

“The Blocking Machine”

Reflective of an intensely competitive and high stakes campaign season, the 2004 South Dakota Senatorial election was bitterly contested and notable for its divisively negative tactics. The race pitted former Republican Congressman John Thune against the incumbent Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle. Among the several oppositional ads the candidates broadcasted to South Dakota voters, Congressman Thune ran a particularly unique soft sell critique of his opponent. “The Blocking Machine,” as the ad was titled, interpolates Senator Daschle into an old time football highlight replete with sepia tone, newsreel style voiceover and a generic fight song playing in the background. Clocking in at just under a minute, 59.9 seconds, “The Blocking Machine” uses irony to portray Daschle as out of touch with his constituency in an attempt to generate feelings of disgust and anger among viewers. The ad’s harsh negativity and irreverent style may have disheartened uncommitted voters, but its emotive appeals ultimately proved effective in engaging a conservative base fruitful enough to sway the election.

“The Blocking Machine” employs a soft sell approach in appealing to a viewers sense of irony in order to generate negative conceptions of Senator Daschle. The light hearted nature of the advertisement is set immediately as viewers are treated to what appears to be an old style football highlight reel. The beginning of the ad indicates that the following spot will be a biopic about a member of “The greatest blocking line of all time,” which also includes Ted Kennedy at “left tackle,” Hillary Clinton, playing “really left tackle,” Barbara Boxer positioned at “way left tackle,” and the star Tom “the blocking machine” Daschle listed at “extremely left tackle.” As the word “left” serves as Condensation Symbol synonymous with “liberal,” it mocks those it describes for

perceived extreme views. Furthermore positioning United States Senators in a completely atypical context creates a humorous aura and makes them appear particularly foolish. Senator Kennedy, who like the others has his face superimposed upon a football player's body, is displayed with a gaping mouth that highlights his wide jaw line and makes him appear goofily ill-tempered.

The Videostyle, as defined by Lynda Lee Kaid and Dorothy K. Davidson, reinforces the ad's ironic tone.. The verbal communication utilized by the ad is the first Kaidian indicator of sarcasm that ridicules Daschle, the narrator's voice is one associated with an old time newsreel. While his inflection alone is jocular to the point of mockery, the narrator proceeds to detail Daschle as "blocking" beneficial pieces of legislation with the intonation of a sportscaster observing a spectacular Tom Harmon touchdown run, raising his cadence each time he repeats the buzzword "blocked!" Furthermore, the fight song in the background recalls a bygone era and befits the theme of Senator Daschle's "success" in preventing desired legislation from being passed. On-screen text, another important aspect of Kaid and Davidson's elements of Videostyle, is used prolifically in irony with the ad, of course, opening with "The Blocking Machine" displayed across the screen. Throughout the spot the word "blocked" appears in bold three times.

While the ironic tone set by the ad's production makes Daschle appear a fool, the ad's overarching purpose is to highlight Daschle as out of touch with his constituents. For the brief 1.6 seconds at the beginning of the ad that Thune appears on screen, in which he says "I'm John Thune and I approve this message," the challenger is made to look like the common man. In accordance with Kaid and Davidson conclusions, Thune adopts the common challenger attire of casual dress. Relaxingly leaning against a tree,

Thune sports a flannel shirt tucked into a pair of blue jeans. Behind him lies a picturesque landscape of tall trees and green forestry interrupted only by an American flag waving at full mast in the light wind beside what appears to be a Revolutionary era cannon pointed away from the camera. During this brief screen shot, Thune appears to embody the image of a “regular guy” as well certain values such as patriotism and a comfort in South Dakota’s landscape. Once Thune is established during this short moment as a “man of the people” the rest of the ad seeks to establish Daschle as out of touch.

Immediately Thune starts his attack on Daschle through verbal and visual association, one of eight principles of advertising enumerated by Darrell West. The narrator explains that Daschle is a member of “The Greatest Blocking Line of All Time” along with Ted Kennedy, Hillary Clinton and Barbara Boxer. More than a simple association with other Democrats, however, these Senators in particular were chosen because they served as Condensation Symbols, as defined by Doris Graber, which seek to “stir vivid impressions involving the listener’s most basic values.” In a state positioned in America’s “Heartland” and where, according to CNN voter exit polls, 84% of voters described themselves as moderate or conservative and 55% made under \$50,000 per year; Kennedy, Clinton and Boxer are *emblems* of a coastal liberal elite that Thune perceives as alien to South Dakotans but that Daschle, he argues, embraces.¹ In its description of these Senators, the advertisement describes their positions as variations of “left tackles.” The advertisement continues to use the word “left,” a synonym for liberal, as a condensation symbol both as a buzzword that causes its detractors to bristle and as a

¹ CNN.com, 2004 U.S. Senate South Dakota Exit Poll, <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2004//pages/results/states/SD/S/01/epolls.0.html>

means to stereotype Daschle as an adherent of an ideology which the vast majority of the state rejects.

Because at the time Daschle was in a position of power in the Senate from which he could conceivably derive benefits for South Dakota and its residents, it was necessary for Thune, as is the case for many challengers, to attack Daschle retrospectively on his issue positions. Successful attacks on issue positions throughout this commercial would hopefully generate either disgust or anger on the valence scale. Candidates who try to invoke these emotions generally use economic issues as their avenue of attack and thus most of the ad's issue attacks are rooted in Daschle's failure to account for South Dakota's economic needs. According to the narrator, Daschle "blocked," "an energy bill that would help South Dakota farmers," "a permanent tax cut for South Dakota families," and "lawsuit reform that would stop frivolous lawsuits and lower medical costs." Employing the "block" terminology implies that Senator Daschle actively ensured that his constituents would not receive the supposed economic benefits that these pieces of legislation guaranteed. Details of the various bills of course are limited, but the outcomes, helping South Dakota farmers and families and lowering medical costs, and Daschle's obstruction of those outcomes are clear. One can conclude that John Thune, already having proven himself as a man of the people, would not be so out of touch with the desires of the people.

The only issue mentioned that is not rooted in the economy and not outcome driven, is Daschle's response to confirming judicial nominees. Here the ad once again reverts to condensation symbols associating Daschle with the buzzword "filibuster," a topic of particularly hot controversy at the time. The narrator explains that when asked to

confirm judicial nominees, “Tom ‘the blocking machine’ Daschle called upon his patented move: ‘the Filibuster.’” If the viewer was not disgusted with Daschle already, the narrator blithely offers an epitaph: “Tom ‘the Blocking Machine’ Daschle: crushing laws, fighting progress, stone walling hopes and dreams.” Again the ad countermands positive themes, “laws,” “progress,” and “hopes and dreams,” with descriptions of willful obstruction on Daschle’s part.

“The Blocking Machine,” most likely is an effort to arouse and inspire a conservative base as opposed to a wider audience of undecided voters. The ad’s decidedly emotive appeal to viewers’ revulsion would likely not resonate with voters who are educated on the issues and not tantalized by buzzwords, emblems and stereotypes. Furthermore, the considerably outlandish nature of the ad’s production and content may very likely serve to keep voters away from the polls. The harshness of the ad’s conclusion, bordering on a character assault, that Daschle “stonewalls hopes and dreams,” surely may have induced a different sort of revulsion among viewers. It was ads like these which, according to the South Dakota based *Aberdeen American News*, “grated on voters like nails on chalkboards” and led the paper to conclude that candidates should “quit listening to the ‘experts’ who say negative campaigning works.”² Yet for all of the *American News*’s idealism, Thune’s negativity proved effective as he won an incredibly close race by under 5,000 votes. Most importantly, however, while Daschle captured healthy majorities of independent and moderate voters, Thune’s succeeded on

² American News Staff, “Does Negative Work? We’ll See Soon,” *Aberdeen American News*, November 3, 2004, Editorial Section, http://infoweb.newsbank.com/iw-search/we/InfoWeb?p_product=AWNB&p_theme=aggregated5&p_action=doc&p_docid=1067BBCD54498CEF&d_place=AANC&f_subsection=sEDITORIAL&f_issue=2004-11-03&f_publisher= .

the strength of overwhelming support from his base, capturing 80% of the conservative vote and 82% of the Republican vote.³ Ultimately, the election's results are emblematic of "The Blocking Machine's" effectiveness. To uncommitted observers its utter shamelessness likely served as a repellent. Yet emotive appeals rooted in perceptions of Daschle's obstruction of desired outcomes and political associations which embarrassed his constituents seems to have fueled in conservatives a righteous indignation to make 2004, in the words of the commercial's narrator, "Tom 'the blocking machine' Daschle's farewell season."

³ CNN.com exit polls.