ *Minneapolis Star Tribune* 24 November 1999, 12 A.

fitness for the presidency, Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz) said last week that he would release his voluminous medical records...The effort to gather records of his many hospitalizations had begun before published reports of a *whisper campaign* about McCain's mental stability, he said. - *The Atlanta Constitution*²⁵

Hundreds of (medical) documents were made available to the Associated Press, in part to counter what aides call a 'whisper campaign' engineered by Republican rivals challenging (McCain's) mental fitness. - *The San Diego Union Tribune*²⁶

Although the source of these rumors was never disclosed, Vice Admiral James B. Stockdale (who had been a POW in the same Viet Cong detention camp with McCain) revealed that he had received a call from an old friend who was also close to the George W. Bush campaign, soliciting comments on McCain's "weakness" brought on by his imprisonment. Time magazine reported at the time that at a meeting of Bush's top staff that first day, the signal went out "to take the gloves off."²⁷

At other times, the identities of these surrogates are made public. During the 2004 presidential race, the campaign by the Swift boat veterans to discredit John Kerry's military service was persuasive precisely because they had served on the same detail as young Lieutenant Kerry. Although these accusations were shown to be baseless, the media coverage of this smear campaign raised doubts among the electorate. This tactic

²⁵²⁴ Sherman, Mark. "McCain Baring Medical Record to Combat Fitness Rumors," *The Atlanta Constitution*, 28 November 1999, 6A.

²⁶²⁵ Fournier, Ron and Lauran Neergaard. "Doctors give McCain Clean Bill of Health," *San Diego Union Tribune*, 5D December 1999, A17.

²⁷²⁶ Richard Gooding, "The Trashing of John McCain," *Vanity Fair*. November 2004, 531, 193.

has now been adopted as part of the administration's ongoing communications strategy. In January 2005, it was disclosed that Armstrong Williams, a conservative commentator, was paid \$240,000 to "extemporaneously" promote the No Child Left Behind education initiative in the course of his radio commentary and in his newspaper column, without acknowledging that he had been paid to do so.

Strategic Response

Once again, the best response appears to be: 1) anticipate an attack by surrogates; 2) act promptly; and 3) embrace the issue by exposing the surrogates. This can be achieved by publicizing their backgrounds and their motives for their efforts to discredit the candidate. In the case of the Swift Boat Veterans, their leader, John O'Neill, was first hired by the Nixon administration to counter young Lieutenant Kerry's antiwar activities after his return from service in Vietnam. A major objective is to expose the surrogates as being tied to the Rove campaign. One could make a persuasive argument that a smear campaign using others smacks of cowardice.

A key campaign position now calls for a person with journalistic skills who can investigate these surrogate groups: the background on the players, who funds the organizations, and connections with the Rove campaign. This information can be incorporated into campaign speeches by the candidate and given to the media.

A third approach is to demand that the opponent denounce the attacks by the surrogates. These statements can be featured in campaign ads, along with information about possible links to the opponent—thus sending a message about his/her hypocrisy. And if the opponent refuses to denounce the smear campaign, this can also be featured.

Tactic #12: Use Emotional Appeals

In politics, emotional appeals directed at the heart can be more effective than policy statements directed at the head. The Bush campaign strategy taps into a wide range of *fears* and *insecurities* within the public that in turn controls their attitudes and—more importantly—their voting behavior. As Congressman Jim McDermott (D-Washington State) observes, creating a climate of fear makes people compliant—willing to accept the unacceptable and embrace a strong, authoritarian leader.²⁸

Scaring voters has been a staple of Bush campaigns. During his gubernatorial race against Ann Richards, the Bush campaign ran the following television ad designed to frighten people about the crime rate in Texas:

(The ad presented) the graphic images of a woman being grabbed at gunpoint in parking garage and police draping a sheet over a young boy's body... Bush declared in a voiceover that Texas was considered 'the third most dangerous state in the nation. No wonder, because in the last three years, 7,700 criminals have been released early from prison.' Bush promised, I will end early release of criminals and end parole altogether for rapists and child molesters.²⁹

In reality, however, the crime rate had actually *declined* during Richards' term as governor.

Scare tactics were evident during the 2004 presidential campaign as well, this time focusing on terrorism. One Bush campaign ad featured a pack of wolves lurking in a forest. The voiceover intoned, "Weakness attacks those who are waiting to do America harm."

²⁸ *Fahrenheit 9/11* dir. Michael Moore, 122 min, 2004.

²⁹ Richards, Ann page 128

The right wing ideological media have reinforced this climate of fear. Fox News keeps people in a perennial state of alarm about issues such as immigration, terrorism, and sexual difference. Their news reports routinely sensationalize and exaggerate the threats. During the Anthrax scare (which accounted for only five deaths), Fox News ran a series entitled “Are You Prepared?” in which the reporter intoned, “Don’t drink or eat anything” (for more discussion on ideological media, see Tactic #8).

More recently, these scare tactics have been incorporated into the Bush administration’s daily operations. In January 2005, Rove deputy Peter Wehner sent an internal memo to the White House staff declaring that in order for their plan to privatize social security to succeed, the administration must “establish an important premise: the current system is heading toward an iceberg...This reality needs to be seared into the public consciousness; it is the precondition to authentic reform.” When the email became public, Congressman Charles Rangel (D-N.Y.) observed, “This memo shows that some in the Bush administration will resort to the worst kind of scare tactics to undermine Social Security.”³⁰

A related appeal exploits people’s *fear of change*. During the 2004 race, Bush and Cheney stressed the value of continuity during wartime. The latent message essentially was that even if the voter wasn’t satisfied with Bush’s overall performance, at least the president was a known quantity in an uncertain time.

Another variation exploits the public’s *fear of the unknown*. During the 2004 race, Vice President Dick Cheney targeted undecided voters’ anxiety about the future by asserting that a Kerry win would lead to acts of terrorism in the United States. Paul and

³⁰ Strope, Leigh. “E-mail Lays Out Crisis Strategy on Social Security,” St. Louis Post Dispatch, 6 January 2005, sec. A, 5.

Elder refer to this as” accusing your opponent of sliding down a slippery slope (that leads to disaster), in which a politician sets up future scenarios based on suppositions that cannot be proved (or disproved)”:

The slippery slope is used when a person implies that if someone does one thing (A), it will inevitably lead to a domino effect of negative things that, in the end will result in something terrible. In other words, ‘A’ is not so bad, but A leads to B and B leads to C and C is horrible! Imagine a mother lecturing her teenage daughter: ‘OK, maybe there is nothing wrong with a kiss, but remember where kissing leads and where that leads and that. Before you know it you’ll be the mother of an unwanted baby! Your young life will be ruined forever!’ Manipulators who use this argument conveniently forget that many people walk carefully on slippery ground and don’t fall down.³¹

The Bush campaigns also exploit a positive emotion: *patriotism*. Love of country can be used to justify actions, cover up mistakes, and select leaders. Nationalistic symbols such as flags, banners, and pins are essential props in the Bush campaigns. At campaign events, the handpicked audience is typically outfitted with tiny American flags, combining the message of patriotism and support for Bush.

Response Strategies

Armed with this knowledge, a political campaign could employ affective ads designed to “outscare” the opponent. The Democrats tried this approach toward the end

³¹ Strobe, Leigh. “E-mail Lays Out Crisis Strategy on Social Security,” *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, 6 January 2005, sec. A, 5.

of the 2004 campaign, alarming the public about the shortage of flu vaccine.

However, taking the philosophy that it is always better to take the high road, ads may be directed at a range of positive emotions. For instance, *reassurance ads* are designed to create confidence in the candidate. Other ads are intended to inspire *hope* in the audience.

Tactic #13: Rely on Expert Testimonials

Expert testimonials are often very influential. The Rove team regularly brings in experts who support the Bush agenda. It is not terribly difficult to find “experts” who will support a political point of view. Often, these people have a financial stake in their positions (e.g., working for a tobacco company or as a lobbyist) or hold a like-minded ideological position (e.g., a member of a think tank, former member of an administration, or ex-government official). To illustrate, Bush has argued that global warming is a phenomenon that has not been proven by the scientific community. To support his point, he points to several scientists who hold this position. However, the overwhelming consensus of the scientific community points to scientific evidence of dramatic climatic shifts, in large measure as a result of human pollutants in the air.

Strategic Response

The responses to this tactic include the following:

- Bring out experts who support your platform
- Play a “number’s game.” Collect a large percentage of the community of experts (e.g., identify 200 scientists who can attest to the global warming theory)
- Play up qualifications of your experts (e.g. Nobel Prize Winners).
- Question the motives behind the testimony of Bush’s experts
- Raise the issue of these experts’ previous or current connections to the industries or

corporations that would profit from the administration's policies in this area.

- Ask sympathetic experts to come forward themselves. Encourage them to bring issues to public attention by writing letters to the editor, etc.
- Embrace the issue. The candidate could call for public forums to discuss the issue
- Ask the scientists to participate in discussions, workshops
- Have experts appear in the media
- Have experts appear with the candidate

Tactic #14: Rhetorical Devices

Rhetorical devices are tricks that manipulate how information is presented, influencing how the public responds to issues and candidates. The Rovian campaign machine relies heavily on the following rhetorical devices:

** Misrepresenting a person's position and presenting it in a form that people will reject*

In 2004, Bush characterized Kerry's health care plan as a government program that would lead to rationing. Despite Kerry's denials, Bush persisted in repeating this mischaracterization.

** Take your opponent's words out of context*

The Rove campaign team routinely combs through comments of their opponents to find comments that can be damaging when taken out of context. At one point during the 2004 campaign, Kerry declared, "I believe I can fight a more effective, more thoughtful, more strategic, more proactive, more *sensitive* war on terror." Vice President Dick Cheney then lifted the word "sensitive" out of this statement, declaring, "President Lincoln and General Grant did not wage sensitive warfare, nor did President Roosevelt, nor Generals Eisenhower and MacArthur." By taking Kerry's statement out of context,

Cheney was able to depict Kerry as unmanly (in contrast with Bush's macho persona).

** Three-Card Monte*

The Three-Card Monte is a sophisticated rhetorical technique, used in the following way: Bush makes a false statement. He then qualifies it by admitting its falsehood, but then reiterates the first statement, reinforcing the idea in the mind of the public. Columnist Paul Krugman provides the following example in reference to how Bush linked terrorism to the Iraq war:

Speeches about Iraq invariably included references to 9/11, leading much of the public to believe that invading Iraq somehow meant taking the war to the terrorists. When pressed, war supporters would admit that they lacked evidence of any significant links between Iraq and Al Qaeda, let alone any Iraqi role in 9/11-yet in the next sentence it would be 9/11 and Saddam, together again.

Krugman points out that the Bush administration used this same rhetorical technique as part of its plan to overhaul social security:

...Calls for privatization invariably begin with ominous warnings about Social Security's financial future. When pressed, administration officials admit that private accounts would do nothing to improve that financial future. Yet in the next sentence, they once again link privatization to the problems posed by an aging population.³²

** Shift the burden of proof*

The "burden of proof" is a legalistic sounding term, which refers to which party in a dispute has the responsibility to prove what he/she asserts. This concept is also tied to the

³² Krugman, Paul. "Three-Card Maestro," The New York Times, 18 February 2005, sec. A, 23.

notion of whether a person is presumed innocent or guilty. A prime example occurred in Iraq. Paul and Elder observe,

‘Wait a minute before I have to prove that the invasion of Iraq was justified, you need to prove that it wasn't.’ In point of fact any country that invades another needs to have powerful evidence to justify that act. No country has the obligation to prove that it ought not to be invaded. By international law, the burden of proof is on the other side, the side that initiates violence.³³

* *Shift the argument*

The Bush political machine seamlessly changes its rationale for a policy if the given reason falls flat. Over time, the rationale for the war in Iraq shifted several times:

- Iraq’s Weapons of Mass Destruction.
- Saddam’s complicity in the attack of 9/11
- Bringing democracy to Iraq
- Saddam was an evil man.

This rhetorical technique depends on the limited attention span of the audience, as well as Bush’s conviction and media support.

* *Personal Testimonials*

This is an old campaign device, in which average citizens who personify issues and concerns are trotted out at public events. Bill Clinton invited individuals to each of his State of the Union Addresses and told their stories as a way to put a face on impersonal policy decisions. Karl Rove fully recognizes the value of this tactic. The Bush

³³ Paul, Richard and Linda Elder. The Thinkers Guide to Fallacies: The Art of Mental Trickery and Manipulation. (Foundation for Critical Thinking, 2004).

campaign has used veterans, families of 9/11 victims, and senior citizens who personify the points that Bush is trying to make.

** Ignore/Downplay the Evidence*

When faced with incriminating evidence, one approach is to ignore it. In his 2004 campaign speeches, Bush simply overlooked the evidence to paint a rosy scenario about Iraq and the economy.

A related rhetorical technique occurs when the Bush team *downplays* potentially damaging evidence. To illustrate, in October 2004, there were news reports that after the American invasion of Baghdad, a cache of explosives were missing (See discussion, Tactic #5). These explosives were powerful enough to shatter airplanes or tear apart buildings. In fact, the bomb that brought down Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland in 1988 used less than one pound of this type of material. However, Bush spokesperson Scott McClellan minimized its significance, saying that the stockpile contained “no nuclear materials.”

A third approach occurs when Bush uses incriminating evidence to support his own position. In October 2004, the (Atomic Energy Commission?) released its definitive report on the status of weapons in Iraq. Not only did it conclude that there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq before the American invasion, but, according to the report, Iraq’s weapons capabilities had actually *declined* since the first Gulf War; in other words, the sanctions had been working. However, the Bush camp claimed that the report vindicated their actions, citing one passage in the lengthy report that noted that Saddam entertained intentions about weapons of mass destruction; if he could have produced weapons, he probably would have.

In this case, the Bush campaign made the following assumptions that proved correct: 1) people won't read the document in its entirety; 2) the right-wing media would trumpet Rove's positive spin; 3) response in the interest of "fairness" the non-ideological media would give equal attention to the Bush Administration's statement, legitimizing this false assertion.

* *Substitute Fact for Truth*

Many of Rove's political ads are designed confuse voters by presenting isolated facts as truth. For instance, during the 2000 Republican primaries, a Bush ad ran in Iowa and New Hampshire, making the following claims: 1) as Governor of Texas, he signed the two largest tax cuts in Texas history; and 2) reduced the growth of state government spending to the lowest in 40 years.

Bush opponent Steve Forbes disputed these claims, pointing out that, as governor, Bush had sought a half-cent *increase* in the state sales tax and a new-business levy. Forbes also charged that Bush had boosted the two-year Texas budget from \$72.8 billion to \$98.1 billion.

However, the Bush campaign refused to back down, citing a litany of facts: "real per capita" state spending increased just 2.7 percent—after taking into consideration inflation, population growth, and property tax relief.³⁴

As Economics reporter David Leonhardt explains, "Numbers without context, especially large ones with many zeros trailing behind, are about as intelligible as vowels without consonants."³⁵ In the face of this bewildering array of information, facts become

³⁴ Kurtz, Howard. "Forbes Says Bush Should Pull Ad," Washington Post, 27 October 1999, sec. A, 11.

³⁵ Okrent, Daniel. "Numbered by the Numbers, When They Just Don't Add Up," The New York Times, 23 January 2005, sec. 4, 2.

meaningless. Truth has become reduced to a matter *of faith*—whose facts the public chooses to believe.

In other cases, facts are distorted or omitted entirely. To illustrate, a 2000 Bush campaign ad took aim at Al Gore's positions on Medicare prescription drug benefits and on education. The narration included the following charges: Al Gore's prescription plan forces seniors into a government- run H.M.O. Gore says he's for school accountability, but requires no real testing...Gore's targeted tax cuts leave out 50 million people-- half of all taxpayers.”

However, according to reporter Alison Mitchell, this ad “stretched” the facts:

Mr. Gore does not force the elderly to accept his new prescription drug benefit. It is voluntary. And Medicare recipients can stay in traditional plans where they choose their own doctors. Mr. Gore's plan does rely on private benefit managers to manage the program-- just like private insurers do-- which encourages use of generic drugs and less expensive brand names. But these are not H.M.O.'s.

On schools, Mr. Bush and Mr. Gore both propose testing and different kinds of accountability measures, but Mr. Bush's proposal calls for tests that would cover more grades and be more frequent than does Mr. Gore's.³⁶

Statistics can also be employed to confuse rather than clarify the truth. During the 2004 campaign, Bush declared that the War on Terrorism was a success, claiming that “75% of Al Qaeda had been captured.” Not only was there no way to verify this

³⁶ Mitchell, Alison. “The Ad Campaign: A Three-Part Attack on Gore,” The New York Times, 15 September 2000, sec. A, 10.

information, but this pronouncement did not take into consideration the number of new Al Qaeda members who had been recruited during this period.

Indeed, the Bush campaign does not hesitate to rewrite history when it is to their advantage. For instance, in the past, Republicans were highly critical of budget deficits, arguing that they were detrimental to the economic well being of the country. However, during the 2004 campaign, Bush reversed course, contending that the deficits accrued during his first term would have a minimal impact.

This rhetorical device has also been incorporated into the Bush administration's daily operations. In January 2005, the administration defended the legitimacy of the upcoming Iraqi elections, since only four of the eighteen provinces in the country were deemed too unsafe to conduct the vote. But although this may be factually accurate, the larger truth is that approximately fifty percent of the population lives in these four provinces.

* *Evasive Rhetorical Techniques* - The Rovian playbook includes the following rhetorical techniques designed to avoid difficult or embarrassing questions.

- *Jokes* Answering a hard question with a joke that deflects the query.
- *Truistic answers* - These answers may be true, but they do not answer the question. For instance, in response to the question, "How long will the troops have to remain in Iraq?" Bush answered, "As long as it is necessary and not one day longer."
- *Diversions* - This technique involves providing an answer so long and detailed that the speaker manages to avoid answering the thrust of the question.
- *Talk in Vague Generalities* - Paul and Elder explain, "It is hard to prove people

wrong when they can't be pinned down. So instead of focusing on particulars, manipulators talk in the most-vague terms they can get away with.”

- *Ignore the Main Point* - Because Rove puts candidate Bush in a position in which his statements go unchallenged (e.g., debates or press conferences in which the journalist only asks one question), he can simply choose to ignore the question and provide an answer to a different topic.

For instance, during the 3rd debate of the 2004 election, Bush was asked a question about minimum wage. Bush immediately moved the question to a discussion on education.

Strategic Response

An awareness of these evasive techniques should enable campaign strategists and journalists to deflect these tactics. In all of these cases, the best approach is to challenge the opponent so that they are forced to speak directly. In addition, a campaign can call public attention to the continual use of these evasive techniques—people don't like liars or slippery politicians. Consequently, the candidate can insist on straight answers:

“People deserve a direct answer.”

TV and radio appearances provide a record of statements (and misstatements), which can be used to prod the collective memory of the public. Political ads can simply play the opponent's comments and then point out the fallacies of these statements. The candidate can then express “disappointment” (an acceptable reaction) with the opponent's desperate tactics.

Humor is also an effective response to these rhetorical devices. For instance,

during the issue of the missing explosives discussed above, *The Daily Show*, John Stewart juxtaposed clips of Bush's statements with footage of explosive devastation, making jokes about how the president was not operating in reality. Employing a good joke writer on the campaign staff might be a welcome addition to the campaign staff.

However, politicians have limited opportunities to challenge their opponents in a timely, direct fashion. The time constraints of debates make it nearly impossible to confront the opponent and, at the same time, make his/her own points.

Thus, it is largely up to the media to assume this responsibility. This response requires that the media think of themselves as a body—the fourth estate—who serve as societal watchdogs, instead of a collection of individuals whose priority is only to promote their own careers. For instance, during the Watergate scandal, President Nixon conducted news conferences, in which he would employ many of these evasive tactics. However, on these occasions, the next reporter relinquished his/her prepared question and instead asked a follow-up question, pressing Nixon to respond to the previous question. It is imperative, then, that political strategists encourage them to be prepared to challenge all candidates who evade questions.

Tactic 15: Use of Language

The Republican political machine uses language to frame issues in a fashion that benefits them. One technique involves the use of *Newspeak*, a term that originated in George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty Four*. Newspeak refers to words that mean the opposite of its original meaning. This Orwell envisioned a totalitarian world in which newspeak was employed to control people's thoughts and behaviors:

The purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide

a medium of expression...but to make all other modes of thought impossible. It was intended that when Newspeak had been adopted once and for all...(divergent thoughts)—should be literally unthinkable.³⁷

As an example of modern-day newspeak, the Bush administration invented the term “Clear Skies” to describe its environmental policy--which, in fact, relaxes many federal protections against air and water pollution.

Further, when the Bush team senses that public opinion is opposed to their policies, they will confuse the issue by appropriating the language of the opposition. To illustrate, in March 2005, the Bush administration was faced with convincing a dubious public about the merits of privatizing social security. Opponents offered an alternative plan in which individuals could choose an “add-on” option contributing an additional portion of their salary to a private account. In his speeches, Bush borrowed the term “add-on” to describe his own option. Reporters Anne E. Kornblut and Sam Roberts note³⁸,

Despite widespread evidence that the public is wary of changes to the benefits system, Mr. Bush did not retreat from his plan to divert some payroll taxes into individual accounts. Instead he shifted his language a bit to emphasize the parts of Social Security that would stay the same ...borrowing a term for the types of accounts some Democrats have favored, 'add-on' accounts outside the Social Security benefit system, to now describe his version of private accounts.

One proposal in circulation would allow individuals to invest in personal retirement accounts on top of their current payroll taxes, as an 'add-on,' rather than diverting payments from the existing system. Mr. Bush has been cool to the 'add-on,' approach, but he used that very phrase on Friday to describe his vision for the plan. Under his proposal, Mr. Bush said, income

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³⁸ Kornblut, Anne and Sam Roberts. “Pro and Con Line Up as Bush Presses Social Security Effort,” The New York Times, 5 March 2005, sec. A, 1.

from a private account 'goes to supplement the Social Security check that you're going to get from the federal government.'

'See, personal accounts is an add-on to that which the government is going to pay you,' he said. 'It doesn't replace the Social Security system.'

But in fact, Bush simply re-defined the term "add-on" to describe his initial unpopular proposal:

Trent Duffy, a White House spokesman, said Mr. Bush was not embracing the alternate plan, which he said would amount to creating an entirely new program outside Social Security.

Instead, Mr. Duffy said the president used the term 'add-on' to describe his own proposal. 'Social Security is facing its own problems and the president's mission is to save Social Security,' Mr. Duffy said.³⁹

Adam Cohen provides the following illustration:

Republicans have succeeded in framing the issue as "tax relief," a metaphor that presents an affliction, and that predetermines who are the heroes - tax opponents - and villains. Taxes are, of course, necessary even for programs Republicans back, like the military, and simple economics dictates that we cannot keep cutting taxes and maintaining spending forever. But the Democrats are hard-pressed to make these points once the frame is "tax relief." It is not by accident that "tax relief" presents taxes in moral terms, as a calamity in search of a cure.⁴⁰

Connotative words assume associated meanings beyond their literal dictionary definition. According to columnist Frank Rich, the Rove camp used connotative words whenever possible during the 2000 presidential race: Repeat "compassionate

³⁹ Kornblut, Anne and Sam Roberts. "Pro and Con Line Up as Bush Presses Social Security Effort," The New York Times, 5 March 2005, sec. A, 1.

⁴⁰³⁶ Cohen, Adam. "Why the Democrats Need to Stop Thinking About Elephants," The New York Times, 15 November 2004, sec. A, 22.

conservatism," "a tone of civility," "inclusion," "tolerance," and "heart" often enough and no one's going to look too hard at the fine print. Especially if you're posing in "inclusive" photo ops worthy of a Benetton campaign.⁴¹

When a particular word does not resonate with the public in the way they had intended, the Rovian strategists will substitute a new connotative term. In February 2005, while developing their campaign to promote the social security plan, the Rove team discovered that the public had a negative reaction to the use of the term "privatization" to describe their plans to reshape the social security program. Their focus groups discovered that the public reacted more favorably to the term "personal accounts" to describe their plan.

Labels are terms that are used with such frequency that they no longer simply *describe* but, in fact, *define* groups. For instance, "liberal" was once a neutral term, referring to a particular political philosophy. However, the Republicans managed to re-frame the word, so that it now has a pejorative connotation. At the same time, Rove has made "conservative" (or "Compassionate Conservative") a respectable, even positive label. Along the same lines, "trial lawyers" has come to stand for greedy shysters.

Euphemisms are neutral terms that are intended to minimize the reaction of the audience to media messages. For example, in February, 2003, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell made a presentation to the United Nations Security Council, making the American case for going to war against Iraq. As evidence, Powell presented satellite photographs of a cluster of buildings that he described as a poisons and explosives factory that is supported by both Baghdad and Al Qaeda. The next day, the Iraqis invited twenty 20 journalists to enter the compound. The reporters found

⁴¹³⁷ Rich, Frank. "Don't Worry, Be Happy." The New York Times, 29 July 2000.

a cluster of buildings lacked plumbing and had only the limited electricity supplied by a generator. In response, a senior State Department official explained, "A poison factory is *a term of art*, and it doesn't necessarily mean that people are pumping out thousands of gallons a year." A more accurate term, however, would be *lie* or *deception*.

C. J. Chivers, "Threats and Responses: The Evidence; Islamists in Iraq Offer a Tour of Poison Factory' Cited by Powell," The New York Times, February 9, 2003, Sunday, : Section 1; Page 17.

On the other hand, *negative terms* are used to describe (and define) political opponents. Paul and Elder explain, "Your opponent believes in tyranny, suppression, conflict, terrorism, aggression, violence, subversion, barbarism, fanaticism, the spread of chaos, attacking the innocent, extremism, dictatorship, plots, cunning, cruelty, destruction."⁴²

Obfuscation refers to the use of language to confuse or disguise meaning. To illustrate, when defending its environmental policy, the Bush team makes the case that no "scientific certainty" exists with regard to global warming, a claim that goes unchallenged within the scientific community. However, scientists' reluctance to use the term "certainty" is not evidence that the earth isn't experience rapid and devastating global warming. Rather, the term "scientific certainty" doesn't exist in scientific parlance. Even 350 years after gravity was first quantified, gravity remains a theory, subject to revision. The proper term for all theories, no matter how

⁴²³⁸ Paul, Richard and Linda Elder. The Thinkers Guide to Fallacies: The Art of Mental Trickery and Manipulation (Foundation for Critical Thinking, 2004).

³⁹ Orwell, George. Nineteen Eighty-Four. New York; Harcourt Brace and Company, 1949.

certain, is “scientific consensus.” Thus, the use of the term “certainty” by the Bush administration clouds its essential meaning.

Code Words Throughout his presidency, George W. Bush has embedded “code words” into his mainstream speeches; that is, words that have a particular meaning to specific constituents while being overlooked by the general audience. In this way, Bush is able to send messages to his evangelical base. Beyond the single paragraph on abortion, gay marriage, and ‘faith-based’ charities, a strong religious subtext was carefully crafted to slip beneath the radar.

Biblical references were firmly planted at the beginning and end of the speech. Early on, Bush spoke of ‘hills to climb’ and seeing ‘the valley below,’ an allusion to Israel’s escape from slavery and Moses’ vision of the Promised Land, as described in Deuteronomy 34.

On July 19, President Bush described his nominee for the Supreme Court, John Roberts, as a man with “a good heart.” This curious choice of words has a special meaning to the evangelical community. According to Albert L. Winseman, D. Min. Religion and Social Trends, individuals’ personal experiences -- what 18th-century English reformer John Wesley called the “warmed heart” -- have become a central part of what it means to be evangelical.

Thus, Bush’s veiled message to his conservative base is a reassurance that Judge Roberts can be counted on to support their social and moral agenda.

Strategic Response

Language can be an effective tool in shaping how voters think about candidates and issues. To illustrate, because of the pejorative connotation of the label “liberal,” adopting another term, “progressive” would provide an opportunity to reframe how people think of politicians who support programs that promote

the well being of the public.

Conclusion

There is no denying that Karl Rove has had a significant impact on the American political landscape. Further, there is every indication that Rove will extend his influence over the Republican Party machine in the future. As a result, it is imperative that political strategists become familiar with the Rovian playbook in order to anticipate these campaign tactics. Indeed, identifying these tactics should enable strategists to use some of these Rovian tactics (albeit in an *ethical* way) on behalf of their candidates.

In general, the most effective ways to counter Rove's political tactics outlined above include the following:

- | ✓ *Act Preemptively* - A candidate's campaign strategy should be prepared well before the onset of the campaign. Establish the agenda for the campaign. Immediately introduce your candidate's strengths and point out your opponent's weaknesses. Try to anticipate the tactics that would be employed, as well as the exact form that these Rovian tactics will take.
- | ✓ *Respond in a Timely Fashion* - Given the shrinking news cycle, a candidate must be prepared to react quickly and decisively to these Rovian tactics. This requires that they are able to recognize the tactic and know how best to respond
- | ✓ *Embrace the Tactic* - Rather than being put on the defensive, use these tactics as a vehicle for shedding light on the opponent. It also offers opportunities to call attention to the candidate's accomplishments and policies.
- | ✓ *Look to popular culture as a resource* Popular culture can furnish cues and clues about cultural attitudes, behaviors, values, and preoccupations. Consequently, films,

television programs, and Internet blogs serve as texts that can be very useful in developing themes and messages that resonate with the public.

- ✓ *Humor* can be a subtle way to attack the argument without seeming defensive. Humor is based upon shared understanding; if the audience laughs, they are acknowledging the basis for the joke.
- | ✓ *Campaign Reform* is a long-term but essential strategy to combat the Rovian political machine. Currently, fundraising is essential for purchasing media time and producing ads, As a result, candidates become entangled with donors, which affects their campaign platforms. Reforming this system will give all candidates an independence that will alter the way that they campaign.

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