

Presidential Image Management

The 1996 Presidential Election was a decisive victory for Bill Clinton. At the same time, it was a decisive victory for image management. His campaign remained positive and well organised and picked up 379 of the 538 (70%) Electoral College seats and the millions of dollars spent and the thousands of miles traveled paid off. Clinton has his second term. Yet, this victory was not necessarily won through the best policies but through a campaign strategy focused on managing the President's image.

As visible media have become the dominant form of public communication in politics, so the candidate's message has moved away from word-content toward visible-image content. Indeed, many candidates have won or lost campaigns for no other reason than their ability to project an appealing image. Still, the Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton Presidencies have advanced the use of political persuasion through visible media with their focus on image creation and control. Techniques used in marketing and product promotion to appeal to personal and psycho-social need, have been demonstrated to be also useful in the selling of a President. The need for a father, a leader, or even a listening friend, have all been addressed by either Reagan or Clinton in their presidential persona.

While image management has been a factor in previous campaigns, Clinton has made an art of it, even to the expense of concentrating on the issues. Whatever a candidate's strategy, it affects both the issues they address and the images they project. However, the Clinton Campaign showed a subtle but definite shift in paradigm away from a concentration on the issues towards a concentration on the image.

To many, including Bob Dole, Clinton may have seemed like a political light-weight, with no substance to his issues and with loyalties to no-one and nothing but the camera and public opinion ratings. Yet, this was not a mistake nor bad campaign management but a change in style and approach.

For Clinton, it was all a matter of strategy. If he had wanted to debate the issues and communicate through the press, there is no doubt that the White House could have presented an informative and rigorous argument. But the Clinton team chose to concentrate on the visual media and image projection and, accordingly, use all the communication techniques available to them. Popular appeal, rather than constituency appeal, and image management rather than issue management, are intelligent strategies in an age of television.

Clinton is promoted as a populist President. He is the friendly President. The man who cares. His smile, style and dress are all managed for optimum returns and general appeal.

The Clinton campaign signals a style for campaigns yet to come. The speed of communication and the realization that "a picture is worth a thousand words" translates into more focus on image projection and image control and less on information and debate.

Truly, Clinton represents a new style of politics while Bob Dole represents the style and an age almost gone. In many ways this campaign between the old man and the kid represented a philosophical fight between the old era and the new. As David Maraniss of the Washington Post suggests; "Bob Dole [was the] last man standing" among a generation of notable politicians. (Maraniss Oct 27, 1996) In contrast, Bill Clinton came in first. Indeed, Clinton has moved beyond the policy papers and the drawn out legislative processes. Image management is now the name of the game and Clinton plays it better than most.

In many ways, Clinton is the other side of the coin to Bob Dole. While Dole represents the hard-nosed astute Congressional legislator, Clinton has developed an empathy with the people. He has an innate ability to identify with mass audiences and as Maraniss points out; "It does not matter that his 'I feel your pain' performance art has become a cliché mocked by cartoonists; it is an established part of his identity, as real in that sense as Mean Ole Dole." (Maraniss p15. 1996)

Clinton's style of image management politics is further illustrated in the October, 1996, peace negotiations at the White House between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Yasser Arafat. On Wednesday, September 25, hostilities broke out between the Israelis and Arabs over the reopening of a tunnel near the Al Aqsa Mosque in East Jerusalem. President Bill Clinton, taking advantage of the Middle East crisis, and in the tradition of other Presidents, invited the Israeli and Arab leaders to meet on American neutral ground.

Arranging for Netanyahu and Arafat to meet over the weekend became a more powerful visual statement on foreign policy than any amount of rhetoric on the subject. And, in the terms of political effort, it was easy. Bob Dole was left holding his speech in the wings once again.

Truly, this election was about selling a President, or at least a presidential image.

Ronald Reagan, was known to his contemporaries as the 'Teflon President' because none of the many accusations of impropriety seemed to stick, but he is also remembered as the 'great communicator'. As a trained actor, Reagan brought a different approach to politics as his team sought to orchestrate the media and Reagan's presentations. He was a master at communication and played to the camera. The Clinton team, seeing the success of Reagan's image management, modeled their campaign approach on Reagan's 1984 victory and had Clinton study video tapes of Reagan's speeches. (Wilson Nov 7, 1996) Clinton's presentation and image was tailor made.

Clinton was first supported by the Democratic Party because of his appealing image and it is his image that remained the controlling feature of his campaign. For the Clinton team it has always been about image. They came into office by projecting the southern, young alternative to the old style money making big government. The political commentator, Gore Vidal, once had portrayed Clinton and Gore as the Huck Finn and Tom Sayer of politics. Clinton was portrayed as the man with simple and down to earth ideas and as the man who would always be young at heart. (Vidal 1996) In many ways they seemed politically naive - but that was good: It won votes.

Despite the accusations of the misappropriation and fraudulent management of funds, of an over meddling wife and covert sexual relations, Clinton continued to hold onto strong leads in the polls for the several months leading to the election. With particular reference to the President's troubled past, an election exit poll showed that while 59% of voters believed that Clinton had not told the full truth about the Whitewater affair, they believed he is a good President. (Wilson 1996, p.19) Again, the President's image has been the decisive factor. In the early stages of the Campaign voter opinion research showed strong feedback on the President's new image and the improved involvement of his wife, Hillary. For the Clinton's, keeping the White House was an image problem.

There is a famous picture of a young Clinton, meeting John Kennedy. While Kennedy may be considered more sophisticated than Clinton, they have much in common, particularly in the area of creating a popular image. Remember it was Kennedy who went on TV with Nixon in the now famous Presidential debates and used this media to his advantage. Elections and campaigning were never to be the same.

Clinton, too, has placed his mark on political strategy. While some may complain about his style, his communications management is a winning formula.

In a growing appreciation of the attitudes and values of particularly the female voter, the Clinton Campaign had to seek not only to redefine Clinton as a man who would be President but redefine the kind of government he represented. Accordingly, there was a move away from the familiar and distasteful conflict paradigm of government to one of practical government and productive government. In the wake of the Cold War there is no need for an adversarial approach any more and a 'feminising', or a 'humanising', of politics is now possible with an accent on relationships. As Al Gore introduced Clinton at their election night victory the two men stood hugging at the podium, something unimaginable of previous Presidents. (Wilson, 1996 p.20) Clinton not only represents a new style but a new era for America and American politics.

Clinton's image is that of a President who cares. He has made a virtue out of nurture as he presents himself as a man who is listening to the concerns of average Americans. No doubt, this is a strong element in Bill Clinton's character but it could have been portrayed as a sign of weakness by an opposing candidate in campaigns of old. For Clinton, it has been a strength in a time when the female vote is paramount to a candidate's success.

As a gender constituency, women make up the larger proportion of the voting population with 52% voting last November and 54% voting in 1992. In addition, the female vote is important because women tend to have weaker political allegiance, their vote is less predictable and they tend to make up their minds later in a campaign than do men. (Caldwell, 1997, p.27) Accordingly, the accent on campaigning has turned to women as men seem less likely to be effected in their voting by appeals to woman's concerns. In Clinton, there is evidence of a paradigm shift to image management and a 'soft focus' in a projecting a nurturing President in order to gain the female vote. This 'soft focus', now also being used in advertising for consumer goods, Caldwell suggests, tends to use "emotional appeals over

hard, rational argument”’. (Caldwell, 1997. p.27) Clinton’s image was the central piece to his campaign strategy.

Yet, the time was right for a new style of President and a new approach. Alvin Toffler, in his book *Creating a New Civilisation*, suggests that the world is moving into a new civilization based on information and communication. People now have more communication options and mass society is being ‘demassified’ into a variety of ‘publics’. All this has implications for electioneering, and for marketing in general.

As politicians seek to appeal to more specific target audiences, a variety of message genre are created with an emphasis on emotional stimulus rather than information. That is, image creation is used to gain desired emotional responses rather than necessarily intellectual assent.

A candidate now has to associate themselves with a ‘public’s’ existing values and attitudes rather than trying to create new ones. Consequently, argument and political double-talk are a thing of the past. Simple direct messages and images for association and emotional appeal is now the formula for visual media success.

Perhaps the real loser here, however, is truth. While it may be the first casualty of war, it certainly could be said to be the first casualty of populist campaigning. Yet, truth, as such, is not a consideration. The modern strategic campaign is audience-message sensitive and truth is only another variable in the marketing mix. Truth, is now a “perspective” and is presented with emotional appeal to align with the values of prescribed ‘publics’. Accordingly, presenting the truth is a matter of which perspective is acceptable to a target audience. This is not to suggest that there is no integrity in the message but that words and images carry meaning and the communications process has in itself becomes a management exercise.

There is more to Bill Clinton and his campaign than is obvious and his friendly-caring approach is a very intelligent use of visual media. Having worked on the Jerry Brown Senate Campaign and the Alan Cranston Presidential Campaign, I am aware of the importance of a strategy and strategic thinking. Indeed, a strategy effects every other aspect of a campaign. Methods and messages only have a place in a campaign as the strategy gives them meaning and context. The lesson learned from the Clinton Campaign is that a strategy is no longer just an action statement but also an image statement. Their strategy was not so much a statement of what they were going to do as a image of who they were. Image management has become paramount in a new age where public opinion is more powerful than public policy.

The October Presidential debates demonstrated how image has become the main ingredient in the message as Clinton remained cool and polished and continued to build audience rapport. The best Dole could claim was to have come out as equal value on the issues. Still, people don’t remember what they hear as much as what they see. In this regard, Clinton has the appeal and the image. He also has the presidency.

The Clinton campaign successfully developed an approach started by Reagan and moved to develop an image for Clinton as the caring President. His openness to people's concerns became a virtue. When he spoke on issues or even spoke to the Congress, it was always in the context of the 'caring President'.