The Political Brain

THE ROLE OF EMOTION IN DECIDING THE FATE OF THE NATION

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TO
LAURA, MACKENZIE, AND SARAH

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INTRODUCTION

* * *

This book is aimed at readers interested in how the mind works, how the brain works, and what this means for why candidates win and lose elections. Its intended audience includes readers interested in politics, psychology, leadership, neuroscience, marketing, and law.

This book is likely to be of particular interest to the 50 million Democratic voters who can't figure out why their party has lost so many elections despite polls showing that the average voter agrees with Democratic positions on most policy issues, from protection of the earth to fairness to middle-class taxpayers who want nothing more than a better life for their children.

The central thesis of the book is that the vision of mind that has captured the imagination of philosophers, cognitive scientists, economists, and political scientists since the eighteenth century—a *dispassionate mind* that makes decisions by weighing the evidence and reasoning to the most valid conclusions—bears no relation to how the mind and brain actually work. When campaign strategists start from this vision of mind, their candidates typically lose.

If this book doesn't read like the typical book on politics or political strategy, it's because it asks a question seldom asked by political pundits or political scientists: How would candidates for public office run their campaigns if they started with an understanding of how the minds and brains of voters actually work?

The questions we ask invariably reflect our own background. I am a scientist who studies emotion and personality; the lead investigator in a team of neuroscientists who have been studying how the brain processes political and legal information; and a periodic contributor to public discourse on psychology and politics in print, television, and radio. For the last two decades, I have been advancing a view of the mind that differs substantially from the more dispassionate visions of the mind held by most cognitive psychologists, political scientists, and economists (which suggest that although we may cut a few cognitive corners here and there, we are largely rational actors, who make important decisions by weighing the evidence and calculating costs and benefits).[1]

I am also a practicing clinician, who has trained psychologists and psychiatrists for more than twenty years in how to understand the nuances of meaning in what people say, do, and feel. In working with patients, if you miss those nuances—if you misread what they may be trying to communicate, if you misjudge their character, if you don't notice when their emotions, gestures, or tone of voice don't fit what they're saying, if you don't catch the fleeting sadness or anger that lingers on their face for only a few milliseconds as they mention someone or something you might otherwise not know was important—you lose your patients. Or worse still, you don't.

In politics, if you misread these things, you lose elections.

The Partisan Brain

In the final, heated months of the 2004 presidential election, my colleagues Stephan Hamann, Clint Kilts, and I put together a research team to study what happens in the brain as political partisans—who constitute about 80 percent of the electorate—wrestle with new political information. We studied the brains of fifteen committed Democrats and fifteen confirmed Republicans.[2] (We would have studied voters without commitments to one party or candidate as well, but by the fall of 2004, finding people with intact brains who were not already leaning one way or the other would have been a daunting task.)

We scanned their brains for activity as they read a series of slides. Our goal was to present them with reasoning tasks that would lead a "dispassionate" observer to an obvious logical conclusion, but would be in direct conflict with the conclusion a partisan Democrat or Republican would *want* to reach about his party's candidate. In other words, our goal was to create a head-to-head conflict between the constraints on belief imposed by reason and evidence (data showing that the candidate had done something inconsistent, pandering, dishonest, slimy, or simply bad) and the constraints imposed by emotion (strong feelings toward the parties and the candidates). What we hoped to learn was how, in real time, the brain negotiates conflicts between data and desire.

Although we were in relatively uncharted territory, we came in with some strong hunches, which scientists like to dignify with the label *hypotheses*. Guiding all these hypotheses was our expectation that when data clashed with desire, the political brain would somehow "reason" its way to the desired conclusions.

We had four hypotheses.

First, we expected that threatening information—even if partisans didn't acknowledge it as threatening—would activate neural circuits shown in prior studies to be associated with negative emotional states.

Second, we expected to see activations in a part of the brain heavily involved in regulating emotions. Our hunch was that what passes for reasoning in politics is more often rationalization, motivated by efforts to reason to emotionally satisfying conclusions.

Third, we expected to see a brain in conflict—conflict between what a reasonable person could believe and what a partisan would want to believe. Thus, we predicted activations in a region known to be involved in monitoring and resolving conflicts.

Finally, we expected subjects to "reason with their gut" rather than to analyze the merits of the case. Thus, we didn't expect to see strong activations in parts of the brain that had "turned on" in every prior study of reasoning, even though we were presenting partisans with a reasoning task (to decide whether two statements about their candidate were consistent or inconsistent).

We presented partisans with six sets of statements involving clear inconsistencies by Kerry, six by Bush, and six by politically neutral male figures (e.g., Tom Hanks, William Styron). Although many of the statements and quotations were edited or fictionalized, we maximized their believability by embedding them in actual quotes or descriptions of actual events.

As partisans lay in the scanner, they viewed a series of slides.[3] The first slide in each set presented an *initial statement*, typically a quote from the candidate. The second slide provided a *contradictory statement,* also frequently taken from the candidate, which suggested a clear inconsistency that would be threatening to a partisan. Here is one of the contradictions we used to put the squeeze on the brains of partisan supporters of John Kerry:

> *Initial statement (Slide 1):* During the first Gulf War, John Kerry wrote to a constituent: "Thank you for contacting me to express your opposition . . . I share your concerns. I voted in favor of a resolution that would have insisted that economic sanctions be given more time to work."
>
> *Contradiction (Slide 2):* Seven days later, Kerry wrote to a different constituent, "Thank you for expressing your support for the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. From the outset of the invasion, I have strongly and unequivocally supported President Bush's response to the crisis."

Without some kind of mitigating information, it would be difficult to argue that these two statements are not mutually contradictory (although, as we'll see, the human brain is a remarkable organ).

After partisans read the first two slides, which presented them with a clear contradiction, the third slide simply gave them some time to stew on it, asking them to consider whether the two statements were inconsistent. The fourth slide then asked them to rate the extent to which they agreed that the candidate's words and deeds were contradictory, from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree).

Bush supporters faced similar dilemmas, such as the following:

> *Initial statement (Slide 1):* "Having been here and seeing the care that these troops get is comforting for me and Laura. We are, should, and must provide the best care for anybody who is willing to put their life in harm's way for our country."—President Bush, 2003, visiting a Veterans Administration Hospital.
>
> *Contradiction (Slide 2):* Mr. Bush's visit came on the same day that the Administration announced its immediate cutoff of VA hospital access to approximately 164,000 veterans.

For the politically neutral figures, the inconsistency was also real, but it was not threatening to partisans of one candidate or the other. Thus, it provided a useful comparison.

Our committed Democrats and Republicans were scanned in the run-up to one of the most polarized presidential races in recent history. So how did they respond?

They didn't disappoint us. They had no trouble seeing the contradictions for the opposition candidate, rating his inconsistencies close to a 4 on the four-point rating scale. For their own candidate, however, ratings averaged closer to 2, indicating minimal contradiction. Democrats responded to Kerry as Republicans responded to Bush. And as predicted, Democrats and Republicans showed no differences in their response to contradictions for the politically neutral figures.

Science is an untidy business, and you don't expect all your hypotheses to pan out. But in this case, we went four for four. The results showed that when partisans face threatening information, not only are they likely to "reason" to emotionally biased conclusions, but we can trace their neural footprints as they do it.

When confronted with potentially troubling political information, a network of neurons becomes active that produces distress. Whether this distress is conscious, unconscious, or some combination of the two we don't know.

The brain registers the conflict between data and desire and begins to search for ways to turn off the spigot of unpleasant emotion. We know that the brain largely succeeded in this effort, as partisans mostly denied that they had perceived any conflict between their candidate's words and deeds.

Not only did the brain manage to shut down distress through faulty reasoning, but it did so quickly—as best we could tell, usually before subjects even made it to the third slide. The neural circuits charged with regulation of emotional states seemed to recruit beliefs that eliminated the distress and conflict partisans had experienced when they confronted unpleasant realities. And this all seemed to happen with little involvement of the neural circuits normally involved in reasoning.

But the political brain also did something we *didn't* predict. Once partisans had found a way to reason to false conclusions, not only did neural circuits involved in negative emotions turn off, but circuits involved in positive emotions turned *on*. The partisan brain didn't seem satisfied in just feeling *better*. It worked overtime to feel *good*, activating reward circuits that give partisans a jolt of positive reinforcement for their biased reasoning. These reward circuits overlap substantially with those activated when drug addicts get their "fix," giving new meaning to the term *political junkie*.[4]

So what are the implications of this study?

One is pragmatic. If you're running a campaign, you shouldn't worry about offending the 30 percent of the population whose brains can't process information from your side of the aisle unless their lives depend on it (e.g., after an attack on the U.S. mainland). If you're a Republican, your focus should be on moving the 10 to 20 percent of the population with changeable minds to the right and bringing your unbending 30 percent to the polls. Republican strategists in fact have had no trouble branding Northern Californians and Northeasterners "latte-drinking liberals." They know their own party's kitchen doesn't have room for a latte maker, and that scalding the other side can bring a little froth to the mouths of their own voters.

The implications for Democrats should be equally clear: Stop worrying about offending those who consider Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell moral leaders because *their minds won't bend to the left*. Indeed, the failure of the Democratic Party for much of the last decade to define itself in opposition to anyone or anything has created a Maxwell House Majority convinced that the only coffee the Democrats are capable of brewing is lukewarm and tepid—tested by pollsters to insure that it's not too hot or too strong—and served up with stale rhetoric. And they're right.

But if we take a step back, and place this study in the context of a growing body of research in psychology and political science, there's another message in these findings: *The political brain is an emotional brain*. It is not a dispassionate calculating machine, objectively searching for the right facts, figures, and policies to make a reasoned decision. The partisans in our study were, on average, bright, educated, and politically aware. They were not the voters who think "Alito" is an Italian pastry, the kind of voters who have raised so many alarm calls among political scientists and pundits.

And yet they thought with their guts.

Rational readers may take solace in noting that in American politics today, partisans are roughly equally split, with a little over a third of voters identifying themselves as Republican and roughly the same percent identifying themselves as Democrats. So they cancel each other out, leaving those in the center to swing elections based on more rational considerations.

But as it turns out, they think with their guts, too.

There is, however, a bright side to this story. Most of the time, emotions provide a reasonable compass for guiding behavior—including voting behavior—although the needle sometimes takes a couple of years to move. What led voters to demand a change of course on Iraq in November 2006 was not that they had new information. They had new emotions. The compass shifted from nationalistic pride and hope to anger, concern, and a rising crest of resignation. "Stay the course" made little sense in light of this emotional shift.

We can't change the structure of the political brain, which reflects millions of years of evolution. But we can change the way we appeal to it.

And that's what this book is about.

chapter two

RATIONAL MINDS, IRRATIONAL CAMPAIGNS

* * *

When the eloquent Adlai Stevenson was running for president against Dwight Eisenhower, a woman gushed to the Democratic candidate after a rally, "Every thinking person will be voting for you." Stevenson supposedly replied: "Madam, that is not enough. I need a majority."[1]

The founding fathers, many of the great seventeenth and eighteenth century philosophers whose ideas shaped their thinking (and ultimately the U.S. Constitution), and two hundred years of political scientists, economists, and cognitive scientists have held to some version of a *dispassionate* vision of the mind. According to this view, people make decisions by weighing the available evidence and reaching conclusions that make the most sense of the data, as long as they have a minimum of time and interest. Many have argued that this is the way the mind works. The vast majority have argued that this is the way it *should* work if people are behaving rationally.[2]

This view of the mind is not one to be dismissed lightly. It is a vision that ushered in the Age of Reason and was intimately related to the rise of democracy, freedom from religious authority, and development of the scientific method. By turning to reason, philosophers could argue against the absolute authority of monarchy, usually justified by appeals to divinity, tradition, or assumptions about the natural order of things.

This was the approach taken by the social contract philosophers who influenced the framing of the American Constitution. The common denominator of the social contract theorists (and their modern-day descendants, notably the philosopher John Rawls) was that people came together to create a state and govern themselves through rational autonomous choice.

Although these philosophers generally agreed that reason is the basis of democracy, they differed in the extent to which they allowed a place for emotion at the table of the republic. Thomas Hobbes, whose *Leviathan* ushered in the age of social contract theories, argued that people enter into a social contract—an agreement to submit to laws and join civilized society—because they seek pleasure and avoid pain. Ultimately, however, he presumed that giving up the liberty to do as one pleases makes rational sense when compared with the "war of all against all" that constitutes the "state of nature" prior to the social contract, in which life is "nasty, brutish, and short."[3]

The framers of the U.S. Constitution themselves were of many minds about emotion, although in general, in keeping with more than 2000 years of Western philosophy since Plato, they feared the distorting influence of emotion on the rational thought necessary for good decisions in a democracy.[4] Plato argued that when reason and passion collide, the proper place for passion is in the back seat. In the *Federalist Papers*, the framers of American democracy made clear, like both Plato and the social contract philosophers, that only through reason can people set aside their self-interested and parochial desires to make decisions in the common interest. Passions can lead to rapid, poorly thought-out, self-interested acts, or to the psychology of the mob, inflamed by the emotion of the moment and capable of turning on anyone in its path.[5]

Inventing the Calculator

In one version or another, the vision of an ideally dispassionate electorate has dominated political science as well as political philosophy.

Political scientists have expressed concerns since the origins of their discipline—and particularly since the advent of modern polling in the 1940s—about the "irrationality" of the American electorate. Walter Lippmann used the term *public opinion* in 1922 to describe the morass of beliefs (about what is happening in the economy, what is going on in the world, and what policies might make things better) held by a population that generally lacks the firsthand experience and expertise to know what is truly going on. For eighty years, political scientists have echoed his concerns, focusing on the way American voters are vulnerable to all manner of irrational appeals[6] and seem more likely to attach a sense of duty to showing up at the polls than to knowing who and what, exactly, they are voting for.

In actuality, the American public at the dawn of our democracy was even less issue-oriented than the public today, largely pledging its political allegiance to the men who had fought the Revolutionary War until their generation died out in the early to mid-1800s, and then voting primarily based on their habitual allegiance to one or another political party for decades thereafter.[7] As we shall see, allegiance to party—a largely emotional allegiance[8]—remains the central determinant of voting behavior today. The same is true in most stable Western democracies, where political affiliation tends to be handed from generation to generation like a family heirloom.

With the advent of modern polling, U.S. politicians have had at their disposal constant information on public opinion—on where it is and where it seems to be going—that has been a constant source of both angst and ambivalence to political campaigns. On the one hand, in a representative democracy or a republic such as our own, representatives are supposed to *represent* their constituents—and hence to attend to their opinions. On the other hand, leaders have access to information not available to the average citizen and expertise that comes from governing. Thus, they are supposed to *lead*—including staying one step ahead of, and helping to shape, public opinion.

The problem, according to most accounts, is that public opinion largely reflects efforts at manipulation by special interests and political elites, often filtered through a media that only sometimes serves as the

"Fourth Estate" envisioned by the founders. George Marcus, a political scientist who has challenged the traditional understanding of reason and emotion in politics, has eloquently described the prescriptions typically offered by scholars of American electoral politics:

> Most of the current proposals for reform . . . minimize the evocation of passion and enhance the function of rationality. The effort has been to encourage the dispassionate citizen: a citizen who will watch reasoned debates, read detailed issue position papers, read newspapers to get thoroughly informed about the facts underlying the many public policy issues; a citizen who will be less inclined to vote as he or she has voted in the past and more inclined to "weigh the issues" . . . ; a citizen who will be less responsive to the attractiveness and appeal of candidates and guided more by their programs; a citizen who will be less distracted by matters of public performance, the gaffes or slips of the tongue, and more mindful of the candidate's record of public service. All in all, what is called for is a citizen more serious, more reasoning, and less passionate.[9]

Such prescriptions are not entirely without merit. The problems they attempt to address have been amplified in the era of cable television, when the media increasingly mix information with entertainment (sex scandals are much more entertaining than war scandals) and when public disinterest in "issues" leads to less issue-oriented programming (because "issue" programming is less profitable), creating a vicious circle in which increasingly ill-informed voters prefer increasingly ill-informing programs (whatever happened to Chandra, Laci, the runaway bride, and Natalie?). The problem is further compounded when media executives follow precisely the same polls as politicians and use them to "spin" their news in a way more likely to appeal to a larger segment of the population, as when CNN veered sharply to the right during the 2004 presidential campaign as it watched its market share erode in favor of the more conservative Fox Network.

However, these maneuvers seriously understate the complex relations between thought and feeling in mind and brain—and by extension in state and nation.

Neither the social contract philosophers nor their dispassionate modern-day heirs in political science ever wrestled adequately with the fact that people all start out with strong emotional commitments to communities, tribes, sects, or nations that raise the question, "Whose interests should the rational actor pursue—his own, his immediate family, his extended family, his tribe, his religious sect, his state, or his nation?" This has been one of the great sticking points—and one of the great unknowns—in the attempt to extend democracy to peoples who do not start with the Western assumption of autonomous individuals, who may instead put what the anthropologist Clifford Geertz[10] called "primordial sentiments" toward tribal or religious communities above all others. There is nothing to protect a minority group in a democracy if people enter into the social contract without the peculiarly Western, individualistic assumptions embodied in our Declaration of Independence that were themselves the product of centuries of intellectual history: that all men (and ultimately women and blacks) are created equal, endowed with certain inalienable rights.

The vision of the dispassionate mind of the political scientist is remarkably consistent with the vision of the decision theorist and cognitive scientist. Indeed, it is no accident that when Howard Gardner published his landmark book, *The Mind's New Science*,[11] the word *emotion* did not appear in the index. Across a number of fields—cognitive science, psychology, and business, as well as political science and economics—the most widely held models of judgment and decision making are "bounded rationality" models. These models suggest that we are essentially reasonable animals, give or take a few shortcuts our minds take to make rapid judgments when we have neither the time nor interest to deliberate over which brand of olive oil to grab off the shelf—or which lever to pull in the ballot box if we are not terribly informed or interested in politics.*

Contemporary models of decision making are derived from rational decision theories that focus on the processes by which people

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*My apologies to decision theorists who may find this characterization too categorical, particularly in light of discussions of heuristics involving emotion. A close reading of reviews of judgment and decision making in the *Annual Review of Psychology*, however, turns up remarkably few references to emotion.

weigh the pros and cons of various options and draw conclusions designed to maximize their expected utility. According to these models, when people make decisions, they consider the utility to them of different aspects of each option and the likelihood of obtaining them.[12] A rational actor compares each potential option on its *expected utility* by adding up the costs and benefits of each option, weighing in their probabilities.

So how might such models work in practice, particularly in electoral politics?

It's 2004, and a fifty-two-year-old coal miner in rural Pennsylvania has to decide whether to vote for George W. Bush or John Kerry. According to rational decision models, he makes (and should make) his choice as follows.

First, he selects the issues that affect him most and weighs their importance, from least to most important. Let's say these issues include safe working conditions at the mine, job security, the solvency of Social Security and his pension plan, safety from terrorist attacks, and safety from violent crime. Given that he lives in rural Pennsylvania, he doesn't need to worry much about terrorist attacks or violent crime from inner-city gang members. The probability of such events is small enough that he might give each one a low importance rating, perhaps a 1 on a scale from 1 to 5. On the other hand, given his occupation and his age, if he is rational, he should heavily weigh safety conditions at the mine, job security, and his retirement security, giving these issues each an importance rating of, say, 5.

He then assigns a *utility value* for each candidate on each issue. Let's say Kerry receives a score of +3 for each of the economic and occupational issues, whereas Bush receives –3 on each of these issues, given his prior voting record. But Bush is tough on terror and crime, so he gets +3 on the final two issues, whereas Kerry seems to be windsurfing through life and hence earns a –2 on each.

The next step is to multiply the two sets of numbers, producing a combined index of the importance of each issue and the likely utility of a vote for the candidate. Finally, to decide which way to cast his vote, the miner adds up the totals for each candidate to see who scores best for him across the issues that matter.

If our coal miner has even a napkin on which to scribble a few numbers, his decision should be clear. Kerry's score for the three most important issues totals 45, minus 4 points for his disutility on terror and crime, earning him a total expected utility of 41. Bush, on the other hand, racks up 6 points for his toughness but loses 45 for his record on worker safety, the economy, and Social Security, producing an expected utility of –39. The contest isn't even close, with an 80-point spread between the two candidates.

Kerry's problem, however, is that he never met a coal miner, or any other voter for that matter, who actually makes decisions this way. Nor have I. The only people who think like this on important issues—whether choosing a spouse or a president—have serious brain damage or psychopathology. In *Descartes' Error*, the neurologist Antonio Damasio[13] describes patients with damage to regions of the frontal lobes involved in emotional decision making (and particularly in linking thought and feeling) who look very much like this. In one case, a patient spent over thirty minutes trying to decide which date and time would be optimal for their next appointment. Without an emotional signal to say "this isn't worth debating anymore," he continued to weigh the utility of every possible alternative.

Yet not only do most decision theories assume this kind of decision making on issues of importance to people. *So does much of contemporary Democratic campaign strategy.* We can hear the whirring of the dispassionate mind in the following exchange on Medicare that occurred during the first presidential debate between Al Gore and George W. Bush in 2000:

> GORE: . . . Under the Governor's plan, if you kept the same fee for service that you have now under Medicare, your premiums would go up by between 18% and 47%, and that is the study of the Congressional plan that he's modeled his proposal on by the Medicare actuaries. Let me give you one quick example. There is a man here tonight named George McKinney from Milwaukee. He's 70 years old, has high blood pressure, his wife has heart trouble. They have an income of $25,000 a year. They can't pay for their prescription drugs. They're some of the ones that go to

> Canada regularly in order to get their prescription drugs. Under my plan, half of their costs would be paid right away. Under Governor Bush's plan, they would get not one penny for four to five years and then they would be forced to go into an HMO or to an insurance company and ask them for coverage, but there would be no limit on the premiums or the deductibles or any of the terms and conditions.
>
> BUSH: I cannot let this go by, the old-style Washington politics, if we're going to scare you in the voting booth. Under my plan the man gets immediate help with prescription drugs. It's called Immediate Helping Hand. Instead of squabbling and finger pointing, he gets immediate help. Let me say something.
>
> MODERATOR (Jim Lehrer, PBS): You're—
>
> GORE: They get $25,000 a year income; that makes them ineligible.
>
> BUSH: Look, this is a man who has great numbers. He talks about numbers. I'm beginning to think not only did he invent the Internet, but he invented the calculator. It's fuzzy math. (First presidential debate between Vice President Al Gore and Governor George Bush, October 3, 2000)[14]

Now let's take a "clinical" look at this interchange. Note the *expected utility model* underlying Gore's approach. He saw his job as to convince the average senior citizen or aging worker—someone not unlike our hypothetical Pennsylvania coal miner—that Bush's plan would have a lower utility value than his own. Now there's nothing wrong with comparing and contrasting plans, although Gore's appeal would have been far more effective if he had simply reversed the order, reeling voters in with a personal story and *then* hooking them with a contrast between his plan and Bush's. And from the standpoint of the dispassionate mind, Bush clearly had few answers to Gore's charges, other than to play the Washington outsider and mumble some platitudes about helping hands.

After eight years as vice president and months campaigning against George W. Bush, Gore clearly knew everything he needed to know about every "issue" in the campaign. The last thing he needed was a debate coach to quiz him on facts and figures. Yet precisely this kind of debate preparation set him up for the most memorable (and, for Gore, the most destructive) moment of the debate: Bush's line about Gore claiming to invent the calculator. Bush delivered this barbed one-liner with an affable style that stood in stark juxtaposition to Gore's nonverbal dismissiveness of Bush's arguments (and, by extension, of his intellect).[15] The line was unfair, but the Gore team handed it to him, by attending to the facts and figures rather than to the *stories* Bush had been telling the public about Gore. Instead of getting voters to *feel* the difference between his concern for the welfare of seniors struggling to pay their medical bills and Bush's, Gore went to a level of numerical precision—premised on a model of expected utility, giving them every number they needed to make the appropriate calculations—that played right into Bush's strategy of portraying Gore as an emotionless policy wonk, "not a regular guy, like us."

Gore's statement, "your premiums would go up by between 18% and 47%, and that is the study of the congressional plan that he's modeled his proposal on by the Medicare actuaries," may well have been accurate, and it was surely convincing to his debate "prep" coach, Bob Shrum, who was a master debater at Georgetown and must have clenched his fist with delight and shouted "yes!" when he heard the figures roll off Gore's tongue. In fact, following the debate, while media pundits were concluding decisively on television that the debate had been a disaster for Gore, Shrum and his colleagues were celebrating, convinced that their fighter had put his opponent on the mat multiple times.[16]

In rational terms, Gore *had* given Bush a beating. But in emotional terms, both the presentation of exact numbers (as opposed to "your premiums would go up by about a third") and the mention of "actuaries" undercut the story Gore most needed to tell the American people: that he *cared about* that seventy-year-old man, and he would *do* something about it. Instead, his exacting reference to numbers and actuaries reinforced the story George W. Bush wanted to tell about him: "Look, I'm like you, I don't care about all this fancy math. I care about people. They're just statistics to him."[17]

In that single line about inventing the calculator, Bush killed three birds with one stone. He established himself as a guy with a sense of humor who would likely be fun to have around for the next four years. He reiterated themes about Gore's hubris and lack of trustworthiness that struck at the heart of his character. And most importantly, he disarmed Gore for the remaining debates—and the rest of the election—of the *value of data*. From that point forward, all reference to numbers was just "fuzzy math."

It didn't help, of course, that the media did their postmodernism routine, turning Gore's claims about Bush's Medicare plan and tax cuts, which both turned out to be true, into a he said/she said contest of competing claims to a truth that somehow couldn't be adjudicated.[18] But it's the job of a campaign to get the media to convey its message rather than the opponent's message, and in the last thirty years, with the exception of the Clinton years, Republicans have consistently outflanked Democrats in these maneuvers, using the same emotional skill they have demonstrated with the electorate.

So now let's return to our hypothetical Pennsylvania coal miner, who was likely a Democrat in the 1970s, a Reagan Democrat in the 1980s, and considered himself an Independent with Republican leanings in 2004. If public opinion polls provide any indication, he was *not* likely to place more weight on the issues that actually affect his life than on concerns about terrorism and violent crime that were of far less immediate relevance to his own and his family's safety. And, with the right priming, he was likely to place a heavy weight on homosexuals getting married in San Francisco and Massachusetts.

With this emotional calculus, our rational decision maker enthusiastically cast his ballot for Bush in 2004. And in fact, extrapolating from the 2004 exit polls, he had a 55% to 60% likelihood of voting doing so, as long as he wasn't a union member. Like his fellow Pennsylvanians, he also probably rated terrorism as the most important issue on his mind as he cast his ballot.[19]

Now to be fair, bounded rationality models are more sophisticated than the kind of classical utility models I have described.[20]

Their rationality is *not* boundless. They recognize the existence of cognitive shortcuts (called heuristics) and other cognitive biases that can lead a rational mind astray (biases whose discovery led to the Nobel Prize for psychologist Daniel Kahneman).[21] For example, people are prone to the *availability bias*, by which they may overestimate the frequency (or danger) of an event on the basis of how readily it comes to mind (i.e., on how available it is to their consciousness).[22] Thus, after the United States was attacked on September 11, and after repeated televised terror alerts, a voter was likely to weight the likelihood of a terrorist attack as higher than a car accident, even though tenfold more people died in car accidents in 2001 than in the Twin Towers.[23]

Bounded rationality models are a vast improvement over eighteenth century notions of rationality, but they actually don't help us much with our Pennsylvania coal miner. The availability bias might explain why he placed so much emphasis on the possibility of terrorist attacks. But it doesn't explain why terrorism was more available to his consciousness than to the consciousness of the average urban New Yorker, who, realistically, had much more to fear from al Qaeda but voted for John Kerry. And it doesn't explain why recent mine disasters, which should be particularly available to the consciousness of a miner in a neighboring state, seemed to loom less large than the specter of two men kissing on the courthouse steps in San Francisco.

The Marketplace of Emotions

The view of democracy that naturally flows from the dispassionate view of the mind is of a *marketplace of ideas*. Parties and politicians who want to convince others of their point of view lay out the data, make their best case, and leave it to the electorate to weigh the arguments and exercise their capacity to reason. To the Western ear, and particularly to the American ear, this view of mind and politics seems eminently "reasonable."

But this view of mind and brain couldn't be further from the truth. In politics, when reason and emotion collide, emotion invariably wins. Although the marketplace of ideas is a great place to shop for policies, the marketplace that matters most in American politics is the *marketplace of emotions*.

Republicans have a keen eye for markets, and they have a near-monopoly in the marketplace of emotions. They have kept government off our backs, torn down that wall, saved the flag, left no child behind, protected life, kept our marriages sacred, restored integrity to the Oval Office, spread democracy to the Middle East, and fought an unrelenting war on terror. The Democrats, in contrast, have continued to place their stock in the marketplace of ideas. And in so doing, they have been trading in the wrong futures.

I have it on good authority (i.e., off the record) that leading conservatives have chortled with joy (usually accompanied by astonishment) as they watched their Democratic counterparts campaign by reciting their best facts and figures, as if they were trying to prevail in a high school debate tournament. They must have heaved a huge sigh of relief (but not on the air) when Al Gore ran for president pretending that he had not co-presided over one of the most prosperous periods in modern American history. One can only imagine the relief of the Bush campaign in 2004 when no one thought to pull out the classic television footage of a smiling Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney shaking hands in the 1980s with an equally charming Saddam Hussein, with the narration, "Why was Vice President Cheney so sure Saddam had weapons of mass destruction? Because he sold them to him." And they must certainly have appreciated the Kerry campaign's failure to juxtapose footage of Governor Bush running for his first term as president with his arm around his biggest campaign contributor, Ken Lay, promising to "run this country like a CEO runs a company."

These failures are systematic, not incidental. There is no doubt that institutional factors play a key role in the difficulty Democrats have had, particularly in presidential politics. Since John F. Kennedy, in the last forty-five years, the three Democrats who have ascended to the presidency (Lyndon Johnson, Jimmy Carter, and Bill Clinton) have shared one characteristic: They were from the South. Indeed, virtually every political consultant who has led his candidate into the White House in the last three decades on *both* sides of the aisle—Roger Ailes (who later started Fox News), Lee Atwater, Hamilton Jordan, Patrick Caddell, James Carville, Paul Begala, and Karl Rove—have hailed from the South. Given the strength of John Edwards' resurgence in the 2004 primaries after Super Tuesday in 2004—despite the fact that voting for Edwards was by that point a lost cause since John Kerry had already just about wrapped up enough delegates to win the nomination—it takes little stretch of the imagination to suggest that had the first Democratic primaries been held in Georgia and Florida, we might today be writing about the prospects for reelection of President Edwards.

But institutional factors are only part of the problem. Since Franklin Roosevelt more than sixty years ago, only one Republican incumbent has *failed* in his bid for re-election to the Presidency, whereas only one Democrat has *succeeded.* These are astounding figures given that when the electorate hasn't been evenly split in party identification during those years, Democrats have generally outnumbered Republicans.

What Franklin Roosevelt and Bill Clinton shared was not only the keen intellect so valued by those of us to the left of center but something deeply valued by people in the heartland: an understanding of what they were feeling. When Roosevelt assured Americans that they had nothing to fear but fear itself; when he engaged them in heart-to-heart conversations in their own homes in his fireside chats; when he confidently responded with innovative programs and offered people a "New Deal" in a terrible time of depression and desperation, he was reading the emotional pulse of the American people.

The following passage from his second fireside chat was delivered less than three months into his presidency, on May 7, 1933, as he was engaged in the most radical legislative agenda in the history of the nation:

> Two months ago we were facing serious problems. The country was dying by inches. It was dying because trade and commerce had declined to dangerously low levels; prices for basic commodities were such as to destroy the value of the assets of national institutions such as banks, savings banks, insurance

> companies, and others. These institution . . . were foreclosing mortgages, calling loans, refusing credit. . . . We were faced by a condition and not a theory.[24]

In this one paragraph, we can see the opening act of a narrative structure that would frame not only this particular (and crucial) fireside chat but the story of his presidency. He began with a diagnosis. He made clear that he understood that this was "a condition and not a theory," that these were real people's lives he was talking about. He then continued, using a familiar narrative construction with tremendous emotional power, describing two alternatives, one that had already led to ruin, and the other that would require a leap of faith in a time of hopelessness:

> There were just two alternatives: The first was to allow the foreclosures to continue, credit to be withheld and money to go into hiding. . . . It is easy to see that the result of this course would have not only economic effects of a very serious nature but social results that might bring incalculable harm. Even before I was inaugurated I came to the conclusion that such a policy was too much to ask the American people to bear. It involved not only a further loss of homes, farms, savings and wages but also a loss of spiritual values—the loss of that sense of security for the present and the future so necessary to the peace and contentment of the individual and of his family. When you destroy these things you will find it difficult to establish confidence of any sort in the future. It was clear that mere appeals from Washington for confidence and the mere lending of more money to shaky institutions could not stop this downward course. A prompt program applied as quickly as possible seemed to me not only justified but imperative to our national security.

In this passage, Roosevelt was elaborating his narrative emotionally, leading the listener from the hopeless state of economic affairs with which he began his presidency, to the alternatives facing the country, to the dire consequences of failing to take bold and decisive action. He reassured his listeners that in taking a leap of faith with him they were not plunging into the abyss with a man who lacked either the courage or the knowledge to lead, liberally mixing occasional phrases that most Americans could not exactly understand (e.g., "forcing liquidation") that conveyed his command of the issues with emotionally charged phrases that conveyed that he *understood where they lived*.

After next outlining one piece of bold legislation after another, sharing the credit for these legislative achievements with the Congress and members of both parties, Roosevelt continued, in a spirit of honesty and humility that today seems like a distant memory in American political-speak:

> Today we have reason to believe that things are a little better than they were two months ago. Industry has picked up, railroads are carrying more freight, farm prices are better, but I am not going to indulge in issuing proclamations of overenthusiastic assurance. We cannot bally-ho ourselves back to prosperity. I am going to be honest at all times with the people of the country. . . . I know that the people of this country will understand this and will also understand the spirit in which we are undertaking this policy. I do not deny that we may make mistakes of procedure as we carry out the policy. I have no expectation of making a hit every time I come to bat. What I seek is the highest possible batting average, not only for myself but for the team. Theodore Roosevelt once said to me: "If I can be right 75 percent of the time I shall come up to the fullest measure of my hopes."

And ultimately, he concluded his address to the hearts and minds of the American people on a note of confidence, determination, and shared mission:

> To you, the people of this country, all of us, the Members of the Congress and the members of this Administration, owe a profound debt of gratitude. Throughout the Depression you have been patient. You have granted us wide powers, you have encouraged us

> with a wide-spread approval of our purposes. Every ounce of strength and every resource at our command we have devoted to the end of justifying your confidence. We are encouraged to believe that a wise and sensible beginning has been made. In the present spirit of mutual confidence and mutual encouragement we go forward.

Fast-forward a half century, and we see Bill Clinton listening to people in unstaged town hall meetings, his eyes always locking with theirs. Like Roosevelt, he understood the power of a one-two punch in politics: following an emotional appeal that draws his audience in with some specifics about what exactly he is going to do to make their lives better.

The second debate of the presidential election of 1992 had a town hall format that showcased a spry, young, emotional heavyweight (Clinton) against an aging, badly mismatched welterweight (George H. Bush) on a canvas that could not have been better suited for the younger, quicker, more emotionally powerful man. An audience member posed a question to President Bush about the national debt that was essentially about how he could understand the plight of people in the midst of a recession when he was not personally feeling it.

> BUSH: Well, listen, you ought to be in the White House for a day and hear what I hear and see what I see and read the mail I read and touch the people that I touch from time to time. I was in the Lomax AME Church. It's a black church just outside of Washington, DC. And I read in the bulletin about teenage pregnancies, about the difficulties that families are having to make ends meet. I talk to parents. I mean, you've got to care. Everybody cares if people aren't doing well.
>
> But I don't think it's fair to say, you haven't had cancer. Therefore, you don't know what it's like. I don't think it's fair to say, you know, whatever it is, that if you haven't been hit by it personally. . . . But I think in terms of the recession, of course you feel it when you're president of the U.S. And that's why I'm trying to do something about it by stimulating the export, vesting more, better education systems.
>
> Thank you. I'm glad you clarified it.

Bush's response was probably a turning point in the election, confirming the average voter's worst fears about their president as someone who had no idea what they were feeling. It was strangely egocentric for a man not generally characterized by egocentrism (focusing on *his* discomforts as president), likely reflecting his defensiveness in the face of an "in your face" question. Bush tried (no doubt advised by his consultants to take a leaf from the Reagan playbook) to use a human example, an encounter at an AME church. But he *forgot to include the human part.* He didn't mention any of the nameless, faceless people he had met. He seemed more interested in reading their bulletins. He obviously had been advised to use emotionally evocative phrases such as "the people that I touch," but they were not in his vernacular, and he immediately spoiled them with phrases such as "from time to time" that only reinforced a sense of his fleeting contact with everyday Americans.

Clinton seized on the opportunity, first expressing an interest in the *questioner's* experience, asking what *her* experience had been. He then described precisely how he knew what the recession felt like, artfully overcoming the same potential challenge leveled against President Bush (that he had easily weathered tough times in his own Arkansas White House). Once he had established an emotional connection with the questioner—and with similar "questioners" throughout all around the country—he gave his listeners a diagnosis and a dose of policy—ascribing the recession to a failed economic theory that had guided the last twelve years of Republican policy—and made clear that he would follow a different approach.

> CLINTON: Well, I've been governor of a small state for twelve years. I'll tell you how it's affected me. Every year Congress and the president sign laws that make us do more things and gives us less money to do it with. I see people in my state, middle class

> people—their taxes have gone up in Washington and their services have gone down while the wealthy have gotten tax cuts.
>
> I have seen what's happened in this last four years when—in my state, when people lose their jobs there's a good chance I'll know them by their names. When a factory closes, I know the people who ran it. When the businesses go bankrupt, I know them.
>
> And I've been out here for thirteen months meeting in meetings just like this ever since October, with people like you all over America, people that have lost their jobs, lost their livelihood, lost their health insurance.
>
> What I want you to understand is the national debt is not the only cause of that. It is because America has not invested in its people. It is because we have not grown. It is because we've had twelve years of trickle down economics. We've gone from first to twelfth in the world in wages. We've had four years where we've produced no private sector jobs. Most people are working harder for less money than they were making ten years ago.
>
> It is because we are in the grip of a failed economic theory. And this decision you're about to make better be about what kind of economic theory you want, not just people saying I'm going to go fix it but what are we going to do? I think what we have to do is invest in American jobs, American education, control American health care costs, and bring the American people together again.
>
> QUESTIONER [spoken with genuine appreciation]: *Thank you.*[25]

The ability to speak to people's concerns at an emotional level was characteristic of Clinton's campaigns and governance. During the New Hampshire primary, with news stories swirling about Jennifer Flowers and other less-than-perfumed daisies that could readily have derailed his campaign, Clinton responded in an interview on *60 Minutes* with his wife by his side. He made a simple statement that allowed millions of viewers to respect his admission of the human frailty shared with

half of them, and to share his wife's forgiveness: "I have acknowledged causing pain in my marriage. I think most Americans who are watching this tonight, they'll know what we're saying, they'll get it, and they'll feel we have been more than candid." Whether planned or unplanned, I don't think it was accidental that he used the word *we* rather than the more logical *I*. Doing so signaled that this was an issue shared with his wife and, most importantly, that this was an issue *between him and her* within the privacy of their marriage and not between him and the American people. The issue died.

This level of emotional intelligence is unusual in American politics (and among the population, where emotional intelligence, like all forms of intelligence, is distributed along a bell-shaped curve, with most people squarely in the middle). Among twentieth-century presidents, Franklin Roosevelt and Bill Clinton were probably rivaled in this respect only by Teddy Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan. But with the exception of the Clinton years, what has differentiated Republican candidates and strategists in the last thirty years from their Democratic counterparts is whether they drew their inspiration from the marketing team or the debate team.

When the younger Bush's pollsters detected in early 2000 that his infamous smirk was creating "the wrong impression," they rapidly coached him on how to reflect gravitas instead of hubris. As it turns out, voters were not being "irrational" in their initial negative "take" on Bush's facial movements. They were detecting what turned out to be perhaps the central character defect that colored his presidency, a pathological certainty and smugness without regard to the facts. No one appears to have systematically coached Dukakis on the wooden use of his hands, Gore on the hints of condescension in his demeanor, or Kerry on the emotional messages conveyed by his periodic lack of vocal intonation or facial movement. What candidates' faces, tone of voice, and gestures often reveal are aspects of their character to which voters respond—and to which they sometimes *should* respond because they may provide a window into the soul of a person who can only be seen through a television glass darkly.

The failure of Democratic political consultants and campaign managers to attend to these signals reflects the overvaluation of reason and undervaluation of emotion characteristic of Democratic campaigns over several decades. Although many Democrats have come to associate emotional appeals with demagoguery, as the illustrations in this chapter from the only two Democrats in the last eighty years to win reelection to the presidency make clear, emotionally compelling appeals need not be appeals to people's fears and prejudices. They can just as easily be appeals to their hopes and dreams, their sense of shared fate or purpose, their better angels, or their sense that there might be someone who genuinely cares about their welfare and has what it takes to help restore it.

Indeed, implicit in most of the dispassionate "issue appeals" of Democratic candidates over the last several decades is the same *moral compass* that guides most Americans: the conviction that everyone who works hard should earn a livable wage and should be able to take his or her sick child to a doctor; that people who get the most benefit from living in this country should pay the most for what America has given them; that workers should be safe on their jobs from foreseeable dangers; that we should take care of the environment so that we don't drown the living or poison the unborn; that a great and wealthy nation does everything it can to fight poverty within its borders; and that tolerance is a virtue not a sign of moral weakness or uncertainty.

It's the job of a candidate to get people to feel these things during an election. And it's the job of a genuine leader to get them energized by these feelings when the election is over and it's time to govern.

The paradox of American politics is that when it comes to winning hearts and minds, the party that views itself as the one with the heart (for the middle class, the poor, and the disenfranchised) continues to appeal exclusively to the mind. True to the liberal philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (who by today's standards would be far to the right of, say, Pat Buchanan—even *he* would let his wife vote, and probably black people), contemporary "liberals" believe that the way to voters' hearts is through their brains.

But they are appealing to the wrong part of the brain.

chapter three

THE EVOLUTION OF THE PASSIONATE BRAIN

* * *

On March, 7, 1965, Dr. Martin Luther King organized a march in Selma, Alabama. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 had attempted to protect those rights. But officials all over the South circumvented it. Mississippi, for example, registered only 6% of its black voters. The march from Selma to Montgomery—the first of three King was to organize that month—made it only six blocks from the steps of the humble church from which it began. An entire nation watched in horror—and in real time, as ABC, ironically, had to interrupt its showing of *Judgment at Nuremberg* to reveal America's own day of judgment—as the local police and a "deputized" lynch mob descended on the peaceful marchers with batons, tear gas, bullwhips, and rubber tubing wrapped in barbed wire. The next day, people from all over the nation began flooding south to march with Dr. King.[1]

A week later, on March 15, 1965, President Johnson delivered an address before the Congress, demanding the passage of legislation that would truly put an end to the disenfranchisement of African Americans:

> At times history and fate meet at a single time in a single place to shape a turning point in man's unending search for freedom.

The results were unambiguous: Subliminally flashing Clinton's face before Davis's significantly decreased people's negative ratings of Davis.* For committed Democrats and Republicans, who already tended to have relatively entrenched feelings toward Davis, the effects were minimal. But for Independents—precisely the group who had voted for Clinton twice but switched to Bush in 2004—the effects were very strong. An association with Bill Clinton was a strong plus for a Democratic candidate, even an unpopular one like Davis.

And it should have been for Al Gore.

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*As in the Dr. Z study, we didn't use subliminal procedures to manipulate people's votes, as in the RATS ad against Gore. Doing so would clearly be unethical. Our goal was to *test* people's unconscious associations, not to alter them. In accord with scientific standards of ethical conduct, we both told them at the beginning of the study that they might be exposed to a subliminal stimulus and we debriefed them afterwards about the actual procedure.

chapter thirteen

POSITIVELY NEGATIVE

* * *

> The problem with American politics today is that one party has the monopoly on all the anger. . . . Look at John Bolton—if you can. Now, I don't know if this man has human relationships, but . . . his hair's not speaking to his mustache. . . . And to be a Democrat means—I dunno, your guess is as good as mine. It seems like ever since Michael Dukakis was asked how he'd feel if his wife got raped and he said "whatever," the Democrats have been the party that speaks softly and carries Massachusetts.
>
> —Bill Maher, *New Rules*[1]

For years, politicians, pundits, and political scientists have decried the negativity of political campaigns in the television (and now the Internet) era. They have argued that negative campaigning has been on the rise, that it is destroying the quality of information getting to the public, that it is depressing voter turnout, and a host of other ills.

Several myths have colored discussions about negative campaign appeals. One is that campaigns are getting nastier. Whether this statement is true or false depends on your time frame. In his book *Going Dirty*, David Mark has shown that American political campaigns are actually much more civil today than they were at the start of the republic and throughout the nineteenth century. In the nineteenth century, virtually all newspapers were partisan newspapers whose diatribes against the other side would have made even Bill O'Reilly blush. On the other hand, content analyses of campaign ads in the television era suggest that negative ads are indeed becoming more prevalent,[2] and some of the highly personal ads that ran in the 2006 midterm election represent an unmistakably new low.

A second myth is that negative campaigning depresses voter turnout. This belief, widely held for years by many political scientists, was belied by the 2004 election, when the percent of eligible voters who chose to go to the polls jumped from 54 to nearly 60 percent. The increase in voter turnout largely reflected a concerted—and highly targeted—negative campaign by Republicans aimed less at changing the minds of undecided voters than on bringing conservatives who normally don't vote to the ballot box by making them angry.[3] The high turnout in 2006 for a midterm election also reflected voter anger and concern about the War in Iraq.

Voters are usually moved by positive or negative emotions.

Three other myths are unique to the left and uniquely dangerous, having contributed to the failed campaigns of the last two Democratic presidential candidates: that negative appeals are unethical, ineffective, and when made by the other side, better left alone.

All three fly in the face of everything we know about mind and brain. And there is no better evidence against them than modern American electoral history.

Positively Unethical

The first myth is that negative campaigning is inherently unethical. Anyone who believes this should read the *Declaration of Independence*. A content analysis found that about 70 percent of the statements in that document are negative (toward British rule, despotism, taxation without representation, and so forth).[4] If you're trying to convince people to change course, you generally have to elicit emotions such as anxiety or anger along with enthusiasm for your cause, particularly when your point is that an incumbent has behaved in ways that are incompetent or unethical.

Understanding the use and misuse of negative emotion in campaigns (which is what negative ads try to engender) requires distinguishing between attacks that are unfair, misleading, or unethical and those that are not only accurate but essential for catching voters' attention and informing their emotions.

As we have seen, voters tend to take their cues from party leaders on what to feel. If party leaders or candidates deliberately mute their responses, whether because of fear, misplaced ethical concerns (many of which are "front men" for fear), or a misunderstanding of what polls and focus groups can and can't offer, they misinform the electorate, project fear and weakness, and cede values, patriotism, or whatever other social good the opposition is claiming as its exclusive territory.

Fairness, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder, but it isn't difficult to distinguish prototypes of ethical and unethical appeals and to use those to guide the ethical use of negative emotions in political campaigns. Democrats err when they confuse negative campaigning with sleazy campaigning. Politicians can and do make unethical negative appeals to voters, but they also make unethical positive appeals, as when President Bush told voters up until November 7, 2006 that the United States was "winning" in Iraq all the while he and his advisors were plotting a new course based on what they knew wasn't true.

Whether an appeal is rational or emotional, or positive or negative, is completely independent of whether it is ethical. The conflation of reason, positivity, and ethics is a profound logic error that has had profound effects on Democratic campaigns for decades.

Consider this exchange from *Meet the Press* between now-Senator Bob Casey of Pennsylvania and then-incumbent Rick Santorum:

> MR. RUSSERT: It is interesting, Senator Santorum, hearing you distinguish your voting records in some cases with the president. . . . [I]f you go to *Congressional Quarterly* and review your voting record in support of the president, here it is: In 2005 you were with him 95 percent of the time, 100 percent of the time in '04, 99 in '03, 96 in '02, 97 in '01. . . . You think he's a great president?

> SEN. SANTORUM: I think he's been a terrific president, absolutely.
>
> MR. CASEY: . . . Tim, when you have two politicians in Washington that agree 98 percent of the time, one of them's really not necessary.[5]

Casey's amusing line was no doubt "negative" in that it had some fun at Santorum's expense, but it also made an important point: That Santorum was part of a Republican Congress that had moved in lockstep with the president and had failed in its constitutional obligation to exercise independent oversight. Voting 98 percent of the time with the president, particularly during a time of foreign policy disasters and out-of-control spending, was a sign that Santorum was not exercising the independent judgment expected of a senator.

Because Casey's response occurred in a debate, many Democrats would likely have little trouble with it from an ethical standpoint. But consider the following from an attack ad Casey ran against Santorum:

> NARRATOR: Rick Santorum's record? [An image of Santorum appears, against the backdrop of the Capitol, with words superimposed to underscore the narration] Voted three times to give himself a *pay* raise [An image appears of a working-class woman hard at work] while voting 13 times against raising the *minimum* wage. [An image appears of a smiling Santorum sitting next to a grinning George Bush, with words again underscoring the narrative] And he votes 98 percent of the time with George Bush. Even to privatize Social Security.[6]

What made this ad (versions of which ultimately ran against incumbent Republicans all over the country) powerful were two features. The first was its use of *juxtaposition*, one of the most powerful tools in negative political advertising. Juxtaposition essentially connects two networks that were previously unconnected. By creating a link between Santorum's generosity to himself and his lack of generosity to the hard-working men and women he was supposed to represent, Casey two took facts that alone carried little weight for many voters but put them together in a way that *told a story* about the kind of person who, if you do the math, actually raised his own salary by more money than a Pennsylvanian working forty hours a week at the minimum wage *earned*. That juxtaposition raises serious questions about Santorum's sense of equity and his ability to empathize with constituents who worked just as hard as he did.

And it should.

Second, a feature of ads that often renders them more powerful than speeches is the impact of multimodal networks linking words, images, sounds, and emotions. This creates more room for mischief, but it also creates a greater opportunity to activate emotions. In this case, the ad linked Santorum both visually and verbally to an increasingly unpopular president, and emphasized one of the president's signature issues that most Americans didn't trust (privatizing Social Security). It also superimposed the words "Voted 13 Times Against Raising the Minimum Wage" on a hard-working woman, clearly conveying a lack of compassion by Santorum.

The reality is that Santorum and his Republican colleagues *did* show a lack of compassion for hard-working Americans who just didn't resemble them enough to elicit the empathy they showed for beneficiaries of multi-billion dollar inheritances. Making that point in a way that elicited emotions, was central to Casey's electoral success—and to the lives of millions of American workers and their families.

This ad is a prototype of both an effective and ethical negative appeal. It didn't distort Santorum's record. It didn't mislead by leaving out details that a reasonable person would consider exonerating (e.g., if Santorum had opposed the minimum wage because it was attached to billions of dollars of pork-barrel spending that would have driven up the deficit). It didn't link him to a president he had opposed on numerous important occasions.

It told the truth with emotional clarity.

Now compare this to the barrage of *personal* attack ads run by the National Republican Congressional Committee in House races all over the country in the final weeks of the 2006 midterm election. These ads reflected a year of private investigations of Democratic candidates' personal lives. Republican Congressman Tom Reynolds, who headed up these efforts, responded candidly in an article in the *New York Times* as the ad blitz was about to commence, that "These candidates. . . . have never seen anything like this before," and "We haven't even begun to unload this freight train."[7]

An ad run against Democrat Michael Arcuri in New York, ironically titled "Bad Call," provides a prototype of an unethical attack ad:

> FEMALE VOICE: [Speaking in a sexy, licentious tone, with an image of an undulating exotic dancer in silhouette, juxtaposed with a moving image of Arcuri designed, in this context, to appear as if he is leering and then leaning back, as if in ecstasy] Hi, sexy. You've reached the live, one-on-on fantasy line.
>
> MALE ANNOUNCER: The phone number to an adult fantasy hotline appeared on Michael Arcuri's New York City hotel room bill [close up photo of part of an unidentifiable man's face talking on the phone in front of a keyboard, with words similar to the narration superimposed in text, with *adult hotline* in italics] while he was there on official business [images rapidly move from left to right showing the bottom half (i.e., just the pants) of a man wearing a suit that looks like the one Arcuri is wearing in the rest of the ad]. And the call was charged to Oneida County taxpayers [the only image is a black screen with white text that rapidly appears and disappears, with the word *charged* in italics]. Arcuri has denied it [image of Arcuri, with his head downcast, pointed so far toward the floor that he appears to be deeply ashamed or hiding his eyes] but the facts are there [image of the undulating woman returns lightly in the background, initially outside awareness, surrounded by what looks like white smoke as Arcuri slowly and solemnly lifts his face, at one point licking his lips, his eyes remaining closed]. Who calls a fantasy hotline and then bills taxpayers? Michael Arcuri.

> FEMALE VOICE: [again in sexy voice, but this time slightly chastising]: Bad call [image remains of Arcuri juxtaposed with the exotic dancer, with no smile on his face and eyes remaining closed].
>
> MALE ANNOUNCER: The National Republican Congressional Committee paid for and is responsible for the content of this message.

The visual images in this ad were very carefully chosen. The undulating woman was juxtaposed with what was either a video taken out of context or a photo taken while Arcuri's face was moving or changing expressions. The photo was then manipulated in space to create the impression of movement, as he appeared to throw his head back in pleasure. The image of a man's partial face in front of the keyboard activated associations of both official business and Internet porn. The face was unidentifiable, but in the context, viewers would clearly infer it to be Arcuri's. The photo of a man in a suit from the waist down was obviously meant to activate networks about a man on official business whose pants were coming off, but it was presented so rapidly that viewers wouldn't have consciously registered its meaning.

The italicization and rapid presentation of the word *charged* played on the two meanings of the word, the less frequent meaning that had just been activated by the ad (that he *charged* a call) and the more frequent meaning, particularly in an attack ad suggesting illicit behavior—against a candidate whose record as a *district attorney* the Republicans had recently run what were equally deceptive ads—that he had been *charged* with misappropriating taxpayer funds for illicit purposes. There is no other reason this word would have been italicized, and the fact that the words came and went quickly, unlike all the other text in the ad, which was stationary, suggests that its intended effects were primarily implicit (i.e., to make it vivid enough to register, but not in the context of the sentence in which it was embedded, which was its "cover").

The downcast face of Arcuri juxtaposed with narration and text reading, "Arcuri has denied it. But the facts are there," clearly indicated to voters that Arcuri was ashamed of his behavior—so ashamed that he wouldn't even show his eyes. As that image started moving, with Arcuri lifting his head to face forward but with his eyes closed, it activated two networks by virtue of the ambiguity of the body movement and his reasons for keeping his eyes closed, one implying shame and the other suggesting that he was deep in sexual fantasy. Having watched the body movement in that brief film clip of Arcuri several times, I suspect it may actually have been lifted by the ad makers from a video of Arcuri raising his head at the end of a prayer.

Like the "Harold, Call Me" ad, this one was brilliantly produced to create just the right associations. Unfortunately, the charge was manufactured out of whole cloth.[8] As described by FactCheck.org, and confirmed by multiple sources, the phone records described in the ad did indeed show a call to a fantasy phone line at 3:26 PM on January 28, 2004. But exactly a minute later, the caller redialed the same number—but with the area code corrected from *800* to *518*. The intended number was the New York State Department of Criminal Justice Services. The man who made the call was a colleague of Arcuri's, attending the same meeting of the New York State District Attorneys Association. The hotel billing charge that created the cover for the story was $1.25.

Tim Russert confronted Congressman Reynolds on the ad in late October on *Meet the Press*:

> MR. RUSSERT: Everyone admits it, and yet you put an ad on suggesting that this guy is calling sex hotlines. Is that fair?
>
> REP. REYNOLDS: Well, first of all, the chairman of the committee doesn't know what the IE's actually producing when it goes on, we pay for. Second, that ad is now down.
>
> MR. RUSSERT: You said you're responsible, that's what the banner says. You can take it down if you wanted to.
>
> REP. REYNOLDS: I paid for it. The committee paid for it, it was pulled down.

> MR. RUSSERT: Is it, is it fair? Is it fair?
>
> REP. REYNOLDS: Politics isn't always fair, Tim. . . . [T]he contents of both ads, we review all those.[9]

Arcuri went on to win, but so did Reynolds, in a very close race. Reynolds almost lost the race when it became clear that instead of contacting the House Ethics Committee when he learned of Mark Foley's inappropriate behavior with congressional interns, he put partisan interests before the safety of teenagers, and took no action other than, according to him, alerting "my boss," Speaker Dennis Hastert.

It is difficult to imagine how Reynolds could have won re-election if the Democrats had run a concerted campaign immediately after his indifferent admission on *Meet the Press* that he knew the facts of the case on Arcuri and ran the ad anyway, and woven together the story of a ruthless, morally defective man who let a pedophile run free in the Congress when it suited his political purposes, knowingly slandered a decent man without concern for the damage it might do both to his marriage and his reputation, and most importantly, didn't care what effects the ad would have on Arcuri's two *teenage daughters*, who had to confront a lurid story everywhere they turned raising questions about their father's alleged illicit sexual behavior—charges Reynolds *knew were untrue*.

If those actions don't define bad character, I don't know what does. And that's precisely how Democrats should have talked about it.

Democrats should replay this episode, and Reynolds' response on *Meet the Press,* in every election for the remainder of his political life. Rather than accepting the frame, "Hey, politics is dirty," they should create a very different, more appropriate, and more *personal* frame: *Imagine you were Mike Arcuri.* Imagine you were a decent man, running an honest campaign, sitting down one night watching television with your family.

Now imagine watching in horror as that ad appeared.

What would you feel? What would it do to you, your marriage, your children, and your reputation? The reality is that no matter how a message like that has been debunked, it will always leave lingering doubts. And Tom Reynolds knew that.

A person who would knowingly and premeditatedly do what Reynolds, Arcuri's opponent (Raymond Meier, who deservedly lost), and every Republican operative who researched and produced that ad did to another person has no place in American democracy. And the best way to ensure that Republicans think twice the next time they Corker or Reynolds another human being is to make a voting issue out of it—not just against Reynolds, but against any candidate who hires any producer, director, consultant, opposition researcher, or strategist who was involved in the Republican smear campaign of 2006, starting with those who used their talents to such bad ends in what was truly a "Bad Call."

The ads by Bob Casey on the one hand, and the Republican Congressional Committee against Arcuri on the other, provide useful prototypes of ethical and unethical ads. But it isn't difficult to formulate a rule of thumb about fair and ethical appeals, whether positive or negative. Aside from attacks that involve clear deception or that deliberately exploit hate and fear (to which we return in the next chapter), a good rule of thumb is that if the *real* point of an ad or other attack involves a "borderline call" the candidate made in some area of life unrelated to public service, one that is not part of a broader pattern or is distant in time and has not been repeated, or involves sex with a consenting adult, it's unfair.* Candidates or party leaders who attack their opponents outside these bounds should be hit with whatever their opponents have at their disposal, beginning with a blistering assault on their character. A candidate or party that is willing to practice the "politics of personal destruction," showing no concern about who is destroyed in the process, lacks the normal capacity for conscience that is a prerequisite to participatory democracy.

People without conscience respond to aggression, not to appeals to the conscience they don't have.

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*The exception is when a candidate is running on sexual morality while engaging in the same kind of behavior he or she is condemning, in which case his or her behavior speaks to dishonesty and hypocrisy.

A final point about the ethics of negative campaigning deserves attention because it is rarely discussed. The *failure* to "go negative" against an incumbent whose behavior in office is deeply immoral or destructive to America's moral authority is itself an ethical failure. If voters take their cues from political leaders, and their leaders are publicly silent on issues about which they are privately outraged, they are misleading in their silence.

A prime case was the Kerry campaign's decision not to discuss Abu Ghraib. As the details of what had happened at Abu Ghraib were unfolding in the summer of 2004—during one of the greatest foreign policy disasters in American history, in which a nation that had stood for human rights rounded up and tortured not Taliban fighters in Afghanistan but citizens in the very country we were supposed to be liberating, 70 percent of whom were detained by mistake—the Kerry campaign remained silent. In this, as in virtually every other case, Kerry's advisors feared that an aggressive condemnation of the Bush administration might backfire and be spun by the Republicans as an "attack on our troops."[10] Once again, Democrats were playing checkers, instead of anticipating the other side's next move, blocking it, and mapping out the most likely moves and countermoves that would follow.

Note how easily Kerry could have blocked the likely Republican charge that an attack on Abu Ghraib was an attack on our troops, beginning with words from his own convention address:

> I know what kids go through when they are carrying an M–16 in a dangerous place, and they can't tell friend from foe. I know what they go through when they're out on patrol at night and they don't know what's coming around the next bend.

Now suppose he had continued:

> President Bush has no idea how easy it is in those kinds of circumstances for soldiers, scared and angry after they've seen a good friend blown up in front of them, to lash out in anger against the people they're there to protect. He has no idea of the

> danger in which he has placed our men and women in uniform when he unilaterally declared our right to torture prisoners, giving license to any army we ever fight to declare the same right, and emboldening terrorists who don't fight by the rules of civilized nations who now sneer at what they see as our hypocrisy. He has no idea how many new terrorists he created among the teenage sons of the men who came home damaged from Abu Ghraib or who never came home at all.
>
> Mr. Bush has no idea because he never felt a bullet whizzing over his shoulder or a piece of shrapnel lodge in his leg. He never knew what it was like to dodge a bullet because, when called to duty, he dodged the draft. Being in the National Guard is an honorable way to serve this nation. We have tens of thousands of Guardsmen fighting for our country in Afghanistan and Iraq at this very moment, and they make us proud to be Americans. But we all know what it meant in 1969 to pull strings so you could get into the National Guard during the Vietnam War. It meant somebody else got shot at in your place. And the same thing goes for his draft-dodging vice president, who not once, not twice, but *five times* had "other priorities" than to defend his nation when called for duty.
>
> Let there be no mistake. What happened at Abu Ghraib was not the action of a few renegade soldiers. We see the same pattern at Guantánamo. We see the same pattern in Afghanistan.
>
> This came from the top, not from the bottom. To blame it on the soldiers at the bottom of the chain of command so the civilians at the top can get off the hook is not only a moral outrage but an affront to every veteran who has ever worn the uniform of the United States of America.
>
> And let me say to the president's Attorney General, Alberto Gonzales, who has dismissed the provisions against torture in the Geneva Conventions as "quaint" and outdated: Go ask John McCain how quaint those Conventions seem when someone isn't following them. Go ask our British comrades in arms from World War II who suffered in Japanese prison camps how quant those Conventions are when someone isn't following them. And go ask all the Vietnam War veterans the president and vice president would have known if they'd answered their call to service how quaint those Conventions are when someone isn't following them.

So why did Kerry, a man who personally understood the stakes, choose not to make an issue of Abu Ghraib? Because his chief advisors, strategist Bob Shrum and campaign manager Mary Beth Cahill, strongly advised against it, and they had the data to back them up: what people said in focus groups.

Unfortunately, this use of focus groups represents a profound misunderstanding of how the mind works. When strategists are tempted to ask voters questions about how they should run their campaigns, they should remember a simple maxim: *don't ask, don't tell.*

As I have shown throughout this book, much of political persuasion occurs through changes in networks that are inaccessible to consciousness. If you ask people conscious questions about unconscious processes, they will be happy to offer you their theories. But most of the time, those theories are wrong. And except when focus groups are performed by a very skillful moderator like Frank Luntz, who uses them to help identify unconscious overtones and to test alternative ways of talking about an issue,[11] they say nothing about what would happen if a candidate actually made an effort to *shape* public opinion rather than mirror it.

Ironically, Cahill and her colleagues had actually collected information on voters' unconscious networks in some of their focus groups. They just didn't know how to "read" it. In one group, they asked voters to draw a picture to convey their feelings about Abu Ghraib. Voters drew a skull-and-crossbones, a hand squeezing the world out of shape, and the United States encircled by fingers pointing at it.[12] Cahill and company had used Abu Ghraib as a Rorschach (one of the first tests designed to assess unconscious networks), but they didn't get the picture.

So John Kerry, who had seen atrocities on both sides in Vietnam, who had testified about those atrocities, and who had spent years working with lawmakers on both sides of the aisle to bring home the remains of American soldiers in Vietnam who had been the victim of them, remained silent as the United States of America squeezed the world out of shape, encircled by pointing fingers warning that the path it was going down was poisonous.

That two Democratic presidential nominees failed to raise the "character" issue against George W. Bush, all the while letting him raise it against them, similarly represents a profound failure to understand both the necessity and ethics of negative campaigning. Attacking Bush's character would have called voters' attention to feelings they *should* have had about a man who ultimately presided over the country the same way he had presided over his life, with the same recklessness, inability to learn from his mistakes, and lack of concern for the consequences of his behavior.

Bush had led a profligate life, and the story he used to try to put that life off-limits was that he was born again at age forty. But Bush had himself discounted that principle in judging people's past actions, and demonstrated that whatever evils lurked in his soul before finding Jesus had not been exorcised, when he refused as governor of Texas, despite the impassioned pleas of even Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, to commute the death sentence of Karla Faye Tucker. Tucker, a convicted murderer with a childhood history that jurors might have considered to be mitigating circumstances in sentencing her had they been aware of it, had been a model prisoner for fourteen years after herself finding Jesus. Bush showed a serious character defect that would have repulsed most Americans if the Gore or Kerry campaigns had simply told them about it—and done so repeatedly—when he mocked Tucker's plea for clemency. In a candid moment with a sympathetic interviewer, Bush pursed his lips and whimpered derisively, "Please, please, don't kill me."[13] Democrats should have invoked Bush's Tucker impression every time he used the phrase "compassionate conservative," and they should have asked what kind of born-again Christian could possibly send another clearly repentant sinner to the lions.

Telling the truth about an aspect of your opponent's character that has a direct bearing on his or her capacity to lead is essential in a democracy because people vote with their emotions. If a candidate has

character flaws that *should* worry voters, candidates do them a deep disservice by jamming their emotional radar.

Playing Nice

A second myth about negative appeals is that they are ineffective. This is another distinctly liberal misconception. If it were true, George W. Bush would not have won the 2004 election after spending three-fourths of his budget on attack ads—the same percentage of the electorate, by the way, that reports an antipathy to negative campaigning.[14]

Every winning campaign in the last century has featured salient attacks on the opposition.[15] Roosevelt had no trouble indicting the Republicans as sitting blithely by as people suffered through the Great Depression, and he vowed to end their "era of selfishness" that had put the interests of the rich above those of the nation. Kennedy minced no words about Richard Nixon, and Nixon ran a brutally negative campaign in 1972, describing the Democratic Party as the party of "abortion, acid, and amnesty." George W. Bush ran the two most negative presidential campaigns in recent history. Consider the ad he used to reinforce his message on Gore's character:

> [Camera zooms slowly in on kitchen scene with television broadcasting speech by Al Gore] FEMALE VOICE: There's Al Gore, reinventing himself on television again. Like I'm not going to notice? [spoken sarcastically, with a half laugh in her voice] [image zooms in on Gore speaking] Who's he going to be today? [screen turns to static, with accompanying sound, to indicate that a new Gore is about to appear, which he does] The Al Gore who raises campaign money at a Buddhist temple? [video clips of Gore interacting with Buddhists] Or the one who now promises campaign finance reform? [full picture of Gore on the television set, saying, in the background, "I will fight for you!"] Really [spoken sarcastically, as screen again turns to static]. Al Gore, claiming credit for things he didn't even do [barely audible video clip of Gore doing an interview, which goes to full volume as the narrator stops speaking].

> GORE: "I took the initiative, in creating the Internet."
>
> FEMALE VOICE [interview continues, but Gore's volume decreases again, so that it is barely audible as the female narrator continues] Yeah, and I invented the remote control, too [static on television, followed by return to original scene of Gore blathering away about policy on the television in the kitchen]. Another round of this and I'll sell my television [in small boldfaced black letters in the middle of the screen: *gorewillsayanything.com*].[16]

Using Gore's own "testimony" renders the commercial particularly effective, because it makes the charges seem irrefutable. This is a technique Democratic ad makers should use uninhibitedly because it convicts an opponent with his own words. Had the Democratic Party done its job in 2004, every American would have been able to recite verbatim the following words from a 1991 National Public Radio interview by then-Defense Secretary Dick Cheney, as he described why American troops didn't march into Baghdad after defeating Saddam:

> They would get mired down inside Iraq, in a conflict that's been raging for generations, in the interest of trying to dictate who's going to govern in Iraq. That is not something that we are prepared to see American forces do. . . . For the U.S. to get involved militarily in determining the outcome of the struggle over who's going to govern in Iraq strikes me as a classic definition of a quagmire.[17]

Although Democrats can and should emulate the highly effective technique used in Bush's character ad against Gore, they should not emulate its ethics. It capitalized on principles of association in a way that reinforced an untruth. Gore never claimed to have *invented* the Internet, as charged by the Bush campaign and accepted by the media, and he didn't do it in this ad, either, although that's what most Americans remembered (and many readers probably took away from it after *just reading* the transcript—take a look at what he actually said). The ad activated the "invented the Internet" network by quoting Gore using a word, *create*, that in many contexts is a synonym of *invent*. The Gore team tried repeatedly, and unsuccessfully, to set the record straight. What they didn't realize was that what they really needed to do was to set the *emotion* straight, and the record would follow.[18]

The attacks by Bush and his surrogates on Kerry were far fiercer. Re-election campaigns generally hinge on whether people are happy or unhappy with the job performance of the incumbent. In 2004, Bush's approval ratings were hovering dangerously below 50 percent. Bush strategists knew that they needed to make the campaign "a choice, not a referendum,"[19] and to make it about the challenger, not the incumbent. So by May 2004, three months before Kerry had even officially become his party's nominee, the Bush campaign had already run an astonishing 50,000 negative ads against him throughout the country, and succeeded in defining him before he could define himself.

Confronted with a relentlessly negative campaign against him, one might imagine that Kerry would have fought back hard. But quite the opposite: Kerry's campaign literally had a rule that no one was allowed to attack the Republicans, particularly at the Democratic Convention.[20] The only Democratic campaign strategists who had actually elected a presidential candidate in thirty years, Carville and Begala, each attempted "an intervention" with the Kerry team, trying to explain to them how and why to go negative and how to avoid the politics of personal destruction while telling *some* kind of story about why voters should replace Bush and Kerry.

But Kerry's team, led by a strategist with an impressive zero-for-seven record in presidential campaigns, knew better. In the midst of a withering attack on his war hero status and an increasingly successful attempt to tell the story that Kerry was weak, effete, and feminine, they chose to stage a convention where everyone was expected to play nice. They told Bill Clinton—the most brilliant orator in the Democratic Party, who could be counted on to take just the right tone, which he did—to mute his criticism of the Bush administration. They were enraged at Jimmy Carter when he delivered an extraordinarily powerful, well-aimed attack on the Bush administration's foreign policy. And Kerry got virtually no post-convention "bump" in the polls, something previously unheard of.

Things were very different at the Republican Convention. Delegates handed out Band-Aids with purple hearts on them to mock Kerry's heroism. This should have led to a devastating offensive by Democrats against a draft-dodging president and vice president for making fun of a soldier wounded for defending his country—especially while our own men and women in uniform were fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq. A firing squad of Democrats fanning out across the networks in rapid response would have created a media event that overshadowed the rest of the convention.

The polls were clear throughout the election of 2004 that the country didn't want four more years of George W. Bush. His approval ratings hovered at dangerous levels throughout the campaign, even without any coherent attacks from the Kerry team. So why were Shrum and Cahill so convinced that it wouldn't be in Kerry's or the nation's interest for him to challenge the president on Abu Ghraib; on his extraordinary suspension of the Kyoto Treaty and the Geneva Conventions; on his decision to stay on vacation for a month after receiving a presidential daily briefing on August 6, 2001, titled "Bin Laden Determined to Attack Inside the U.S."; on his administration's cavalier dismissal of the Clinton administration's apocalyptic warning that al Qaeda would occupy more of the new president's time than any other issue and the detailed memo Richard Clark handed Condoleeza Rice on al Qaeda in January 2001 that she ignored; and on the stonewalling for two years of any investigation of the intelligence failures that led to September 11 and the Iraq War, which culminated in that dramatic moment (which the Kerry team never turned into an ad) in which Condoleeza Rice defensively disclosed the title of that memo the administration had tried to hide for fear of breaking the bubble of "George W. Bush, brave hero of September 11?" Why did Kerry's campaign decide not to "go negative" on Bush, instead arranging the sweetest, let's-play-nicest convention in American history, against one of the dirtiest, let's-play-roughest campaigns in memory?

Because of Dayton, Ohio.

Focus groups in places like Dayton told the Kerry campaign that they didn't like negativity.[21] And the Kerry team believed them[22]—while Bush was beating the pants off Kerry with a steady stream of negativity.

Counterpunching

I had recently moved back to Georgia after twenty-five years away when Senator Max Cleland was running for re-election in 2002. What astounded me was the following sequence of events.

Cleland's opponent, Saxby Chambliss, began attacking the Vietnam veteran and triple amputee for his lack of patriotism. The orchestrated attack began in May, when Chambliss, who had received two deferments from Vietnam because of "bad knees," chided the decorated war veteran "for breaking his oath to protect and defend the Constitution."[23]

On the surface, Chambliss was attacking Cleland for a particular vote, but it was the same vote cast by the majority of Senators, including conservative Republicans, such as Bill Frist (who, by extension, must also have been a traitor). In reality, this was simply the first act of a smear campaign with all the hallmarks of Rove politics: attack your opponent on his strong suit (in this case, Cleland's war credentials) and use innuendo, whisper campaigns (about how, exactly, Cleland had lost his limbs), and misleading accusations to destroy your opponent's reputation.

The main act came in the form of an advertising campaign, interspersed with visits from the popular "war president" (who came repeatedly to Georgia at Rove's insistence, despite the fact that Chambliss was initially seen as a long shot), claiming that Cleland was "soft on terror." The most controversial (i.e., most widely watched and discussed) commercial began with images of Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden, accompanied by the words, "As America faces terrorists and extremist dictators, Max Cleland runs television ads *claiming* he has the courage to lead." Saddam and Osama then disappear from the screen, to be replaced by Cleland, in an obvious attempt to link them associatively. The ad then portrays Cleland as having voted eleven times against the president's proposal for the creation of a Department of Homeland Security and lying about his support for the president's antiterrorism efforts, with the phrase "but that's just not the truth" stamped in large red letters over his face.

Cleland had actually been one of the first to propose a Department of Homeland Security, against Bush's vehement opposition. Later, the president changed his mind, proposing a bill with an antilabor provision that led many Democrats, including Cleland, to vote against it—and opening them to a deceptive attack on their patriotism. The ad ends with the line, "Max Cleland *says* he has the courage to lead, but the record proves that's just misleading," with the word *misleading* stamped in large red letters over his face.

This was just the kind of attack that should lead Democrats to take the gloves off. The ad was so reprehensible that Republican Senators and Vietnam veterans Chuck Hagel and John McCain denounced it.

Although I was astounded by the draft dodger attacking the disabled war veteran on his patriotism, I was even more astounded when Cleland barely responded (until the end, when it was too late). The Cleland I had watched rise through the ranks of Georgia politics when I was a teenager would have come back with a swift, unconstrained, no-holds-barred attack, which would surely have started with some variant of, "How *dare* you, you yellow-bellied, country-club coward, accuse *me* of not loving my country. How *dare* you utter my name in the same breath with Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein. I have half a mind to kick your ass with the one arm I have left."

But that wasn't how Cleland responded. He seemed like he'd been muzzled.

I shook my head in astonishment, knowing that despite his having started with a twenty-point lead in the polls, he was heading for defeat. So why didn't he make the obvious response?

I understood better two years later when Republicans used exactly the same strategy against John Kerry, who responded in just the same way—and with the same results. The Democrats had kept the same consultants who were so spectacularly unsuccessful two years earlier, and they offered the same advice.

A central psychological principle in shaping voters' networks is never to let the other side create emotional associations without countering them. That means, among other things, never letting an attack linger without responding to it. Or as Carville and Begala have gracefully put it, "It's hard for your opponent to say bad things about you when your fist is in his mouth."[24]

Most people understand the Ninth Commandment: "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor." The best response to an unfair attack is a vigorous counterpunch thrown with genuine anger that goes straight to the heart of the attacker. Particularly for Democrats, who voters tend to perceive as weak when confronted with aggression, a strong counterpunch confers the added advantage of sending the *meta-message* that this is a "different kind of Democrat," one who knows when it's time to take off the gloves.

Unfortunately, Democrats tend to respond to attacks, particularly unfair ones, with a set of strategies that virtually always fail.

The first is not to respond at all. The conscious intent of such a strategy is usually to take the high road. But a nonresponse allows the opposition to shape voters' networks with impunity, creates uncontested frames that the media readily adopt, suggests that the candidate isn't contesting the charge or has something to hide, and emboldens the person who threw the punch to follow up with another.

The second strategy is to respond to a low blow with a flurry of facts or counterarguments. This was the tack Gore took on the "serial exaggerator" charge in 2000. This response will always put a candidate on the ropes because it turns the debate into one about *the extent to which* the charges are true and erodes the candidate's credibility no matter what the eventual outcome. Candidates hit with a series of scurrilous charges may well need to answer one or two of them (preferably the weakest or most clearly dishonest), but as soon as they allow the charges to become the central focus of the exchange, they have tacitly accepted their opponent's frame—that they have something to answer to—and this will rapidly become the dominant media frame. Counterarguments or facts should always be parenthetical statements embedded in a story about the character of someone who would behave unethically in a campaign, which is a good predictor of how he or she will behave in office.

A third response is the "he knows that's not true" or "he's lying" tack. The problem with this response, like the last one, is that it turns the issue into a he-said/she-said debate that maintains the focus on whether the candidate has really done whatever he or she has been accused of doing. Once again, if you're going to say your opponent is lying, you need to establish lying as part of a broader story about your opponent's character. The response to a low blow must always convey the message that this act reflects who the opponent *is*, not just a campaign tactic.

The fourth kind of weak response, particularly to a low blow, is what Arnold Schwarzenegger might call "girlymanspeak." Senator Tom Daschle made this mistake in 2004, when Republican John Thune told him to his face on *Meet the Press* that his criticism of Bush's handling of the war in Iraq "emboldens our enemies." Like many Republicans in 2004, Thune was questioning the patriotism of his opponent. The war veteran Daschle should have come back with a withering attack, spoken directly to Thune rather than to Tim Russert, which would have guaranteed a full camera angle showing the two together, with Daschle's veins bulging in his neck and Thune leaning backwards looking weak or frightened. Had Daschle told Thune he'd had enough of chicken hawks who don't even know how to hold a gun, let alone how to salute, question the patriotism of someone who had actually *fought* for his country—and to drive the point home, egged his challenger on with, "show us, John, how you make a proper salute" (something more difficult than one might think for someone who hasn't been in the military, and a very powerful emotional message to veterans)—he would likely still be in Washington.

Daschle eventually got to the right content (mentioning, for example, that only one of the two was a veteran), but here and elsewhere, he used cautious, gentle words such as *disappointed* and *saddened*. It's fine to be saddened at a loss, but you don't express sadness or disappointment when someone slugs you. You express rage, and you start slugging back. What *is* sad is how little coaching it would have taken Daschle to avoid this mistake. But to understand why this kind of coaching should be a central task of political consultants, you have to start with the right vision of mind.

The fifth trap into which Democrats often fall is to appeal to the referees (the media), or, worse still, to the other side, to stop it and play nice. A prototypically Democratic response to grossly misleading or otherwise offensive attack ads is "that's not fair, take that down." This has three predictable, and always unwanted, consequences: it reinforces the view of Democrats as weak and woosie; it establishes the candidate who has been attacked as the supplicant to the attacker, sending a signal all humans, as primates, understand, that the candidate is *one down*[25], and it allows the other side to milk the message for all it's worth as the media replay it repeatedly while engaging in debates about its fairness, accuracy, racism, and the like, all the while allowing it to do its unconscious handiwork.

A similar problem can be seen when Democrats call for removal of some administration official who has become a lightning rod for public disapproval, such as Bush's Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. Doing so places the blame on a subordinate to the president rather than the president himself, who ultimately called the shots. This simply allows the president to jettison the offending official and weaken the associative link between himself and his failed policies. Had Democrats not waited so long to speak in unison about the failures of the Iraq War in the fall of 2006, Bush would no doubt have availed himself of this strategy and saved a dozen Republican seats in Congress.

Why is counterpunching so important?

Because failing to counterpunch costs elections.

The two most decisive moments in the 2004 election were both failures of counterpunching. The first was Kerry's silence on the "flip-flopper" charge. The only reason such a seemingly trivial attack became so powerful was that Kerry's team refused to answer it. Left unanswered, it came to define Kerry and to shape the way both voters and media analysts listened to his answers on complex questions, just as the "serial exaggerator" charge had shaped ongoing perceptions of Gore. Long before Kerry had even won his party's nomination—within forty-eight hours of his victory in the New Hampshire primary—the Bush campaign and the conservative spin machine were already using the word and defining Kerry as someone who had taken every side on every issue.[26] Kerry ultimately gave them all the ammunition they needed with his infamous statement that "I actually did vote for the $87 billion before I voted against it." That comment played thousands of times, was a primary theme of the Republican Convention, and came to define the Kerry candidacy more than any other story told by either candidate.

The flip-flopper charge was actually a familiar one. George H. W. Bush had used it against Bill Clinton, claiming that Clinton would turn the White House into the Waffle House. Nixon had used it against McGovern, in an ad called "Turnaround," that appears to have been the prototype for the highly memorable flip flopper ad run by George W. Bush against Kerry. The Nixon ad began with a photo of McGovern in profile, accompanied by the following narration: "In 1967, Senator George McGovern said he was not an advocate of unilateral withdrawal of our troops from Vietnam." The picture then rotated 180 degrees so that the viewer saw the other side of McGovern's face, conveying the message that he was literally talking out of both sides of his mouth. That this metaphor came to my mind is a good indication of the networks the ad activated. The announcer then continued, "Now, of course, he is. Last year, the senator suggested regulating marijuana along the same lines as alcohol, which means legalizing it." Once again, the photo flipped the other way: "Now he's against legalizing it, and says he always has been." The ad continued along these lines, with the "turnarounds" coming more rapidly as the ad progressed. By the end, as the photo of McGovern's "two sides" spun dizzyingly around a pole, the narrator asks, "Last year—this year. The question is, what about next year?[27]

Bush's flip-flop ad was similar, but it added the additional, largely implicit theme of Kerry as effete and privileged, by featuring him windsurfing. The ad begins as a narrator asks, "Which way would John Kerry lead?" The rest of the ad then shows him rapidly shifting back and forth in the wind to the sound of Tchaikovsky's waltz from *Swan Lake*, as the narrator describes Kerry's repeated changes in course:

> NARRATOR: Kerry voted for the Iraq war [Kerry changes directions on the water] opposed it [Kerry changes direction again], supported it, [Kerry changes direction again], and now opposes it again.

The ad continues along the same lines, with its primary focus on Iraq, but then extends to domestic issues. It concludes, "John Kerry: whichever way the wind blows."

Straight from the playbook of the Gore campaign, the Kerry campaign simply let the flip-flopper charge fester for months. By April, Kerry was reportedly infuriated by it, and he wanted to strike back by showing how much Bush flip-flopped on the issues. This wouldn't have been hard to do. It can be done against anyone with a public record, and particularly against any candidate who has run toward his party's base in the primaries and then toward the center in the general election, as Bush (and most presidential candidates on both sides of the aisle) had done. Yet again bolstered by focus groups from Cahill showing that people don't like "negativity," Shrum responded at a campaign strategy meeting, "Are we really going to get into a debate about who's the biggest flip-flopper? . . . Is this what this campaign is going to be about? These attacks aren't sticking. We're ahead in the polls."[28]

The tone deafness of the Kerry campaign to the flip-flopper attack's increasing emotional resonance with the public is disturbing. But equally disturbing was the campaign's disinterest in the available science. If the debacles of the last two elections hadn't been enough evidence of the danger of letting an attack go unanswered, relevant research from political science should have been. Years earlier, political scientist Larry Bartels had published an article in a highly visible professional journal on the importance of clarity of message. Bartels found, as expected, that voters prefer candidates whose values and policies match their own preferences. But he also found that voters prefer candidates who are clear on what they believe, *even if it is not what they believe*.[29]

Kerry could easily have dispatched with the flip-flopper charge and transformed it into a potent counterattack:

> President Bush is calling me a "flip-flopper," someone who changes his mind on issues. He's absolutely right: When I make a mistake or learn something new that tells me I'd better rethink my decision, I admit my mistake, figure out where to go next, and change course.
>
> When Mr. Bush makes a mistake, he says it wasn't a mistake, blames it on somebody else, attacks whoever said it was a mistake, tries to get them arrested or blows their wife's CIA cover, and pins a medal on whoever convinced him to make it.
>
> And the president is also right that this is an issue of character and leadership, on which the American people should cast their votes in November. A real leader doesn't make a decision, close his eyes, go full steam ahead no matter what the consequences, and attack whoever tries to get him to wake up.
>
> That's not "staying the course." That's *pride*, and last time I looked, it was a sin.

The second decisive moment in the election of 2004 was Kerry's failure to respond to the attacks on his war record by the Swift Boat Veterans. News about the impending publication of their book, *Unfit for Command: Swift Boat Veterans Speak Out Against John Kerry,* broke on the Drudge Report the day before Kerry's acceptance speech at the Democratic Convention. The book rose to the top of the best-seller list within a week—not coincidentally, the same week Kerry was supposed to get the traditional convention "bounce" in the polls, with a convention centered on his military heroism.[30]

A week later came the first of the notorious ads. The ads were extremely well produced. The first, which appeared on August 4, was by far the most persuasive. It featured one veteran after another—all claiming to have been on the boat with John Kerry, to have served under him, to have been his commanding officer, or otherwise to have had direct knowledge of his service in Vietnam—who offered some variant of the following: "John Kerry has not been honest about what happened in Vietnam," "He is lying about his record," or "He betrayed us."[31] Particularly damning was the "testimony" of a man identified on the screen as "Louis Letson, Medical Officer, Lieutenant Commander," who stated boldly, "I know John Kerry is lying about his first Purple Heart because I treated him for that injury." The timing was not coincidental: the theme of the Democratic Convention was that Kerry was a war hero who could lead the nation in a time of war.

Unanswered, this ad would surely raise doubts on the part of anyone watching it as to whether Kerry was really who he said he was. It raised doubts in my mind, and I was a committed Kerry supporter.

The Swift Boat ads, like the Cleland ads, had all the earmarks of a classic Karl Rove smear[32]: always just one step removed from Rove (funded and produced by his colleagues, protégés, and major campaign contributors), always devastating in their impact (particularly in their immediate impact, which either disrupts momentum of the opposition or leaves lingering questions in the minds of voters), and always difficult enough to sort out at first blush that their truth or falsehood would be adjudicated, if at all, long after their damage was done.

That Kerry would have to respond, and to do so within hours after the first ad hit the airwaves, was obvious. The only question was how.

But it was not obvious to the Kerry campaign.

After watching two days of deafening silence from Kerry (which ultimately turned into two weeks), I personally sent a one-page, single-spaced memo to the Kerry campaign through a common friend, detailing why Kerry needed to respond immediately or would drop precipitously in the polls and lose the entire South. I don't know if my memo reached Kerry's top advisors, but others who had his cell phone number—including James Carville, Paul Begala, and later, Bill Clinton—did, and gave them a similar message.

I emphasized in that memo two psychological issues that made a swift display of outrage and a direct attack on the president, essential. The first was the meta-message Kerry was conveying with his silence. Bush's master narrative in the 2004 campaign was that he was a strong commander in chief, a "war president," and the right man for the job in an unrelenting battle against a relentless foe. The story he was telling about Kerry was that he was weak and indecisive in the face of aggression and could not be trusted to steward the ship of state in such uneasy times. In microcosm, Kerry's silence was confirming exactly what Bush was saying about him: that he was weak and indecisive in the face of aggression (an attack on his honor). Second, as described earlier, in the South, when a man calls you a name, questions your integrity, or attacks your honor or that of your family, to step away is an act of cowardice.

By the time Kerry responded to the Swift Boat ads, the election was over. His poll numbers plummeted, and, as predicted, he lost every state in the South. His pollster, Mark Mellman, began seeing Kerry's negatives rise immediately after the first Swift Boat ad, but Shrum didn't want to respond and Cahill was convinced that an aggressive response would only accentuate the story.[33] Oddly, they seemed unaware of classic research, known to every undergraduate who has ever taken introductory psychology, on the "sleeper effect" in advertising, in which an ad that viewers may initially judge as coming from a noncredible source has an increasing impact over time.[34] What essentially happens is that people gradually forget the source, and the message becomes absorbed into their networks. Making matters worse in this case, the credibility of the sources was not initially unclear; not until much later was it clear, for example, that the doctor who claimed he had treated Kerry was not the one who signed the medical records, and his name was nowhere in Kerry's military medical records.[35]

Kerry finally struck back, linking the ads directly to the president once the Kerry campaign had meticulously documented the trail to Bush. But not only did he strike long after the iron that had branded him turned cold, but his eventual response undermined what should have been his message: that he would respond to aggression with swift and massive retaliation. The day of the first attack, he should have launched a character assault—preferably in front of an audience of veterans—against a self-proclaimed "war president" who ran ads dishonoring a decorated war veteran while our own troops were still fighting on foreign soil. He should have angrily demanded that the president stand before the American people, with his hand squarely on the Bible, and swear before God that neither he nor Rove nor any member of his campaign had anything to do with this unprecedented wartime attack on the honor of a decorated war veteran. The Bush campaign had given him a gift: the chance to make a real story of Bush's draft evasion, and to brand Bush, not Kerry, as the fake hero,

who would attack the war record of an American veteran with shrapnel still in his leg.

Instead, his campaign responded, after two weeks of silence, by putting up ads and Web site petitions pleading with the president to take it back. His campaign manager, Cahill, wrote an open letter to Bush's campaign manager, Ken Mehlman, on August 24, almost three weeks after the first ad appeared.[36] The letter impressively detailed the web of connections between the Swift Boat Veterans and the Bush campaign. (The Bush campaign's general counsel, Benjamin Ginsburg, had to resign when it turned out he'd been advising the "independent" group.) Cahill's letter concluded:

> It's time for the President to stand up and specifically condemn "Swift Boat Veterans for Truth." Not only is this a smear on John Kerry's distinguished military service; it's an insult to all veterans who've served their country. The American people want to hear an honest discussion of the issues. They're concerned about the economy and the troubling situation in Iraq. Today, as we enter week four of this smear campaign, I'm asking you to talk to the President and ask him to heed Senator McCain's call and condemn this smear. The American people deserve better.

If the letter hadn't been signed by Cahill, I would have wondered if it had been written by Rove himself. It sent virtually every message you wouldn't want to send under these circumstances. First, from a symbolic standpoint, you don't send your mother out to fight for you when another boy bullies you in the schoolyard. Kerry's response should have been man to man, and it should have been live, on the air, not in print. Second, the form and goal of the letter had a groveling, beseeching quality, which gave Bush the power to do with it what he wanted—including ignoring it, which gave him yet another chance to demonstrate that he was the more powerful primate. The letter wasn't even addressed to Bush; it was beseeching his campaign manager to beseech the president. Third, instead of making the entire incident a condemnation of the president's character, it gave Bush the opportunity to look magnanimous, if he so choose, by simply condemning the ads, now that they'd had their desired effect. Finally, it got off message, wandering into dispassionate Democratic rhetoric about how the American people want to hear debates on the issues and meandering off onto the economy and Iraq.

In his handling of the Swift Boat affair, what Kerry effectively told the American people was what he would do if America were attacked: he would wait an inordinate amount of time until he had gathered enough evidence to establish guilt beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law, use polls and focus groups to see what kind of response Americans preferred, and then write our enemies a letter imploring them to stop their terrorist acts immediately.

Sometimes, the meta-message is the message.

Conclusion: Get There First

The last several pages have focused on how to respond to attacks. But there's one strategic principle that can sometimes head off attacks or effective appeals from the opposition before they hit: *get there first.*

In the 1940s, social psychologists began studying persuasion, including how to prevent the other side from getting the upper hand. Over time, they discovered a number of methods for increasing resistance to the opposition's message. We have known for half a century that in advertising, being the first to make a pitch renders an effort at persuasion more effective.[37] The one who gets there first has the widest latitude in shaping networks while they are most malleable (i.e., when no other dots have been firmly connected).

Psychologists discovered years ago that a related technique for reducing the power of a negative appeal from the other side is *inoculation.* Inoculation means building up "resistance" to an appeal by forewarning against it or presenting (and answering) weak arguments in favor of it before the other side can offer a stronger version.[38] Much as a vaccine builds the body's defenses through exposure to small, inert amounts of a virus, weak and easily assailable arguments supporting the other point of view prompt people to accept or spontaneously generate counterarguments that serve as emotional "antibodies."

Kerry could have prevented most of the problems that ultimately undid his campaign if he and his advisors had just followed this simple, well-researched strategy. There was no sensible alternative to inoculation on the issue of his Senate testimony of April 1971. Kerry needed to explain to the American people why he had turned against the war and why he had testified about American atrocities. Leaving an "eighteen-minute gap" in his narrative simply telegraphed to Karl Rove where Kerry's team thought he was vulnerable. Embracing this part of his history would have given him the platform he needed later to speak about Abu Ghraib and to respond to the Swift Boat Veterans, who scored some of their most powerful points with the notion that Kerry's testimony was a betrayal of his fellow soldiers.[39]

Whenever Democrats are tempted to take a "wait and see" approach, they need to remember that in politics, he who frames first usually frames best.