

“Safer, Stronger” ... is it?

“I am George W. Bush, and I approve this message.” Unlike most other political ads put out by candidates running for presidential elections, this is how the “Safer, Stronger” ad began its 30 seconds spot, which first aired on March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2004. Obviously, just as the beginning line suggests, this is an ad by then-incumbent candidate, president of the United States campaigning for the 2004 presidential election that was so heavily contested. At the first time viewing the spot, I could not clearly figure out whether it was a candidate-positive ad or a negative attack ad put out by his opponents, even though I had found the ad from the Republican side of the 2004 presidential contest. Certain features of the ad, especially in the first half, such as negative images of American economy, stock market falling bright red, and struggling to rebuild the nation after the tragic events of September 11, 2001, were presented that could have misled many viewers. Not only were the presented images depressing and gloomy, the overall tone of the color of the spot was also bleak and murky. Even at the very last part of the ad, when the Americans were supposed to have “turned the corner,” as the caption had suggested, even though the sounds in the background definitely carried positive images, presenting giggling kids running around playing joyfully, sound of welding, which indicates rejuvenated and now bursting economy, and the sound of jet fighter, indicating strong defense and national security against our enemies, the visual images almost told a different story, buried in the heavy tone of the background color of darkness.

That is why I had decided, immediately to analyze this particular political ad, just as Professor Bucy had suggested, by viewing it without the background sound. With all the sounds muted, as I had suspected, this spot almost seemed as a negative ad against the incumbent

candidate put out by the Kerry campaign. With all the background sounds and hope-inducing music excluded from the sensory system, first half of the ad appeared to be an attack ad against the President. After showing the clip of President George W. Bush taking oath, with his left hand on the Bible, and his right hand up in the air, for the inauguration ceremonies, the next clip the viewers find themselves in looking at the gloomy messages of “an economy in recession,” with so many big bright red arrows pointing down, definitely pointing to “a stock market in decline.” A man is seen shaking his head, unbelievably at what is happening with the American economy. With the caption “A dot come boom... gone bust,” it almost seemed like a lack of imagination to express what they had intended to appeal through this ad to the audiences, who are potential voters and possibly potential supporters to his cause, on Bush campaigners’ part, when the ad showed “http://www...” being typed in. I thought showing these images clearly indicating to bad economy was not a sound plan for the President’s campaign since it could raise a question that could serious hurt the incumbent candidate’s position: “Who is responsible for this mess?” Obviously, he was the President of the United States of America for the past couple years. Apparent from the fact that the ad started with the January 2001 inauguration of President Bush, the Bush campaigned seemed to want to establish the “incumbent-style” ad that presented him as the only person who is fit to lead the country in time of “economy in recession.” But his political advisers also should have remembered that, it could have backfired on his cause and haunted him, a candidate-positive ad put out by him, blaming himself for the worsened economy, while he was in the position to lead the nation away from it.

As if it was not bad enough, in the next scene, the ad took the audiences back to the “day of tragedy” with showing the images of September 11, rubbles from the buildings that had been hit by the terrorist activities, and firefighters continuing on with the search and rescue efforts,

while American people are mourning the national tragedy and raising up the American flag, the icon of American freedom and people's patriotic allegiance to the nation in distress. Showing of these images of vulnerable America, attacked by terrorists and deeply scarred could almost seem ironic with the title of this ad: "Safer, Stronger."

In Chapter 8 of Going Dirty, David Mark gives examples of various levels of candidates, ranging from local mayoral candidates to presidential candidates, appealing to the emotions, related to nation's experience of September 11. Even though, most of these ads were part of negative campaigning, resting on the "politics of fear," as the chapter's title had suggested, it was not the case with this particular political ad that I had chose to analyze. The incumbent president's campaign had tried to appeal to the voters that Bush is more apt at fighting terrorism and building "safer" nation against our enemies by establishing "stronger" defense and national system, and stayed away from naming Kerry as incapable of doing so, or at least, not as fit as President Bush, as other negative ads of the 2004 contest had claimed.

In Chapter 6 of Media Politics, Iyengar and McGrady talk about the "issue ownership" when candidates campaign for public positions. The authors give examples of "owned-issues" by the Republican Party, and they include: "national security, defense, and foreign affairs." (p. 142, Iyengar & McGrady) "Safer, Stronger" ad aired by the Bush campaign, yet again, tries to claim the issues owned by their party. Two main things the Bush campaign had tried to boast as their advantages against their opponent were, fiscally conservative, indicating that he can bring back to life the economy in recession, and build "stronger" nation by focusing on national security and defense.

Also the Bush campaign had tried hard to present their candidate as a strong, well-established candidate. This ad tried to put out the “incumbent style” of campaigning by starting out with the inauguration ceremonies: “I, Gorge Walker Bush, solemnly swear...” Whenever the President is shown in the clip, he is wearing suit and tie in a very formal fashion, and showing what he had tried to do to establish “safer” and sounder economy and “stronger” national security and defense. As suggested in lecture, the incumbent rarely speaks directly to the audience, except for the part where he or she claims responsibility, after the passage of a new requirement enacted through the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002 (BCRA). BCRA requires candidates, parties and interest groups to include both an oral and written disclaimer statement with radio and television ads, thereby taking responsibility for the content of the political advertisement. Even so, in this particular ad, President Bush did not talk directly to the audiences, rather walking erectly towards the camera, while the voice-over of himself “approved the message.” Also, with his “incumbent-style” of campaigning, he appealed to the people to support the “steady leadership.”

This particular political spot tried very hard to establish strong association with the candidate it supported with the American flag. Just as West had suggested in the Overview of Ads article, the American flag is a strong symbol of patriotism. (West, p. 6) In the post-9/11 world, the appeal to American flag and patriotism associated with the most American symbol, swayed across the nation. Riding on the current, this ad presented the American flag five times in a seemingly short spot of 30 seconds. The ad begins with the American flag in the background while President Bush took the oath to “preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States.” Then there is a flag standing firmly flying high in the sky, in front of the rubbles of fallen buildings from the terrorist attacks, indicating even though our enemies had managed to

destroy the buildings, the American ideal did not fall and remained to stand firm against the vicious world out there. The next scene when the American flag is found is when the firefighters carry the victims of the attack, wrapped around the flag. This image is juxtaposed by a private citizen raising the flag. Then just as the ad began with the flag in the background, the spot ended with the flag at the last scene, in the background of the candidate's name.

Overall, I was not able to find any condensation symbols that were buried in the messages of this particular political ad, and also I could not grasp any "ethically suspect" editing or production techniques. From the beginning to the end, most of the images and clips put on were presented without much editing and I believe that is what the Bush campaign had tried to establish. Through candidly speaking to the viewers, even though there were hardships that the American nation faced, the message of the ad was to urge people to "rise to the challenge" with "steady leadership in times of change." One thing that caught my eyes was that, it seemed very interesting that the ad tried to evoke the image of "change." With all the "incumbent-style" of campaigning he had tried to establish up to that point, I do not think "change" was not such a good choice of word use, or a concept that he should have appealed to, since it could suggest "changing" the presidency. Also, with overall gloomy and depressing contents, accompanied with dark tone the images were presented with, I do not think that this particular ad would have helped the candidate's cause very much.