

MANUFACTURING POLITICAL GAFFES:
HOW MAINSTREAM MEDIA DISCOURSES IMPLICATE POLITICAL AUTHENTICITY

By

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(Under the Direction of Roger Stahl)

ABSTRACT

Gaffes are increasingly common in political discourse and dominate media coverage. Typically, gaffes are defined as mistakes that show something authentic about the politician. I argue, however, that gaffes are neither mistakes nor authentic. Gaffes are discourses that promote political imaging. While inspired by certain moments, a closer look shows that many things labeled gaffes are not mistakes. Even when these moments are deemed authentic, these discourses argue that politicians should hide their true selves from the public. Using nine examples of well-known political gaffes inspired by speech, hot mic incidents and photo ops, I argue that these mainstream media discourses are less about politicians than they are about the public. Gaffe discourses are demophobic because they depict the public as politically unsophisticated.

INDEX WORDS: Gaffes, Politics, Media, Hypermediacy, Authenticity, Demophobia

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CHAPTER ONE

POLITICAL GAFFES: MISTAKES, MEDIATION, AND AUTHENTICITY

“A ‘gaffe’ is the opposite of a ‘lie’: It’s when a politician inadvertently tells the truth.”¹

Named for the journalist who coined this definition, the “Kinsley Law of Gaffes” is arguably the most popular conception of gaffes. For Michael Kinsley, gaffes are mistaken moments that reveal the truth. “Gaffe” is used to denote a truthful departure from the political norm of being “on message,” otherwise known as lying. Politicians strive to avoid these political liabilities and regret it when they happen: “If they wish they’d never said it, it’s a gaffe.”² *Safire’s Political Dictionary* defines “gaffe” (bloopers) as, “An exploitable spoken mistake; a slip of the tongue, or unthinking comment, that can be seized upon by the opposition.”³ Similarly, *Taegan Goddard’s Political Dictionary* defines “gaffe” as “An unintentional comment that causes a politician embarrassment...a politician inadvertently saying something publicly that they privately believe is true, but would ordinarily not say because it is politically damaging.”⁴ These popular definitions characterize gaffes as mistaken revelations of political truths that can be used as political weapons by one’s opponents.

In practice, though, “gaffe”⁵ is used to describe such an extensive range of speech and actions that the term seems quite meaningless. Consider this selected list: Vice President Nixon’s haggard appearance during a presidential debate, Senator Edward Muskie’s visible tears during a speech, President Gerald Ford’s attempt to eat a tamale still wrapped in its corn husk, photos of President Jimmy Carter shooing away a swamp rabbit from his canoe, photos of President Ronald Reagan wearing a dress shirt tucked into high-

waisted sweatpants while delivering remarks on Air Force One, Vice President George H. W. Bush's condescending tone to his opponent Geraldine Ferraro during a debate, Senator Gary Hart's challenge to journalists to follow him to disprove an extramarital affair (which they did and found), Governor Bill Clinton's admission that he tried marijuana but "didn't inhale," Vice President Al Gore's audible sighs during a presidential debate, President George W. Bush's declaration, "We cannot let terrorists and rogue nations hold this nation hostile," Howard Dean's impassioned "scream" after a primary loss, Senator John Kerry's explanation of his changing support for an Iraq war funding bill, saying, "I actually did vote for the \$87 billion before I voted against it," Senator Barack Obama's claim that some frustrated voters "cling to guns or religion," Vice President Joe Biden's whisper into a hot mic that the Affordable Care Act was "a big fucking deal!," Governor Rick Perry's inability to remember the third governmental agency he planned to abolish along with the Department of Commerce and the Department of Education during a Republican primary debate (it was the Department of Energy), and Governor Mitt Romney's secretly recorded claim that 47% of Americans are entitlement abusers. Everything on this list is referred to as a gaffe. The items on this list are even more disparate when we consider that some gaffes are speech while others are actions, some are factual errors while others are simply noises, some seem intentional while others seem accidental, some happen during political debates while others happen during vacation, some are labeled gaffes immediately while others receive the label much later, some ruin political careers while others are quickly forgotten, and so on. Surely we would not classify all these as Kinsley-esque accidental political truths.

I argue that gaffes are made, not discovered. Definitions of gaffes as accidental truths do not recognize that gaffes are media discourses, not mistaken moments. As the

preceding list demonstrates, any raw material, speech or action, mistake or not, truth or not, can inspire a gaffe discourse. A gaffe is not a moment that *causes* a media discourse; a gaffe *is* the media discourse. There are more potential gaffes than column inches or TV minutes could possibly cover and not every mispronunciation, audible sigh, or sartorial misstep becomes a gaffe. Many things that become gaffes are not mistakes at all—they are carefully planned aspects of political imaging. There is nothing essential that unites these moments and little to help us predict what will later become a gaffe. Thus, a gaffe is a media discourse that transforms a moment into an imaging mistake.

While many assume that gaffes are truths about the politicians who speak them, gaffe discourses are in fact about the American people. The discourse of gaffe-as-imaging mistake, I argue, is driven by an underlying discourse of demophobia, or the impossibility of democratic governance. Political imaging⁶ happens through frontstage “messaging” that endeavors to curry favor with the public. The most popular definition of gaffes is that they are accidental revelations of truth. They are things that should not have been said, but also widely recognized as authentic. This odd approach to gaffes can be explained, I argue, by demophobia. Gaffe discourses transform moments into political imaging errors. They then encourage politicians to repair the supposed damage done to their political images. In so doing, gaffe discourses dwell on the mechanics of political imaging, consistently reminding the public that political images are crafted and thus, necessarily inauthentic. Because they draw attention to mediation instead of minimizing it, they are what I will later describe as “hypermediated.” In other words, gaffe discourses explicitly promote inauthenticity in political imaging. Eschewing the desirability of authenticity in the political sphere precludes the opportunity for the public to rationally deliberate about their political

leaders. The demophobia expressed in these discourses is particularly insidious because it does not contend that the public should be excluded from politics because of their propensity to be manipulated. Rather, it works by asserting that the public can and should be manipulated. In the following sections I will review the scholarly literature related to political mistakes, authenticity, and mediation. Then, I will conclude with a preview of upcoming chapters.

Mistakes

Political gaffes seem to happen all the time and overwhelm political news coverage. They are considered occupational hazards for politicians. The success of political speeches and events is measured by the lack of gaffes. Gaffes determine debate outcomes, are blamed for dips in the polls and election losses, punctuate and are often the most memorable features of campaigns, and are potent partisan weapons. It is common practice for politicians to send operatives to record their opponent's every event, speech and conversation in the hopes of capturing something that can be turned into a "defining moment." There are more possible channels for politicians to commit gaffes today, such as social media. Politicians are categorized by how many gaffes they commit, are called "gaffe-machines" and some politicians boast their own category of gaffes, such as Reaganisms and Bushisms. Some gaffes are blamed for forcing politicians out of office and when a politician does leave office or even dies, articles commemorate their best-known gaffes. Because of their perceived danger, politicians have teams of people dedicated to preventing "gaffe-gates." Gaffes provide endless material for talking heads on television, inspire top gaffe lists, encyclopedias, blogs and comedy books. Extensive gaffe coverage in the news media

inspires complaints about negligent journalists and think pieces about the lack of substance in American politics.

All this suggests that gaffes are significant political phenomena. In what follows, I examine the scholarly literature related to political mistakes. This literature is disciplinarily diverse and much of it does not necessarily use the term “gaffe.” It is united by the theorization of political mistakes as the unfortunate effects of mediated political speech. These scholars argue that the direct relationship between eloquent speakers and their admiring audiences cultivated memorable speeches. By contrast, electronic mediation separates speakers and audiences leading to, paradoxically, more sophisticated political imaging as well as attention to the mistakes that disrupt it. Politicians strive to recreate intimate forms of communication through imaging while audiences hunger for mistakes that reveal what their politician is “really” like, aided by journalists bored by the continuous coverage that this media environment requires. Ultimately, these are historical arguments about the detrimental role the development of electronic mediation has had on political speech.

These scholars argue that unmediated political speech was higher quality and received positively by audiences. It allowed speakers to reuse effective material while also adapting to specific audiences. Speakers could practice a speech to perfection and fix mistakes before their next performance. Joshua Meyrowitz notes,

[T]he treasured images of many of our other political heroes were made possible by their ability to practice and modify their public performances. Early mistakes could be limited to small forums, minor changes could be tested, and speeches and presentations could be honed to perfection. Politicians could thrill many different crowds on different days with a single well-turned phrase.⁷

Since they were not recorded nor broadcast until the 20th century, speeches could be used repeatedly. Mistakes still occurred, but were incidental. Fortunately, the ephemeral nature of speech meant audiences did not notice mistakes, or, if they did, they were quickly forgotten as the speaker continued. According to Stephen Lucas and Martin J. Medhurst, “Listeners do not fasten on a speaker’s every hesitation, slip of the tongue, and vocalized pause. These and other disfluencies usually pass quickly in the flow of oral communication and are subordinated into the listener’s consciousness unless they become so frequent as to distract from the speaker’s message.”⁸ So-called unmediated speech was higher quality and delivered to more generous audiences.

These scholars argue that mediation degrades the speaker-audience connection. Both speeches and mistakes are less transient because they are recorded and broadcast. Meyrowitz argues,

When the camera or microphone is on, politicians can no longer separate their interaction with the press from their interaction with the public. The camera unthinkingly records the flash of anger and the shiver in the cold; it determinedly shadows our leaders as they trip over words or down stairs. And, unlike the testimony of journalists or of other witnesses, words and actions recorded on electronic tape are impossible to deny. Thus, while politicians try hard to structure the *content* of the media coverage, the *form* of the coverage itself is changing the nature of political image.⁹

Electronic media means audiences now see and hear their politicians in unprecedented detail. Backstage characteristics became public when seen through a camera lens. Things that avoided notice, like tears and shivers, are now brought to light. These nonverbal expressions give us more information about our politicians than ever before. As Meyrowitz writes, “Expressions are constant and much less controllable than communications. Further, while communications can be about anything, expressions, in one very important sense, are always ‘about’ the individual giving them off.”¹⁰ Unlike the live, forgiving

audiences of the past, now the camera records everything, both good and bad. Things live audience may not notice or would “pass quickly” in the flow of speech become mistakes when the camera is so close. When a speech is electronically recorded, flaws like “hesitation[s], slip[s] of the tongue, and vocalized pause[s]” become more apparent. The small mistakes that present audiences would ignore during fleeting speech also become permanent with mediation. According to Michael Lempert and Michael Silverstein, “in our age of total recordability and instant replay no slip-up necessarily winds up on the cutting-room floor of the political process.”¹¹ The more mediated a speech is, the more likely mistakes will appear.

Mistakes seem more significant by their sheer exposure. Even if the relative incidence of mistakes is the same, it seems like there are more because we are exposed to them more frequently and more widely. Recorded and broadcast speeches do not allow reuse of material or repeat practice to minimize mistakes. As Meyrowitz argues, “because politicians address so many different types of people simultaneously, they have great difficulty speaking in specifics. And any slip of the tongue is amplified in significance because of the millions of people who have witnessed it.”¹² As Samuel McCormick and Mary Stuckey argue, “By making the spoken discourse of American presidents almost immediately available to mass audiences, more examples of presidential disfluency could enter into American public culture. Somewhat accordingly, the president began to seem more prone to verbal slips and glitches.”¹³ When speeches are broadcast, the speech as well as the mistakes are disseminated to mass audiences.

Some scholars argue critics should edit out mistakes to reproduce the direct relationship between speaker and audience. For example, Lucas and Medhurst contend that

the translation of speech from the spoken to written medium emphasizes mistakes to the eye that the ear would miss. Lucas and Medhurst argue that critics should replicate the spoken performance to “provide as accurate a record as possible of what the speaker actually said—not the speech as printed in the press or revised for subsequent publication, but the speech as delivered to its immediate audience.”¹⁴ To them, this means editing out mistakes that appear on the page because they would not have been noticeable in the original speech performance. Editing preserves a speech’s integrity when translating a speech to text.¹⁵

To minimize mistakes in an electronically mediated environment, politicians work in the opposite direction, from text to speech. Specifically, they rely on scripts. “Literacy, not orality,” McCormick and Stuckey argue, “is the key to presidential eloquence. The authority of presidential speech resides on the Teleprompter more than in spoken discourse.”¹⁶ Reliance on scripts, presumably, minimizes the potential for mistakes. In other words, “the art of public address continues to morph into the art of electronically mediated recitation.”¹⁷ Even the script, however, is not a failsafe against mistakes. Not only does the camera highlight things that can be considered errors, like tears and shivers, but reliance on the script requires politicians that excel with declamation. Not all do, and politicians deviate from the script in unexpected ways. McCormick and Stuckey write, “Much to the embarrassment of professional politicians and their handlers—and usually to the amusement of mass-mediated audiences—official public discourse is often perforated with moments of everyday talk.”¹⁸

Still, the “script” is an important aspect of political imaging. Imaging is particularly difficult in a media environment that zooms in and reveals flaws. But having consistent and

compelling scripts helps to build a strong political image. A politician's charge, particularly when running for office, is to earn the public's support by creating favorable impressions. Meyrowitz writes, "The new situations created by electronic media have a tremendous impact on politicians...political performers express their characters more directly and exclusively through the dominant forms of communication than do average citizens."¹⁹ Thus, politicians focus on "message" in creating their political image. Lempert and Silverstein write that message, or "what the politician seems to communicate about his or her identity and personal values," is central to political success.²⁰ W. Lance Bennett notes, "candidates are permitted a remarkable degree of freedom to contrive their personae and then are held accountable for the faithful portrayal of those characters."²¹ Their task is to build character and properly manage the media.

Media is an instrument that politicians use at their own risk. As a politician gains through media exposure, they should equally be prepared to lose. John B. Thompson calls this the "double-edged sword of visibility." Politicians succeed by building their images, but they are also "attribute[s] by which they could just as easily be hung."²² Thompson writes, politicians "must be on their guard continuously and employ a high degree of reflexivity to monitor their actions and utterances; since an indiscreet act or ill-judged remark can, if recorded and relayed to millions of viewers, have disastrous consequences."²³ Despite attempts to stay on script and message, Craig Allen Smith and Kathy B. Smith warn, "The sheer quantity of talk virtually guarantees that the presidential foot will, sooner or later, find its way into the presidential mouth."²⁴ They further write, "those who live by the word die by the word."²⁵ Similarly, James David Barber notes, "Given the enormous volume of verbal productions candidates spew forth and the semiexhausted state in which they

compose them, it is a wonder they do not gaffe every day.”²⁶ Politicians gain through media exposure, but it can also destroy them. A gaffe is a “breach” in message that “offer[s] us the chance to see how people in the media and in the public think politicians should talk, act, comport themselves.”²⁷ Politicians are tasked with political imaging in an intrusive media environment that makes it extremely difficult to control their messaging. Thompson explains, “Gaffes and outbursts are among the most common sources of trouble for political leaders. They represent a failure on the part of the individual fully to control his or her behaviour, and they thereby attest to an individual who is not fully in command of the situation or of his or her own feelings, actions, or utterances.”²⁸

To be sure, electronic mediation has dramatically changed political speech. The relationship between speakers and audiences is necessarily indirect because it is highly mediated. Speakers and audiences no longer have to be in the same place at the same time. Unlike unmediated speech, many scholars argue, mediated speech is more prone to mistakes. Electronic media zooms in on politicians, revealing and emphasizing mistakes that would otherwise go unnoticed. Mediation also transforms normal speech patterns, such as vocalized pauses, into mistakes. In addition, broadcasting means more speech must be produced because speeches cannot be used more than once, increasingly the likelihood of mistakes. Politicians have the difficult task of constructing their political images in this environment. There are more speeches, less practice, and bigger audiences, which is a recipe for more mistakes. Despite the simulated intimacy that the media environment creates, the public understands that political images are scripted. Mediation creates suspicion of political images, and some scholars even want to edit out the mistakes they

believe arise from mediation. However, they argue that journalists intentionally devote media coverage to mistakes.

While electronic mediation affords us a closer perspective that could result in more speech mistakes, we should be careful not to equate mistakes with gaffes. Many moments we might call mistakes do not inspire gaffes and many gaffes do not arise from mistakes. Gaffes are discourses about certain moments, not necessarily mistakes. A mistake is a moment in time; a gaffe is a discourse. A mistake is an unintentional act; a gaffe is a media discourse that produces an act, intentional or not, as an event for mass consumption and dissection. Still, since political images are constructed, the reasoning goes, mistakes are indicators of authenticity. If the political image is a sham, a flaw in that image must be authentic. In the following section, I examine political authenticity's important role in political imaging.

Authenticity

Like political mistake scholars, authenticity scholars argue that electronic mediation increased the appeal of authenticity.²⁹ The rise of television, social changes in the 1960s and 1970s and the shift in the political landscape following the Watergate scandal caused the public to become suspicious of all things manufactured. This made political authenticity especially important to Americans.³⁰ As Nixon scholar David Greenberg notes, "We now live in a culture that's hyperaware of the construction and manipulation of images in politics."³¹ While American politics has always been concerned with authenticity, midcentury social and political changes "further fused politics with matters of authenticity."³² Seifert writes, "In order to evaluate candidates in a world where 'real' and 'mediated' were often

indistinguishable, voters demanded not only increased access to candidates, but also access to the candidate-making process itself.”³³

The increased desire for political authenticity changed the political landscape. Shawn J. Parry-Giles defines political authenticity in part as “assessing...the veracity of a political leader’s public image ‘on the grounds of truth and realism.’”³⁴ Authenticity is the battleground on which political contests are fought. According to Parry-Giles, authenticity is “the *raison d’être* of the image-making struggle.”³⁵ Politicians, their opponents, and the news media battle over which politicians’ images are deemed authentic. She writes,

Political authenticity derives from character concerns as candidates (and their surrogates) attempt to authenticate a candidate’s image as their political opponents, in turn, attempt to inauthenticate it. The news media ultimately enter the image fray and become self-appointed arbiters of political authenticity within this image-making struggle. This political exercise operates within a public-political sphere, culminating in socially constructed images that masquerade as political reality.³⁶

Erica J. Seifert’s study of authenticity in presidential campaigns found that in every contest since 1976, the candidate considered more “authentic” won.³⁷ Allan Loudon and Kristen McCauliff additionally argue that authenticity frequently outweighs other political considerations, writing, “Even when particular candidates do not embody our ideal, we often *respect* them. We believe that this has something to do with their being authentically authentic.”³⁸

The media environment that inspires the desire for authenticity also makes it impossible. The public desires authenticity because political images are constructed. But impressions of authenticity are the result of political imaging. The public’s desire to avoid manipulation precipitates their manipulation. As Tamar Liebes writes, “we may witness the paradox concerning public opinion: it is the fear of being manipulated by politicians, perceived as motivated by their own private interests, that makes people crave for

‘sincerity,’ through (phony) interpersonal communication within a community of values.”³⁹

Liebes continues, “As everyone is aware of the rules (and assumes that any show of sincerity or spontaneity is phony), and the politicians know that everyone knows, the challenge is to persuade the public against their better judgment because they want to believe (or, rather, to suspend disbelief).”⁴⁰ The fact that authenticity seems so far out of reach makes it extremely appealing to audiences. Unfortunately this makes them susceptible to politicians able to create authentic impressions via political imaging.

Appearing authentic in front of cameras and microphones does not come naturally. It requires skill to perform. Liebes argues, “Authenticity is performed, live, on stage, and can be watched, in action, and everyone can see and judge for themselves (or so it seems) if he is for real or just faking.”⁴¹ Political mistake scholars wrote that electronic mediation changed the relationship between the speaker and the audience, and that necessarily changes how a speaker must perform for media. Politicians that look most at ease in front of the cameras are considered authentic because their performances minimize awareness of mediation. For example, Kathleen Hall Jamieson’s analysis of President Reagan’s rhetorical success argues that looking authentic necessitates skilled deception. She writes,

Speaking effectively on television requires an ability both to create the illusion of eye contact with an unseen audience and to converse with a camera. Delivering from a ghosted text requires a skill at speaking someone else’s words as if they were your own and investing a script with the illusion of spontaneity. Most televised political speechmaking is built on these minor but not insignificant forms of deception.⁴²

Speaking in front of a camera requires a different skill set than everyday speech. Those with that skill set will rank high on perceived levels of authenticity. Liebes writes, “Paradoxically, however, demonstrating qualities such as spontaneity and authenticity – which are supposed to reflect an uncalculated and uncalculable personality – has got to be

carefully worked out and rehearsed in advance (and are unthinkable with no help from professional image-makers.)”⁴³ Those without the skill set to speak to the cameras will appear inauthentic. Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Paul Waldman explain,

Unlike the grand nineteenth-century rhetoric, this form of political communication demands ‘sincerity’ and ‘authenticity.’ Candidates whose performance is stilted or uncomfortable—Michael Dukakis, George H.W. Bush, Al Gore—are punished for appearing insincere, while those who enact the rituals of politics with ease and comfort are judged successful. Such comfort is taken as proof that the persona the politician represents is real and true, while the persona represented by the awkward politician is false and contrived.⁴⁴

Authentic qualities, ironically, take considerable skill to perform and must be consistently practiced over time. Ludger Helms writes, “authentic leadership has to be created through the continuous and visible efforts of a leader. Leaders have publicly to demonstrate and persuade citizens that they really are true to themselves and act accordingly, and that their convictions and beliefs are actually reflected in the government’s policies.”⁴⁵ Loudon and McCauliff further explain, “[t]o be skilled at political moves has a certain authenticity, especially if that reveals skills and boundaries of core character. Voters perhaps tolerate, even invite, a degree of deception as long as it is ‘authentic.’”⁴⁶ Of course, Jamieson and Waldman warn, “Even if a politician’s performance accurately represents reality, it remains a performance and thus in some sense artificial.”⁴⁷

Authenticity is also frequently measured by political image consistency. Loudon and McCauliff argue that candidates who “are who they say they are” and “know who they are and behave consistently with themselves” will be more successful.⁴⁸ They write, “The candidate who emerges surely will be aided if he *is* authentic.”⁴⁹ Authenticity, they say, will necessarily show itself in some form because, “It is impossible to communicate without character leakage, however oblique.”⁵⁰ Jamieson and Waldman similarly define authenticity

“in part as a minimal difference between the frontstage persona presented to the public and the backstage persona presented to intimates.”⁵¹ The backstage persona is assumed to be authentic, making “The search for the ‘real’ candidate...an effort to drag the backstage persona to the front.”⁵²

This may explain why gaffes, or interruptions in political image, are considered authentic. McCormick and Stuckey note, “Presidential disfluency, spontaneous and somehow ‘real,’ reverses this process, allowing the public to experience the president as a person. They are markers of authenticity.”⁵³ As Lempert and Silverstein explain, “These days, knowing that all such public appearances are matters of product design, we pay attention to what bloopers then reveal to us, who are so culturally conditioned to think in terms of an ‘inner self’ deep down in others.”⁵⁴ They further write, “Gaffes, or what can be turned into gaffes after the fact, become lenses that sharpen the incompatibilities and incoherences of ‘the real stuff’ in the raw material, the inner person who, through Message, is seeking our understanding—and our vote.”⁵⁵ A gaffe, interpreted as a flaw in the image, is construed as a “bit of ‘truth’ that has emerged to public view despite all precautions taken.”⁵⁶ Stephen Frantzich similarly argues, “For the public, a gaffe purports to cut through the public relations cloud surrounding a candidate to reveal his or her true feelings or shortcomings.”⁵⁷ Gaffes are considered moments of authenticity that disrupt the political image. The public believes that gaffes are evidence of the backstage persona that escape through the layers of political image. They also believe, Samuel L. Popkin argues, that mistakes are an accurate reflection of that hidden person. He writes, “Because we tend to overestimate the reasonableness of our own actions, we also overestimate the probability

that others would do what we do. For this reason, we tend to believe that people who make mistakes or blunders are revealing their true character.”⁵⁸

Politicians’ general adherence to imaging scripts makes mistakes newsworthy by definition. Despite the recognition that the public desires authenticity, several authenticity scholars fault journalists for their “authenticity preoccupation.”⁵⁹ Popkin says, “When a candidate makes careless or poorly worded statements, the public reaction often depends on whether news reports highlight these comments as significant or pass them by.”⁶⁰ Most often, mistakes will garner substantial media attention. Parry-Giles argues, “The need for breaking news, for scandalous intrigue, for enhanced ratings, and for twenty-four-hour broadcasting feeds the dogged pursuit of the politically (in)authentic.”⁶¹ Gaffes “fulfill the media’s desire for drama and excitement. From time to time reporters enjoy a break in their routine when the candidate makes a gaffe or offers a controversial view.”⁶² Bennett argues, “The most newsworthy (and, perhaps, the most noteworthy) departures from electoral routine are those occasions when candidates blunder, lose control, or otherwise create embarrassing flaws in their carefully staged performances.”⁶³ And Frantzich dramatically writes that gaffes “provide a break in the routine, only one step below an assassination attempt, that make the continuous ‘body watch’ coverage of major political leaders worthwhile.”⁶⁴ Discrepancies in political images are considered moments of authenticity, making them ideal news stories. Louden and McCauliff argue that this pursuit of authenticity “turn[s] nearly every reporting encounter into the drawing-aside-the-screen scene in the *Wizard of Oz*...The media’s cynical reading seldom strays far from the assumed duplicity of campaign behavior, assessing the *appearance* of authenticity.”⁶⁵

Many scholars argue that journalists attempt to “expose” politicians at all costs.

Journalists “have become amateur psychologists, probing the candidates for fatal flaws and trying to discover the ‘real’ person behind the speeches, position papers, and staffers.”⁶⁶

As Ellen Reid Gold explains,

The media seem to prefer a self-appointed role of exposing the ‘real’ person beneath the candidate (widely assumed to be nothing more than an image). Candidates are subjected to continual questioning about possible inconsistencies in their statements or incongruencies in their past behaviors. Should press members hear a potentially embarrassing statement or a contradiction, they will pursue the luckless speaker relentlessly, trying to obtain an explication, or, if luck is with them, a dramatic admission of guilt and a promise to do better in the future.⁶⁷

If a political performance deviates from the political image, it is automatically considered to be authentic. “Mistakes give reporters an opportunity to reveal to the public the ‘real’ candidate behind the image,” Thomas E. Patterson argues. “The gaffe’s significance is symbolic, resting on the contradiction between the impression the candidate tries to create and that suggested by the incident.”⁶⁸ Mistakes are irresistible news material, so “Reporters,” James David Barber says, “like classical Freudian psychoanalysts, tune their ears to hear slips of the tongue that suddenly clarify something ‘real’ about the candidate. Gaffes show up the candidate as a fool or knave or both.”⁶⁹ For journalists, gaffes are “grist for the character mill...presented as mirrors into [politicians’] souls, the contents of their characters.”⁷⁰ In fact, Larry J. Sabato contends that gaffes cause “feeding frenzies” of intense news media coverage. Referencing the journalists’ tenet, “If it bleeds, it leads,” Sabato wryly refers to this modern news philosophy as, “If it bleeds, try to kill it.”⁷¹

If gaffes are authentic moments, it follows that they provide the public with valuable information. In a political environment dominated with imaging and “message,” gaffes provide information about our politicians that can be found nowhere else. Indeed,

politicians do the best they can to hide this information. Frantzich writes that gaffes are “test[s] of intelligence, potential to perform in office, and/or deeper attitudes normally hidden from the public.”⁷² Public attention to gaffes, unlike political images, is necessary because gaffes indicate a politician’s quality and help the public make better informed political decisions. Frantzich continues, “Some types of gaffes and certainly patterns of gaffes deserve public attention. Voters ignore candidate gaffes at their peril.”⁷³ Gaffes may be fundamentally unique in this regard. As Bennett writes, “Gaffes and the degradation sequences they can initiate may well constitute the last predictable form of democratic accountability in our electoral process.”⁷⁴

Gaffes disrupt the political image, but rhetorically skilled politicians may be able to repair the damage. Politicians can and do attempt to respond to news media coverage of gaffes with apologies and explanations, with varying degrees of success. If a politician does not repair their political image, Bennett writes, “voters may be more likely to conclude that their suspicions about the meaning of actions are warranted, and that the gaffe is an accurate gauge of the genuine character traits and leadership abilities of the candidate.”⁷⁵ As Meyrowitz writes, “A *single* inappropriate act can disqualify political performers from completing an ongoing ritual. Edmund Muskie’s public shedding of tears, Thomas Eagleton’s admission of mental difficulties, and Earl Butz’s racist joke-telling are a few examples of ‘contaminating’ acts.”⁷⁶ Or as Stephen Hess so bluntly puts it, “The brutal manner in which some are eliminated and some survive is one of the realities that presidential candidates must accept.”⁷⁷ The interpretation of gaffes as moments of authenticity may result in the capricious removal of politicians from office, but even worse, Parry-Giles argues, it may ultimately harm the political process by leaving audiences with

the feeling that no one is authentic. She writes, “The unfortunate result of authenticity disputes is that these fixations enhance the cynicism about politics as we come to believe no one is genuine and the political process is inherently flawed, perpetuating a sense of anxiety and uncertainty about our leaders and the U.S. political process in general.”⁷⁸

Scholars of political authenticity argue that electronic mediation led to a preoccupation with authenticity. Because authenticity is less possible when everything is mediated, it has considerable appeal. The more authentic a political image appears, the more successful the politician will be. Authenticity is typically measured by a politician’s ease, which minimizes awareness of mediation. The fact of mediation is less relevant than *impressions* of mediation. Otherwise, how could we explain why people distrust political images but trust in mistakes, which are also mediated? The public is exposed to speech and speech mistakes through the same mediated channels. In the following section, I further examine the role of mediation in political imaging.

Mediation

Mediation makes political imaging more complex. As Shawn J. Parry-Giles argues, “Because of the near invisibility of mediation, scholars often overlook its role in the image-making process.”⁷⁹ The same technological advances that scholars argue increase mistakes also make modern political imaging possible. But if the public distrusts mediation, how does political imaging ever work? According to Parry-Giles and Trevor Parry-Giles, one answer lies in meta-imaging. They write, “*Meta-imaging* is the communicative act in which political campaigns and their chroniclers publicly display and foreground the art and practice of political image construction.”⁸⁰ Meta-imaging is a political imaging strategy that involves highlighting some aspects of the political imaging process in order to minimize

impressions of mediation. Meta-imaging “is a political rhetorical genre wherein campaign outsiders attempt to get ‘inside’ presidential campaigns to unmask the image and the ‘real’ candidate.”⁸¹ Meta-imaging feigns insider access of political imaging to give audiences the impression that they have an unmediated view of their politicians. It is not unmediated, of course; it just appears to be. These impressions are “highly managed and controlled by the campaigns.”⁸² By admitting the obvious—that political images are constructed—and depicting *some* of those construction strategies, politicians hope to strengthen their political images. The campaign provides a view that looks authentic, despite being highly mediated. The authors further explain, “Presidents and presidential candidates have always used and manipulated their images for political purposes, but the hyperreality of the meta-image entices publics into the belief that that imaging can be unmasked and revealed.”⁸³ Meta-imaging works by drawing attention to some aspects of mediation to hide others. As a result, meta-imaging allows the public to experience political images as authentic. The public can listen to speeches and interviews, watch campaign documentaries and read biographies, yet experience them as unmediated when they are in the meta-imaging mode.

Audiences are attracted to these seemingly transparent views. Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles write, “In the age of image making, capturing the real, the actual, the authentic, seems appealing to a public fascinated by celebrities and the intimacies of their private lives.”⁸⁴ Elsewhere, Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles term this pleasure at looking “political scopophilia.”⁸⁵ Jamieson similarly writes that the increasing tendency to portray politicians’ private lives in the media increases the public’s desire for that information. She writes, “By basting the public’s belief that it is entitled to such information, such revelations

have disposed us to not only accept but welcome comparable revelations by presidents themselves. Reagan's disclosures are at one with the culture that consumes televised docufiction about the lives of its celebrities, carries home *People* magazine, and at checkout counters casts more than an inconspicuous glance at *The National Enquirer*."⁸⁶

What happens, though, when that view is disrupted? Roderick P. Hart writes, "political intimacy is almost always a case of bait-and-switch. The politician opens up his or her heart. We are drawn in. The politician then does something craven or stupid—an inevitability in politics. We jump back, scorned, again. We declare the lot of them toxic waste. Then television brings us a new, more vulnerable soul to probe. The soap opera continues."⁸⁷ Meta-imaging is not a foolproof strategy. Just as the public experiences political images as unmediated through meta-imaging, I argue they can experience them as hypermediated. Media scholars Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin argue that people experience mediation both ways. They can experience immediacy, which is the invisibility of mediation, or they can experience hypermediacy, when mediation is conspicuous. Immediacy is "the viewer's feeling that the medium has disappeared and the objects are present to him, a feeling that his experience is therefore authentic."⁸⁸ Like meta-imaging, an experience of immediacy feels direct and unmediated. Audiences interpret that as an expression of authenticity. Hypermediacy,⁸⁹ by contrast, is a heightened awareness of mediation. I propose borrowing Bolter and Grusin's "hypermediacy" to describe the opposite experience of meta-imaging. "In every manifestation," Bolter and Grusin argue, "hypermediacy makes us aware of the medium or media and (in sometimes subtle and sometimes obvious ways) reminds us of our desire for immediacy."⁹⁰ Hypermediated experiences draw attention to mediation and limit interpretations of authenticity.⁹¹ When

politicians present the public with their political images and utilize successful meta-imaging the public is more likely to interpret those images as authentic. Politicians striving for authentic political imaging may attempt meta-imaging, but hypermediacy may interfere.

These opposing experiences demonstrate that authenticity is an effect of our experience of mediation. Discourses of political imaging can be immediate or hypermediated. Immediacy is not a lack of mediation nor is hypermediacy the presence of it. They merely describe awareness of mediation. If meta-imaging is a rhetorical strategy employed by politicians to minimize awareness of mediation, then hypermediacy describes the opposite experience. This explains why meta-imaging is such a powerful political imaging strategy. Political images are necessarily mediated, but decreasing awareness of mediation results in authentic impressions. Hypermediacy highlights the mediation of political images by drawing attention to the many strategies used to create them. Heightened awareness of mediation is associated with inauthenticity. Both political mistake scholars and mediation scholars argue that authenticity is highly desirable in political imaging. The public scrutinizes gaffes for signs of the real person, while campaigns attempt to hide the real person while simultaneously crafting an image that the public might consider authentic. The draw of authenticity explains why meta-imaging is such an important political strategy but also perhaps why mistakes are so appealing. One might think that gaffes reveal authenticity and gaffe discourses reveal it further. Instead, I will argue that gaffe discourses instead call for increased and more perfect political imaging.

Chapter Preview

An understanding of political gaffes lies at the intersection of these three bodies of literature. Some think that the prevalence of mistakes is caused by the fact that the media environment now remembers everything. Some think gaffes are driven by the need for authentic moments. Finally, some argue that political imaging has developed new strategies. In fact, the news media in general have shifted to a hypermediated mode of discussing politics, of which gaffes are a part.

We know that political images are crafted and therefore inauthentic. All conceivable aspects of political images are chosen for maximum effect. Campaign managers pick catchy slogans, ghostwriters craft speeches, stylists modify physical appearance through clothing, exercise, haircuts, and flag pins, debate coaches teach zingers, advance teams set up promotional events, biographers write inspirational personal histories, body language experts coach on posture, gestures, and blink rates, and pollsters test possible policy positions to the letter. This extreme pandering gives us the sneaking suspicion that every candidate is a Manchurian candidate. Still, mistakes happen. Scholars that study political mistakes argue that mediation has negatively affected the quality of political speech and increased the likelihood of mistakes. Fortunately, those mistakes, they argue, are moments of authenticity that can be useful to voters. Mistakes are frequently taken for granted as moments of authenticity. Whether they are deemed reality, truth, or evidence of the backstage persona, they are considered distinct from a politician's constructed political image. They proffer a glimpse of the person behind the political image. Similarly, imaging scholars argue that strategies that minimize awareness of mediation increase perceptions of authenticity, while increasing awareness of mediation decreases perceptions of

authenticity. Indeed, the only reason the massive efforts that characterize political imaging could ever be effective is through the media discourse minimizing attention to their constructed nature. Political imaging can only be successful if it feels immediate.

Authenticity scholars argue that authenticity is a mediated performance but those most skilled in making their images seem unmediated will be deemed authentic. The more consistent the political image the more unmediated and authentic it will seem. Ironically, the more skilled a politician is with political imaging the more authentic they will seem.

The current theorizations of gaffes do not fully explain these common yet complex phenomena. A closer look at these supposed mistakes discredits the gaffe-as-truth model. Mistakes cannot be authentic moments because they are just as mediated as other forms of speech. In fact, many “mistakes” are not actually mistaken; they only appear mistaken once described as such through discourse. In addition, mistakes cannot be equated with gaffes, because there are many moments that never attain “gaffe” status, “mistaken” as they may be. Many gaffes are made from moments that are not mistakes to begin with. As such, I argue that gaffes are discourses whereby moments are selected and produced as imaging errors. Instead of bypassing the mediation of political imaging, gaffes draw attention to it with a hypermediated aesthetic. They emphasize all of the factors that go into political imaging, including mediation. While many of these discourses (though certainly not all) include references to the possibility that a moment could be authentic, they chastise politicians for flaws in their political images and call for savvier political imaging: more message control, more control over journalists, and so on. They call for more of the strategies that make the public suspicious of political imaging in the first place. To the extent that they deal with authenticity, it is through their prescription for politicians to

become better at imaging to give audiences the *impression* of authenticity where there can be none. They argue that politicians should manipulate the public's desire for authenticity. While they may depict those moments as authentic, these discourses argue that the public should be denied authenticity. The resignation to a political sphere built on political imaging alone suggests a loss of hope for democratic governance. As such, these discourses are demophobic. They portray the public as in need of deception because they are incapable of reason.

The following chapters will examine nine gaffe discourses to explore their implications for political authenticity. The interesting aspects of gaffes are not in the moments, but in the media discourses that produce and make those moments relevant. This dissertation is not a rhetorical criticism of politicians' speech or actions, but of the mainstream media discourses about politicians' speech or actions. It is also not a study of political images, good or bad, or even necessarily how they are made. Instead, it is a study of the discourses about the creation of political images and their implications for the possibilities of democratic governance.

In fact, politicians' speech or actions sometimes become wholly irrelevant to the gaffe discourse that develops. These case studies will show that gaffes are hypermediated discourses. Instead of cutting through mediation, gaffes shift public attention to mediation. Though political images are strategized and executed skillfully, which requires minimizing perceptions of mediation, these media discourses overtly draw attention to mediation. I will chart these cases by focusing on the mainstream media discourse to show what it looks like in the aggregate.

Each case study tackles a different type of gaffe: speech, hot mic and photo op. This is not to suggest that there is something essential about these “types,” but the discourses about them do share similar qualities. Categorizing gaffes this way challenges several of the common assumptions about gaffes: that they are unintentional speech, public speech, or merely speech. Gaffes can be created from intentional speech, private speech, and photos (and more). These different types alone show that there is nothing essential about gaffes.

Second, each case study deals with a different rhetorical mode associated with authenticity: the private style, private speech, and photo ops. The private style is the dominant mode of political speech and is assumed to create impressions of intimacy through self-disclosure. Private speech is considered authentic because it was never intended to be part of a constructed political image. Photographs are often believed to reflect undistorted reality. I examine these three modes to show how hypermediation changes how they are interpreted.

Third, each case study includes three examples in order to show variation among gaffe discourses. The examples have similarities and differences but importantly, the gaffes in each chapter loosely form a discourse on their own, as these incidents often reference one another. Though others may remember other prominent gaffes, I think the gaffes studied here are both commonly remembered and representative. The case studies include politicians from both major parties, gaffes that appear on “top gaffe” lists, indicating that they are memorable and mainstream, and at least one gaffe from each presidential election from 1984 to 2012 (excluding 1996). Incidentally, many of the most remembered gaffes took place in close proximity to presidential campaigns. This is likely because these politicians are extremely high profile and presidential campaigns are characterized by

intense media scrutiny. While I mention electoral outcomes in many of the case studies, it is not to imply that any one gaffe could make the difference between victory and loss. I reference campaign outcomes only because they are convenient stopping points for these discourses, which are often linked to specific political campaigns. The discourses do not disappear after the campaign cycle ends; in fact, many of them become reference points in future gaffe discourses.

Chapter Two uses speech gaffes to examine the private style and authenticity. This chapter specifically argues that gaffe discourses promote political imaging above all else. It considers, first, Vice President Dan Quayle's misguided spelling advice at a campaign stop. Quayle encouraged an elementary school spelling bee participant to add "e" onto the end of "potato." This recommendation became a high-profile gaffe that haunted Quayle for the rest of his political career. Second, it considers Vice President Al Gore's brag during a *CNN* interview that he had a primary role in "creating the internet." While it was credible from a legislative standpoint, the brag ultimately demonstrated Gore's difficulties with political imaging. Third, it considers Senator Hillary Clinton's inaccurate description of her plane's landing in Bosnia. Her account of her 1996 trip to Bosnia said that she had landed under sniper fire when she had in fact landed under the threat of sniper fire. These discourses argue that politicians should always promote their "message," what I will call "sticking to the script."

Chapter Three and Four are specialized examples of this prescription. Chapter Three uses hot mic gaffes to examine private speech and authenticity. Specifically, this chapter argues that gaffe discourses promote political imaging to the point that it eclipses any backstage persona for politicians. It first examines President Ronald Reagan's joke about

bombing Russia before a national radio address. During the mic check Reagan joked that “we begin bombing [Russia] in five minutes,” causing widespread backlash and concerns that Reagan was bellicose. Second, it examines Governor George W. Bush’s insult about a *New York Times* reporter before a campaign rally. Bush turned to his running mate, Cheney, and called the reporter a “major league asshole.” Reporters captured the remark and pointed out that it directly contradicted the speech on civility in political discourse that he delivered immediately afterwards. Third, it examines President Barack Obama’s negotiation with Russian leader Dmitri Medvedev during a nuclear security summit. Reporters captured Obama and Medvedev discussing the possibilities of delaying a nuclear arms reduction treaty until after the 2012 presidential election. It raised suspicions about Obama’s personal ambitions. These discourses encourage politicians to always be focused on political imaging, even in private moments, because it is impossible to predict when their words will receive public exposure.

Chapter Four uses photo op gaffes to examine photos and authenticity. This chapter argues that gaffe discourses promote photos as an avenue for obscuring reality. It analyzes, first, images of Governor Michael Dukakis’ on a tank. Dukakis’ photo op was meant to make him look tough on national security but ultimately backfired. Second, it analyzes President George H. W. Bush interacting with a grocery store scanner. His look of “amazement” while operating ostensibly common grocery store technology fueled rumors that Bush was out of touch with the average American. Third, it analyzes President George W. Bush’s photo op on an aircraft carrier standing in front of a banner proclaiming “Mission Accomplished.” When conditions in the Iraq war went sour, the banner was seen as premature and

careless. In each case, the discourse encouraged politicians to craft political images that were extremely different than, and sometimes in opposition to, their “real” personalities.

Chapter Five reviews these case studies and discusses their implications for authenticity. In all nine cases, showing one’s self is portrayed as a political liability and something that politicians should always avoid. This chapter argues that the emphasis on political imaging demonstrates a lack of faith in democratic governance. Gaffe discourses are demophobic because they portray the public as incapable of rational deliberation and deserving of political manipulation.

Notes

¹ Michael Kinsley, "Mondale Tries Demagoguery On Mortgage Interest Issue," *Los Angeles Times*, May 15, 1984. LexisNexis Academic.

² Michael Kinsley, "Gaffe-Checking The Debates," *Bloomberg*, October 2, 2012.

<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-10-02/gaffe-checking-the-debates.html>.

³ William Safire, "Bloopers," *Safire's Political Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 63. Safire specifically quotes Kinsley's definition.

⁴ "Gaffe," *Taegan Goddard's Political Dictionary*, 2014.

<http://politicaldictionary.com/words/gaffe/>. *Taegan Goddard's* also quotes Kinsley's definition.

⁵ There are a wide variety of synonyms for the word gaffe. The following is a selected list of the synonyms I encountered in scholarly literature as well as news media discourses during this study: bafflegab, bêtise, bloomer, blooper, blunder, bollix, boner, bumble, bungle, clanger, diarrhea of the mouth, disfluency, error, faux pas, verbal faux pas, flap, flapdoodle, flub, flub-up, fluff, foot in mouth, foot in mouth disease, Freudian slip, fumble, gibe, goof, goofy comment, grammatical error, hot mic/live mic/open mic, howler, ineloquence, Kinsley gaffe, lapse, lip slip, mega-error, mic slip, miff, misfire, misperformance, misspeak, mistake, off color remark, off-the-cuff, off-handed, oratorical pretzel, outburst, outtake, paralinguistic flaw, political misspeak, referential lapse, rhetorical accident, rhetorical curlicue, sally, shooting off at the mouth, slip, slippage, slip-up, slip-of-the-tongue, solecism, stumble, stylistic breakdown, talk scandal, transgressive utterance, tumble, unintentional remark, verbal contortion, verbal missile, verbal sin, verbal snafu, verbal spasm, and zinger.

⁶ For touchstone works and anthologies on political imaging, see Dan Nimmo and Robert L. Savage, *Candidates and Their Images: Concepts, Methods, and Findings* (Pacific Palisades, CA: Goodyear Publishing Company, Inc., 1976); Kenneth L. Hacker, ed., *Candidate Images in Presidential Elections* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1995); Kenneth L. Hacker, ed., *Presidential Candidate Images* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004).

⁷ Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 269.

⁸ Stephen Lucas and Martin J. Medhurst, eds., *Words of a Century: The Top 100 American Speeches, 1900-1999* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), xxvii. For more on this type of editorial license, see Robert N. Gaines, "The Processes and Challenges of Textual Authentication," in *The Handbook of Rhetoric and Public Address*, eds. Shawn J. Parry-Giles and J. Michael Hogan (West Sussex, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 143. Gaines writes, "Textual errors can also arise in rhetorical performances and artifacts themselves, where rhetorical performers unintentionally misperform their discourse or deviate sporadically from their planned performance to accommodate audience participation in the transaction. These misperformances and deviations are usually obvious in audio and video representations of rhetorical discourse, and their handling requires a principled decision as to whether they constitute a substantial element of the performance or a mistake of representation incidental to the performance. Based on this decision, these textual features can either be retained or refined."

⁹ Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place*, 272; emphasis in original.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹¹ Michael Lempert and Michael Silverstein, *Creatures of Politics: Media, Message, and the American Presidency* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2012), 126.

¹² Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place*, 270.

¹³ Samuel McCormick and Mary Stuckey, "Presidential Disfluency: Literacy, Legibility, and Vocal Political Aesthetics in the Rhetorical Presidency," *The Review of Communication* 13, no. 1 (2013): 8.

¹⁴ Lucas and Medhurst, *Words of a Century*, xx.

¹⁵ Ibid., xxvii. Lucas and Medhurst write, "The speaker may lose his or her place, omit a word, interject vocalized pauses, commit an error in grammar, or stumble over a phrase before regaining balance – especially when talking without the benefit of notes. In some places, a speaker's imprecise articulation may make it hard to decipher his or her exact words. Then there are instances in which a speaker says the wrong thing and keeps going, perhaps unaware that he or she has misspoken. Dealing with all these circumstances required not only technical accuracy in transcription, but also the exercise of editorial judgment." Davis Houck warns that overreliance on availability and accuracy in speech texts can often limit out worthy case studies, noting, "if records concerning the delivery and effects of a speech, along with a reliable written text, become the *sine qua non* of critical investigation, that clearly limits the number and types of speeches deemed worthy of analysis." See Davis Houck, "Textual Recovery, Textual Discovery: Returning to Our Past, Imagining Our Future," in *The Handbook of Rhetoric and Public Address*, eds. Shawn J. Parry-Giles and J. Michael Hogan (West Sussex, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 117.

¹⁶ McCormick and Stuckey, "Presidential Disfluency," 6.

¹⁷ Ibid., 5-6.

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- ¹⁸ Ibid., 4.
- ¹⁹ Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place*, 276; emphasis in original.
- ²⁰ Lempert and Silverstein, *Creatures of Politics*, 2.
- ²¹ W. Lance Bennett, "Assessing Presidential Character: Degradation Rituals in Political Campaigns," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 67, no. 3 (1981): 312.
- ²² John B. Thompson, *Political Scandal: Power and Visibility in the Media Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), 41.
- ²³ John B. Thompson, *The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 141.
- ²⁴ Craig Allen Smith and Kathy B. Smith, *The White House Speaks: Presidential Leadership as Persuasion* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994), 191.
- ²⁵ Ibid., 225.
- ²⁶ James David Barber, "Characters in the Campaign: The Scientific Question," in *Race for the Presidency: The Media and the Nominating Process*, ed. James David Barber (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1978), 161.
- ²⁷ Lempert and Silverstein, *Creatures of Politics*, 23.
- ²⁸ Thompson, *The Media and Modernity*, 141. Erving Goffman argues that gaffes arise when a speaker is oblivious to the rules of social interaction. Gaffes are opposed to slips, when a speaker understands the rules and makes an honest mistake. See Erving Goffman, *Forms of Talk* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981) and Carly W. Butler and Richard Fitzgerald, "'My F***ing Personality': Swearing as Slips and Gaffes in Live Television Broadcasts," *Text & Talk* 31, no. 5 (2011): 525-551.

²⁹ For other works on authenticity, see Marshall Berman, *The Politics of Authenticity: Radical Individualism and the Emergence of Modern Society* (London: Verso, 2009); Alessandro Ferrara, *Reflective Authenticity: Rethinking the Project of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1998); Jacob J. Golomb, *In Search of Authenticity: Existentialism from Kierkegaard to Camus* (London: Routledge, 1995); Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1989); Howard H. Schweber, *Democracy and Authenticity: Toward a Theory of Public Justification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); and Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972).

³⁰ Erica J. Seifert, *The Politics of Authenticity in Presidential Campaigns, 1976-2008* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2012).

³¹ David Greenberg, *Nixon's Shadow: The History of an Image* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003), xii.

³² Shawn J. Parry-Giles, *Hillary Clinton in the News: Gender and Authenticity in American Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 11.

³³ Seifert, *The Politics of Authenticity*, 27.

³⁴ Parry-Giles, *Hillary Clinton in the News*, 11.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 179.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

³⁷ Seifert, *The Politics of Authenticity*.

³⁸ Allan Loudon and Kristen McCauliff, "The 'Authentic Candidate': Extending the Candidate Image Assessment," in *Presidential Candidate Images*, ed. Kenneth L. Hacker (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004), 100; emphasis in original.

³⁹ Tamar Liebes, "'Look Me Straight in the Eye': The Political Discourse of Authenticity, Spontaneity, and Sincerity," *The Communication Review* 4, no. 4 (2001): 503.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 499.

⁴² Jamieson, *Eloquence in an Electronic Age*, 132.

⁴³ Liebes, "'Look Me Straight in the Eye,'" 503.

⁴⁴ Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Paul Waldman, *The Press Effect: Politicians, Journalists, and the Stories that Shape the Political World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 30.

⁴⁵ Ludger Helms, "Democratic Political Leadership in the New Media Age: A Farewell to Excellence?" *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 14 (2012): 658.

⁴⁶ Louden and McCauliff, "The 'Authentic Candidate,'" 97.

⁴⁷ Jamieson and Waldman, *The Press Effect*, 27.

⁴⁸ Louden and McCauliff, "The 'Authentic Candidate,'" 94.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 100.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 97.

⁵¹ Jamieson and Waldman, *The Press Effect*, 29.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ McCormick Mary Stuckey, "Presidential Disfluency," 10.

⁵⁴ Lempert and Silverstein, *Creatures of Politics*, 129.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 126.

⁵⁷ Stephen Frantzich, *O.O.P.S.: Observing Our Politicians Stumble: The Worst Candidate Gaffes and Recoveries in Presidential Campaigns* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2012), 8.

⁵⁸ Samuel L. Popkin, *The Reasoning Voter: Communication and Persuasion in Presidential Campaigns* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 76-77.

⁵⁹ Parry-Giles, *Hillary Clinton in the News*, 2.

⁶⁰ Popkin, *The Reasoning Voter*, 49. Popkin does note, however, "Some remarks are so revealing when reported in the media that no elite mediation is necessary."

⁶¹ Parry-Giles, *Hillary Clinton in the News*, 180.

⁶² Thomas R. Marshall, *Presidential Nominations in a Reform Age: American Political Parties and Elections* (New York: Praeger, 1981), 72.

⁶³ Bennett, "Assessing Presidential Character," 310.

⁶⁴ Frantzich, *O.O.P.S.*, 10.

⁶⁵ Louden and McCauliff, "The 'Authentic Candidate,'" 91.

⁶⁶ Jamieson and Waldman, *The Press Effect*, 26.

⁶⁷ Ellen Reid Gold, "Political Apologia: The Ritual of Self-Defense," *Communication Monographs* 45, no. 4 (1978): 306-307.

⁶⁸ Thomas E. Patterson, *Out of Order* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 153.

⁶⁹ Barber, "Characters in the Campaign," 160.

⁷⁰ Larry J. Sabato, *Feeding Frenzy: Attack Journalism and American Politics* (Baltimore: Lanahan Publishers, 2000), 30.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁷² Frantzich, *O.O.P.S.*, 4.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁷⁴ Bennett, "Assessing Presidential Character," 312.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 319. For more on the role of apology after gaffes, see Sandra Harris, Karen Grainger and Louise Mullany, "The Pragmatics of Political Apologies," *Discourse & Society* 17, no. 6 (2006): 715-737.

⁷⁶ Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place*, 276; emphasis in original.

⁷⁷ Stephen Hess, *The Presidential Campaign* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1978).

⁷⁸ Parry-Giles, *Hillary Clinton in the News*, 181.

⁷⁹ Shawn J. Parry-Giles, "Mediating Hillary Rodham Clinton: Television News Practices and Image-Making in the Postmodern Age," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 17, no. 2 (2000): 205.

⁸⁰ Shawn J. Parry-Giles and Trevor Parry-Giles, "Meta-Imaging, the War Room, and the Hyperreality of U.S. Politics," *Journal of Communication* 49, no. 1 (1999): 29; emphasis in original.

⁸¹ Ibid., 29.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid., 40.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Trevor Parry-Giles and Shawn J. Parry-Giles, "Political Scopophilia, Presidential Campaigning, and the Intimacy of American Politics," *Communication Studies* 47, no. 3 (1996): 191-205.

⁸⁶ Jamieson, *Eloquence in an Electronic Age*, 183-184.

⁸⁷ Roderick P. Hart, *Seducing America: How Television Charms the Modern Voter* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 29.

⁸⁸ Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*

(Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999), 70.

⁸⁹ A possible analogue of hypermediacy is “the reflexive mode,” as described by Bill Nichols. He writes, “Instead of *seeing through* documentaries to the world beyond them, reflexive documentaries ask us to *see documentary* for what it is: a construct or representation.” See Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 125.

⁹⁰ Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, 34.

⁹¹ Bolter and Grusin do argue that both immediacy and hypermediacy can lead to impressions of authenticity. They write, “Hypermedia and transparent media are opposite manifestations of the same desire: the desire to get past the limits of representation and to achieve the real.” See Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999), 53. In the case of political gaffes however, hypermediacy emphasizes the inauthentic.

CHAPTER TWO

PUBLIC SPEECH: THE MISSPELLING, THE BRAG, AND THE EMBELLISHMENT

During the 2012 presidential election, the *Christian Science Monitor* website released the animated game *Gaffe Dodger*. Players posed as politicians giving speeches at campaign events with a broken teleprompter. The teleprompter displayed most of the text of the politician's speeches but it made "mistakes" by replacing nouns with blanks. As the text advanced, the player's job was to fill in the blanks by dragging the correct words from the word bank on the right side of the screen into place on the teleprompter on the left side of the screen. The player dodged gaffes by choosing the correct words for the blanks. For example, in the line "My Fellow ____" the player chose from "Americans," "Earthlings" or "terrorists." The correct answers were usually clear: "My Fellow terrorists" was an obvious wrong choice. The animated politician "read" along on the teleprompter in an obfuscated voice reminiscent of adults' "wah wah" speech in Charlie Brown cartoons. If the player chose correctly, the animated crowd cheered and the Approval Rating status bar at the bottom of the page increased; if the player failed the crowd booed and the status bar decreased. As the game progressed, the player had to correctly choose geographical information such as state nicknames, largest cities, native wildlife, favorite foods, sports teams, natural disasters, and so on as the amount of words in the word bank increased.¹

Gaffe Dodger suggests that well-performed scripts of political platitudes are the key to political success. The politician's only job is to read the words provided. Only in the rare event of technology failing must the politician provide material, but it is far from original—

they make references the audience already knows and recite platitudes such as “Thank you, God bless you, and God bless America.” The audience can see the politician reading from the teleprompter and knows that the words are not the politician’s own, yet they cheer when the words are read correctly. If a politician can avoid patently ridiculous word choices, they will be rewarded with cheering crowds and high approval ratings.

Gaffe Dodger incorrectly implies, however, that gaffes are relatively easy to avoid. In the game, the teleprompter provides most of the relevant material, and the politician is merely the messenger. They will succeed if they can read the script correctly. Gaffes are rarely so simple. I argue that while a mistaken word choice can inspire a gaffe discourse, a gaffe is not the mistaken word choice itself. *Gaffe Dodger’s* depiction of gaffes as spoken directly to audiences who make quick judgments on their appropriateness is also inaccurate. It is rarely the case that a politician says something and receives immediate negative feedback from the audience to signal that a mistake has occurred. Rather, a gaffe is something a politician says or does that is taken up and interpreted by media discourses as a gaffe.

This chapter examines spoken gaffes because they are typically what come to mind when we hear the word “gaffe.” As *Gaffe Dodger* implies, we tend to think of gaffes as moments that disturb otherwise eloquent speech. However, this chapter argues that gaffes are discourses about politics that, in hypermediated fashion, draw attention to the importance of the script for effective imaging.

The three discourses in this chapter are all well-known gaffes, yet none of them were obvious mistakes when they were uttered. First, we will examine the discourse about Vice President Dan Quayle’s inaccurate spelling advice at an elementary school spelling

bee. Second, we will assess the discourse about Vice President Al Gore's brag that he played a role in creating the Internet. Third, we will consider the discourse about Senator Hillary Clinton's embellishment of the story of her plane's landing in Bosnia. Each politician was engaged in the private style and attempting to create favorable impressions by promoting education at a campaign stop, supporting technology in an interview, and demonstrating bravery through personal anecdotes. Typically, the private style is interpreted as more authentic because of its closeness to interpersonal communication. But the case studies here show that change in the discourse from immediacy to hypermediacy greatly influences the reception of the private style.

Public Speech and Authenticity

This chapter investigates the relationship between public speech and authenticity. Recall the argument from Chapter One that electronic media brings the backstage to the front. Cameras and microphones capture mannerisms and expressions that old media simply cannot. Audiences literally see more of the speaker. In addition, increased mediation has also resulted in changed content. Politicians utilize a private speaking style to spread their messages and build public support. An effect of the private style is to disclose personal information to the audience in order to create impressions of authenticity. Unlike the politician in *Gaffe Dodger* who makes audience-specific references, today's politicians typically spend a significant portion of their speeches on self-disclosure.

The direct relationship between a politician and their audience has all but disappeared. As opposed to the necessity of a shared place and time, electronic media transformed the relationship between speakers and audiences into "mediated quasi-interaction."² This relationship allows for impressions of closeness, which John B.

Thompson calls “nonreciprocal intimacy at a distance.”³ Those separated by great distances in time and space communicate, “with the kind of close attention once reserved for those with whom one shared an intimate personal relationship.”⁴ Despite the invention of the teleprompter, public speech shares many characteristics of intimate speech. Public speech is increasingly informal, personal, and private in style. Speakers utilize speaking conventions more commonly found in interpersonal speech: self-disclosure, conversational word choice, relaxed body language, etc. Technology allows “rhetorical aloofness [to give] way in part to mediated intimacy; the fiery oratory of the impassioned speech could be exchanged for the conversational intimacy of the fireside chat.”⁵ The cold, impersonal relationship that might exist as the result of mediated barriers is offset by the development of a more personal speaking style. Thompson says it is “increasingly common for political leaders and other individuals to appear before distant audiences and lay bare some aspect of their self or their personal life.”⁶ Politicians now “present themselves not just as leaders but as human beings.”⁷ Audiences feel more connection and less distance, despite the mediation required to create those impressions.

Even public speech, if in the private style, is considered authentic. Simulated intimacy encourages politicians to reveal more about themselves. Kathleen Hall Jamieson calls this “public intimacy,”⁸ or how private *style* is being used in public speech. Because public speech often adopts a private speaking style, the lines between the public and the private person are blurred. And, since media “are fixated on differences between the private and public self of public figures, a comfort with expressing instead of camouflaging self—or at the minimum an ability to feign disclosure—is useful for a politician.”⁹ When a politician does not look like they are putting on for the cameras, we tend to forget that the

cameras are there. If a politician seems uncomfortable, it feels like “voyeurism;” if they look at ease they are more “believable.”¹⁰ For example, President Reagan became known as the “Great Communicator” because his personal disclosures made audiences feel as though his frontstage and backstage personae were one and the same. Reagan’s acting background made him better able than his predecessors at reading speech scripts, which in turn made his speeches seem more genuine. Audiences felt that Reagan’s speeches were his words, not those of an unseen speechwriter (though they were). His perceptible ease erased the layers of mediation between Reagan and the public.¹¹ Reagan was more successful than other politicians because he successfully adjusted to the television age with his rhetorical style. The public welcomes “intimate” speech and interprets it as more authentic than public speech. More private sounding or backstage speech is assumed to be more authentic. I argue that the private style is one form of meta-imaging. It offers a zoomed-in look at our politicians that minimizes our awareness of mediation.

It may be true that politicians speak in a more authentic style today than was common before electronic media. However, I argue that gaffe discourses specifically draw attention to mediation. Just as the crowd can see the teleprompter on *Gaffe Dodger*, gaffe discourses focus on the media strategies that politicians use to create their political images. Hypermediacy is a *zoomed-out* look at our politicians’ imaging strategies and the role of mediation in creating them, not the politicians themselves. Despite the private style’s assumed authenticity, gaffe discourses create impressions of inauthenticity. Meta-imaging attempts to reduce attention to mediation, whereas gaffe discourses increase attention to mediation. Instead of promoting the idea that audiences are getting an authentic view, the discourse draws attention to what politicians do to create that view. While politicians

endeavor to speak in the private, more authentic style, hypermediated gaffes draw attention to mediation. The audience is “in” on the process because so much of the discourse is about the methods that politicians use (or should use more effectively) on audiences. The following case studies will demonstrate that gaffes are discourses of hypermediation. In Quayle’s Gore’s, and Clinton’s cases, the discourses promoted impressions of inauthenticity that trumped the private style.

Vice President Dan Quayle’s Misspelling

On June 16, 1992, Vice President Dan Quayle visited an elementary school in New Jersey to moderate a spelling bee. Quayle held a stack of spelling cards and asked students to come up to the chalkboard to write them. He called on sixth grade student William Figueroa to write “potato.” Figueroa wrote “potato” in perfect cursive and stepped back from the chalkboard. Instead of praising him, Quayle encouraged Figueroa to “add a little something on the end.” Confused, the student added an “e.” Quayle and other adults in the room applauded. After journalists pulled out a dictionary that showed there was no “e” on the end of “potato,” Quayle revealed that the spelling card he was using had an extra “e.”

Quayle unfortunately used someone else’s inaccurate spelling card. If not for the considerable media attention, the public would never have known about the extra “e” on a spelling card in a classroom in New Jersey. Extensive media coverage turned Quayle’s misspelling into a gaffe. *The Washington Post* wrote, “Just when he was establishing himself as a serious newsmaker in the presidential campaign, US Vice-President Dan Quayle misspelled the word ‘potato’ and now that’s all anyone wants to talk about. The gaff-prone Vice-President has egg on his face and his party in a pickle over his failure to spell the word correctly while coaching a 12-year-old in a spelling bee...”¹² The gaffe, “probably doesn’t

mean squat,” but that did not stop it from “reverberat[ing] through the popular culture with gale-force intensity.”¹³ While “Most newspapers initially dismissed the incident as a light item on an inside page...television has run the footage over and over, and late-night comics are again slicing up their favorite target.”¹⁴

Quayle was ridiculed relentlessly for his bad spelling advice. An article titled, “Quayle Just Can’t Shake His Big Potato Blunder” said, “Much as the U.S. vice-president would like to forget it, his Mr. Potato Head incident in a New Jersey classroom recently served up more piping hot material for late-night comics to feast on this week.”¹⁵ Jay Leno said, “Quayle taught the kids a valuable lesson - if you don’t study, you could end up vice-president.” Arsenio Hall teased, “Isn’t it frightening that the man who’s a heartbeat away from the presidency is not even qualified to be on *Wheel of Fortune*?”¹⁶ *The Atlanta Journal Constitution* aped Johnny Carson’s answer-then-question gag, with “Answer: one potatoe, two potatoe, three potatoe, four. Question, asked of Dan Quayle: Name three vegetables and your I.Q.”¹⁷ *The Simpsons* parodied Figueroa’s place at the chalkboard by having Bart Simpson write “potato not potatoe” on a chalkboard as part of an episode’s intro sequence.¹⁸ Prior to the “potatoe” incident, Quayle had accused the TV sitcom *Murphy Brown* of glamorizing single motherhood. The *Murphy Brown* season premier responded by having the titular character Brown criticize Quayle’s views on the family and concluded with a truckload of potatoes dumped onto Quayle’s driveway.¹⁹ At a Clinton-Gore fundraiser, performers sang: “There was this young fella named Quayle//He was out on the campaign trail, doing well// Till he told that fifth-grader//Put an E in potater//I guess that’s why he didn’t get into Yale.”²⁰ Adding insult to injury, Figueroa, the spelling bee participant, was invited on *David Letterman*. He said, “The vice president should know how

to spell. So that's why everybody is making a big deal out of this blunder...I hope he can take it."²¹

Quayle's misspelling inspired many news stories about the impact it would have on Quayle's political image. The *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* criticized the media attention that the misspelling received. It wrote, "I was hoping l'affaire potatoe (That is the French spelling, isn't it?) would die quickly and it wouldn't come to this. Alas, there's no such luck. I must rise to the defense of Dan Quayle." Quayle may not be a great speller, but then again, "There have been many national spelling bee winners, and none has made it to the vice presidency of the United States. Obviously."²² The *St. Petersburg Times* wrote one of few defenses of Quayle, noting, "I don't think Dan Quayle is the idiot we make him out to be." It referenced the misspelled spelling bee card and the fact that a lot of people are not champion spellers. It concluded, "this smug nitpicking is going to backfire. If you're still laughing, then laugh at this: Quayle intends to be president of the United States, and this is helping."²³ Clearly, Quayle's ability to bolster his political image was more important than a misspelling. As these stories point out, Quayle's intelligence was irrelevant to his ability to return to the White House. In fact, the *Washington Post* noted President George Washington's tendency to spell potato with an "e" in his farm logs. "Dan Quayle isn't a bad speller—he was just born too late. A couple centuries ago, George Washington also spelled it 'potatoe.'" Quayle's spokesperson responded, "We're delighted to see he's in such fine company."²⁴

The Bush-Quayle campaign struggled with their response. His wife, Marilyn, was livid. "He gives five speeches a day for 25 months, never makes a mistake," Mrs. Quayle said; but "He makes one mistake and they air, air and air it. Human beings make errors."²⁵

Quayle attempted to shrug it off. When asked about the misspelling, he playfully quoted Mark Twain: “I should have picked up the mistake on the spelling bee card, I didn’t. But as Mark Twain once said, ‘never trust a man who only has one way of spelling a word.’”²⁶ *ABC’s 20/20* asked Quayle’s running mate President George H. W. Bush about the misspelling and he speculated, “Maybe he was thinking of the Chaucer version of potato.”²⁷ Journalists contacted Mark Twain scholars and found that the quote Quayle used could not actually be attributed to Twain.²⁸ In addition, it was impossible for Quayle to be thinking of the “Chaucer version” of potato as Bush said, because potatoes were not native to England during Chaucer’s time.²⁹ The campaign admitted that “potatoe” was incorrect, but struggled with providing a believable explanation for the misspelling.

Several stories described the narrative as taking the media by storm and dominating news coverage. *The Washington Post* cheekily wrote, “There are those who might suggest we put to rest the sad story of Dan Quayle and the misspelled potato. But we feel we owe it to our many readers who are intensely interested in the substantive aspects of the political process to drag it on as long as possible. So today we choose to provide the list of an anonymous Capitol Hill press secretary on: The Top 10 Reasons to Add ‘E’ to ‘Potato.’”³⁰ In 1993, “potatoe” was named the “top Junk Food News story,” which denoted “over-reported unimportant stories.”³¹ When there was a lull in the discourse, that itself became a justification to talk about it more.

Even before “potatoe,” though, Quayle was dealing with political imaging problems. This was taken as justification enough for the extensive media coverage the misspelling received. *The Washington Post* asked,

How can the media make so much of something so silly—especially when Quayle was repeating a misspelling on a flash card provided by a volunteer teacher? The

answer is that Quayle is vulnerable to the slightest misstep that feeds the popular caricature of him as a dim bulb. The press has a weakness for the simple metaphor that appears to stand for some larger character flaw—especially if it has been captured on videotape. Thus, Bill Clinton's 'didn't inhale' comment about marijuana seemed to underscore his reputation for slick evasiveness. And the disputed incident in which President Bush appeared unfamiliar with a supermarket scanner brought Bush weeks of ridicule as an out-of-touch patrician.³²

Quayle's poor spelling advice mattered because it would influence Quayle's political image. The truth of the matter—that there was a misspelled spelling bee card—was irrelevant. And the larger character flaw seemed to be Quayle's ability to provide easy material for the media. *The New York Times* wrote, "Unscripted, Vice President Quayle often flounders. Even scripted, he suffers frequent embarrassment. With two *r*'s."³³ As the *Independent* noted, "Ever since his misspelling of 'potato' when visiting a school earlier in the campaign, he has never escaped from the hope in newsrooms across America that he will make a boob of similar dimensions. All this is a little unfair. On topics he knows about Mr. Quayle is often eloquent, though even here he tends to become entangled in his efforts not to commit some further blunder."³⁴ In other words, the real story was Quayle's political imaging skill, not his supposed lack of spelling skills. Discussions about the place of spelling skills for the Vice Presidency were a foil for discussing the role of imaging. The discourse did not express concern that Quayle was bad at spelling and possibly unintelligent as much as it did that he was not good enough at political imaging in order to hide it. It was not that Quayle should be disqualified from his office; he just needed to adapt his image to it. "Authentic" character was irrelevant. It was apparent that few cared about Quayle's IQ. His ability to project an intelligent *image* (regardless of his actual intelligence) was the relevant issue.

The discourse about Quayle's misspelling showcased a desire for more skilled political imaging, not authenticity. As one story noted, "no-one pays much attention to

party platforms. It is the slogans chosen by the candidates that matter, like George Bush's promise in 1988: 'Read my lips, no new taxes.' Casual remarks, like Dan Quayle's inability to spell potato, carry more weight than the longest policy statements."³⁵ Many maintained that Bush-Quayle could win reelection only if Quayle could avoid his tendency to gaffe: "if Dan Quayle can avoid repeating his 'potatoe' mistake victory may yet be within the GOP's grasp this fall. On such matters of 'character' are elections now decided."³⁶ Quayle's repeated problems with imaging, script or no, would be to blame for him losing the election. His subpar imaging skills reflected poorly on his running mate and his party, and would overshadow any of the possible policy information or accomplishments that they aimed for.

"Potatoe" dogged Quayle for the rest of the 1992 campaign. When the Clinton-Gore campaign team spotted a potato truck at a campaign stop in Indiana (Quayle's home state) they immediately recognized the possibility for a great photo op. Clinton "selected a big potato and held it up in the air for 10 seconds or so. Everyone got the shot."³⁷ The DNC kept the story alive by inviting William Figueroa to recite the Pledge of Allegiance at the convention.³⁸ Georgia Governor Zell Miller noted at the convention, "If the 'education president' gets another term, even our kids won't be able to spell potato."³⁹ The "potatoe" gaffe fueled speculation that Quayle would be dropped from the Republican ticket before the election. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* wrote, "Washington is abuzz with rumors about big shake-ups to come. The focus is on Vice President Dan Quayle as the 'sacrificial potatoe' who should be tossed over the side to save a sinking ship."⁴⁰ When Quayle was blamed for giving Bush bad advice on a Clean Air Act loophole, The *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* remarked, "Mr. Quayle has baked the president one heck of a hot potatoe."⁴¹ And when

Quayle accidentally referred to the next Presidential election year as 1994 instead of 1996, the *Daily Mail* wrote, “America’s Vice President promised yesterday that his bumbling days were over and a ‘new Dan Quayle’ was about to take the stage. But within minutes, the old gaffe-prone Dan Quayle—the one who told a school class that potato should be spelled potatoe—was up to his old tricks by getting his election dates wrong.”⁴²

“Potatoe” followed Quayle for the rest of his political career. The misspelling is by far Quayle’s most memorable feature, despite his four years in the White House and Presidential campaigns, one for re-election as Vice President in 1992 and one for President in 2000. He was criticized when his personal website was posted in 1996 with multiple spelling errors, like “Quayles” and “Noverber.”⁴³ When Indiana was set to open the Dan Quayle Museum, *The Guardian* noted that the museum’s spokesperson pointedly refused to answer questions about spell checking for “potato.”⁴⁴ The “Top Junk Food News Story” fittingly inspired Quayle to appear in a potato chip ad for the 1994 Super Bowl. His line in the ad was, “Potatoes have become a big part of my life, but this time I’m enjoying them.”⁴⁵ Quayle wrote about the “potatoe” gaffe at length in his memoir, *Standing Firm: A Vice-Presidential Memoir*. Much of his book dealt directly with his tortured relationship with the media. In “Baked, Mashed, and Fried,” an entire chapter devoted to the misspelling, Quayle observed, “Politicians live and die by the symbolic sound bite.”⁴⁶ He wrote, “It was more than a gaffe; in the language of Lee Atwater it was a ‘defining moment,’ of the worst kind imaginable.”⁴⁷ On the book tour for *Standing Firm*, disaster struck again. A young girl named Samantha lined up for an autograph. Quayle started spelling out her name as he wrote, “S-Y-M,” until her mother corrected him, spelling “S-A-M.”⁴⁸ On the tour, Quayle said he signed many copies of his book, “plus 100 potatoes.”⁴⁹ When Quayle was contemplating

a presidential run in 2000, he reminded voters of “potatoe” with a quip: “If Bill Clinton and Al Gore are moderates,” “then I’m a world-champion speller.”⁵⁰ He would use a variation of this joke to make fun of Gore’s brag discussed in the next section of this chapter. When he dropped out of the 2000 presidential race, *The Australian* noted, “The epitaph for his bid is the one-word placard that greeted him during a campaign tour of New Hampshire, a commemoration of the day he corrected a school child’s spelling: potatoe.”⁵¹ *Time Magazine’s* feature “America’s Worst Vice Presidents” lists Quayle’s many shortcomings as a Vice President, but his entry ends with, “it was the dreaded ‘potatoe’ incident that did Quayle in. While visiting a school in Trenton, NJ, a student was asked to write the word ‘potato’ on the blackboard and Quayle urged him to add an ‘e’ to the end. The entire nation held its belly in laughter.”⁵²

The Bush-Quayle campaign’s scheduled stop at an elementary school spelling bee was ostensibly a chance for to depict Quayle as a supporter of children and education. Unfortunately, his reliance on an inaccurately spelled card dominated the event. Quayle did make a mistake. “Potato” does not have an “e” on the end, at least not in the US in 1992. But the discourse consistently returned to Quayle’s lack of imaging skills and the necessity of repair. While recognizing the insignificance of an extra “e” on “potato,” news reports, late night shows, sitcoms and cartoons all covered the misspelling. Quayle’s ability to spell (and perhaps to trust his own judgment) was called into question. Many ridiculed Quayle for a supposed lack of intelligence. Ultimately, however, the discourse turned on the *perception* of Quayle’s intelligence. When Quayle’s and Bush’s half-hearted explanations of the misspelling did not pan out, it magnified criticisms of the campaign’s imaging strategy. Regardless of Quayle’s command of English, the ability to project a command was far more

important. In fact, many stories openly argued that spelling skills were irrelevant to the Vice Presidency. His imaging inadequacies were far more damning. Staying on script, which in this case meant bolstering the campaign's image and preventing more supposedly "authentic" moments, was considered sufficient to be America's Vice President.

Whereas the discourse about Quayle's misspelling was about his supposed dullness, his 1992 counterpart, Vice President Al Gore, bragged about creating the internet and inspired a gaffe discourse about his own dullness.

Vice President Al Gore's Brag

At the end of eight years in the White House as Vice President to President Bill Clinton, Al Gore wanted to make a name for himself. Before formally announcing his candidacy for president, Gore sat down to an interview with *CNN's* Wolf Blitzer on March 9, 1999. The interview covered Gore's possible presidential run, potential Vice Presidential picks, and speculative political projects. Blitzer asked Gore why he believed he would be a better nominee than his likely Democratic opponent, Senator Bill Bradley. Gore said,

Well, I will be offering—I'll be offering my vision when my campaign begins. And it will be comprehensive and sweeping. And I hope that it will be compelling enough to draw people toward it. I feel that it will be. But it will emerge from my dialogue with the American people. I've traveled to every part of this country during the last six years. During my service in the United States Congress, I took the initiative in creating the Internet. I took the initiative in moving forward a whole range of initiatives that have proven to be important to our country's economic growth and environmental protection, improvements in our educational system.⁵³

Blitzer then asked Gore about polls, Clinton's impeachment and the administration's current policy initiatives.

Two days later that attention returned to the interview through Declan McCullagh's *Wired* piece. The "creating the Internet" line from Gore's interview came during a list of what Gore likely hoped would become campaign talking points—the economy, the

environment, and education. But the rest of Gore's interview with Blitzer was forgotten when McCulloch's *Wired* article singled out the "creating the internet" line. Indeed, Al Gore's nuanced phrasing, "During my service in the United States Congress, I took the initiative in creating the Internet," was interpreted simply as "I invented the internet." McCullagh mused, "It's a time-honored tradition for presidential hopefuls to claim credit for other people's successes. But Al Gore as the father of the Internet?" McCullagh pointed out that Gore was far too young when developers were actually inventing the Internet to make such a bold claim. McCullagh did admit, however, that Gore was "one of the most prominent people in the Clinton administration on issues related to high technology."⁵⁴

As in Quayle's case, jokes kept Gore's comment in the news. Trent Lott joked, "I took the initiative in creating the paper clip. Paper clips bind us together as a nation."⁵⁵ House Majority Leader Dick Armey said, "I created the Interstate highway system."⁵⁶ A Gore spokesman replied, "It's no surprise that Senator Lott and the Republicans are taking credit for an invention that has been around for centuries...After all, their policies are intended to take us back to the Dark Ages."⁵⁷ Later, when Armey tripped on some ice and broke his wrist, his spokesperson released the statement, "When [Vice President] Al Gore claimed he had invented the internet, it knocked him off-balance."⁵⁸ Gore got in on the action and said, "The day I made that comment, I was tired from staying up all night inventing the camcorder."⁵⁹ Later, Gore also quipped, "Nobody questioned Strom Thurmond when he said he invented the wheel," poking fun at the aging senator.⁶⁰

Unfortunately for Gore, his brag stayed in the news. When Steve Forbes threw his hat into the ring as a Republican contender for President, he referenced Gore's environmental concerns and joked, "We can take comfort in knowing that [Gore] won't

claim he invented the automobile.”⁶¹ Shortly after George W. Bush officially entered the race for president, about three months after Gore’s interview with Blitzer, one of his opening salvos was that the administration “did not invent prosperity any more than they invented the Internet.”⁶² He used the line again during a visit to Silicon Valley the next month.⁶³ At the White House Correspondents Dinner, Gore was the butt of more jokes than Clinton, and most were about the Internet brag.⁶⁴ All of the ribbing received positive press. *USA Today* wrote, “And you thought your public officials were so busy slinging mud that they’d forgotten how to have fun.” Gore’s “gaffe injected some much-needed levity into political discourse after a year of acrimony. If the partisans are learning to laugh at each other, why they just might be able to sit down and work out those tough issues together. And that really would be something to crow about.”⁶⁵

While it began as all-in-good-fun, the discourse quickly became more serious. Multiple stories shed doubt on Gore’s professed relationship to the Internet. Gore clarified, “I did take the lead in the Congress in promoting the expansion of the early Defense Department and National Science Foundation networks into what we have today.”⁶⁶ Many pointed out that while what he said had *some* truth to it, it was not *technically* true. *The Washington Times* asked, “did Mr. Gore bring into existence the very communications network that is today helping to propel the Dow toward 10,000? Not so fast.” It wrote that the idea for the Internet was born in a research paper by an MIT professor in 1966, when Gore was only 18. It went on to explain that the Internet prototype was ARPANET, a project the Department of Defense commissioned in 1969, when Gore was just graduating college. Referencing Gore’s well-known formality, the article joked, “Perhaps the clearest sign that Mr. Gore did not invent the Internet came in 1979, when ‘emoticons’ such as :) came into

use as a means of injecting emotion back into the dry medium of e-mail.”⁶⁷ Others, however, came to Gore’s defense. *The New York Times* acknowledged Gore’s positive influence on the commercialization of the Internet. It wrote, “Even as Mr. Gore’s political foes mocked him, a group of computer scientists, policy makers and others who have worked with Mr. Gore over the years quickly leaped to his defense. Mr. Gore, of course, did not create the Internet, but, his defenders say, he helped lift the Internet from relative obscurity and turn it into a widely accessible, commercial network.”⁶⁸ *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution* even dug up Bill Gates’ book, *The Road Ahead*, which mentioned Gore’s (and Gore’s father, Senator Albert Gore, Sr.’s) role in supporting the “information superhighway.”⁶⁹ Stories took the opportunity to educate audiences about the history of the Internet, and Gore’s defenders explained how his legislative support was crucial to the Internet we have today.

This discourse was less about inventing the Internet than about *reinventing* Gore’s image. Gore vacillated between looking like a boring stiff and looking like a fool. His propensity to exaggerate was considered an ineffective attempt to throw off that image. The brag only mattered in that it was a failed political imaging strategy. *The Herald* noted, “Mr. Gore, seeking to appear interesting to the American public, claimed earlier this year to have invented the Internet, a claim he later, and properly, had to recant, causing him much embarrassment.”⁷⁰ *The Times* drew attention to Gore’s difficulty with imaging, noting,

Perception is all, and as Mr. Gore heads off on the long road to the election he faces a crucial choice: if he retains the decent but stiff image that reflects his nature, he could easily bore voters away, but if he continues to hype himself artificially he may end up looking thoroughly foolish, and nothing kills a campaign faster. Jimmy Carter became a laughing-stock in 1979 when he claimed to have been attacked by a ‘killer rabbit’ in a Georgia pond; Dan Quayle will never live down his misspelt potatoe.⁷¹

Gore's image tended to "bore" the electorate and the Internet claim, possibly an attempt to inject some excitement, backfired. *The Times* wrote, "In private Mr. Gore is anything but a bore: likeable, ardent and savvy, he has a good line in deadpan humour and a reputation for integrity. Put him out in public, however, and the result is so wooden you wonder whether this is a politician on the stump or an entire tree." But when Gore tried to reveal his "real" self, it "backfired, for when Mr. Gore tries to depict who he is, what seems to come out is a version of the person who, in an ideal world, he would like to be."⁷² The real Al Gore was an electoral liability. As one journalist wrote,

Gore and his team keep insisting there is no real problem - just a matter of perceptions. The Vice-President can out-policy any opponent, they repeat, and win any debate on the issues. If only he could get people to, er, listen...But that's the trouble. The US public seems to have very little interest in doing so. Partly it is because Gore often sounds as if he is addressing a kindergarten class - speaking CLEARLY and SLOWLY as he explains what is IMPORTANT. His personality, even after all those years as a Southern politician, sits on the public like an uncomfortable, over-starched dress shirt. He sometimes looks as if every word has to be wrenched out of him, every gesture practised in front of a focus group. Bill Clinton is a brilliant liar who slips easily through the bounds of reality. Gore is dreadful at telling the truth and prone to embarrassing, obvious exaggeration. Sure you invented the Internet, Al.⁷³

This article is clear about what makes a good candidate, which includes looking at ease and "brilliantly lying." Gore's problem was that he could not do it. Dick Morris, a Clinton aide, noted, "Al Gore clings to the traditional, the formal, the stiff because he fears if he shows his real face, he'll blow it."⁷⁴

Gore's lack of aptitude for political imaging was overwhelmingly the focus. *The Washington Post* wrote, "The Democratic presidential front-runner has escaped damage before for massaging the truth. But staking claim to cyberspace has got Washington buzzing about the vice president's penchant for 'the gaffe'—that verbal misstep that can stain a political image, embolden late-night comedians and become a nagging historical

footnote.” The paper brazenly interviewed William Kristol, Quayle’s chief of staff during the “potatoo” misspelling. Gore’s brag “is adding to his lore of questionable claims,” *The Washington Post* claimed, referencing other Gore brags, such as the suggestion that he and his wife were the inspiration for a romance novel.⁷⁵

Gore’s lack of imaging ability was described as unpresidential. Gore did not have President Clinton’s charm. Whereas Clinton could get away with almost anything – and keep record high approval numbers, even amidst impeachment—Gore could not successfully sell himself to the American people. Clinton could skillfully lie in such a way that most people still liked him, even when they knew he was lying. Clinton’s style of lying was presidential, while Gore was, at best, a failed wannabe. Stories commented on Clinton’s mentorship, including his urging for Gore to have fun on the campaign trail: “Good advice, no doubt, given that Mr. Gore seems to enjoy campaigning about as much as a proctological exam. But how? How can a notorious stiff like the veep overcome his stone-faced persona? Can the man who invented the Internet and reinvented government reinvent himself?”⁷⁶ The article cheekily suggested Gore change his image by wearing a rainbow wig, popping some of his wife’s anti-depressants, or the ultimate Clinton calling card, having an affair. *The Independent* wrote, “Mr. Clinton’s political flair served only to underline his deputy’s lack of it, and Mr. Gore’s stilted and jargon ridden speech had even so well-disposed an audience fidgeting within minutes.”⁷⁷ Unfortunately, unlike Clinton, Gore was not “a natural and convincing performer.”⁷⁸

A key claim of the *Wired* article was that it was presidential to take credit for others’ work. But Gore’s attempts came off as obvious and pitiful. Lying, of course, implies inauthenticity. The discourse demonstrated that it is not authenticity that we desire,

otherwise Gore's attempt to deceive would have been the focus of negative attention, not the fact that Gore was simply no good at deception. According to several stories, the treatment Gore received was par for the course for someone who aimed for the highest office. The *South China Morning Post* wrote, "While it is almost certainly the case that this cybergeek only meant to remind voters that he helped push the idea through to fruition, his words—as befits any man who would be president—were taken literally."⁷⁹ A skilled politician would never let himself become "Quayle-ized. Mr. Gore's flubs seem so unnecessary for a dignified and experienced politician. Most recently, he claimed to have invented the Internet while in Congress...Mr. Gore could legitimately claim to have been an energetic propagandist for the possibilities of the Internet—his 'information superhighway'—but why the silly bluster?"⁸⁰

Gore's lack of imaging skill was considered more damaging than the fact that his brag was possibly an intentional lie. The popularity of the current administration guaranteed him the election, if only he could improve his political image. As the *Scotsman* noted, "For Democrats, it is this simple: on present form, the race is Gore's, if he does not screw it up like he did last week, when he claimed to have invented the internet (he did not)."⁸¹ Gore was his own worst enemy: "He has stumbled in his early steps on the campaign trail, hindered in part by his own words. He was ridiculed for claiming he invented the Internet."⁸²

Like Quayle's misspelling, Gore's brag inspired discussion of the importance of the script in politics. *The Washington Times* noted, "The flub seemed to epitomize Mr. Gore's image problem. When he sticks too closely to his script, he is accused of being boring and uninspiring. When he ad libs, he sometimes makes mistakes that become the object of

ridicule, such as his now-legendary claim to have invented the Internet.”⁸³ When Gore did follow the script, he did it too obviously and seemed wooden and boring. His ability to perform the script convincingly, to stay “on message,” was called into question. For Gore, too much or too little fidelity to a script was dangerous. Gore’s problem was that he seemed too intelligent. But it did not matter how “authentically” intelligent Gore was. The discourse called for Gore to project a different kind of image, even, if not especially, involving hiding that intelligence behind a more personable façade.

Comparisons to Quayle’s misspelling solidified the focus on imaging. The *Washington Times* wrote, “Did you catch the news media coverage of the latest stereotypical Dan Quayle blooper?...Do not berate yourself if you missed the coverage of that gaffe—for it was also missed by most of our major news media. And, you need to know, it was uttered not by our ex-veep, Dan Quayle, but by our present veep, Al Gore.”⁸⁴ Gore’s brag “sounded like something former Vice President Dan Quayle would say. But it was current Vice President Al Gore who last week dumbfounded observers.”⁸⁵ Some stories even remarked that Gore’s comments were *worse* than Quayle’s, despite Gore’s higher intelligence:

Mr. Gore has outshone his Republican predecessor, Dan Quayle, who had the populace alternately laughing at his gaffes and fearing he might ever end up in charge - the man who could not spell potato and who wondered why Latin Americans did not speak Latin. Certainly, there is much more happening upstairs in the Gore grey matter than was ever apparent in Mr. Quayle’s. But to the Democrats’ horror, the two have started to appear startlingly similar.⁸⁶

Investor’s Business Daily noted, “Al Gore, the vice president as well as the campaigner, loves to be all things to all people. It’s a necessity when hustling for votes, and Gore is as good a political chameleon as any. But his preferred image—technology whiz—needs burnishing. In recent weeks, Gore has stumbled his way through a series of gaffes. They’ve made him

look more like Dan Quayle than Bill Gates.”⁸⁷ Quayle, embarking on a presidential run himself joked, “If Gore invented the internet, I invented spell check.”⁸⁸ The comparisons to Quayle, a politician already thrashed for his political imaging ineptitude, reinforced the notion that Gore’s problem was his political image.

The “Internet” brag took place during the nascent stages of the campaign. Gore’s interview on *CNN* was meant to refine his image and reintroduce himself to the American people. Gore was aiming to make a name for himself independent of Clinton, to look presidential, and to start a national conversation on the policy initiatives his campaign would focus on. Blitzer’s interview did what it was supposed to do: introduce Gore to the people and cast him in a favorable light. A *Wired* article a few days later, however, rearticulated a line from the interview as an unrealistic brag. It inspired a controversy over Gore’s actual role in creating the “information superhighway.” Internet experts agreed that Gore was indispensable to its development. Despite that truth, Gore’s imaging was deemed problematic. Gore’s proclivity for the truth was deemed an imaging liability. The truth was boring, which meant his image was boring. The discourse picked apart Gore’s image and prescribed more Clinton-esque skill in imaging. Despite the gaffe about his brag, Gore did receive the Democratic nomination for President. But he eventually lost to Governor George W. Bush at the Supreme Court, and is still widely known for this gaffe. Many even believe that Gore flat out said, “I *invented* the Internet.”

Gore was not the only politician deemed incapable of matching Bill Clinton’s imaging prowess. Clinton’s wife, Hillary, was also unfavorably compared to Bill when her embellishment of a plane landing in Bosnia inspired a damaging gaffe discourse.

Senator Hillary Clinton's Embellishment

The Iowa Caucuses are the first time in the presidential campaign cycle that citizens can formally support presidential hopefuls. For two candidates as close in ideology as Senator Hillary Clinton and Senator Barack Obama, clear distinctions needed to be made to draw in supporters. During the 2008 Democratic primary season, Clinton endeavored to make that distinction based on foreign policy experience. Responding to Obama's comment that her foreign policy experience consisted mostly of having tea as First Lady, Clinton gave a speech about her foreign policy chops in Dubuque, Iowa on December 29, 2007. Less than a week before the Iowa Caucuses, Clinton recalled her trip to Bosnia in 1996:

I was so honored to be able to travel around the world representing our country. You know, going to places that often times were, you know, not necessarily a place that a president could go. We used to say in the White House that if a place was too dangerous, too small or too poor, send the first lady...So, we landed in one of those corkscrew landings and ran out because they said there might be sniper fire. I don't remember anybody offering me tea on the tarmac.⁸⁹

Her comments received scant, if positive, media attention. The next day the *New York Observer* remarked that Clinton "told voters in Dubuque about a 1990's visit to Bosnia in which her helicopter made a 'corkscrew landing' to counter the threat of sniper fire. (She didn't mention that she was traveling at the time with daughter Chelsea, Sheryl Crow and Sinbad.) But it was the more mundane, personal anecdotes that seemed to make the most powerful impression on audiences..."⁹⁰ In Waco, TX on February 29, 2008, Clinton again recalled her experience in Bosnia. She noted that the welcoming ceremony "had to be moved inside because of sniper fire."⁹¹ It was not until March 12, 2008, almost two-and-a-half months and multiple retellings later, that Clinton's description of the Bosnia trip came under scrutiny. The comedian Sinbad, one of her companions on the trip, denied that it was at all dangerous. He said, "What kind of president would say, 'Hey, man, I can't go 'cause I

might get shot so I'm going to send my wife...oh, and take a guitar player and a comedian with you.”⁹² On March 13, 2008, *The Globe and Mail* also accused Clinton of using the trip to draw artificial distinctions between herself and Obama. It wrote that Clinton “frequently refers to her trip to war-torn Bosnia, where she practically had to dodge sniper fire... her résumé is as inflated as the Goodyear Blimp. There were no bullets in Bosnia. She went there on a tour with Sheryl Crow and another entertainer named Sinbad, who says the most harrowing part was deciding where they were going to eat.”⁹³

It was Clinton’s remarks on March 17, 2008 that ultimately sparked serious media scrutiny. Clinton said, “I remember landing under sniper fire” and “running with our heads down to our vehicles.”⁹⁴ *The Washington Post* noted, “A review of nearly 100 news accounts of her visit shows that not a single newspaper or television station reported any security threat to the first lady,” so “Clinton’s tale of landing at the Tuzla airport ‘under sniper fire’ and then running for cover is simply not credible. Photographs and video of the arrival ceremony, combined with contemporaneous news reports, tell a very different story. Four Pinocchios.”⁹⁵ Four Pinocchios is the maximum amount of Pinocchios that a statement can receive. *The Washington Post* released an additional story fact-checking Clinton’s “sniper fire” story and her response four days later. It wrote, “Since I have already awarded her a maximum four Pinocchios for her depiction of the event, it seems churlish to add any more.”⁹⁶ The Obama campaign rehashed *The Washington Post* story and posted a press release quoting it directly.⁹⁷

Claims that Clinton embellished the sniper fire story received pushback from the Clinton campaign. Howard Wolfson, Clinton’s campaign spokesperson, said “There is no question if you look at contemporaneous accounts that she was going to a potential combat

zone, that she was on the front lines.”⁹⁸ He also noted that Clinton accurately wrote about the Bosnia landing in her 2003 memoir *Living History* and that “in one instance, she said it slightly differently.”⁹⁹ Lisa Caputo, the White House press chief who accompanied Clinton on the 1996 trip, also argued that Clinton’s account was accurate. She said, “We were briefed this area could have random sniper fire at any moment,” and that “the landing was rapid. Like it seemed one moment we were overhead and the next we were down. That’s because it was a dangerous area. So did we experience snipers - no. But could we and were we thus mindful of it—yes.”¹⁰⁰ Clinton’s aides were also quick to point out that the “sniper fire” story was not part of Clinton’s prepared remarks.¹⁰¹ Obama’s spokesperson, Tommy Vietor, disagreed. He said, “when you make a false claim that’s in your prepared remarks, it’s not misspeaking, it’s misleading, and it’s part of a troubling pattern of Senator Clinton inflating her foreign-policy experience.”¹⁰² The Obama campaign was insistent that the sniper fire anecdote had been a part of Clinton’s prepared remarks, presumably to suggest that the embellishment was intentional and premeditated, not a result of careless wording in the moment. (Indeed, Clinton told the story at least three times). Another Clinton spokesperson, Mark Nevins, argued that the Obama campaign was to blame for the undue attention to Clinton’s remarks. “There’s a significant disconnect between the Obama campaign’s rabid desire to make this an issue and the public’s reaction to it,” Nevins stated, “It’s sad that a campaign that has hung its hat on a claim to represent the politics of hope is now practicing the politics of personal destruction. It’s hypocritical and a little bizarre.”¹⁰³

Clinton herself addressed the remarks repeatedly. Clinton explained, “You know I have written about this and described it in many different settings and I did misspeak the other day. This has been a very long campaign. Occasionally, I am a human being like

everybody else.” According to Clinton, the strenuous nature of the campaign meant that she was sleep deprived, and that caused her to misspeak.¹⁰⁴ The *Pittsburgh Tribune Review* countered the claim, noting that Clinton had no speaking events the day before and slept at her own home, implying that the sleep deprivation comment was also inaccurate.¹⁰⁵ Clinton additionally noted, “I have written about it in my book and talked about it on many other occasions, and last week, you know, for the first time in 12 or so years misspoke.” When pressed on *that* statement, she explained, “I was joking—I mean, you know, gosh, lighten up guys,” and, “Obviously I say millions of words every week. There is a lot more room for error when you are talking as much as I am talking.”¹⁰⁶

Stories tied what they deemed to be Clinton’s unhealthy ambition with her propensity to embellish. The *Australian Financial Review* wondered, “What motivates people in public life to embroider their CVs when, in this digital age, nothing on the public record, and much that is off the record for that matter, is beyond reach?...the Bosnia episode forms part of a pattern that suggests the New York senator has a fairly promiscuous attitude to truth-telling.”¹⁰⁷ In the digital age, “Clinton thought she could make up a story about how she came under sniper fire in Bosnia in 1996 and that no one would check it. More, she repeated the story at least four times, into the microphones, straight to the press corps, and still never thought anyone would check. At which point one doesn’t even bother calling her a liar. One just calls her a dumb broad.”¹⁰⁸ In other words, “One conundrum is why an experienced politician would risk being caught out in a lie unless he or she believed that pursuit of higher office involved the dictum ‘whatever it takes.’”¹⁰⁹ Stories described the “sniper fire” remarks as the result of Clinton’s most fatal flaw: her ambition. While the “sniper fire” remarks were “meant to illustrate her international

experience and her personal courage,” they actually “revealed the neurotic depths of her ambition...Clinton's only sensible choice is to withdraw, sooner rather than later, and sacrifice her personal ambition to the greater good of her party and her country, and, not incidentally, herself.”¹¹⁰ These stories speculated that Clinton’s ambition would interfere with her image. The temptation to embellish ultimately caused problems for the important foreign policy distinction she was trying to make.

Several stories pushed the lying explanation even further, claiming that Clinton was a pathological liar. Stories included lists of other instances where Clinton likely exaggerated. *The New York Post* included a list of “Hillary’s biggest whoppers,” such as the anecdote that she was named after Mt. Everest climber Sir Edmund Hillary, though he climbed the mountain after she was born, that she opposed NAFTA when she had actually pushed for it, and that she said she was a life-long Yankees fan, though she was from Chicago.¹¹¹ Stories claimed Clinton would do what she thought was necessary to secure the nomination, even if she hurt herself and the Democratic Party in the process by unnecessarily extending the primary battle. *The Union Leader* theorized, “The sniper claim would immediately end the career of a normal politician. But no one has ever accused Sen. Clinton of being normal. At this point it is as obvious as the dye in her hair that Hillary Clinton is a hopeless fraud, a liar of mythical duplicity who thinks the American people are so stupid that they can be tricked by falsehoods of obvious transparency. Democrats are not really going to nominate such a person for the presidency, are they?”¹¹²

Many stories emphasized that Clinton’s hand was forced once *CBS* unearthed video of the uneventful landing in Bosnia. The video showed “a neatly coifed Mrs. Clinton and her daughter, Chelsea...exiting a U.S. transport plane, smiling and waving and walking to a little

group of Bosnian civilians, including children, who greeted her.”¹¹³ *The Guardian Unlimited* wrote, “after days of argument, *CBS* settled the matter, unearthing film confirming there had been no sniper fire. The outcome was a rare retreat by Clinton, the first time since she began campaigning more than a year ago that she has publicly admitted making a mistake...Faced with the video evidence, Clinton acknowledged on Monday that she had made a mistake.”¹¹⁴ *The Oklahoman* noted “Facts can be troublesome things—especially when they appear on videotape.”¹¹⁵ Stories recognized that Clinton’s clarification could potentially damage the crucial distinction her campaign was attempting to create. As *The New York Times* wrote, “The backpedaling was a rare instance of Mrs. Clinton’s acknowledging an error, and she did so on a sensitive issue: She has cited her ‘strength and experience’ since the start of the presidential race, framing her 80 trips abroad as first lady as preparation for dealing with foreign affairs as president.”¹¹⁶

Clinton’s mistake was not that she would fabricate a story about landing under sniper fire more than ten years prior. It was that *CBS* had been there to capture it and could reveal the lie. It is silly to lie when you can be proven wrong, but not when you can get away with it. *The Dayton Daily News* wrote, “There was no sniper fire. There was no ducking. And there was, indeed, a greeting ceremony. And yet it’s hard to believe that Sen. Clinton consciously lied. The event, after all, was covered by the media, attended by a lot of other people and quite a big deal in Bosnia. There was no way to sustain a lie. A sophisticated politician would know that. And the current presidential campaign has certainly shown Sen. Clinton to be a sophisticated politician.”¹¹⁷ In other words, Clinton could not have lied on purpose, because an experienced politician like herself would lie better. For many, the most notable aspect was not that Clinton had embellished the story.

Of course Clinton would hyperbolize her foreign policy experience, since that was the main distinction her campaign was trying to make between herself and Obama. Not only did she provide weak and radically different responses over time, from “I speak a lot” to “I misremembered” to “I was tired,” but her embellishment was also easily disproven by news channel videos, others’ accounts, and even her own words. Stories wondered not, “Why would she lie?” rather, “Why is she so bad at it?” Instead, the most notable aspect of the “sniper fire” remarks was that Clinton had exaggerated in the YouTube era—when she would be caught. Many wondered why she said it when her account could easily be compared to archived video footage.

Despite Bill Clinton famously getting caught in multiple lies, he was held up as more presidential for his ability to avoid being caught or to charm his way out. Stories referenced his liberty with words during the Monica Lewinsky scandal: “The deadly selective memory syndrome (SMS) claims its second Clinton victim in 10 years. In January 1998, President Bill declared about White House aide Monica Lewinsky: ‘I did not have sexual relations with that woman.’ Now his wannabe president wife, Hillary, says of a trip to Bosnia as first lady: ‘I remember landing under sniper fire.’”¹¹⁸ Also, “She is not the first politician to ‘misspeak’ - if that’s what we’re calling it now. In 1998, her hubby Bill, with absolute sincerity, addressed the US to denounce slurs and rumours that he’d had sex in the White House with intern Monica Lewinsky... Perhaps that’s where Hillary learned to ‘mis-speak.’”¹¹⁹ The *Dallas Morning News* wrote, “To err is human; to tell this self-serving whopper for months on end is Hillary—or at least it fits the image many Americans have of Mrs. Clinton and her husband. Fair or not, the Clintons have a reputation as Machiavellians who are willing to say anything to protect their political interests.”¹²⁰ These stories equated

Clinton's sniper fire "remarks" with Bill's famous attempts to skirt the truth (minus the finger wagging).

Some stories suggested that Clinton's ambition caused her to lash out against her opponent. Clinton's "sniper fire" embellishment occurred after revelations that Obama's long-time reverend Rev. Jeremiah Wright espoused what some believed to be anti-American beliefs. Obama addressed his connection to Rev. Wright with a speech and calmed the criticisms. The discourse, however, pitted Obama's "Wright gaffe" and Clinton's "sniper fire" remarks against one another. Stories compared the relative damage to their poll numbers, supporters, and campaign strategy. When Clinton finally remarked, after remaining silent on the issue, that "Given all that we have heard and seen, he would not have been my pastor," many stories posited that it was Clinton's attempt to deflect attention from her own comments. As *The New York Times* noted, "The Obama campaign fired back, accusing her of trying to 'distract attention away from the story she made up about dodging sniper fire in Bosnia.'"¹²¹ The *Guardian Unlimited* accused Clinton of "stok[ing] up the row over Barack Obama's fiery pastor" and that Clinton's "intervention opens the way for the media to revisit the row."¹²² "[B]oth candidates have seen their credibility tarnished on several fronts," wrote *The Washington Post*, and listed the Rev. Wright issue and the "sniper fire" remarks as the two main issues influencing the election.¹²³ However, Clinton's embellishment was considered more damaging than Obama's affiliation with Wright. Clinton's story smelled of desperation and a lack of political finesse. The *Charleston Gazette* wrote, "The fact that Clinton's poll numbers suffered more than Obama's might have to do with the way her campaign gives the impression of being willing to do anything it takes—anything—to win the nomination."¹²⁴

The proximity to Obama's Reverend Wright controversy inspired a discussion of who was more presidential based on their respective reactions to the gaffes. The discourse argued that it was more presidential to recover from gaffes. And in this case, Obama's ability to repair to damage from the Wright controversy made him more presidential, giving Obama the upper hand. Indeed, her inability to dig out from under the sniper fire story made her less qualified for the presidency: "If the ability of presidential candidates to recover from roundhouse blows delivered with precision to their own chins from their own hands is an appropriate measure of their fitness for the job, Barack Obama might just as well move into the White House now."¹²⁵ Just as it was "presidential" only to lie when one would not get caught, it was presidential to explain away any flaws when they arise.

Unfavorable comparisons to Gore's "Internet" brag emphasized that Clinton suffered from a lack of imaging prowess. Clinton's remarks were described as "pure, calculated fabrication. Lies, all of it... Fraudulence of this scope and severity makes Al Gore's claims that he invented the Internet look downright quaint. But the real scandal is that anyone is surprised by this anymore."¹²⁶ Another story asked, "Did you hear how Hillary Clinton invented the Internet? That's the 'claim' that got Al Gore in trouble in 2000. Now it's Clinton who stands to be labeled a serial exaggerator, after her account of a 1996 trip to Bosnia failed to jive with the facts."¹²⁷

Clinton's sniper fire embellishment became a story about how Clinton's ambition was destroying her public image. She needed to tamp it down, and handle the situation more like Bill. It became evidence that Clinton would not be able to image successfully enough to be president, and should leave the race. One paper wrote, "Of course, the volley of shots Hillary inflicted upon herself were better timed and a bit more explosive on

impact...Having decked herself dizzy with a flub that even makes her opponents wince in pain, Clinton could only flail at the air in vain attempts at recovery.”¹²⁸

The “sniper fire” gaffe developed at a very inopportune time for Clinton’s campaign. Many were already calling for Clinton to leave the race. Barack Obama had an arguably insurmountable lead and many Democrats wanted to avoid drawing out an already negative and bruising primary battle that could harm Obama’s general election chances versus Republican Senator John McCain. The “sniper fire” gaffe magnified the demands for Clinton to bow out. Clinton’s “sniper fire” embellishment received sustained media coverage and is remembered as a key point of her campaign. Clinton ultimately left the race in June 2008. She did, however, put her extensive foreign policy experience to use as President Obama’s Secretary of State.

To bolster her foreign policy image, Clinton repeatedly used an anecdote about a dangerous landing in Bosnia. The story was likely used to add a personal element to Clinton’s impressive list of travels as First Lady—she had faced danger and survived. The semantic difference between “under sniper fire” and “under the threat of sniper fire” led to accusations that Clinton’s ambition caused her to embellish the story. The campaign’s multiple and mismatched responses to the media attention called their imaging operation into question as well. The discourse depicted Clinton’s embellishment as an expected deviation from the truth from an experienced politician. However, embellishing is acceptable when a politician cannot be caught.

Conclusion

The previous case studies show that gaffes are media made discourses, not merely strategic blunders. Viewed in a vacuum none of these three moments are notable. Quayle’s

poor spelling advice was at a low stakes campaign event and those in attendance, including reporters, saw the inaccurate spelling card. Gore's Internet brag garnered no special attention at the time, despite being broadcast on *CNN*. Clinton's embellishment of the Bosnia landing occurred repeatedly over the course of several months before it eventually sparked the larger discourse. But as the discourses developed, they were labeled and interpreted as imaging mistakes.

Even when a politician follows the script, a gaffe discourse can develop that retroactively finds that script to be mistaken. The discourse, ironically, encourages politicians to avoid being authentic and instead focus on creating an appealing political image. Scholars of private style argue that the private style adapted mannerisms, phrases and content from private, interpersonal conversation. So while it is public, audiences experience a more intimate connection with the speaker. This is reinforced by the rise of electronic media that allows these conversations to happen close to us—from their homes to ours, with close-ups of their facial expressions, etc. Electronic media often erases itself, and the private style similarly erases mediated and psychological barriers between speakers and audiences. Even when audiences are primed to find authenticity in politicians' public performances, the media discourses that create gaffes work against that. The role of mediation in imaging is front and center. We are getting not an image of the politician per se, but the making of the political image.

These discourses also demonstrate that even when the discourse seems invested in certain moments as "authentic," authenticity is not valued. Instead, they value sophisticated political imaging. Quayle's, Gore's and Clinton's words demonstrate that gaffes are not prized for their authenticity. Even if aspects of the discourse characterize the misspelling,

brag, and embellishment as authentic moments, they are ultimately derided for it. In each case there were extenuating factors and plausible explanations for what happened. Quayle was handed an incorrect spelling card, Gore did advocate for the development of the Internet in Congress, and Clinton did land under the threat of sniper fire. However, these discourses were not about the truth or what happened, nor were they about what each politician was authentically like. The accompanying prescriptions for the politicians to retreat into and repair their manufactured personas suggest that authenticity is not the primary value.

In these three cases, an image of the ideal politician is starting to take shape. Robust imaging skills were considered the most important asset for any politician. For example, all three of these politicians were compared to Bill Clinton. Quayle was depicted as an amateur political imager compared to his political opponent during the 1992 presidential election. Later, Gore failed to live up to the President's ability to charm voters. Though married, Clinton did not pick up on her husband Bill's imaging abilities. Yes, these three politicians were all connected to Bill in some fashion, as opponent, running mate, and wife. But in each case, it was their inability to image like Bill that was the point of comparison. The overwhelming message is that to be Presidential is to be inauthentic. The discourses argued that politicians should do their best to hide their true selves. In addition, inability to recover effectively from gaffes was interpreted as unfitness for office. I should also note that the ideal politician seems also to be male. The descriptions of Hillary Clinton as a "dumb broad" with a "promiscuous" relationship to the truth and dyed hair were particularly sexist. This type of language is unique to Clinton's case and demonstrates the inhospitable treatment women face when running for office.

These discourses also speak to the character of the American public. The emphasis on inauthentic political imaging is demophobic, because it argues that the public should be denied accurate information about their political leaders. In addition, each case featured arguments about the public's incompatibility with deliberation. Stories about Quayle argued that the public cared more about slogans and jokes than about Quayle's intelligence. The discourse about Gore contended that he repelled voters with his boring personality. The discourse asserted that the public squirmed when forced to listen to his long-winded explanations of policy. In Clinton's case, *The Union Leader* accused Clinton of lying because she assumed the American people were stupid. But the discourse itself contended that the public *should* be lied to (as long as there is not video evidence to the contrary). The prescriptive tone demonstrates that imaging, not authenticity, is the most important asset in politics. Indeed, this is the message of *Gaffe Dodger*: the ideal politician reads the teleprompter's script. These discourses contend that politicians should stick to the messaging script.

In the following Chapter, I examine how words spoken into hot mics become gaffes by discussing President Ronald Reagan's joke before a radio address, Governor George W. Bush's insult toward a reporter, and President Barack Obama's overheard negotiation with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev.

Notes

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CHAPTER THREE

PRIVATE SPEECH: THE JOKE, THE INSULT AND THE NEGOTIATION

The documentary *Spin* premiered in 1995. It was a collection of intercepted satellite feeds that Brian Springer recorded from his home dish in 1992. *Spin* focused on the 1992 presidential election and the Los Angeles riots. The intercepted feeds showed politicians and their handlers, journalists, and other public figures in the moments before, during and after the segments that eventually aired on television. The feeds showed material that regular TV viewers would otherwise never see, such as politicians discussing interview strategy with advisors, make up crews prepping the faces of presenters, and the commercial break chitchat between talk show hosts and their guests. The end of the film included a conversation between an in-frame Tipper Gore and an off-camera Clinton-Gore campaign aide on the usefulness of the unedited satellite feeds for the campaign. The aide explained that campaign operatives in Arkansas could scrutinize the wide-shot satellite feed of live events from all over the country and relay information to the campaign operatives on site, allowing them to create a more attractive camera shot or alert security to the presence of unsightly protestors. The documentary ended with Mrs. Gore looking warily into the camera as we hear the campaign aide's words, "See, everybody watches."¹

We could easily take the lesson from *Spin* that material that does not make it into our regularly scheduled programming is more "real" than the edited final product that we do see. The behind-the-scenes shots, presumably, show people as they really are; before the distorted view that the parroted words of strategists, professional makeup, and expert

camera angles provide (in other words: *spin*. Recall that this is the primary mode of political communication according to Kinsley). Stephen Holden's review in the *New York Times* said the documentary included "revealing, sometimes embarrassing compilation of scenes of television personalities and politicians caught in unguarded moments that were transmitted to satellite dishes." Holden argued, "While there are no smoking-gun revelations in the chitchat of famous people unknowingly caught on camera with open microphones, the accumulated scenes of spin-doctoring and power-mongering add up to a devastating critique of television's profound manipulateness in the way it packages the news and politics."² *Spin*'s intercepted feeds theoretically offered audiences the opportunity to see politicians as they have never seen them before. However, one gets the strong impression from Holden's review that some "smoking-gun revelations" would have been a welcomed aspect of the film. Indeed, we could argue that much of Springer's feeds showed what we already knew—that what audiences see and hear is the manipulated finished product. *Spin* was about that "profound manipulateness." Of course there were no smoking-gun revelations: *Spin* depicted what did not make it onto the mainstream airwaves. Perhaps what Holden was hoping for was authenticity, not the edited television interview or the politician's discussions with their campaign aides, but the "real" material. In this case, real is considered something the politician does not want us to see.

The type of satellite feeds in *Spin* are harder to come by today. Satellite feeds are often encrypted or digitized, making them difficult or impossible for the average person to intercept as Springer did in 1992. However, politicians still make unguarded comments on live feeds, which viewers can see live or journalists can bring to our attention. These comments are often called "hot mics." Hot mics, also called open mics or live mics, are

microphones that are switched on. Hot mic gaffes occur where politicians do not realize that they are being recorded and/or broadcast. What Holden misunderstood is that “unguarded moments” can never be smoking-gun revelations unless packaged as such. Not all hot mic comments become gaffes, but we could easily imagine that some of the clips in *Spin* would have been gaffes if they had been publicized.

The three gaffe discourses in this chapter are about hot mic incidents that were broadcast after they were uttered. This chapter argues that hot mic gaffe discourses posit that political imaging should encompass a politician entirely and erase the backstage itself. In the three case studies in this chapter, the politicians’ remarks were not broadcast live to an audience. Instead, they were recorded by microphones and journalists reported on them after the fact. First, we will examine the discourse about President Ronald Reagan’s joke about bombing Russia before one of his weekly radio addresses. Second, we will assess the discourse surrounding Governor George W. Bush’s insult about a *New York Times* reporter that was captured by a hot mic at a campaign stop. Third, we will consider the discourse on President Barack Obama’s conversation with Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev recorded by journalists at an arms control summit.

Private speech is closely associated with authenticity because of its lack of mediation, but these case studies will show that the discourses suggest that authenticity should be avoided. Comments captured by a hot mic would appear to be the most authentic because they also appear to be unscripted or at least, not meant for public consumption. The gaffe discourses in this chapter suggest that hot mics are not celebrated for their authenticity. In fact, the gaffe discourses on hot mics describe these moments of authenticity as risks to the politicians. Instead of celebrating their authenticity, they are

interpreted as errors in the public persona that must be repaired. Politicians should be managing their political images at all times because they can never predict when their words might become public.

Private Speech and Authenticity

This chapter investigates the relationship between private speech and authenticity. Recall from Chapter Two that private style is common in public speech. The private style mimics the conventions of everyday conversation to seem unmediated. These stylistic choices, paired with the close up views of the video camera inspire impressions of authenticity. Several scholars argue that the private style is appealing to audiences because it promises authenticity. Presumably, speech never meant for the public would be considered authentic as well. Kathleen Hall Jamieson finds that several factors made private speech more appealing to audiences, not least the Watergate scandal. When President Nixon's recorded conversations in the White House became public, they depicted a crude and calculating Nixon that differed greatly from his public speeches.³ Despite Nixon's public denials of involvement in Watergate, his private conversations proved that there was indeed a cover-up of a cover-up. Nixon's private speech undermined his public speech because it was ultimately proven to be authentic. Jamieson notes, "truth was contained in the private conversation conducted behind closed doors; deceit wrapped itself in formal public rhetoric. Accordingly, the revelations subtly suggested that a private conversational style was the more trustworthy form."⁴ This led audiences to believe that "casual, conversational remarks reveal where formal public address conceals."⁵ Private speech is, by definition, not created for the cameras or microphones. If politicians using the

private style are appealing, then politicians in their most private and unguarded moments must be more so.

Ostensibly, politicians are not performing for the microphone because they believe it is off. “Hot mic” has come to mean not just that the microphone is on, but that it is on and not supposed to be. Hot mic incidents are notable because they reveal what would otherwise have been private speech. Often, there is nothing notable or transgressive about the speech except the fact that it became accessible to the public. The very fact that the speech became publicized is what makes it relevant. Scandals are a close analogue to gaffes and can be used as a point of comparison.⁶ Both scandals and hot mics are defined by publicization. Thompson defines scandals as “a process of *making public* or *making visible* through which the actions or events become known by others.”⁷ He says, “Activities that remain invisible to non-participants cannot *ipso facto*, be scandalous. They can, at most, be potentially scandalous, and the transition from a potential to an actual scandal requires, among other things, a process of making public.”⁸ Hot mics, or “[t]he leakage of back-region behaviour into front regions,”⁹ provide a glimpse of a politician’s private speech.

Publicization can be threatening to politicians because it interferes with imaging. The private speech that becomes publicized, as in the case of a hot mic, may be considered authentic. As Thompson argues, “mediated scandals provide us with a new and unsettling view of a world which, in the routine flow of day-to-day life, is generally hidden from view. They are windows on to a world which lies behind the carefully managed self-presentation of political leaders and others who may be in the public eye.”¹⁰ Hot mics are unsettling because they publicize words that were secret, even if said in public settings, and are immediately juxtaposed with the ones they did want us to hear. The problem is not that

they said it but that people found out they said it. The very fact of publicization is the imaging mistake. Even if the private speech (or action, in the case of scandal) is consistent with the public image, private speech was not meant for public consumption. It is an error because the public was not meant to hear it.

Mediation creates distrust in public speech. Audiences understand that what they see is indirect and mediated, and that the purpose of public speech is to persuade. For a variety of reasons, they assume that these public creations are deceitful. This is why speech, even in the private style, is considered more authentic. If public speech is false, then private or unplanned speech must be true. With multiple layers of media between us and our public figures, private speech at least *seems* the least mediated. When speech does not appear to be performed for the cameras, it does not have the same polish as the stump speech or the press conference, and we tend to assume that it is more *real*. When the media contends or the politician admits that the speech was not intended for the public, that is a cue that the speech is in a more unfinished form. Material framed as a mistake seems to show what is real and what is not—the breakdowns in the process give us a glimpse of reality. Otherwise, image making is so skillful that it is impossible to tell the difference. As *Spin* demonstrates, there is much private speech that is never meant for the public. What we do not know cannot outrage us. *Spin* demonstrated that what takes place in private is considered more authentic because it presumably has not been repackaged by mediation. Of course, however, even hot mic speech is highly mediated.

I argue in this chapter that hot mic gaffe discourses are hypermediated because the discourses focus on the role of imaging in matching private and public speech. These discourses posit that politicians should always be imaging. They should know that the

proliferation of media technologies means they are always “on” because they are always being surveilled. The prescription is for politicians, even in ostensibly private moments, to be focused on imaging. In Reagan’s, Bush’s and Obama’s cases, the discourses about their private speech highlighted mediation.

President Ronald Reagan’s Joke

On August 11, 1984, President Ronald Reagan prepared for his regular weekly radio address. On vacation and reporting from his ranch in Rancho del Cielo, CA, he shunned the traditional countdown microphone check in favor of a joke: “My fellow Americans. I am pleased to tell you I just signed legislation which outlaws Russia forever. The bombing begins in five minutes.”¹¹ He was playing on the scripted opening line of “My fellow Americans, I’m pleased to tell you that today I signed legislation that will allow student religious groups to begin enjoying a right they’ve too long been denied — the freedom to meet in public high schools during nonschool hours, just as other student groups are allowed to do.”¹² Reagan’s crew chuckled at his clever parody.

Reagan’s joke was initially kept private, as he likely intended. He got a laugh from his crew and though technicians recorded it, networks did not report it due to previous off-the-record agreements. Despite many networks, such as *CNN* and *CBS*, having access to the feed prior to air, the joke was not broadcast to the public. In 1982 Reagan was caught calling the Polish government “a bunch of no-good lousy bums” while doing a sound check and the incident inspired an agreement between the networks and the White House not to broadcast pre-speech comments. A few days after the joke, however, Gannett News Service, which was not part of the original off-the-record agreement, reported on it. Journalist Ann

Devroy said, "The others waited for me to put it on the wire, and then it was like a floodgate opened, they all began to report it."¹³

At first, it did not inspire much reaction. *Financial Times* reported that Reagan "found himself in political hot water yesterday after cracking what he thought was a harmless joke in the dubious privacy of a radio studio at his California ranch."¹⁴ It speculated that the White House was concerned that "Democratic opponents would latch on to the incident as showing that he was not serious about the current chill in superpower relations - an issue on which numerous opinion polls have shown him to be politically vulnerable."¹⁵ However, "there was still no sign that either the Democrats or the public in general was particularly outraged."¹⁶

Reagan's joke, while funny to his radio crew, did not receive the same positive reception with a wider audience. Indifference did turn to outrage. As news of the joke spread, it was described as dangerous and in poor taste. In the context of the Cold War, Reagan's joke became very serious business, especially internationally. It made headlines in England, France, Poland, West Germany and Russia. International newspapers speculated that the joke would undo any good will with the Soviets. The Soviet response was predictably negative. *The New York Times* quoted a Russian commentator who said the joke was, "too low for the President of a great country."¹⁷ Soviet newspapers argued that Reagan's joke was proof positive that he was, despite public speeches and promises to the contrary, anti-Soviet and unwilling to work for peace. Soviets speculated that Reagan did not want peace negotiations to succeed, and that the joke itself would cause their failure. They said, "These blasphemous words, once uttered, have gone down in history" and "They can't be rubbed out like the infamous Watergate tapes."¹⁸ Russia's *Pravda* remarked that

the joke revealed, “what [Reagan] thinks, his secret dream has burst forth.”¹⁹ They said, “We would not be wasting time on this unfortunate joke if it did not reflect once again the fixed idea that haunts the master of the White House” and that “The incident further confirms the need to maintain the highest vigilance before the aggressive plans of the United States and NATO.”²⁰ In other words, “Reagan's quip had given Soviet propagandists a windfall they could not resist – ‘proof’ that he was indeed the very monster they had been describing for their readers for more than three years.”²¹ The Soviets responded with more than just harsh words. On October 1, a little over two weeks after Reagan's joke, Canada's *The Globe and Mail* reported that Japanese forces intercepted a Russian war signal shortly after Reagan's joke that said “We are going into a state of war against the United States.” The intercepted signal caused the U.S. military in Japan to go on high alert. Fortunately, about 30 minutes later, the signal was withdrawn.²²

Some in the US agreed with the Russian media. They argued that the joke was proof of Reagan's never-changing convictions and that he was ideological to a fault. *The Globe and Mail* noted, “It is said by some that the only time you can believe a politician is when his guard is down. Uneasily, if optimistically, we prefer the theory of a warped sense of humor.”²³ David S. Broder of *The Washington Post* argued that the joke proved that “at heart, Reagan is a man of his convictions, and those convictions never change. They may be overlaid for a time, when aides manage to plug in enough real-world information so that Reagan recognizes it is impolitic to give voice to his inner thoughts. But he never abandons them.”²⁴ Because the joke was made in ostensibly private circumstances, stories speculated whether it revealed the authentic Reagan. They wondered if Reagan was bellicose, anti-

Russian, or merely ill-informed. But Reagan's revealing of that self, whatever it was, was impolitic.

Stories speculated about what the joke would mean for Reagan's campaign. The discourse frequently mentioned Reagan's campaign aides' concern with his tendency to speak freely around hot mics and the implications for the presidential election. Lou Cannon of *The New York Times* wrote, "Reagan's proclivity for saying whatever comes into his head discomfits his advisers, no matter what the polls tell them about November." In fact, "the profusion of errors in the Reagan camp had left aides jittery and wondering what might happen next."²⁵ Republicans also worried that Reagan's joke would be taken as a sign that he would fail to pursue negotiations with Russia, which was perceived as a key election vulnerability for the party. *The New York Times* wrote, "President Reagan's gaffe about bombing the Soviet Union has risked tarnishing his recent foreign policy advances and undercutting deliberate efforts by the Administration to put him in a better position in this area for the election campaign."²⁶ Indeed, "in private, high officials and some Republican strategists acknowledge that they winced over the remark by the President."²⁷ Regardless of Reagan's beliefs about Russia, much of the speculation was about the *perceptions* of his willingness to work with Russia. The joke was a "hair-raising aside in a voice-testing session for his weekly radio broadcast that could set off the alarm bells."²⁸ Indeed, actual alarm bells rang that October. The Reagan campaign's Manhattan office was temporarily shut down when a sign was posted outside the building that said "We Will Be Bombing in Five Minutes." The campaign had to evacuate 100 people before they received an all clear.²⁹

The discourse argued that good presidents think before they speak. Whether he was genuinely committed to peace with the Soviets was irrelevant—as President, he should

know better than to express anything other than a commitment to peace. John B. Oakes, former Senior Editor of *The New York Times*, wrote that while the joke was not *meant* to leave Reagan's studio, the fact that it was uttered at all signaled an inept politician:

What Ronald Reagan's little joke reflects is an instinctive feeling that the only good Russian is a dead Russian, which is a rather dangerous sentiment to be boiling along under the Presidential skin in this hair-trigger age. What it also suggests is an innate lack of any sense of Presidential responsibility, a failure to recognize that every word and gesture of the President of the United States has the power to move the world. This failure stems not from humility or modesty but rather from their opposite. It stems from an arrogance that disregards completely the effects of careless or thoughtless remarks on other people and—if you happen to be President of the United States—on other countries.³⁰

For Oakes, Reagan's inability to recognize his responsibility for his words was unpresidential. Reagan's actual views on Russia were irrelevant. As president, he was expected to hide them beneath a peaceful image. In fact, the discourse emphasized that it was presidential to hide one's self, especially political views. The president's words are extremely important, even internationally, and thus it was irresponsible to act as though the joke would not have international consequences—even nuclear war. *The New York Times* argued, "There's no danger that anyone will take a remark like that seriously—yet plenty of danger that it will be misunderstood."³¹ It wrote, "We're all for a President who likes to joke, but death and taxes are just about the least promising topics for humor in the bully pulpit."³² Several wondered how Reagan could make such a mistake. He had been around cameras for decades as an actor, after all. *CNN*'s Vice-President noted, "This is like a guy saying 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. The President is a guy who drops one-liners. In this case it was a little careless of him, considering he's hardly a neophyte."³³ For what it's worth, before his next Saturday radio address, Reagan used the standard "10, 9, 8, 7, 6" countdown.³⁴

Reagan's political foes, primarily his campaign opponents Walter Mondale and Geraldine Ferraro, used the joke as a point of attack throughout the campaign. Presidential candidate Walter Mondale responded to the joke by saying that he was "willing to accept he saw it as a joke...but others will think it is serious...I don't think it is very funny." Mondale also noted "A President has to be very, very careful with his words"³⁵ because "those words live, and they will be read and listened to by the world."³⁶ In response to the news that the Soviets sent out a war signal, Vice Presidential Candidate Geraldine Ferraro said, "That was no joke. Our President's reckless comments jeopardized our safety. The President whose job it is to defend this country made a serious mistake."³⁷ The discourse repeatedly posited that good presidents screen everything they say and do not let private thoughts get through. This was the basis of most of the opposition's attacks as well. Mondale and Ferraro argued that it simply was not presidential to speak off the cuff, making hiding one's self a campaign issue. Good presidential rhetoric requires constant imaging work. In this case, that meant understanding that a microphone is always on.

Even when the joke garnered international attention the White House reiterated it was meant to be private. The joke was told in a private studio (in Reagan's home, no less) but was ultimately broadcast internationally. Stories continually returned to the notion that Reagan meant for it to be private, and it was an "inadvertent recording of remarks."³⁸ Other stories made clear that a radio studio could never be private. The "dubious privacy" of Reagan's home studio was a recipe for disaster to begin with.³⁹ Even though Reagan intended for the joke to be private, he did not take the necessary precautions to ensure that it would be. As *The Guardian* noted, "inevitably, rumours of the bombing comment quickly spread and were then made public."⁴⁰ Multiple White House responses were consistent on

its intended privacy. Ironically named White House spokesperson Larry Speakes refused to comment on Reagan's joke. He said, "I'm not going to comment on anything that is off the record." When Reagan made another joke a few days later to a group at the White House that he was "not going to bomb Russia in the next five minutes," Speakes still refused comment.⁴¹ After Reagan's second joke, *The Washington Post* noted, "Mr. Reagan's nuke 'em joke gets less funny as he continues to play around with it—and it never was much of a thigh-slapper to start with."⁴²

Reagan begrudgingly apologized months later, but continued to blame the media for making the joke public in the first place. Throughout the campaign season he made several comments about the media's responsibility. He said, "Isn't it funny . . . if the press had kept their mouths shut, no one would have known I said it."⁴³ In a later newspaper interview, he said "Now that I know that the security of the nation is at stake when people eavesdrop, I won't be doing that anymore."⁴⁴ The day before the election, Reagan finally attempted an apology. He said, "All right, I shouldn't have said it...But I further emphasize the media also share in the responsibility for our national security, and I don't think they should have spread it." The President noted that while he meant for the joke to be private, he "should have been aware that there are no secrets." When asked if it was insensitive to make such a joke in a nation that suffered 20 million World War II deaths, he simply said, "I had to say something. And you get tired, sometimes, counting to 10 as a voice check and so forth."⁴⁵

The discourse suggested that politicians must hide their true selves, even amid ever-expanding media access. The major networks approached the White House to renegotiate the off-the-record agreement. The discussions of changing off-the-record policies put the media's role in the creation of the gaffe in full view. White House spokesperson Larry

Speakes again refused to make a public comment and maintained that he would work with the networks privately. CBS President Edward M. Joyce announced that remarks were fair game "If the President's remarks on an open mike left the security of a technical perimeter." NBC maintained that they never even had an off-the-record agreement after Reagan's initial hot mic incident, and said that they set up a light system that alerted Reagan when he was being recorded. According to *The New York Times*, "The networks refuse to agree with the White House that a formal policy had existed to keep the President's off-the-record comments private."⁴⁶ When *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* announced that they would *only* be "on the record" for the general election campaign, Mondale quickly announced that he was retracting his "off the record" policy on flights.⁴⁷ The off-the-record policies arose again when Reagan spoke into another hot mic. Discussing the hostage crisis, Reagan threatened to go "Rambo": "After seeing 'Rambo' last night, I know what to do next time this happens." Speakes then threatened to ban all network microphones in lieu of White House controlled microphones. *ABC News* responded, "It's hard for us to devise a fail-safe system that works when with less than one minute to go, he says things into a live microphone. If we have a responsibility in this, I think the president has one, too."⁴⁸ Reagan's joke also helped redefine the boundaries between public and private speech in regards to the hot mic. When networks announced they could report on anything that left the "technical perimeter," that basically meant any speech that was broadcast by a microphone. The entire notion of off-the-record is to protect politicians from embarrassing private comments being made public. Ironically, this joke pushed privacy in the other direction--there was less privacy and more speech became on-the-record.

The discourse argued that Reagan was saved by the ineptitude of the American public. News stories about the gaffe often depicted the American public as ignorant. Americans were quick to forgive Reagan's mistakes because he was a fun, self-deprecating jokester. Americans also did not care about Reagan's policies, no matter how destructive, because they loved his demeanor. According to *The Washington Post*, "The paradox is that many measurements show that Americans don't like his policies...but they like his attitude. They may not think he is so great at governing. But he is all they could ask for in the way of presiding. They love the way he salutes the Marine as he gets off his helicopter; they love the way he 'stands tall.'"⁴⁹ When Iran-Contra threatened Reagan's popularity, journalists reflected on his "Teflon" nature and his ability to sidestep damage, using the joke as a prime example. *The Washington Post* noted that Reagan escaped what should have been a "monumental embarrassment" for his bombing gaffe of "international proportions."⁵⁰ In fact, it was Reagan's existing image as a strong looking leader that helped him sidestep much of the scrutiny from the joke. Because of his pre-existing image, people would rather believe that he was a peaceful negotiator, the joke aside. The supposed authentic moment was ignored because the public wanted to fondly remember his strong image and joking nature. Despite policy disagreements, Reagan is still remembered more fondly than not. Ultimately, the American people appreciated Reagan's image and Russia appreciated Reagan's policy. When Reagan left office, his progress with Russian relations overshadowed his earlier gaffe. Two Russian newspapers remarked that they would forget Reagan's "five minutes" joke and instead fondly remember his five meetings with Gorbachev.⁵¹

Reagan's advisors need not have been worried. The Reagan-Bush ticket beat the Mondale-Ferraro ticket with an overwhelming landslide of 525 to 13 electoral votes and 49 states, the most ever in a presidential race. Reagan's joke continued to garner media attention, however. Several articles analyzing Reagan's performance in his second term remarked on his special connection to the microphone and his expertise with his Saturday radio sessions. His success was even compared to FDR's fireside chats.⁵² Almost three years later, Reagan recalled the joke at the Gridiron Club Dinner. He cracked, "Do you remember when I said bombing (of Russia) would begin in five minutes? Remember when I fell asleep during my audience with the Pope?...Those were the good old days!"⁵³ And before another radio address on April 12, 1987, Reagan noted, "My fellow Americans, having had a bad experience with one of these voice checks once before, finding it in the press the next day -- I'm not going to say anything."⁵⁴ Reagan's "bomb Russia" joke is considered one of his most well known gaffes. *The Washington Post* called it an "industrial-strength" "Reaganism of the Decade."⁵⁵

The "bomb Russia" gaffe inspired a discourse about the dangers of a hot mic for politicians. When Vice President George H.W. Bush spoke into a live microphone and revealed that his "impromptu" question and answer session with voters was actually scripted, many wondered why politicians did not learn from others' mistakes. *The Times* wrote, "Mr. Bush becomes the latest in a long line of politicians who have fallen foul of live microphones."⁵⁶ Despite, for example, the cautionary tale of Reagan's experiences with the hot mic, politicians kept making the same mistakes. *The New York Times* wrote, "If not shocking, it is striking how politicians do not learn from their own mistakes—or those of their predecessors. They cannot seem to stop themselves from repeating vintage

blunders...Unbelievable as it may seem, politicians often forget that the microphone hears everything.”⁵⁷

Reagan’s off-script joke in his home radio studio was almost the definition of private. In fact, the joke was unknown to the public for several days because off-the-record agreements defined it as private. Once the Gannett News Service publicized it, however, it became known internationally. The Soviet Union described the joke as evidence of the real Reagan—a bellicose and rash President. Despite the risk of war (as evidenced by Russia’s high alert status) this discourse focused on Reagan’s image. No matter his true feelings toward the Soviets, Reagan must publicly present a willingness to negotiate. The perception of willingness to compromise was considered essential to his re-election. This gaffe determined that the public wants someone who *acts* as if they want peace, regardless of what they actually believe. Presidential words were also redefined as always on-the-record, meaning that presidents should always be imaging—even when they believe no one is listening.

Reagan’s joke came at the expense of his country’s adversary, the “Evil Empire,” while Bush’s insult in the next section was leveled at a personal foe, a *New York Times* reporter.

Governor George W. Bush’s Insult

Conventional wisdom posits that candidates ahead in the polls on Labor Day are likely winners on Election Day. In the 2000 presidential election, Governor George W. Bush was trailing Vice President Al Gore on this milestone day. At a campaign stop in Naperville, IL, while Bush and his running mate Dick Cheney were smiling and waving to supporters, Bush pointed someone out in the crowd. Bush then leaned over to Cheney and said,

“There’s Adam Clymer, major league asshole from the *New York Times*.” Cheney responded, “Oh yeah. Big time.” Without realizing that the microphone captured his insult, Bush then began his speech. His speech was peppered with lines about civil political discourse. He said, “It’s time to elect people who say what they mean and mean what they say when they tell the American people something,” “We need plain-spoken Americans in the White House,” and “When we tell you something, we mean it.”⁵⁸

Bush’s insult, like Reagan’s joke, was another case of post hoc reporting. The crowd could see Bush’s appropriate public appearance on stage while he spoke to Cheney, but they could not hear what he was saying. He was smiling and waving to the crowd while he shared the insult, but the crowd did not hear it. If not for the hot mic, we would have a completely different impression of that particular campaign stop. *The Guardian* wrote, “George W. Bush was caught bang to rights yesterday when he perpetrated the first big gaffe of the US presidential election campaign. A microphone which Mr. Bush did not know was still on picked up a remark in which he called a *New York Times* journalist ‘a major league asshole.’”⁵⁹ Bush “spoke unguardedly”⁶⁰ because he was “unaware his microphone was live.”⁶¹ Bush “got caught Monday making an off-color remark.”⁶² He “spoke louder than he thought when he whispered an insult about a journalist to his running mate.” “Mr. Bush was unaware that a microphone was picking up his whispers.”⁶³ *The Times* noted, “Mr. Bush’s remarks on the podium at a rally in Illinois were intended to be a confidential undertone but as he leant across to whisper to Richard Cheney, his running-mate, his words were clearly audible.”⁶⁴ It was the pesky microphone that Bush and Cheney were connected to that created the problem. Bush “was unaware his microphone was live.”⁶⁵ Bush spoke freely only because he did not realize he was being recorded. Since a

microphone is “a device known primarily for its capacity to amplify the human voice”⁶⁶ it resulted in broadcasting Bush’s insult “on network, local and cable news shows.”⁶⁷ As *The Scotsman* noted, “the unexpected disclosure of the candidate’s innermost sentiments left the Bush campaign with some awkward explaining to do.”⁶⁸

Since the insult was also caught on video, it was easy to play on the airwaves. *The Washington Post* wrote, “Just as when Dan Quayle misspelled ‘potato’—which was kissed off by most newspapers at the time—television has a weakness for pumping up any gaffe that is captured on videotape.”⁶⁹ However, “George W. Bush has the dubious distinction of being the first candidate for the presidency from a major party to be bleeped out by the US TV networks.”⁷⁰ The insult was referred to variously as an “epithet,”⁷¹ “withering verbal assault,”⁷² and even “the scatological slur.”⁷³ Newspapers often bleeped out the word, referring to it as an “obscenity,” “major-league a...” and “rectal aperture.” Australia’s *The Age* wondered why newspapers had such difficulty with the insult, since “the public has been softened up for this sort of thing with an education on oral sex just a few years ago.”⁷⁴ The censorship reinforced that Bush’s words were not meant for public consumption.

Descriptions of the breach in privacy were echoed in the Bush campaign’s responses to the furor. When a journalist asked Cheney about the appropriateness of name-calling, he said, “The governor made a private comment to me” and refused to answer further questions.⁷⁵ Bush spokesperson Karen Hughes said that Bush’s insult was “a whispered aside to his running mate. It was not intended as a public comment. There’s been a series of articles that the governor has felt have been very unfair.”⁷⁶ Bush himself said that he did not mean for his “private conversation” to become public.”⁷⁷ Like the Reagan administration, Bush and his staff asserted that the insult was meant to be private and even

when made public, did not warrant public comment. Bush, Cheney, and campaign spokespeople all stuck to this explanation. They argued that Bush and Cheney were entitled to privacy, despite the conversation happening on a stage before a crowd of supporters. They reminded us that Bush believed that the mic was off, and felt he was entitled to a private conversation. Bush never apologized for the insult, only that the insult became public.

The insult revealed inconsistency between his public and private speech. Bush's "predilection for stepping on verbal landmines produced a delicious poetic symmetry this week when he publicly averred that a newspaper reporter was 'a major league asshole.'" ⁷⁸ Stories specifically focused on the hypocrisy of Bush's call for civility in the speech he gave directly following the hot mic incident. In the speech that Bush gave to the crowd immediately after his hot mic insult, but before it was publicized, he discussed bringing civility and common sense to the campaign. It was clearly meant to be an attack on the slippery language of the Clinton-Gore White House, but his professed commitment to civility immediately after his insult caused many to remark on Bush's insincerity. *The Times* wrote, "George W. Bush, who has pledged to bring civility back to US politics, accidentally left his microphone on yesterday and thus broadcast his less than civil opinion that one of America's top journalists is a 'major league asshole.'" ⁷⁹ *The Advertiser* similarly wrote, "Bush—unaware a microphone was turned on—fired off an offensive comment yesterday, exposing to ridicule his vow to restore civility and dignity to US politics." ⁸⁰ The public speech was so contradictory to the preceding insult it seemed to be a rebuttal to what he had just said. Bush's insult demonstrated that he could not have been sincere with his own advice. It was possibly an example of "plain speaking," ("When we tell you something, we

mean it!") just perhaps not the kind that Bush was referring to in his speech. Bush, "who has promised to bring a new tone of civility to politics, displayed little warmth for a reporter."⁸¹ A Bush spokesperson attempted to quiet the criticisms: "Bush, on mike and off mike, has great respect for members of the press...We think this is heading to the minor leagues now."⁸² If an open mike had not caught Bush, this imaging problem would not have developed.

Coverage focused on the impact that the insult might have on Bush's campaign. More stories worried that it would be interpreted as authentic than that it was authentic and what that meant for the campaign. *The Times* argued that it "may serve to reinforce the frat-boy side of his image he is trying to shed. He went on in his speech to call for 'plain-spoken Americans' in the White House. But Mr. Bush's problem is that people fear he may already be too plain-spoken. When he was working on his father's 1988 campaign he was renowned for yelling at the press."⁸³ *The Guardian* even speculated that the insult showed Bush's angry side. It said,

This tells us that Bush is not just a nastier fellow than he makes out to be, but also that he is a man who bears a grudge. Seen in this context, Bush's outburst was something more than just another politician randomly abusing another journalist. It exposed a real weakness—a politician prone to bitterness and anger of a kind that could have a real bearing on his presidential bid.⁸⁴

Whereas Bush started his campaign as the "Texas wonder boy," the insult made him look childish.⁸⁵ One story noted, "Bush's comment should be minor-league in the dynamics of the presidential election campaign. He used a word that would have had Barbara Bush dragging young George W. by the ear to the bathroom in his Midland Texas boyhood home and washing his mouth out with soap."⁸⁶ Bush was a child who needed some motherly discipline. Bush did not give a genuine apology and instead "like a recalcitrant child

chastised by his parents,” said, “I regret everybody heard what I said.”⁸⁷ Clymer reinforced impressions of Bush’s immaturity when he responded, “I am disappointed in the governor’s language.”⁸⁸ Bush was depicted as a child who was lashing out because he was embarrassed by his portrayal in Clymer’s stories. *The New York Times* said that the Bush campaign “never complained to us about Adam Clymer. They did raise some questions about that story, and we didn’t agree with them. We take complaints by phone, fax and e-mail, but not generally by open mike. It’s not the standard approach.”⁸⁹ It also noted that should the campaign “have a complaint, they should convey it to us and we will review it as we do all serious complaints about our coverage.”⁹⁰ They additionally said that they were not going to report on Bush’s insult at all because it did not meet their “standards,” but that they changed their minds when White House spokesperson Karen Hughes blamed Clymer’s series of articles for the insult.⁹¹

The insult was primarily concerning to his handlers because of influence it could have on the already stumbling campaign. *The Independent* noted, “Mr. Bush has come in for new criticism over his tendency to confuse words, his leisurely campaign schedule and his choice of Mr. Cheney as his running mate. And over a campaign that seems now to be flying on the defensive for the first time since Mr. Bush’s defeat in the New Hampshire primary.”⁹² In addition, “The point about Bush’s expletive is that the fuss about it is the last thing the candidate needed this week. Why, his camp and the hierarchy must be wondering, when he mangles so many words, did he manage to enunciate so clearly?”⁹³ As *The Scotsman* noted, “The fear for Mr. Bush’s handlers is that his tendency to meander off the verbal reservation will re-assert itself in the debates—in which case it really could be ‘major league.’”⁹⁴

Several stories mentioned Bush’s Secret Service codename, Tumbler, which seemed “apt

for a presidential campaign that is falling out of its former high orbit.”⁹⁵ Even, or perhaps especially, an at-risk campaign should be hyper focused on imaging.

Bush’s insult was interpreted as a sign that Bush was not ready to be president because he could not handle the stresses of the campaign. In addition, a successful president would be able to handle criticism, especially the slight criticism in Clymer’s articles about Bush’s record on healthcare in Texas. This was referenced in contrast to Gore’s 27-hour campaign blitz over Labor Day weekend and the passionate kiss of his wife Tipper that bumped his poll numbers. In contrast, Bush’s Labor Day speech was only ten minutes.⁹⁶ Bush was trailing in the polls when he “did a little of his own plain speaking”⁹⁷ before the speech, many speculated that this was anger because “his campaign has yet to regain the sure footing it held so long.”⁹⁸ His anger was simply misdirected at *The New York Times* reporter. *The Express* noted, “Mr. Bush demonstrated his plain-speaking credentials if not his judgment with a salty description of a newspaper reporter” and that “The Texas governor’s ensuing embarrassment has thrown his once apparently unstoppable campaign onto the defensive again.”⁹⁹ The Gore campaign said, “George Bush, who promised to change the tone, has now broken his word twice: by launching negative, personal attacks on Al Gore, and now by using an expletive to describe a *New York Times* reporter. Gov. Bush’s behavior, under the pressures of a campaign, is unfortunate and curious.”¹⁰⁰

Coverage of Bush’s insult expressed disdain for the public. *USA Today* wrote, “It’s a fair guess that for every voter who will meticulously analyze the prescription-drug plans, dozens will chortle over” Bush’s insult.¹⁰¹ In addition, “The American public seem to regard these masters of the faux-pas as a source of fun, who transform what would be dry-as-dust campaigns into entertainment.”¹⁰² Like Bush, voters tended to dislike the media:

Snafus like this represent the silly season in presidential politics, episodes destined to lodge in the brain long after the campaign is over. If a convention kiss could humanize Gore, then an unvarnished comment like Bush's may provide similar benefits. After all, the open-mike epithet proves Dubya reads the papers, could identify a reporter at a distance and that he shares with many voters an I'd-love-to-tell-that-guy-off antipathy to the press.¹⁰³

The public was not interested in understanding Bush's policies, but would absolutely recall Bush's insult.

The insult was a minor theme for the rest of the campaign. *The Washington Post* even labeled it "Campaign 2000's most delicious moment."¹⁰⁴ During the Vice Presidential debate, Joseph Lieberman "noted that the Clinton-Gore Administration had delivered 'big time' on its economic promises, deliberately echoing the words used by Mr. Cheney."¹⁰⁵ After the election, however, the Florida voting recounts and the Supreme Court battle dominated media coverage. Fittingly, after Bush was declared the winner and Gore announced that he wanted to pursue a legal fight, Gore chose Clymer for the interview.¹⁰⁶

Bush's insult slipped in and out of the "gaffe" category. After the election, the insult was used as evidence of Cheney's contentedness in his supportive role. Cheney was a happy VP who did not have political ambitions that could threaten Bush. *USA Today* noted, "Cheney's comfort in taking the secondary role was evident during the campaign when Bush, not realizing the microphone at a rally was open, called a reporter in the crowd 'a major-league asshole.' Cheney readily agreed. 'Big time,' he replied." *USA Today* also wrote that Bush's nickname for Cheney was 'Big Time.'¹⁰⁷ Coverage of Bush's insult changed dramatically after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. The insult directed at Clymer epitomized Bush's relationship with the media before 9/11, but that relationship drastically changed. Shortly after 9/11, London's *The Daily Telegraph* charted this change, noting, "Nine months after the election, most of the American written and broadcast media

remained hostile to a president they regarded as a naive, extremist Texan too attached to the death penalty. How things have changed in the past two weeks.”¹⁰⁸ Bush transformed from a petulant child to “Lincolnian” and “Churchillian.” *The Independent* wrote,

Bush's address to both houses of Congress in the immediate aftermath of the 11 September atrocity, was so beautifully crafted to his punchy but folksy style that it was hard not to admire his courage, tenacity and truthfulness. Here was a man who had been heard off-microphone during his campaign, rubbishing a respected journalist as 'a major-league asshole.' This discrepancy between private and public speech is at the heart of a very modern deception, in which our own willing collaboration plays a part.¹⁰⁹

When outside circumstances dramatically changed Bush's image, the discourse became much friendlier towards him.

Bush's insult was most often compared to Reagan's infamous “bomb Russia” joke. Stories noted that Bush's insult was not quite at the level of Reagan's joke, but was still noteworthy because it included a swear word. As one journalist noted, “At least he didn't call Russia a you-know-what.”¹¹⁰ “Although a perfect example of politicians' love-hate relationship with the microphone, the Bush incident is not the first of its kind;” Reagan's joke was still the “best known gaffe.”¹¹¹ *The Weekend Australian* remarked, “Ah, how we laughed. Dubbyah clearly has a long way to go before he measures up.”¹¹² The insult was also compared to his father's, Vice President George H. W. Bush “kick a little ass” comments used to describe his debate strategy versus Vice Presidential candidate Geraldine Ferraro (which Bush Sr. called “an old Texas football expression.”¹¹³) Bush's insult resurfaced during the 2004 campaign when Bush's opponent, John Kerry, was caught on a hot mic calling Republicans “the most crooked, you know, lying group I've ever seen. It's scary.”¹¹⁴ It surfaced again when Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair were caught on hot mic

talking about Hezbollah, and Bush said, “The thing is that what they need to do is get Syria to get Hezbollah to stop doing this shit and it's over.”¹¹⁵

The crowd did not hear Bush’s Labor Day insult though it was voiced on stage. Journalists recorded the private moment and publicized it after Bush’s speech on the importance of civility in the country’s capital. The Bush campaign insisted that it was meant to be private. The juxtaposition with Bush’s public speech afterwards reinforced those impressions. The discourse called for Bush to stay on (non-bleepworthy) script and avoid getting caught badmouthing a journalist. Bush should protect his image by realizing that a mic is always “hot.”

Bush’s insult was interpreted as a possible lashing out due to a flailing campaign, while Obama’s negotiation was interpreted as overconfidence at his election prospects.

President Barack Obama’s Negotiation

On March 26, 2012, President Obama, while at a nuclear security summit in Seoul, South Korea, discussed missile defense with outgoing Russian President Dmitry Medvedev. Before their scheduled press appearance, hot mics captured Obama saying, “On all these issues, but particularly missile defense, this, this can be solved but it’s important for (Putin) to give me space.” Medvedev responded, “Yeah, I understand. I understand your message about space. Space for you...” Obama continued, “This is my last election. After my election I have more flexibility.” Medvedev said, “I understand. I will transmit this information to Vladimir.” Neither Obama nor Medvedev knew that cameras and microphones were recording their conversation.¹¹⁶

Obama and Medvedev were conducting diplomacy at an international nuclear security summit. Every part of their captured conversation coincided with things the

leaders said publicly. It was likely that Obama's push for a delay on negotiations with Russia was the result of a lot of behind closed doors diplomacy with administration officials. Unfortunately, it took place directly before a public event and the leaders were on camera and hooked up to microphones. Reporters could see and hear the conversation as it happened, and later report on it.

An overwhelming majority of stories emphasized that microphones were to blame for the mishap because the conversation was intended to be private. *The Guardian* wrote, "The US president's comments were caught on a microphone during what the two leaders believed was a private conversation at a nuclear summit in South Korea."¹¹⁷ The *Christian Science Monitor* noted, "microphones in the conference room picked up Obama making a surprising request—probably not intended for journalists' ears."¹¹⁸ Stories also emphasized the earnestness of the exchange, in stark comparison to the speech that we typically hear. The rarity of a President describing political truths was frequently remarked upon. The conversation was described as a "candid assessment of political reality,"¹¹⁹ a "private moment of political candor"¹²⁰ and a description of "political reality in a supposedly private moment."¹²¹ *The Washington Post* wrote, "The exchange provided a rare glimpse of a world leader speaking frankly about the political realities he faces at home."¹²² And *The New York Times* said that Obama "offered a frank assessment of the difficulty of reaching a deal—on this or any other subject—in an election year."¹²³ The Medvedev negotiation overshadowed the business of the Seoul nuclear summit. Stories rarely mentioned that the summit was devoted to prevention of nuclear terrorism. *The Washington Times* remarked, "Mr. Obama's plea was overshadowed by a few overheard

half-whispers that caused a political furor back home over his foreign-policy honesty.”¹²⁴

Here, candid was clearly code for authentic.

After his conversation with Medvedev became public, Obama asked jokingly, “are the mics on?” and covered his microphone with his hand at the beginning of this next summit meeting. He then gave a serious speech about the difficulties of treaty negotiation in an election year. He explained, “You can’t start that a few months before presidential and Congressional elections in the United States, and at a time when they just completed elections in Russia, and they’re in the process of a presidential transition.” He noted that his conversation with Medvedev reflected his public stance on disarmament. “This is not a matter of hiding the ball,” he said, “I want to see us gradually, systematically reduce reliance on nuclear weapons.” But he reminded us, “The only way I get this stuff done is if I’m consulting with the Pentagon, if I’m consulting with Congress, if I’ve got bipartisan support” and “the current environment is not conducive to those kinds of thoughtful consultations.”¹²⁵ He was not trying to hide the ball, merely punt it. (He did later joke while attacking Republican spending plans, “Feel free to transmit any of this to Vladimir if you see him.”¹²⁶) Perhaps recognizing that the conversation would have political consequences, White House deputy national security advisor Ben Rhodes remarked, “Since 2012 is an election year in both countries, with an election and leadership transition in Russia and an election in the United States, it is clearly not a year in which we are going to achieve a breakthrough.”¹²⁷ Unlike Reagan and Bush, Obama did not emphasize that the moment was meant to be private. Instead, he stressed that he did not say anything privately that he would not have said publicly.

However, some argued Obama's request for a delay in arms control negotiations was a strategic move for his election, not a smart diplomatic one. They asserted that Obama was overly ambitious and would sell out the country that he so desperately wanted to lead. *The Washington Times* wrote, "That [Obama] would be so forthcoming about making U.S. national security second fiddle to his personal quest for re-election is startling." They continued, "Such wheeling and dealing shows that Mr. Obama is willing to do anything to win re-election. But when national security is subjugated to politics, America loses."¹²⁸ London's *The Sunday Telegraph* argued, on the other hand, that Obama's conversation with Medvedev would "leave a mark" because it showed that Obama did not have a nefarious second term scheme. In fact, it was evidence that he did not have a second-term vision other than "more of the same."¹²⁹

Despite the fact that Obama's conversation reflected his public statements, many stories reflected on the danger of the hot mic. The *Christian Science Monitor* wrote,

Obama's candid remarks Monday illustrated the political constraints that hem in any president who is running for re-election and dealing with a congressional chamber—in this case, the House—controlled by the rival party. Republicans have fought Obama fiercely on health care, taxes and other issues. They are eager to deny him any political victories in a season in which they feel the White House is within reach, although Obama's remarks suggested he feels good about his re-election prospects. Even if Obama was confiding a political reality in a supposedly private moment, the comments gave the GOP new openings to question his sincerity and long-range plans.¹³⁰

Though it was likely true that a nuclear arms treaty with Russia was a nonstarter in an election year, several stories fretted that Obama admitted it. A president discussing a nuclear arms deal at a global nuclear summit is to be expected. It was the president's candor that seemed out of place. Stories focused most on the political effects of the negotiation becoming publicized, and almost not at all on the substance of the summit.

Stories emphasized that the conversation was “frank,” “rare,” and “candid” to prove that it was meant to be private. Several stories argued that the private Medvedev conversation was simply revealing a public truth—that Obama’s likelihood of negotiating an arms control agreement with Russia during an election year would be impossible because his Republican colleagues would refuse to cooperate. Republicans were considered the “Party of No” and Obama was merely voicing what we all already knew: that Republican obstinacy made productive negotiations with Russia impossible. Many agreed that Obama’s negotiation with Medvedev simply reflected the political reality of gridlock in Washington, D.C. Instead of refusing to work with Russia, the hot mic incident was evidence of Obama’s inability to work with Republicans. Many also recognized that attacks on Obama for referencing this reality would be baseless because he was being consistent on the difficulties of reaching across the aisle. The conclusion was, of course, that a president should not speak these sorts of truths in public.

Before too long, the discourse conjectured that Republicans would use the Medvedev conversation as a point of attack against Obama. Even if the Medvedev conversation and Obama’s public response were both accurate, Republicans would use it as ammunition. The *Korea Times* wrote, “This hot-mike exchange was a gift from heaven for the Republicans, battered by a seemingly endless series of gaffes by their presidential candidates.”¹³¹ It served both as an attack point and a pivot to allow foreign policy to be a larger issue in the campaign. As *The Guardian* noted,

President Obama's overheard private conversation with Russian President Dmitri Medvedev will give Republican presidential candidates plenty of attack fuel for the short-term. Whether you think it was a grave admission of evil, undemocratic political tactics or simply an admission of the obvious, President Obama's message that he will have 'more flexibility' to work constructively with Russia on missile

defense issues after his reelection will at least give Mitt Romney and Rick Santorum new attack lines, *possibly* dashed with some hyperbole.¹³²

The Medvedev conversation came at an opportune time for Obama's political opponents. To be sure, there was an aspect of the discourse that speculated about Obama's "real" second term agenda. There was already a simmering narrative that Obama would become more radical without the electoral constraints of running again, and the Obama-Medvedev conversation was interpreted as evidence of that. The ultra conservative Jennifer Rubin continued, "This is a stunning gift to Romney from the Obama camp. The legitimate concern that Obama will take his re-election as a mandate to head left is likely to become an all-purpose weapon."¹³³ She wrote that the conversation was a particularly powerful political weapon because "it came from Obama himself and because it is true in the aggregate. Is there anyone who thinks that Obama, if re-elected, wouldn't run wild with policies that the majority of the electorate opposes?"¹³⁴ *Investor's Business Daily* described Obama's new "space policy," which would allow him to "give away missile defense and the rest of the store without political consequences. It seems President Obama has a space program after all, one in which the Russians cool it on the dismantling of U.S. missile defenses until the least transparent administration in history can razzle-dazzle, smoke-and-mirror and divide-and-conquer its way into a second term."¹³⁵

Republicans attacked Obama as predicted. *The Hill* noted, "Republicans used an unscripted remark by President Obama on Monday to label him as someone who could easily change his positions if he wins reelection."¹³⁶ Deemed Obama's most likely Republican opponent for the 2012 election, Mitt Romney quickly tried to use Obama's conversation to his advantage. *The Washington Post* wrote, "Mitt Romney has wasted no time in capitalizing on President Obama's open-mike mega-error."¹³⁷ He accused Obama of

being unpredictable, which was a risky gambit considering his own imaging problems. Romney mentioned Obama's conversation repeatedly. He "issued a statement saying Obama 'needs to level with the American public about his real agenda.'" ¹³⁸ In an interview with *CNN*'s Wolf Blitzer, Romney remarked that Russia was "our No. 1 geopolitical foe. They—they fight every cause for the world's worst actors. The idea that he has some more flexibility in mind for Russia is very, very troubling indeed." This comment led the *Christian Science Monitor* to ask, "Didn't the cold war end more than two decades ago?" ¹³⁹ "Regarding ideological clichés, every time this or that side uses phrases like 'enemy No. 1,' this always alarms me, this smells of Hollywood and certain times [of the past]," Medvedev said. "I would recommend all US presidential candidates...do two things. First, when phrasing their position, one needs to use one's head, one's good reason, which would not do harm to a presidential candidate." ¹⁴⁰ Despite the kerfuffle over Romney's identification of Russia as America's primary enemy, Romney continued to reference the Medvedev conversation throughout the campaign. In one speech, he remarked that Obama did "not want to share his real plans before the election, either with the public or the press" and that "His intent is on hiding. You and I are going to have to do the seeking." He further explained the difference between himself and Obama: "Unlike President Obama, you don't have to wait until after the election to find out what I believe in, or what my plans are." ¹⁴¹

The Obama-Medvedev negotiation was frequently compared to Eric Fehrnstrom's "Etch a Sketch" gaffe from a week before. Romney's campaign advisor, Fehrnstrom, had commented that their campaign strategy was "like an Etch a Sketch" and could be shaken up and changed as they moved into the general election. As *Guardian Unlimited* wrote, "Such a strategy could be risky for Romney, with memories still fresh of last week's 'Etch a

Sketch' gaffe.”¹⁴² The timing allowed the discourse to continue to reference Fehrstrom’s gaffe by comparisons to the Medvedev conversation. *The Irish Times* wrote, “Mr. Obama’s careless remarks are portrayed as the equivalent of a gaffe by Mr. Romney’s adviser Eric Fehrstrom last week, albeit more damaging because they came from the candidate himself.”¹⁴³ The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* called the “Etch a Sketch” remark and the Medvedev conversation “strikingly similar” because they “compounded concerns that the candidate who wins our votes in November will not be the one governing us come January.”¹⁴⁴ In the seesaw of gaffe politics, it is a zero sum game. Obama and Romney were charged with being too “flexible:” Obama for the Medvedev negotiation and Romney for his campaign manager’s “Etch-a-Sketch” comments. *The Star Tribune* wrote, “the media itself should shake up the conventions of covering the race. In Etch A Sketch language, we need to know more about the sharp lines separating the candidates on policy issues—not politics or personalities.” It argued, “gaffe-tracking can divert attention from profound policy differences that are hiding in plain sight.” Of course, “There’s no guarantee that more substance will turn voters into viewers, readers or listeners of campaign coverage, or vice versa. But Americans would be better off if campaign coverage put gaffes into greater context. Indeed, letting miscues define election coverage, let alone the candidates, would be a mistake in its own right.”¹⁴⁵

The Medvedev negotiation was simply the latest installment in a long list of politicians’ run-ins with the hot mic. Stories marveled at Obama’s inability to adapt to the microphone. Microphones are always a danger to politicians, the argument goes, so “the two leaders violated a basic rule of modern politics: Just as people handling firearms should assume every gun is loaded, politicians should assume ever[y] mike is on.”¹⁴⁶ *The*

Washington Post noted, "There's nothing hotter than a hot microphone. Despite decades of cautionary tales, politicians persist in falling into the trap of having their not-made-for-public-consumption words broadcast to the world."¹⁴⁷ Despite the high prevalence of politicians from both parties being picked up on a hot mic, some judged that "Obama's predilection to prattle in the vicinity of plugged-in sound equipment can either denote extraordinary overconfidence and a smug presumption of invulnerability or it's indicative of exceptional foolhardiness. Whatever it is, Obama is serially careless."¹⁴⁸ And unfortunately, "when a politician loses fear of amplifiers and visible recording paraphernalia, all sorts of things are bound to spill out."¹⁴⁹

Stories emphasized that Obama should be careful around microphones and not allow the public access to his conversations. His supposed carelessness, while it merely revealed what people already knew, was a political risk. All presidents, not just Obama, have had to do this. And in the end, it did not matter if what Obama said was true or not. It could be used to attack him, and was thus a political error. Even in a climate of almost constant surveillance of our political leaders, the expectation is that they should become more guarded, even in private moments.

The personal conversation between Obama and Medvedev was during an ostensibly private moment before a public press conference was set to take place. Their conversation, actually a negotiation about a future negotiation was recorded and reported. This type of diplomacy undoubtedly happens all of the time. But this time, it was publicized. Stories described it as evidence of either Obama's realistic assessment of domestic political realities or his intent to deceive. Despite wide recognition that what Obama told Medvedev was accurate, that Republicans were obstructing Obama's agenda and would continue to do

so in an election season, he was castigated for saying it. Truth did not make it appropriate. It risked Obama's image. Instead, Obama should have behaved as if his words are always subject to public scrutiny.

Conclusion

Hot mic gaffes are unique because they presumably broadcast unscripted speech. In addition, these hot mic gaffes are valuable because they overtly show the making of the gaffe—the public did not have access to these comments. In Reagan's case, he believed that his remarks would not be reported on. Bush and Obama believed that their microphones were off and they could speak freely. In each case, journalists made the comments public. None of the comments here could have been mistakes without the corresponding gaffe discourse. The process of publicization, which is typically associated with making authentic private comments public, occurred through a discourse that promoted inauthenticity. While the private comments here did inspire discussions of authenticity (Reagan's bellicosity, Bush's grudge bearing, and Obama's electoral confidence), the discourses quickly turned to the importance of hiding their possible backstage personas at all costs. These discourses show that authenticity is not a prized political value. Even though these politicians were hooked up to microphones, they ostensibly believed that their speech would remain private (like the politicians in *Spin*). As in *Spin*, these discourses suggest that “everybody watches” (and listens). Reagan's “dream,” Bush's “innermost sentiments” and Obama's “candor” were descriptions of possible authenticity.

These discourses posit that the ideal politician is one who is always imaging. Politicians should always be “on” and imaging, or hiding their backstage personas, even in private. These discourses argue that politicians, in effect, should not have backstage

personas. Politicians should always presume that their words may become public and that microphones are always dangerous. They would not have said what they said if they had known that the mic was recording; no competent politician would have. These discourses posit that politicians should assume all they say or do could be publicized and image accordingly. This functionally means they are imaging all of the time and there should never be an opportunity to express their backstage personas. This precludes the possibility for the public to learn anything about their leaders.

In addition, these discourses blatantly characterize the public as ill-suited for more tangible information about their leaders. In Reagan's case, the discourse argued that Reagan survived the gaffe relatively unscathed because his image remained appealing to the public. While they disagreed with his policies, he appeared presidential. The discourse about Bush's insult similarly depicted voters as entirely uninterested in policy and much more concerned with being entertained. And Obama's gaffe blatantly noted that the nuclear summit was ignored, but discussing substance would not make Americans more competent.

In the following Chapter, I examine how images inspire gaffes by discussing Governor Michael Dukakis' tank ride photo op, President George H. W. Bush's photo op at the National Grocer's Association, and George W. Bush's photo op on an aircraft carrier.

Notes

¹ *Spin*, directed by Brian Springer (1995; New York City, NY),

<http://topdocumentaryfilms.com/spin/>.

² Stephen Holden, "Festival Of An Art For Life's Dirtier Nooks," *The New York Times*, October 6, 1995. <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/10/06/movies/festival-of-an-art-for-life-s-dirtier-nooks.html>.

³ Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Eloquence in an Electronic Age: The Transformation of Political Speechmaking* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 178.

⁴ Jamieson, *Eloquence in an Electronic Age*, 179.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Many scholars argue that the line between scandal and gaffe is quite blurry. However, these comparisons depend on the notion of gaffe as a preexisting object, consisting of the revelation of information about a politician that could harm them publicly. See Mats Ekström and Bengt Johansson, "Talk Scandals," *Media, Culture & Society* 30, no. 1 (2008); John B. Thompson, *Political Scandal: Power and Visibility in the Media Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000); and Craig Allen Smith and Kathy B. Smith, *The White House Speaks: Presidential Leadership as Persuasion* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994). Here, I merely argue that private speech or actions are interpreted as authentic. The notion of publicity is essential to understanding scandal because it describes the process by which private transgressions become known to the public. It can also shed light on hot mic discourses which also take the form of publicization. I argue that these discourses are unique because they call for more sophisticated political imaging. While I do not examine scandals here, I

suspect that these discourses are more often invested in the nature of the revealed transgressions.

⁷ John B. Thompson, *Political Scandal: Power and Visibility in the Media Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), 19, emphasis in original.

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²⁸ Mary McGrory, "Surprise; The MX Helps The Nation's Watchful Doves Pick Their Targets," *The Washington Post*, August 14, 1984. LexisNexis Academic.

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CHAPTER FOUR

PHOTO OPS: THE TANK, THE SCANNER AND THE BANNER

The 1999 book *Photo Fakery: The History and Techniques of Photographic Deception and Manipulation* documents the extensive history of falsifying photographs. *Photo Fakery* demonstrates that along with the invention of the photograph came the invention of the photographic manipulation, or, “The art of photo faking is as old as photography itself.”¹ Anyone with the technology to take photos is capable of distorting them. The author, Dino Brugioni, spearheaded the CIA’s photographic intelligence gathering methods in the 1960s. As an intelligence analyst, Brugioni focuses on government photos and their manipulation for strategic purposes. Governments have added extra military equipment to project power, removed their political enemies, inserted unsavory figures into photographs of their opponents, and otherwise tampered with photos for specific strategic ends.

Brugioni developed the CIA protocol to identify manipulation because photographs were so important to America’s intelligence gathering but there was no system for determining their reliability. Brugioni warns readers that while photos may be very persuasive, the trained eye can spot telltale signs of manipulation. He describes four basic types of fakery: deleting details, adding details, combining images, and adding misleading captions. Governments, he writes, use these techniques in order to mislead viewers. And it often works because people tend to trust in the veracity of photographs. Many consider photos snapshots of reality. Even famous photos of American presidents were manipulated, but remain part of the historical record, such as the famous Civil War photos of Ulysses

Grant on a horse (a combination of three separate photos) and Abraham Lincoln (a photo of Lincoln's head grafted onto a photo of John Calhoun).

Brugioni unfortunately defines photo fakery as intentional deception, as if any photo that was not intentionally manipulated in a darkroom accurately reflects reality. Not only are all photos necessarily interpretations, but Brugioni's methods of identifying photo fakery would only work for photos that were manipulated after they were taken.

Photographic manipulation can also take place before the shutter is pressed. Politicians can create history rather than attempt to change history after the fact. By manipulating circumstances, politicians can avoid accusations of photo fakery. When a photo op stages circumstances, the resulting photos do not have any of Brugioni's telltale signs of manipulation. They would be unaltered images of the event. The photos seem to viewers to show the event but without the context of the event's staging. Photo ops may "accurately" capture the moment, but it is the moment that has been faked.

Chapters Three and Four were devoted to gaffes made from speech, now I turn to gaffes about photo ops. Countless photo ops are staged, yet few become gaffes. This chapter shows that photo op gaffes argue for political imaging that specifically counteracts reality. First, I will examine the discourse about Governor Michael Dukakis' tank ride photo op. Second, I will assess the discourse about President George H. W. Bush's photo op at the National Grocer's Association. Third, I will consider the discourse about President George W. Bush's photo op aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln.

Photos are often considered indisputable evidence. In fact, politicians rely on that notion in order for their photo ops to be effective. People trust in photos as reflections of

reality. However, despite their association with authenticity, these discourses posit photo ops as the ultimate tool in political imaging.

Photo Ops and Authenticity

This chapter investigates the relationship between photo ops and authenticity. Many scholars argue that photos are the principal medium politicians use to communicate with the public. According to Maria E. Grabe and Erik P. Bucy, media coverage of candidates chiefly comes in the form of photographs, or “image bites.” Image bites are increasing in length even as sound bites decrease.² Grabe and Bucy write, “Lacking the pithy verbal content of sound bites, image bites are nevertheless informationally and politically potent.”³ In fact, “iconic image bites are the stuff of which lasting impressions are made.”⁴ Keith V. Erickson similarly calls these “view bites” and agrees that they can have more impact than presidential speech: “while populace recollection of a president’s sugared phrases and aphoristic political cant may blur, images of absorbing travel spectacles linger.”⁵ Politicians rely heavily on photos to build their political images. In fact, Erickson argues that politicians use photo ops “to avoid gaffes, overexposure, disgruntled opponents, and the risks of public discourse.”⁶ Images are often considered more powerful than speech because they convey a persuasive and lasting message with one glance.

Photographs seem immediate and promise an authentic look at the politician. Creation of favorable photos is one of the primary tasks of a political campaign. As Kathleen Hall Jamieson notes, “Recognizing the power of the visual image, politicians have become preoccupied with providing the lens with irresistible pictures. Pseudo-events abound.”⁷ Great photos come from great photo ops. J. M. Balkin argues, “Politicians have learned that the appearance of intimacy or the production of an attractive ethos on television is very

helpful to political success.”⁸ Political media events, or photo ops, are meant to simulate authenticity. He writes,

Media events perform a *jujitsu* move on the political values of transparency. The goal of political transparency is to help people watch over the operations of government and the behavior of government officials. The point of the media event is to encourage watching. The media event is a form of political exhibitionism that simulates effective governance and personal candour.⁹

Media events *simulate* transparency and authenticity. Balkin further argues that the imaging strategies that politicians use result in increased public expectations: “Politicians have manipulated television imagery for so long that they have helped to create the very erasure of public and private persona that now haunts them.”¹⁰ Still, photographs are perceived as authentic, possibly more so than the private style and private speech. This is why politicians are so keen to stage them.

Many scholars argue that photographs are much more powerful than speech. The impressions that photographs create will counteract even contradictory speech. Kiku Adatto writes, “television is also a powerful instrument of artifice, at once victim and accomplice of the sophisticated illusions that politicians and their media experts are able to spin.”¹¹ Audiences are aware of the manipulateness of photographs, and Adatto says, “we pride ourselves on our knowledge that the camera can lie, that pictures can be fabricated, packaged, and manipulated.”¹² However, this awareness does not decrease the desire for authentic images. She writes, “If one side of us appreciates, even celebrates, the image as an image, another side yearns for something more authentic. We still want the camera to fulfill its documentary promise, to provide us with insight, to be a record of our lives and the world around us.”¹³ Even when photos seem to contradict reality, their strong appeal may win out. Adatto writes, “no amount of attention to images seemed able to dissolve their

hold.”¹⁴ For example, news coverage could call attention to the artificiality of a photograph while simultaneously showing that photograph, but exposing it as fake does not nullify its power. W. Lance Bennett notes,

[R]eporting on the ways in which a typical campaign stop in Iowa is staged for the local news would reveal only the obvious and leave many viewers with a ‘So what?’ reaction. After all, the beauty of TV is the sense of being there without really being there. The campaign appearance pseudoevent is the event, and there is simply no meaningful reality outside it.¹⁵

Photo ops create impressions that audiences are more likely to remember than speech. If a politician looks patriotic, they are patriotic. If they look like a leader, they are a leader.

Audiences conflate what a politician looks like with their authentic persona.

The cases in this chapter demonstrate that even photo ops can inspire gaffes. According to these discourses, politicians should utilize photo ops in order to create a desirable political image even in direct contradiction with reality. In the cases of Dukakis, Bush Sr., and Bush Jr., the discourses about their photo ops encouraged them to hide themselves behind more compelling imaging.

Governor Michael Dukakis’ Tank

On September 13, 1988, Governor Michael Dukakis gave a rousing speech about US-Soviet relations and visited an Abrams tank factory in Sterling Heights, Michigan. His speech expressed a “tough new stance” in pressuring the Soviet Union to live up to their promises. It marked a big shift for Dukakis but was quite consistent with his opponent George H. W. Bush’s national security policy. Dukakis then donned a helmet emblazoned with “MICHAEL DUKAKIS” and smiled, waved and pointed to the crowd as he rode in a tank around an uneven field. *The Washington Post* wrote that Dukakis’ tank ride was a “rocking, rolling, jolting, smoking 30-mph run around the field. The circuit ended with a frontal

charge at the media stand that brought the long barrel of the tank's cannon menacingly close to a line of startled network cameramen.”¹⁶ With the “perceived need”¹⁷ to make the evening news, Dukakis “jumped aboard a battle tank yesterday and roared off, his helmeted head bobbing up and down as the tank sped away. It was symbolic. Yesterday, for the first time since he won the nomination in July, the Governor of Massachusetts gave some fiery, effective speeches.”¹⁸ The photo op was Dukakis’ response to claims that he was weak on national security. Many commented it was about time Dukakis began fighting back against Bush’s attacks, and the tank ride photo op symbolized a more combative style. *The Times* wrote the event was intended “[t]o ram home his Rambo image.”¹⁹ Dukakis’ communications director noted that the event “played well” and included “a lot of information about the weapons Michael Dukakis would hurl at the Soviets and about George Bush’s failures in foreign policy.”²⁰ His speech, clothing, and the tank ride itself were all orchestrated to make Dukakis look tough on national security.

The only hiccup, at first, was that Dukakis’ tank ride had to compete with news coverage of a “powerful hurricane that was blowing political coverage off the top of the evening news.”²¹ Ultimately, however, it was the hurricane that could not compete. *The New York Times* noted, “as Hurricane Gilbert drove in from the Caribbean, Mr. Dukakis's speeches were largely relegated to the middle of the newscasts and, even worse, correspondents poked fun on the air of his most carefully planned photo opportunity: the Governor riding in military gear in the turret of a battle tank.”²² The video of the tank ride played and replayed as journalists made fun. Soon, images of the tank ride overthrew Dukakis’ “fiery” speech (as well as the hurricane.) Displacing the “Rambo” image, stories described Dukakis as “looking like a cub scout on an outing to an Army base,”²³ “the class

nerd...dressed...in a football uniform as a gag,"²⁴ "Muppet-like,"²⁵ Snoopy, Rocky Squirrel, and a boy soldier. The intended message of national security strength was eclipsed by images of Dukakis looking silly, not like a future commander-in-chief. *ABC* anchor Sam Donaldson called the tank ride "the outstanding have-you-no-shame photo opportunity of the week."²⁶ Soon, Dukakis would wish that the coverage had only lasted for one week.

The photos of Dukakis on a tank overshadowed his "fiery" speech. Bush had often joked that Dukakis "thinks a naval exercise is something you find in *The Jane Fonda Workout Book*."²⁷ Bush continued with the same criticism for the rest of the campaign, now armed with the tank ride photo op. Bush argued that Dukakis' attempt to look strong on national security sharply contrasted with his stated positions, saying, "The tank did not fit. And it's time to take another message to Michael: You cannot fool Soviet leadership by knocking America's defense for 10 years and then riding around in a tank for 10 minutes."²⁸ He said, "Now suddenly he's riding around in a tank, he jumps out of the tank, takes off the helmet and comes on with different positions."²⁹ Though, Bush could not resist joking, "the tank kept veering to the left."³⁰ Later in the campaign after a particularly bitter presidential debate, Bush said, "I'd wanted to hitch a ride home in his tank with him."³¹ Most damaging, the Bush team created an ad³² that "had the unusual attribute of being made almost entirely from a tape of his opponent at a campaign appearance."³³ *The Guardian* wrote the Bush campaign ad "soars in quality, using pictures of Dukakis looking like the cartoon character Snoopy, riding an M-1 tank, while a voice disparages his right to be Commander-in-Chief."³⁴ It was footage of Dukakis' tank ride, and a restatement of Bush's earlier attacks: that Dukakis had opposed multiple types of weapons systems. The Bush campaign's tank ride ad was extremely damaging to the Dukakis campaign.

The problem was not that Dukakis orchestrated a photo op. It was that he was not better at it. The criticisms were not that Dukakis was peddling obvious falsehoods via a photo op—that was expected, even desired—but that Dukakis did not have the imaging skills to pull it off. The discourse argued that Dukakis did not have the polished imaging skills of the Bush campaign. Bush was leagues ahead of Dukakis in staging photo ops and utilizing television to capture voters. The photo op was new territory for Dukakis, and it backfired completely:

They know Dukakis has a brain, but they're not sure about his heart. Perhaps Dukakis deserves our admiration—and even our votes—for resisting the pollsters, media consultants and political handlers who want to make him into something he is not. He listened to them once, and the pictures of Dukakis driving an Army tank became a joke that he is still trying to live down. The great irony of this election could be that after all the complaints about phony images and pre-cooked messages, Michael Dukakis will lose because he insisted on being himself.³⁵

In fact, Dukakis' attempt was described as “the biggest marketing flop since New Coke.”³⁶

The photo op failed because Dukakis did not hide himself more effectively. His usual brainy, no-nonsense self emerged despite the precautions taken. This discourse was not a referendum on Dukakis' actual personality or national security stance. It demonstrated that even if some could admire Dukakis for his obvious lack of manipulation skills, without those skills he was not suited to be president.

Stories frequently compared Reagan's expertise in front of the cameras with Bush and Dukakis' failures. *The Washington Post* wrote, “The Reagan packagers had an asset that far outweighed their media acumen: Ronald Reagan. Reagan could have gone to a flag factory or driven a tank and brought it off, whereas Bush and Dukakis just look like silly asses.”³⁷ There was a glimmer of hope for Dukakis, *The Guardian* wrote, when he improved his imaging capabilities: “there are signs that Mr. Dukakis is genuinely coming back on a

number of fronts. His message is purer, less complex and easier to understand. His events are more televisual, and most importantly, he is grabbing the headlines and TV images away from the Vice-President."³⁸ But by the time the Dukakis campaign "belatedly realised"³⁹ the importance of television, it was too late. *The Washington Post* noted, "The candidates will do almost anything to make the TV news." This results in ill-conceived photo ops, such as Dukakis' tank ride: "Earlier this week, for example, Dukakis gave a thoughtful speech on U.S.-Soviet relations. But two hours later, he put on a green Army helmet and took a bolting, jolting ride in an M1 tank. In most network coverage, the tank scene blasted the speech right off the air."⁴⁰

The Dukakis tank ride brought the role of television in political campaigns into focus. Stories detailing Dukakis' tank ride often meditated on the potentially negative influence of television on politics. *The Sunday Times* recognized that using photographs to boost a candidate's image was no new tactic. It wrote, "Photographers were the first spin doctors." President Lincoln used staged photographs to transform from disheveled and gaunt to presidential: "photography offered American politics the means to fool all of the people, all of the time. This it set about doing with terrifying enthusiasm." However, the article concluded, photo ops have run amok with consequences for both the electorate and the candidates:

The portable camera made it possible for photographers and candidates to get out among the people. Here, they quickly learned how to kiss babies and pretend to drive trains, or in the case of Michael Dukakis, a tank. Dukakis looks profoundly silly. 'I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me,' wrote Lincoln just before his assassination. If Dukakis had said it, you would have believed him.⁴¹

The New York Times wrote that Dukakis was "engaged in one of the most difficult battles for any politician: getting and holding the attention of voters. Television is how most voters

learn about presidential campaigns, so it is of necessity one of the main ways candidates communicate with them. Voters also consider newspapers and magazines and weigh the views of their friends and neighbors. But television is still the most powerful and influential political medium.”⁴²

Several stories commented on this modern form of campaigning and its negative influence on American politics. Political photography was ruining politics because it was powerful but lacking in substance. Photos were not only deceptive, but the ease of understanding a photo meant that they tended to crowd out more complicated policy and reasoned argument. *The Independent* wrote,

The form of this campaign has been entirely dictated by television. There have been few press conferences and little genuine public campaigning. Everything has been subordinated to the needs of the evening news—each day has had its staged photo opportunities and its scripted one-liners. Dukakis looked singularly ridiculous in a tank. This mixture of contrived images and 20-second sound bites is a poor form of political debate. The candidates have tried to use television, but television has used them.⁴³

The Washington Post wondered, “Is this any way to choose a president?”⁴⁴ Photo ops are phony, and “everyone seems to accept how phony they have become but nobody seems to mind. One explanation is that the phony, through constant repetition, is now tradition; it has become accepted as being almost as genuine as the real. Since we see very little of anything that is not carefully staged and scripted for effect, our memory of reality is vague and growing vaguer.” Dukakis’ tank ride was just “one example of phony” and despite the media’s delight in tearing apart these types of photo ops, “there is no ultimate defense against a candidate determined to be manipulative.”⁴⁵ Photo ops work “because this country is populated by couch potatoes who get their news from the nightly television drivel that passes as reporting and not the print media.”⁴⁶ *The New York Times* wondered,

“can television consistently resist pictures, even silly ones, or, for prime time, the punchy question over reasoned debate?”⁴⁷ Ultimately, despite the talk of reform, conclusions were often drawn that photo ops were going to stick around. A *New York Times* article said,

The difficulty here is the nature of television. However much the reporters may kid the pictures (and there was considerable kidding in 1988), the images stay with one, even when they misfire, like that howler of Mr. Dukakis playing soldier in an oversized helmet. To expect the networks not to use such shots may be expecting too much. So the nation is probably stuck with some photo ops. Still, labeling—a sort of Surgeon General's warning—might be helpful: The following picture may soften the brain.⁴⁸

Since photographs were so effective, they would continue to dominate political coverage. Politicians must adjust to the new media environment or fail.

Michael Dukakis did lose. Dukakis' tank ride is widely recognized as one of the worst photo ops of all time. One journalist called it the “worst picture” of the campaign (though, Senator Gary Hart's photograph with his mistress Donna Rice won “killer picture” after it abruptly ended his campaign).⁴⁹ *The New York Times* predicted that the tank ride “will go down as one of the most embarrassing photo opportunities ever”⁵⁰ and that Dukakis made the “gaffers' hall of fame.”⁵¹ Dukakis' tank ride “haunted” the 1992 presidential campaign. *The Washington Post* remarked, “like a ghost of elections past, the specter of Michael Dukakis haunts this campaign, even though none of the Democratic contenders appears to want to get within five miles of him.”⁵² The tank ride is frequently recalled when a photo op does not go as planned and continues to serve as a warning to all politicians. It is now a cardinal rule in politics that candidates do not put on any type of headgear. When Vice Presidential candidate Dick Cheney visited a military firm and journalists encouraged him to put on a helmet to see if it was the right size, he responded, “Come on, guys, you don't think I'm going to try it on, do you?”⁵³

The Dukakis campaign's photo op at a tank factory in Michigan was an attempt to convince voters that he was serious about national security. His hardline speech followed by a ride in a tank was crafted to produce powerful images of a future commander-in-chief. Initially, the speech and optics of the event were well received. Many praised Dukakis for finally getting into the imaging game. Stories praised Dukakis when his imaging tactics seemed to work, no matter how blatantly staged they were. Stagecraft was statecraft. A short time later, however, many criticized the sloppiness of the photo op. The too-large helmet and too-big smile on Dukakis' small frame countered the tough image he was supposed to project. It fueled Bush's attacks instead of countering them. The discourse focused on Dukakis' lack of imaging savvy despite recognizing the possibly destructive role of television in politics and castigated Dukakis for not being more manipulative.

Perhaps Dukakis felt vindicated when, during the 1992 campaign, photographs emerged of President Bush looking amazed when presented with a grocery store scanner.

President George H. W. Bush's Scanner

On February 5, 1992, *The New York Times* reported on President Bush's visit to the National Grocer's Association in Orlando, Florida. Bush toured the Association and tried out some of the machines. He ran a few grocery items across the scanner, and asked, "This is for checking out?" Bush also gave a speech about his economic policies and the importance of deregulation.⁵⁴ Reflecting on this visit, he said he was, "Amazed by some of the technology."⁵⁵

Bush hoped that the photo would show that he was in touch with the American people. Grocery shopping is an integral part of the American experience. Unfortunately, stories immediately focused on Bush's imaging problems, and characterized him as looking

out of touch with American's daily lives. Bush's own words, that he was "amazed" by the scanning technology, came to define the images of him using it. His polite remarks about industry technology lead to the conclusion that Bush had no experience with it. His photo op had the opposite of the intended effect.

The photos of Bush's amazement at scanner technology that most Americans encountered all the time reinforced notions that Bush was out of touch with average Americans. *The New York Times* pointed out the scanner technology had been in grocery stores for at least a decade. The photos of Bush's "look of wonder"⁵⁶ as he played with the grocery scanner made Bush appear distant from the realities of middle-class life. *The New York Times* wrote, Bush "seems unable to escape a central problem: This career politician, who has lived the cloistered life of a top Washington bureaucrat for decades, is having trouble presenting himself to the electorate as a man in touch with middle-class life. Today, for instance, he emerged from 11 years in Washington's choicest executive mansions to confront the modern supermarket."⁵⁷ Even though White House spokesperson Marlin Fitzwater said Bush did go to grocery stores, many were not impressed with the anecdote about Bush's single trip to a grocery store in Kennebunkport, Maine. Bush's speech about the economy was quickly forgotten.⁵⁸

The Washington Post wrote a particularly scathing article ridiculing Bush for his obliviousness to the American experience. It wrote, "If all the other bozos running for the presidency are as ignorant about American life as George Algernon Fortesque Leffingwell Bush proved himself to be last week, then this much is certain: The country really is going to hell, not in a handbasket but in a shopping cart."⁵⁹ The article continued, "The man who runs the United States of America confessed last week, however indirectly and

inadvertently, that he's so out of touch with the daily lives of his constituents, he doesn't even know how they go about buying the food they put on their tables." This is because, the story noted, those who come from money perceive their situation to be normal and representative, even when their situations are statistically rare. They then make political calculations with their unique situation in mind, not that of the average American. *The Washington Post* wrote, "The mere mental image of George Taliaferro Belmont Cabot Bush in the checkout line is enough to cause gales of laughter. Except that when he's president of the United States it really isn't all that funny."⁶⁰ The populist tone so prominent here in the fantastical Bush surnames (undoubtedly a play off "Herbert Walker") was very common in the articles about the incident. Several stories described the wealth gap in America and how Bush's financial elitism could bring harm to the country. *The New York Times* wrote, "Upper-income Americans generally, whether in public or private employment, live not just a better life but one quite removed from that of ordinary families. They hardly experience the problems that weigh so heavily today on American society. And that fact has dangerous political consequences."⁶¹ Average Americans, *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution* noted, have "to fly commercial, we also have to make sure there's money in our bank accounts when we write a check. We also have to go out and buy groceries and see that price scanner that stunned President Bush when he went into a grocery store apparently for the first time since he left Yale."⁶² *Australian Financial Review* wrote, "Being 'amazed' at the basics of middle-class life does not forge the affinity with the common people his advisers feel the President requires. It also feeds the prejudices of his political enemies, who claim him to be at a loss to know how to deal with America's domestic plight."⁶³

Along with accusations that Bush was out of touch came a defense: he was only out of touch because he was a dedicated public servant. Many stories emphasized that public life makes it difficult if not impossible to share experiences with the middle class. *The New York Times* noted, "Bush's days in civilian life have, in fact, been limited since the Nixon Administration, between two ambassadorships (United Nations and head of the liaison mission in Beijing), a stint as Director of Central Intelligence and eight years as Ronald Reagan's Vice President."⁶⁴ Bush was unable to "cast himself as a man of the people" because he was not one. The *Courier-Mail* wrote, "His ignorance of supermarket scanners is easy to explain. Since he became US Vice-President in 1980, he has led a sheltered existence of bodyguards and motorcades that does not allow for standing in supermarket queues."⁶⁵ *The New York Times* also noted "The President is entitled to amazement. The scanner was developed a decade ago. That's when Ronald Reagan took him to the White House, where trips to the market just aren't done."⁶⁶

National leaders live sheltered lives. They don't do their own shopping. Or pick up their dry-cleaning. Or hunt for parking spots. Or go to the bank. Or do any of the humdrum chores that most of us have to do. Not that they could if they wanted to. Imagine the brouhaha that would occur every time the president decided he wanted pick up some pork rinds at the store. Between the Secret Service and the media, the rest of us couldn't get our buggies down the aisles. Besides, one would expect our leaders to have more on their minds than wondering if they're running low on milk. Elections tend to distort the priorities of the nation. We seem to want a[n] ordinary Joe to fill extraordinary job.⁶⁷

Bush's extensive experience in public service made it impossible for him to be an "ordinary Joe." The gaffe emphasized that Bush was a public servant, though not a member of the public he served. The President, they argued, could not and should not be in touch with middle class life. Bush's extensive experience in public service made him unable to do the things that most Americans can do. Life in the White House precluded grocery shopping.

Despite the mention of Bush's other attempt to look more down-to-earth, like his professed predilection for pork rinds, it was clear that the Bush campaign lost control of his image.

The Atlanta Journal and Constitution wrote,

[I]t's also true that in a White House effort to portray the president as in tune with the people, Bush has been put in some strange settings. One was to show him buying socks at a J.C. Penney store—as though Americans would buy into the charade that the president buys his own socks. That episode ended with people derisively accusing Bush of trying to halt the recession by showing people how to spend money.⁶⁸

While several stories admitted, “the technology underlying scanners is much more sophisticated today than it was 20 years ago,”⁶⁹ Bush needed to act as though he was not a Washington recluse. *The Washington Post* wrote, “Whatever Bush's true reaction to the scanner was that day, we all ‘know’ that this man has not bought a bag of groceries in a supermarket in at least 12 years of cloistered White House existence. The metaphysical Bush of our mind's eye conquers the physical Bush we can see.”⁷⁰ Bush had plenty of redeemable qualities that did not involve grocery shopping. It wrote Bush was

[A]n upper-class, rich WASP with greater experience in foreign affairs and national government than any of his opponents, and a strong belief that the American economy can fix itself, without last-minute, election-induced tax cuts. That may not be the electorate's dream guy; but it is sure a lot better than the frantic, unbelievable creature we have seen running away from himself on the campaign trail.⁷¹

The discourse wanted Bush to look in touch with average Americans, while recognizing that it was impossible for him to be so. *The Washington Post* wrote, “This was the year people demanded proof that the would-be presidents know something about Real Life. Forget Camelot—when was the last time they bought groceries? Thus it was a small catastrophe for Bush when he was portrayed as being amazed by a supermarket checkout scanner.” This was in stark contrast to Clinton, who could rattle off the prices of common household items.⁷² Hillary Clinton noted that the American people did not know the real

Bush. She said, “We have spent the last three-and-a-half years watching a man in an identity crisis” and with no clear principles. Her husband Bill Clinton, on the other hand, “didn’t have to go to a grocer’s convention to find out that there were scanners in supermarkets.”⁷³

Bush was a Washington insider, and his attempts to distance himself from Washington were ineffective. *The Financial Post* pointed out, “Bush, a man who has spent his life in Washington jobs, tries the same anti-Washington approach but is not believed, as witness his recent hilarious staged visit to a supermarket where he was amazed to discover the check-out scanner.”⁷⁴ The *St. Petersburg Times* wrote, “The supermarket episode, of course, had nothing to do with the substance of Bush’s campaign and everything to do with the image he wanted to project. But that is what photo ops are all about. They have cheapened and distorted our political system, and they should offend our intelligence.”⁷⁵

Some journalists later claimed that Bush’s grocery scanner gaffe was unfair. Several argued that his look of wonder was directed at a *new* type of scanner that would impress even frequent grocery shoppers, and his comments about being amazed were merely politeness. It was the fault of *New York Times* reporter Andrew Rosenthal who wrote an inaccurate report based on the pool summary of the event. *The Washington Post* wrote, “The story of George Bush and the incredible supermarket scanner has become the media yarn that wouldn’t die.”⁷⁶ After the story made the front page of *The New York Times*, “Columnists in the U.S. have been having a field day lately with that old preppie George Bush, who visited a supermarket in Orlando, Fla., and was stunned by this fabulous new technology - the checkout scanners which have been in place for a dozen years now.”⁷⁷ Many wrote that the original *New York Times* story and the many iterations that followed

were based on false information. In fact, *USA Today* wrote, Bush was introduced to a special scanner that could read damaged labels, not the typical grocery store scanner. *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution* wrote the description of Bush's "look of wonder" was exaggerated, and turned into a narrative about being out of touch: "This is about how a photo opportunity got out of hand and succeeded, wrongly, in bringing ridicule to the president of the United States."⁷⁸ Marlin Fitzwater agreed, saying, "This is a story that is totally media-manufactured and maintained."⁷⁹ In addition, The National Cash Register Corporation's Vice President, Giuseppe Bassani, wrote a letter to the editor of *The Washington Post* that the scanner President Bush was shown was "a newly released, free-standing unit that is dramatically different in size and appearance from conventional" scanners that consumers see.⁸⁰ Regardless, "Reporters made their own quick read of the photo opportunity and termed Bush out of touch with everyday life" and a "political Rip Van Winkle."⁸¹ As the election approached Bush finally chimed in, blaming the story on a "lazy reporter."⁸² Though, when Bush met the inventor of the bar code at the White House, he joked, "You've seen firsthand how impressed I am about how bar coding works."⁸³

The New York Times defended their original story. It reported that the tape of the encounter proved "Bush seemed unfamiliar with even basic scanner technology. Shown an ordinary scanner, he was clearly impressed." They added that the White House was to blame for the continuing coverage of the story: "By continuing to argue that case, the White House has kept alive a story that would otherwise have died down after one or two days. Bush campaign officials say they are baffled about why the White House is doing that."⁸⁴ Eight years later, newspapers were still reflecting on the power of the story despite its inaccuracies: "The story was widely distributed, although witnesses later reported that it

was a bit of an exaggeration. But it was a good story, nevertheless, and it ‘had legs,’ as we in the news business say about stories that seem to keep running as if they were a pink bunny.”⁸⁵

Bush’s amazement at the grocery scanner dogged him. *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution* called the grocery scanner amazement photos Bush’s “Defining Moment.”⁸⁶ When he struggled to answer a town hall question about how he had been personally affected by the economic recession, it was the one-two punch: “And there it is. Too many years, too many limousines.”⁸⁷ *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution* remarked, “Those pictures of Bush at the checkout counter are our answer to the GOP’s 1988 shots of Dukakis in the tank.”⁸⁸ The photos made Bush seem out of touch and were considered “a major factor” in Bush’s loss.⁸⁹ As the *St. Petersburg Times* argued,

Clinton won the White House in part because George Bush was out of touch with Americans’ economic anxieties. Remember Bush’s supposed surprise when he came across a grocery store scanner? The story turned out to be a little shaky, but by the time Bush’s White House took steps to stamp it out, the tale had taken hold in peoples’ minds. Clinton, on the other hand, showed skill with imagery.⁹⁰

Bush’s amazement was a symbol of his as well as the entire Republican party’s elitism, causing the party to become “generationally lost.”⁹¹

Bush’s visit to the National Grocer’s Association was likely meant to bolster his economic image as well as connection to the average American experience. Grocery shopping and knowing the current price of staples is often associated with being “in touch.” But photos and descriptions of Bush’s wonderment while interacting with grocery scanners, and Bush’s own polite comments that he was “amazed by some of the technology” created a different impression. Bush was not a regular guy, and there was no way he ever could be. His government service resume was incredibly long, and he had lived

in the White House for twelve years prior. Regular grocery shopping was all but impossible. But the discourse argued that imaging necessitated providing that image, despite the impossibility of its being real.

Bush's son, George W. Bush, also inspired a photo op gaffe after posing on the USS Abraham to declare major combat duties finished after the invasion of Iraq.

President George W. Bush's Banner

On May 1, 2003, President George W. Bush wowed the nation with a theatrical landing on an aircraft carrier that was "staged...for maximum political effect."⁹² "In a page ripped right out of Hollywood," Bush did "two whooshing flyovers" in a Viking jet (which he himself flew for part of the trip), which had "George W. Bush" and "Commander-in-Chief" emblazoned on the door. After the jet's high speed landing, Bush "climbed out and strutted like a proud Texas rooster."⁹³ After he took off his helmet (obviously), he "was mobbed by pilots and crew who hugged him and cheered, creating images that are sure to be replayed during his 2004 re-election bid."⁹⁴ Afterwards, he changed into a suit and gave a "triumphant" speech that declared the end of major combat operations in Iraq. He stood in front of a giant banner that said "Mission Accomplished" as well as the supersonic jet that he had originally wanted to fly in on, but was deemed too dangerous.⁹⁵ The photo op made Bush look like a powerful commander-in-chief and reinforced the administration's claim that the Iraq war would be short and successful.

Bush's photo op on the USS Abraham Lincoln was enormously effective. *The New York Times* predicted that the "Top Gun" landing would "be remembered as one of the most audacious moments of presidential theater in American history." The Bush administration was "using the powers of television and technology to promote a presidency like never

before,” and employed a White House communications staff saturated with people from network television.⁹⁶ Stories celebrated its “Hollywood” style and meticulous attention to detail. *The New York Times*’ Elisabeth Bumiller pointed out that Bush’s team “had choreographed every aspect of the event, even down to the members of the Lincoln crew arrayed in coordinated shirt colors over Mr. Bush’s right shoulder and the ‘Mission Accomplished’ banner placed to perfectly capture the president and the celebratory two words in a single shot.”⁹⁷ A White House communications director said, “Americans are leading busy lives, and sometimes they don’t have the opportunity to read a story or listen to an entire broadcast. But if they can have an instant understanding of what the president is talking about by seeing 60 seconds of television, you accomplish your goals as communicators. So we take it seriously.”⁹⁸

Caught up in the triumphant moment, even war did not sour the excitement over the administration’s imaging skill. In fact, many stories immediately recognized the event for what it was intended to be, an early campaign move for Bush’s 2004 re-election campaign. *The Toronto Star* wrote, the “heavily stage-managed arrival in a fighter jet on the aircraft carrier followed by the speech was all about the Bush re-election mission which was signaled [sic] with his address last night.”⁹⁹ Despite recognition of its obvious phoniness, the photo op received almost unanimous praise.

About two and a half months later, Bush’s speech given at the photo op received some negative scrutiny. Bush’s claim that Iraq’s president Saddam Hussein had attempted to acquire nuclear material was disproven. This “gaffe” was “symbolic of a president who misled a nation into a costlier-than-expected war by distorting intelligence.”¹⁰⁰ The speech “gaffe” was quickly forgotten.

It was not until almost seven months later that the photo op itself received any real criticism. *The Independent* wrote, “six and a half months after Mr. Bush, dressed up in a Top Gun pilot's suit, declared an end to major combat operations beneath that now infamous banner proclaiming ‘Mission Accomplished,’ a quiet fear is spreading among many ordinary Americans - that their country is slipping ineluctably into another overseas morass of its own making.”¹⁰¹ Stories began addressing the “theatrical” carrier landing with a negative tone. Bush spokesperson Scott McClelland said Bush never technically said the war was over, but *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* wrote, “Some analysts contend Bush's carefully staged May 1 remarks were designed to look like a victory speech and were taken as such by many Americans.”¹⁰² If “the war is over” was not the message of the event, the administration did little to prevent those impressions.

The photo op was recognized as exemplary political advertising, but like most political advertising, ultimately it did not match reality. After several months, the glow from the moment dimmed. The Bush administration's successful photo op turned into a photo flop. What was originally viewed as “a triumph of choreography by the president's public-relations team” had been displaced by “concern about continuing postwar violence and costs has muddled what was once a clear political asset for Bush.”¹⁰³ *The New York Times* wrote,

The so-called ‘Top Gun’ landing had clearly been designed as a triumphal image that would play a prominent part in the president's re-election campaign. Instead, it now seems a symbol of the naive, almost willful, optimism that has marked the administration's plan to overthrow Saddam Hussein and, in so doing, usher in a new era of democracy in the Middle East. Indeed, that footage will now almost inevitably figure in the campaign of whomever the Democrats finally nominate.”¹⁰⁴

Many initially speculated that it would fuel his re-election campaign, but it later became a risk to it. The fatalities and unrest in Iraq contradicted the Bush administration's fantasy on

the aircraft carrier. The “Mission Accomplished” banner began to look premature and imprudent. Bush’s Top Gun moment turned into blatant manipulation intended to distract from a misguided war. *The Vancouver Sun* wrote:

Midway through 2003, the defining imagery for the year seemed apparent—the euphoric toppling of Saddam Hussein’s statue in Baghdad and the Top Gun arrival of President George W. Bush on an aircraft carrier, where he was greeted by a huge ‘Mission Accomplished’ banner. By autumn, those triumphal events seemed more fantasy than reality.¹⁰⁵

The next time Bush addressed the nation on Iraq, it was to ask for \$87 billion in funding to continue operations there.¹⁰⁶ In contrast to the “Mission Accomplished” swagger, Bush kept a low profile on the second anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. *The New York Times* explained, “It is a calculus that hinges not only on measures of taste, but measures of success—especially now that the glow that surrounded Mr. Bush in May as he landed in full flight suit on the aircraft carrier Lincoln, beneath the banner proclaiming ‘Mission Accomplished,’ has burned off, and the successful reconstruction of Iraq is an open question.”¹⁰⁷ Reality was chipping away at the celebratory optimism of “Mission Accomplished.”¹⁰⁸ *The Guardian Weekly* wrote,

Feelgood political advertising sours quickly when broadcast between news footage of body bags. The White House learned that lesson on May 1, when it dressed the president up in a macho combat pilot’s suit and landed him on the deck of an aircraft carrier beneath a banner proclaiming ‘Mission Accomplished.’ Over time it curdled into a public relations disaster, outdone only by the president’s ‘bring ‘em on’ challenge to the insurgents two months later. As it turned out, the killing of Americans in Iraq had only just started.¹⁰⁹

The “pre-emptive victory cheer has haunted [Bush] as the disarray of occupation, the rise in US fatalities, and the stubborn absence of weapons of mass destruction have led many Americans to question why and how the war was fought.”¹¹⁰

The “Mission Accomplished” banner featured so prominently behind Bush during his speech on the aircraft carrier dominated the memory of the event. By September *USA Today* reported that people did not remember Bush’s speech, only the words pictured behind him. It wrote, “Bush’s cautionary words are not what people remember of that day. Instead, many recall two words that Bush did not say but were on a banner that hung behind him as he spoke: ‘Mission accomplished.’”¹¹¹

The administration began distancing itself from the banner. “Once a cause for pride, the banner had become a cause of embarrassment,” wrote *The Sunday Telegraph*.¹¹² When the administration offered explanations about who might be responsible for the banner, the paper noted, “It was the first time in the six months since May 1 that this explanation had been produced. Indeed, it was the first time that an explanation of any sort had been deemed necessary.”¹¹³ Bush defended his speech, saying that he “was there to thank the troops” and his “statement was a clear statement, basically recognizing that this phase of the war for Iraq was over and there was a lot of dangerous work. And it’s proved to be right. It is dangerous in Iraq.”¹¹⁴ He hesitated to take credit for the banner, however. He said the banner “was put up by the members of the USS Abraham Lincoln saying that their mission was accomplished.” Referencing the attention to the sophisticated White House communication staff, he elaborated: “I know it was attributed somehow to some ingenious advance men from my staff. They weren’t that ingenious, by the way.” A White House spokesperson said that White House staff did make the sign, but only after the crew asked for it.¹¹⁵ And Condoleezza Rice said on *Meet the Press* that the “Mission Accomplished” banner simply meant “the mission of those forces that [Bush] went to greet had been accomplished.”¹¹⁶ These three different explanations did not satisfy. As the *Australian*

Financial Review noted, "This may prove to be one of those nagging issues which will not easily fade away. The US media, which had tended to treat the White House gently since September 11, is showing signs of stirring. Once stirred collectively it tends to be quite obsessive about small details."¹¹⁷ In fact, *The New York Times* conducted an investigation into "Bannergate" to determine who had actually ordered the banner. It interviewed a long list of people affiliated with the event, including military personnel, but failed to find the culprit. While many had heard rumors of a banner, no one seemed to remember the details and no one wanted the credit.¹¹⁸ Bush defended the speech he gave on the aircraft carrier, but never the banner itself. In fact, Bush, the White House staff, and the Secretary of State all attempted to deny responsibility for the banner. The banner stood in for the foolhardiness of the entire event.

The "Mission Accomplished" banner became a benchmark to measure the lack of progress in Iraq. It also became the benchmark from which to measure the administration's loss of image control. The most frequent mention of the "Mission Accomplished" banner came with increasing fatalities numbers since the photo op. For example, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* wrote, "At this point, two-thirds of the soldiers killed in Iraq have died since President Bush appeared May 1 on an aircraft carrier, backed by a giant banner that declared, 'Mission Accomplished.'"¹¹⁹ *The Gazette* wrote,

The Bush administration has waged a determined campaign to convince U.S. citizens coalition forces are making progress in Iraq despite a growing guerrilla campaign. More than 217 U.S. soldiers have died and 1,737 have been wounded in Iraq since the president declared major combat operations over May 1. He delivered that message from the deck of a U.S. aircraft carrier, under a banner which said 'Mission Accomplished.'¹²⁰

Despite the administration's efforts to manage the images coming from Iraq, the "Mission Accomplished" photos plagued those efforts.

The one-year anniversary of the banner photo op was particularly bad for Bush. The *Financial Times* noted, "This week a macabre milestone was passed in Iraq. More than 1,000 American soldiers have now been killed since the US-led invasion of the country began nearly 18 months ago. The overwhelming majority lost their lives after President George W. Bush declared major combat operations over in his now infamous 'Mission Accomplished' photo-opportunity in May last year."¹²¹ Reality on the ground, however, made the pictures seem foolish. Bush spoke on the one-year anniversary and said, "A year ago, I did give the speech from the carrier, saying that we had achieved an important objective, that we'd accomplished a mission, which was the removal of Saddam Hussein." He defended the original photo op and said, "I also said on that carrier that day that there was still difficult work ahead."¹²² The *New York Observer* remarked,

As Republicans and Democrats both know, symbols matter, in many cases much more than words. Nobody remembers what Mr. Bush said when he landed on the aircraft carrier U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln; all that most people remember is the image of Mr. Bush in a flight suit, standing in front of a banner that read 'Mission Accomplished.' That image, of course, has come to haunt the President and his supporters, since the mission in Iraq seems far from accomplished.¹²³

Adding insult to injury, May 1, 2004 was the day that news broke of the Abu Ghraib scandal.¹²⁴

Bush's attempt to distance himself from the banner opened him up to further criticism. As *The Toronto Star* noted, the "Mission Accomplished" photos were a winning strategy at first. The administration "was delighted by the heavily orchestrated photo op" and "invited the Democrats to take their best shot. Criticism would just give U.S. networks another chance to play those beautiful pictures."¹²⁵ Later, the failed photo op gave Democrats the fighting power that they dared not use after the September 11 attacks. *USA Today* noted, "in the six months since Bush appeared under a 'Mission Accomplished'

banner on a Navy aircraft carrier, the political dynamic has changed.”¹²⁶ Democratic presidential candidate Wesley Clark criticized Bush saying, “Politicizing the mission of those troops in the first place was bad theater and diminished the office of commander in chief” and trying to offload responsibility for the banner onto them was even worse.¹²⁷ Another political rival, John Kerry, used “Mission Accomplished” repeatedly in his attacks and political advertising. Kerry frequently pointed out that saying “Mission Accomplished” did not make it happen. He said, “Being flown to an aircraft carrier and saying, ‘Mission accomplished’ doesn’t end the war,”¹²⁸ “George Bush thought he could play dress-up on an aircraft carrier,” “Send George Bush back to Texas and we will say to the world, ‘Mission accomplished,’”¹²⁹ and “It wasn’t even Mission Legitimately Attempted.”¹³⁰ Kerry used the phrase so often that his supporters would sometimes yell it out at campaign stops before he did. It also appeared in a pro-Kerry ad that said, “The problem is, you declared ‘Mission Accomplished,’ but you had no plan to win the peace.”¹³¹ The Democratic National Convention also adopted the slogan “Mission Not Accomplished.”¹³²

Where the photo op’s inauthenticity had been reason for praise, now stories picked apart all of the details that made the event so compelling. Stories dissected the many pieces of the “elaborate and prime-time photo op on board USS Abraham Lincoln. Against a background of navy personnel and a banner that read ‘Mission Accomplished,’ the president declared an end to hostilities in Iraq. As we all now realize, the announcement was hideously premature.”¹³³ Stories pointed out that there was no need for Bush to fly in on a jet because the carrier was close enough to shore for a helicopter. In fact, the shots were staged so the viewer could only see ocean, even though they were very near the San Diego shoreline. One paper wrote, “Bush’s stunt of personally flying a jet to an aircraft

carrier to greet homecoming troops went sour. He made war-weary soldiers wait an extra day for him to arrive and the massive Mission Accomplished sign that greeted him was abjectly premature.”¹³⁴ Despite the artifice of the event, it was explained by the fact, “The U.S. media have little appetite for reality because viewers and readers react badly to the nasty images.”¹³⁵ In this case, the photos that began as beautiful and triumphant became nasty.

Attempting damage control, Bush staged another photo op with troops in Iraq on Thanksgiving. Meant as “a corrective” to the “Mission Accomplished” banner, Bush flew to Iraq in secret and surprised the troops with a turkey dinner. *The Ottawa Citizen* noted that while Iraq “remains a disaster area,” the photo op “looked good on American Thanksgiving TV, the president serving turkey and chowing down with the troops in what is really called the Bob Hope Dining Facility.”¹³⁶ *The Ottawa Citizen* wrote, “There is a political lesson to be learned from this, which is that it is more important to show up than to actually do anything.”¹³⁷ The photo op was so successful that even Bush’s Democratic opponents conceded that it was a good move, with the warning that the glow may not last. The *Sunday Tribune* similarly noted, “For now, it seems the most stage-managed presidency in US history has pulled off a major public relations coup. The photo-op president has done it again.”¹³⁸ However, the Thanksgiving photo op was quickly exposed as a fraud. “Turns out the most widely published image of the visit—Bush holding a picture-perfect platter of golden-brown turkey with all the trimmings—was a decoration prop on the buffet line, where 600 soldiers were served from cafeteria steam trays.” It was considered an echo of the “Mission Accomplished” failure. “Bush’s publicity machine has been caught short,” just as when “His staff faced grief for days over who placed the Mission Accomplished banner

aboard the aircraft carrier that Bush used to announce that major combat had ended in Iraq.”¹³⁹

After the display model turkey, many speculated that Bush’s photo ops were all doomed to fail. Many wondered if Bush had lost his imaging abilities. “They are all of a piece. Bush and his inner circle exquisitely plan an assortment of cunning feats. Over time, they turn out to be read in precisely the opposite manner.”¹⁴⁰ It opened him up to criticism that the September 11 terrorist attacks had kept at bay. When Saddam Hussein was captured, Bush’s response was completely different than the “Mission Accomplished” photo op. The *National Post* wrote, “Mr. Bush’s statements and actions in the days following Saddam’s capture contrast sharply with his reaction after U.S. troops routed the Iraqi military last spring” which had ultimately “backfired.”¹⁴¹ The *Washington Post* additionally noted, “The tone of yesterday’s coverage was more sober than the cheerleading on May 1, when Bush landed on an aircraft carrier festooned with the premature ‘Mission Accomplished’ banner.”¹⁴²

The discourse about Bush’s “Mission Accomplished” photo op readily discussed how it was manufactured as part of the administration’s attempts to control public perceptions of the war. The *Edmonton Journal* wrote, “As things have deteriorated in Iraq since George W. Bush landed on the deck of an aircraft carrier last spring and declared an end to hostilities (Mission Accomplished claimed a large banner), good is made out of bad, big is made out of small and things are not what they seem to be. Iraq has become theatre.”¹⁴³ The *Contra Costa Times* remarked, “what appears on our living-room screens isn’t always what it seems. Case in point: President Bush’s dramatic photo-op appearance in which he donned a flight suit and strutted onto a deck of an aircraft carrier to proudly proclaim the

country's military operation in Iraq a 'mission accomplished.'"¹⁴⁴ It additionally pondered the untrustworthiness of television when it can be used this way: "What new and unorthodox ways will humans choose to use the instrument of television in this, the election year of 2004? Will they use it to further contrive and deceive, or to shed light on the truth? Will they, in creative terms, use it to illuminate, inspire and raise the bar, or to lower our standards and expectations? Then again, perhaps we should reposition the question and ask ourselves: In what ways, over the coming year, will we allow television to use (and abuse) us?"¹⁴⁵

As the election approached, Bush went back on the offensive. He defended the photo op and reiterated that it was to thank the troops, not to declare the end of a war. He said, "I would do it again. I think I have an obligation as commander-in-chief to do a couple of things as far as the military goes."¹⁴⁶ Bush also said that he did not regret it: "I flew out there and said thanks. Thanks on behalf of a grateful nation. You bet I'd do it again."¹⁴⁷ However, the "Mission Accomplished" photo op was extremely damaging to Bush. It was considered "the single greatest gaffe of the Bush presidency."¹⁴⁸ After Kerry visited NASA and embarrassing photos of him in a space suit were released, Republicans handed out the photos along with photos of Dukakis' tank ride. Democrats responded with photos of Bush in front of the "Mission Accomplished" banner.¹⁴⁹ Though, *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution* pointed out, "Obviously Top Gun is not the debacle that Michael Dukakis' tank photo turned into, but it's not something the Bush administration is going to play large in its commercials, either."¹⁵⁰

The victory photo op on the USS Abraham Lincoln was one of the most well-received photo ops in history. It was meticulously planned to show a strong commander-in-chief

after a supposedly decisive victory in Iraq. The images were widely praised as fantastic examples of political imaging. The speech Bush gave was all but forgotten in lieu of the beautifully orchestrated photos. The reality of Iraq threatened the images, however. The truth of the messiness in Iraq became too difficult to rationalize. Stories picked apart the imaging techniques that had been so widely praised. The “Mission Accomplished” banner overtook the photo op. Bush consistently tried to redirect focus to his speech, but it did not work. Tellingly, the image of “Mission Accomplished” was considered more important than even the growing fatalities in Iraq. Television was described extremely manipulative, but essential. The discourse argued that Bush needed to be better at imaging, not necessarily military strategy or leadership. The emphasis on the “Mission Accomplished” banner, rather than the photo op itself, suggests that political imaging should be inauthentic. It *should* distort reality. The focus on the banner suggests that if the banner had not been present, Bush’s photo op might still be widely remembered as successful. Though hundreds of Americans had lost their lives, Bush should have just gotten rid of that banner.

Conclusion

Many scholars argue that the public interprets photos as depictions of reality. They show the world as it is. People are less likely to question the perspective depicted in a photo than in a speech. Thus, planning a photo op is usually a savvy political move. In these cases, however, even when the photos were interpreted as authentic, there were calls to change how the politician imaged to avoid those impressions. These discourses argue that reality should not interrupt political imaging. Dukakis used a common method of answering political attacks by looking like a commander-in-chief sitting atop a giant military vehicle, which several politicians had done successfully before him. Bush Sr.

visited the National Grocer's association to show his support for American business. Bush Jr. orchestrated a beautiful and triumphant photo op to justify America's intervention in Iraq. Unfortunately for these politicians, each photo op was reinterpreted. According to the discourses, "reality" disrupted the beautiful photos and the speeches that came with them were forgotten.

Dukakis' photo op at the tank factory was continually referenced as a planned counter-attack to Bush's assertions that Dukakis was weak on national security. Dukakis' speech borrowed heavily from Bush's own foreign policy and the photos of Dukakis riding a tank were an undisguised attempt to visually link Dukakis to military strength. Dukakis was commended for playing the imaging game. Ultimately, however, the photos were picked apart. The discourse called for Dukakis to be a more skilled political imager, in spite of his cerebral nature. Recognizing that Dukakis care more about policy than image, the discourse nevertheless encouraged Dukakis to focus on political imaging. He was specifically encouraged to hide himself because the "real" Dukakis would lose.

Bush's photo op at the National Grocer's Association was panned because it did not give the impression it was meant to. He wanted to show support for small businesses and the economy by staging photos in an environment familiar to all Americans. Unfortunately, Bush's facial expression and explanation of his "amazement" gave the impression that he was completely new to the grocery shopping experience. The discourse argued that Bush should feign familiarity with the technology and create a political image of an average American, despite the fact that it was impossible for him to be one. His lengthy stint of public service literally made it impossible for him to do normal American errand-running,

but the discourse encouraged Bush to create that impression. In fact, it encouraged Bush to create an impression that would hide his decades of public service and policy experience.

Bush's photo op on the USS Abraham Lincoln was widely praised. The impressive jet fly-in, flight suit and throngs of troops cheering on their Commander-in-Chief were considered exemplary political imaging. Even the disturbing reality of fatalities and unrest in Iraq paled in comparison. The discourse here argued that political image matters much more than reality. The fact that the image mattered at all in the context of a hasty war and thousands of American deaths signals the importance accorded to political image in this discourse. The real problem was the *banner*, not Bush's reckless foreign policy. The focus on the "Mission Accomplished" banner itself shows that the discourse posited the image as the primary objective. The photo op would likely have remained successful, according to the discourse, if the banner had not been a prominent feature of the event.

The ideal politician crafted in these discourses utilizes political imaging explicitly to hide reality. It was presidential to use imaging while it was simultaneously recognized to be manipulative by nature. The discourse argued that ideal politicians stage photo ops in order to distract attention from their possible flaws and away from their potentially harmful policies. The discourse argued that politicians should not only hide their flaws, but also create political images that include the exact opposite impressions. The intellectual politician should concern himself with shallow political events, the elitist politician with decades of public service should endeavor to look like an average American, and the "naively optimistic" politician should distract the public from the details of his ill-conceived war.

These discourses additionally posit the public as necessitating deception. The discourses about Dukakis' photo op asserted that the public would not vote for a brainy man with integrity. They were "couch potatoes" and demanded a politician who would create shiny views of the world for them. The discourse explicitly referenced how manipulative TV can be while simultaneously castigating Dukakis for not using it more. The discourse about Bush Sr.'s photo op argued that the electorate does not care if their politicians have decades of experience or have detailed plans for fixing the economy. It argued that they cared more about the fact that Bush appeared to be average, even if averageness is a leadership liability. Bush Jr.'s photo op discourse argued that Americans were simply too busy to understand government decisions. Bush's image campaign to convince the people that he was an effective leader was considered much more important than the actual military campaign that it justified.

Notes

¹ Dino Brugioni, *Photo Fakery: The History and Techniques of Photographic Deception and Manipulation*, (Dulles, VA: Brassey's Publishers, 1999), 25.

² Maria E. Grabe and Erik P. Bucy, *Image Bite Politics: News and the Visual Framing of Elections* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 76.

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CHAPTER FIVE

POLITICAL GAFFES: AUTHENTICITY AND DEMOPHOBIA

This dissertation began with Kinsley's definition of political gaffes. He famously wrote that gaffes are moments of truth that disrupt politicians' carefully crafted images. These truthful moments are considered off "message," otherwise known as the politician's political image. However, I argued that gaffes should not be defined as truthful disruptions. Gaffes are not moments of ineloquence, Freudian slips, or otherwise self-evident political mistakes. Gaffes are mainstream media discourses about political imaging. Despite being a journalist, Kinsley does not give enough credence to the power of these media discourses. The cases studied here demonstrate that even extremely different instances of political discourse can become gaffes. The nine cases in this dissertation alone include a misspelling, brag, embellishment, joke, insult, overheard negotiation, ill-fitting clothing, a facial expression, and a banner backdrop. "Gaffe" covers all manner of political snafus. My descriptions purposefully describe the case studies here as "brags" and "jokes" to show that even their first appearances in the media do not qualify them as gaffes. They cannot be defined by content, because that suggests we would immediately recognize the mistaken content. Gaffes are made, not discovered. It is the discourse about the moment that carves the gaffe into shape, and it is invariably a discourse about a politician not living up to the standards of proper political imaging.

Looking back, many might see a mistake followed by media attention. But most of these moments were planned and many of them were received favorably. Gore was deeply involved in promoting the Internet and wanted that to feature in his presidential campaign,

Reagan wanted to entertain his radio crew with a parody, and every aspect of Bush's "Mission Accomplished" was exceedingly intentional, as evidenced by the preparation and cost that went into it. The fact that many of them were not initially described as mistakes also demonstrates that gaffes are constructed discourses. Examining the timelines as these discourses developed shows how some of the "mistakes" were created by media attention and often long after the fact. There were wildly different interpretations of these moments, and those interpretations changed over time. The timeline matters because it proves there is nothing essential about gaffes. Some of the things that would later become gaffes were not newsworthy for months. For example, Clinton told her sniper fire story multiple times before it received any substantial media attention. Indeed, some of these moments were widely praised for their effectiveness. For example, stories commended Dukakis for finally fighting back with his photo op atop a tank. It was the application of the word "gaffe" that retroactively turned these moments into mistakes. Especially with political imaging, it is the interpretation that counts. Even if they are "mistakes," the discourse that coalesces around them is what transforms them into gaffes.

Authenticity Revisited

Given the popular conception of gaffes as moments of truth, it would be difficult to avoid a corresponding discussion of authenticity. While these moments were sometimes considered authentic, it would be incorrect to confuse authenticity with the definition of what a gaffe is. Gaffes are not necessarily authentic moments. Moreover, a common thread among all nine discourses studied here is their call to return to inauthenticity. Authenticity, one of the most important aspects of political imaging, is defined by the lack of or impression of the lack of mediation. Recall that meta-imaging is a political imaging strategy

politicians use to simulate authenticity. It gives audiences the illusory impression of insider access to build trust to further control their political imaging by making mediation transparent. By contrast, hypermediacy is when mediation becomes opaque. Audiences are made aware of mediation, not given the impression that they are seeing beyond it. Gaffes are hypermediated discourses. They are not hypermediated merely because they provide a less-than-glamorous view or because politicians do not control them. Our attention is being drawn to the microphone or the camera not to convince us that we know the person, but to show how mediation is yet another way that politicians are obscured from our view. Gaffe discourses are a primary way that we as a society talk about and evaluate political imaging.

The call for savvier political imaging was invariably the message regardless of the form of the moment that inspired the gaffe. The private style, private speech, and photos are all closely associated with authenticity. The private style is considered authentic because it creates impressions of close, unmediated communication. Private speech promises authenticity because it is ostensibly said under the presumption the public would never hear it. Photos are often considered authentic representations despite the long history of photographic deception. Combined with the fact that mistakes are often considered revelatory, these incidents should have been considered authentic. But even a form that predisposes audiences to interpret the content as authentic resulted in discourses that downplayed those interpretations. These discourses suggest it does not matter if politicians are “authentically” unintelligent, boring, dishonest, bellicose, vindictive, sneaky, nerdy, elitist, or reckless. The content of what these politicians said and did was rarely what was damaging or objectionable. The discourses do not end at characterizing a moment as authentic. Gaffes do not characterize these possibly authentic

moments as an opening to learn more about our politicians. Instead, they are disruptions in image that must be covered over. In each case, the discourse calls for the politician to repair the disruption with better imaging. They are discourses about savvy political imaging that encourage politicians to hide anything and everything that may disrupt that.

But if gaffes are not authentic mistakes, that presents another problem. How are we to understand our politicians? Kathleen Hall Jamieson argues that the emphasis on political imaging makes it incredibly difficult for the public to make informed political decisions. She writes,

[T]hose who study a modern president's speech are analyzing not a single person but a syndicate. In an age in which voters increasingly vote for a person, not a party, the amalgam of advisers, writers, and an elected official that is the public president should be one that the voter can come to know and know well. How else can a citizen intelligently choose one candidate over another?¹

She takes issue with the fact that most politicians employ ghostwriters, making speech an unreliable channel to get to know our politicians. Jamieson says, "By divorcing the speaking of ideas from conception of them, ghost-writing also has clouded our ability to know the person who would lead. Insinuating speechwriters between the speaker and the message means that in most instances on the national public stage the speech will not reveal the actual speaker the way speeches of the past did."² Political mistake scholars argued that mistakes could help us to know our leaders. Politicians may not write their speeches, but when they go off script they may be showing their true selves. These scholars, though, rely on the fact that gaffes are authentic moments. They argue that the emphasis on political imaging means that gaffes alone allow the public to know their leaders and make better-informed voting decisions. However, gaffe discourses preclude the sort of democratic

accountability they describe. Gaffes are not authentic moments, so using the “truths” gleaned from them won’t help voters make more informed decisions.

Even if they are not authentic, some argue that political images are still useful for democratic decision-making. For example, Trevor Parry-Giles argues that political image assessment is necessary for democracy. Political images are necessarily inauthentic, but they constitute important and useful material for the public to deliberate on. He argues that political image rhetorics are valuable to democracy because they allow the public to deliberate about leadership itself. Parry-Giles takes issue with the oft-cited issue/image dichotomy because it minimizes the importance of political image in democratic deliberation. He states, “Because political images are often communicated visually, they too are subjected to the same criticisms and suspicions. Seen as easily manipulated and emotional rather than reasonable, political images also are trapped by the assumed inauthenticity of images in general.”³ The issue/image dichotomy that exists in a lot of mainstream descriptions of public deliberation is misleading because,

[I]mage rhetorics of public character and persona *are rhetorics of public policy*. Providing citizens with the capacity to engage political image rhetorics enhances their deliberative arsenal and frees citizens from the burden of extensive public policy knowledge and expertise. Citizens will feel empowered to assess character and measure leadership, to debate persona and ethics, to determine the limits of public virtue and the capacity for moral action. Such matters must occupy the public sphere and may well contribute to its enhancement.⁴

According to Parry-Giles, then, political image and policy are fused. This argument contends that critics often accuse political images of being inauthentic but ignore that politics are hyperreal. He continues, “Political images are, by definition, inauthentic, and accepting their hyperreality allows for an honest assessment of how leadership is rhetorically manifested in a mediated political environment.”⁵ In other words,

[E]ach political system where political images of character and persona are communicated to a larger public must embrace the hyperreality of such images, must accept that the images are all that exist in this particular rhetorical scheme, and must understand that the answer becomes not the rejection or degradation of such discourse, but the skilled and careful consumption of such images by a discerning, discriminating, aware public able to assess character and persona as legitimate public matters.⁶

The crux of his argument is that political images are still, in some way, a proxy to understanding policy. His argument is dependent on the notion of “rhetorical trajectories,” the predictions that the public can make based on political images. He writes that a political image means that a politician is “obligated” to follow through with it, and that allows the public to predict how they will govern.⁷

Obviously, when our politics are hyperreal, aiming for knowledge of what our politicians are “really” like is a fool’s errand. But it does mean that how we talk about our political sphere matters even more. When politics is hyperreal, with no distinction between the real and the fake, there is no reason “fake” images are less valuable. They are just as real as anything else. As Shawn J. Parry-Giles and Trevor Parry-Giles note, “When politics is hyperreal, and there is no distinction between the metaphors that represent politics and the actual acts of political campaigning, those metaphors acquire even more profound influence.”⁸ In other words, if everything is necessarily inauthentic because politics is hyperreal, why does it matter if gaffes call for inauthenticity?

I argue that Parry-Giles argument that the public can and should deliberate about political images does not adequately deal with the fact that the public learns about those images through discourses that covertly and overtly denigrate the public. How can it be empowering to deliberate using discourses that expressly conceive of the public as incapable of deliberation? Far from being discourses about politicians that the public can

use to make informed political decisions, gaffes are actually a case study about the impossibility of democratic governance. Gaffe discourses demonstrate a severe lack of trust in the public's ability to participate in democracy. These discourses argue that politicians should become more skilled in political imaging in order to cater to a public that cannot be trusted with anything else. They say that the public cannot or will not be interested in or persuaded by policy discussions or reasoned argument. Even if politics is hyperreal, many scholars argue that the way we talk about the public deeply influences how the public will see itself.⁹ Gaffes may not be the rare moments of authenticity that we can use to deliberate, but they also should not function as calls for more imaging. Gaffe discourses argue that the public can and should be manipulated; as such, they are demophobic discourses.

Demophobia

As its core, demophobia describes the untrustworthiness of the public. Historically, demophobia was central to the founding and development of the United States.¹⁰ As Robert L. Ivie and Oscar Giner write, the “mythos of the democratic demon contained within the republic has haunted the nation throughout its history.”¹¹ Demophobia is a “deep distrust of the people”¹² because of their propensity to be swayed by demagogues. Their susceptibility to manipulation, the argument goes, makes them unsuitable for rational deliberation. Ivie writes that demophobia is reliant on “a caricature of the public as prone to popular rage and fits of passion, convulsions of factionalism that poison public deliberations, and a contagion of jealousy and avarice that reduces the people to a collection of mere dupes subject to the manipulation of unsavory politicians.”¹³ Jeremy Engels similarly argues that many of the founders “slandered democracy because they

feared that weak-willed citizens could be manipulated by smooth-talking demagogues into unspeakable acts of destruction.”¹⁴

The public’s propensity to be manipulated makes democracy a risky system. Demophobes argue that demagogues can easily manipulate unreasonable people who were already predisposed to emotion. Demophobes consider the public as an “unthinking irrational mob whose emotions are preyed upon by demagogues, a common herd that lacks sufficient virtue to consider the good of the community.”¹⁵ Oscar and Giner write, “The uncontained, undisciplined demos was seen as a violent mob under the evil influence of primal passions, allowing the savagery of chaos to prevail over reason, order, and justice.”¹⁶ As a result, demophobia justifies excluding the public from deliberation. Engels explains, “Demophobia closed the door to popular deliberation because the founders feared that citizens were stupid. This made Americans easy prey for demagogues who would encourage the demos to do what it did best: run amok.”¹⁷ Since the public could be “led astray by emotional public persuasion or led responsibly by elected representatives engaged in informed dialogue and dispassionate dialectic,”¹⁸ the Founders reasoned that at least representation allowed elected elites to deliberate in citizens’ place, neutralizing the public’s irrationality.

The key characteristic of demophobia is exclusion based on susceptibility to demagoguery. Demophobes argued that the public’s weakness for emotional manipulation made them likely to make rash and destructive decisions. Both Ivie’s and Engels’ corrective to demophobia is to open up deliberation to the public. Ivie writes, “the mythos of the demented demos” is a drain on participatory democracy. It “sustain[s] a fiction of the people that discourages serious experimentation with participatory politics, for who would

want their fate determined by rogues and fools?!"¹⁹ Similarly, Engels writes that demophobia's counter-discourse, demophilia, embraced the public's ability to participate in deliberation.²⁰

The demophobia expressed in gaffes seems distinct. I argue that it is a more dangerous form of demophobia because it does not argue that the public should be excluded from deliberation based on their likelihood of being duped by demagogues. Rather, gaffe discourses assert that the public *can* and *should* be manipulated. They call for more demagoguery, and argue that the people need to be duped in order to participate. Gaffe discourses argue that demagoguery is not a danger to the public; it is a necessary form of communication with the public. This is a paternalistic form of demophobia that relinquishes any hope for democratic governance. This type of demophobia suggests that the public should be continuously fooled with deceptive political imaging, removing any possibility for the public to make knowledgeable or informed decisions. Even the demophobes active after the American Revolution that described the public as an irrational, demonic, and savage herd believed that they should be protected from demagogues and that those proclivities could be reigned in through a republican system. The demophobia expressed in gaffe discourses exhibits no such regard.

Historically, demophobes described elected representatives as the savior of the public. They were one avenue to protect the public from the ruinous influence of demagogues. The ideal politician weaved through gaffe discourses *is* a demagogue. Gaffes imply that the ideal politician is primarily concerned with political imaging, does not have a backstage persona, and intentionally hides reality from the public. We have arrived at a moment where our political imaging discourses, in practice, call for our politicians to be

little more than sophisticated liars. While none of the cases studied here were Bill Clinton's, his name repeatedly arose as an example of an ideal politician. The politicians in the case studies were compared to Clinton and found wanting. There is something to this. Clinton boasted some of the highest approval ratings ever, even amidst impeachment hearings. The reason many of these discourses seem to idolize Clinton is because he was phenomenal at political imaging, not because he was "authentic." Clinton was a great politician, not in the neutral or derogatory sense, but in a positive sense as a skilled manipulator. Any understanding of the ideal politician necessarily includes an understanding of the public. Our politicians represent us. And presumably we are the ones that the political images are created for. Unfortunately, formulating the ideal politician as one who would intentionally manipulate the public precludes possibilities for healthy deliberation.

In addition to the more covert form of demophobia found in gaffe discourses' calls for more sophisticated political imaging, the discourses studied also expressed overt descriptions of the public as unintelligent and untrustworthy. The discourses in Chapter Two argue that electoral success is dependent entirely on a suitable public image. In Quayle's case, they argued that Quayle's intelligence was irrelevant as long as he minded his image. The discourse noted that the public cared more about campaign slogans than they would ever care about party platforms or policy. "Potatoe" was the only substance in the campaign that mattered. The discourse about Gore's brag reasoned that the more Gore showed his actual personality, the more he bored the public away. The public did not care about Gore's grasp of policy and fidgeted in their seats in reaction to his dull mannerisms. Though he represented integrity, in contrast to Clinton, the public would rather have Clinton. Hillary Clinton, on the other hand, was reprimanded for not being the believable

liar that Bill was. The discourse argued that the only scenario for not lying to the public included one where video footage of the moment in question could be produced.

The discourses in Chapter Three posit that the public cares more about the politician's image than their backstage persona, even if that backstage persona is undesirable. The discourse about Reagan's joke argued that it was ultimately irrelevant to Reagan's political performance because the public already liked his image so much. Even though polls showed they disagreed with many of his policies, he looked like a president and that was enough. His sense of humor was considered endearing (even though could have caused a military conflict.) The discourse about Bush's insult argued that the public did not pay much attention to campaigns, and especially not to policy. They only cared that the politicians entertained them, and reveled in the interesting drama between Bush and a member of the press. The fact that Bush's insult directly contradicted his speech about political civility was irrelevant. In Obama's case, the discourse explicitly argued that being candid was a bad thing. Despite recognition that Obama's negotiation with Medvedev reflected political realities in the United States, the discourse scolded Obama for his honesty. It also remarked that the lack of coverage of the nuclear summit itself was not problematic, since talking about policy would not make voters any "better."

The discourses in Chapter Four argue that the public needs to be deceived. It is helpful if that deception uses images, because the public cannot be expected to pay attention to more complicated policy discussions. The discourse about Dukakis' tank ride argued that Dukakis' intelligence was a political liability. More important than using his intelligence, Dukakis should use television to capture his voters. The discourse pointed out that television is a manipulative medium—and that was why it needed to be used. The

“couch potato” public needed to be persuaded with convincing photographs, not policy speeches. In Bush Sr.’s case, the discourse about the grocery scanner photos argued that Bush should transform his image into one of an average Joe. It recognized that Bush had decades of policy experience, none of it involving grocery shopping, but that he should cover over that in order to look ordinary. It would better appeal to the public who did not have policy understanding or experience themselves. The discourse about the “Mission Accomplished” banner argued that Bush should provide the public with compelling pictures. It did not contend that Bush should explain his foreign policy choices, even the claim that Hussein had acquired WMD that he made in his speech at the photo op. Instead, the people needed high quality photographs of their president that covered over his disastrous foreign policy decisions. The focus on the banner seemed to suggest that if only it had been removed, the photo op would have successfully fooled all viewers.

Conclusion

Gaffe discourses continue the story of the media started by political mistake scholars in Chapter One. Even amongst a wide variety of scholars, the consensus seems to be that electronic mediation has irreparably harmed political speech. For political gaffe scholars, the public used to be generous, ignoring minor mistakes and admiring their political leaders. Mediation creates mistakes and encourages audiences to be attuned to them. Despite the possibilities that electronic media creates by allowing relationships between politicians and the public to form across space and time, the emphasis is on the fact that cameras separate us, and images separate us even further. The direct non-mediated relationship between politicians and their public transformed into an indirect one littered with mistakes. As Meyrowitz notes, “the decline in presidential image” is not

for lack of people up to the task, but is instead the effect of “a communication environment that undermines the politician’s ability to behave like, and therefore be perceived as, the traditional ‘great leader.’”²¹ Now, these discourses argue that those mistakes should be minimized with greater attempts at deception. Unfortunately, gaffe discourses demonstrate that the response to this complex media environment is to disparage the public. The emphasis on political imaging in this media environment created a desire to avoid manipulation but has merely pushed the public into circumstances more likely to result in their manipulation. Gaffe discourses demonstrate that as a society we are still struggling with the effects electronic media have on politics.

Gaffe discourses are not about the politicians that inspire them but about the public that deserves to be fooled. It seems logical to argue that if a mistake is made, it should be fixed. If a politician slips up, why shouldn’t these discourses encourage them to do better? It is because the encouragement to do better has nothing to do with the content of the supposed “mistake.” It encourages politicians to better deceive, instead of making them more accountable to the public. These discourses cut the people out of the process. Instead of advocating on behalf of the public and the reasonable desire for more information about those selected to represent us, these discourses position the media as public relations specialists for politicians. These discourses argue that the public needs to be deceived with political imaging because they are untrustworthy. It is not demagoguery that is dangerous to the public, but reality. The demophobia expressed here is fatalistic and extremely cynical about the prospects for deliberation in the mass mediated age. Depicting the voting public as hopeless while feeding us a media diet that precludes any possibility of democratic

deliberation increases the likelihood that this depiction becomes reality. Even if it is ultimately a fiction, the belief that the public can be reasonable is necessary for democracy.

Notes

¹ Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Eloquence in an Electronic Age: The Transformation of Political Speechmaking* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 217.

² Ibid., 216.

³ Trevor Parry-Giles, "Resisting a 'Treacherous Piety': Issues, Images, and Public Policy Deliberation in Presidential Campaigns," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 13, no. 1 (2010): 44.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 47.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 57.

⁸ Shawn J. Parry-Giles and Trevor Parry-Giles, "Meta-Imaging, the War Room, and the Hyperreality of U.S. Politics," *Journal of Communication* 49, no. 1 (1999): 30.

⁹ On how texts constitute publics, see Edwin Black, "The Second Persona," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 56, no. 2 (1970): 109-119; Michael C. McGee, "In Search of 'The People': A Rhetorical Alternative," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 16, no. 3 (1975): 235-249; Maurice Charland, "Constitutive Rhetoric: the Case of the *Peuple Québécois*," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73, no. 2 (1987): 133-150; Kenneth S. Zagacki, "Constitutive Rhetoric Reconsidered: Constitutive Paradoxes in G. W. Bush's Iraq War Speeches," *Western Journal of Communication* 71, no. 4 (2007): 272-293; and Michael Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics (abbreviated version)," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 88, no. 4 (2002): 413-425. On how political rhetoric has constituted the American people, see Jeffrey K. Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987); Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Deeds Done in Words: Presidential Rhetoric and the*

Genres of Governance (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1990); Vanessa Beasley, *You, the People: American National Identity in Presidential Rhetoric* (College Station, TX: Texas A & M University Press, 2004); Mary E. Stuckey and Karen S. Hoffman, "Constituting "The People": National Identity Under William H. Taft and Richard M. Nixon," *Congress & The Presidency* 33, no. 2 (2006): 69-94; and Martin J. Medhurst, "Afterword: Questioning the Rhetorical Presidency Construct," in *Before the Rhetorical Presidency*, ed. Martin J. Medhurst (College Station, TX: Texas A & M University Press, 2008).

¹⁰ Demophobia is a destructive force today as well. Ivie and Giner argue that demophobia causes America to project its fear of the unruly masses outwards and scapegoat other populations in order to see ourselves as exceptional. This results in destructive foreign policy decisions such as democracy promotion and the war on terrorism. Ivie and Giner write, "The mythic shading of the repressed enemy within—a deformed representation of the people, a distempered image produced by an ingrained fear of democracy—is therefore expressed obliquely in presidential war rhetoric." See Robert L. Ivie and Oscar Giner, "Hunting the Devil: Democracy's Rhetorical Impulse to War," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (2007): 585.

¹¹ Robert L. Ivie and Oscar Giner, "Hunting the Devil: Democracy's Rhetorical Impulse to War," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (2007): 582.

¹² *Ibid.*, 580.

¹³ Robert L. Ivie, *Democracy and America's War on Terror* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2005), 6.

¹⁴ Jeremy Engels, *Enemyship: Democracy and Counter-Revolution in the Early Republic* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2010), 12.

¹⁵ Ivie, *Democracy and America's War on Terror*, 68.

¹⁶ Ivie and Giner, "Hunting the Devil," 582.

¹⁷ Jeremy Engels, "Demophilia: A Discursive Counter to Demophobia in the Early Republic," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 97, no. 2 (2011): 145.

¹⁸ Ivie, *Democracy and America's War on Terror*, 49.

¹⁹ Ivie, *Democracy and America's War on Terror*, 88-89.

²⁰ Engels traces the development of both during the founding of the United States. Both deal with the exclusion or inclusion of the public in deliberation. He writes, "Demophobia imagines the demos as an undisciplined mass, a murderous horde that is not only deaf to right speech but exudes its own toxic speech that spreads demotic violence. Demophilia, on the other hand, speaks of the people with love because it envisions a docile public that is appropriately attuned to civil speech." See Jeremy Engels, "Demophilia: A Discursive Counter to Demophobia in the Early Republic," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 97, no. 2 (2011): 134.

²¹ Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 269.

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