

1 Political Campaign Films

Boy, is that a powerful documentary . . . is that really me?

—Ronald Reagan¹

The Republicans spent nearly \$500,000 on *A New Beginning* in 1984, in contrast to the \$77,000 the Democrats spent in entirety for television advertising in 1952.² The videotaped film was a cornerstone of the campaign, and as such was put to many uses. Parts of the “documentary” were used as spot commercials during the primary and general election campaigns. It preceded the acceptance address that marked President Reagan’s first “live” appearance at the convention, thus assuring network coverage and a large viewing audience. In fact, twenty-three million people were tuned in to the convention.³ Later, the film was combined with footage from the convention and parts of the acceptance address, and rebroadcast as a paid thirty-minute commercial. The commercial aired simultaneously on all three entertainment networks and cable networks WTBS, CBN, and ESPN; thirty million people saw this version.⁴ *A New Beginning* was later recut with up-to-date images and rebroadcast at the 1988 Republican National Convention, and George Bush used sequences from it in his own 1988 political campaign film. (Bush, too, used his political campaign film immediately prior to the acceptance speech at the convention). These multiple functions helped the Republicans keep their messages simple and consistent across two presidencies; even more pragmatically, the campaigns reaped the returns from their investments.

A New Beginning initially gained notoriety as an admixture of news event, documentary, and political advertisement. It was also the latest incarnation of the genre of political campaign films, which has existed in some form since 1952, when television first became an essential tool in national politics. Both Eisenhower and Stevenson aired thirty-minute films in 1952. Eisenhower’s election-eve broad-

cast combined live and filmed footage. His spot series, *Eisenhower Answers America* consisted of ordinary Americans asking questions that were edited together with the candidate's answers: an early manipulation of frames where discrete events became unified as one continuous television "event." This technique was further refined in 1956 when Eisenhower appeared on a split-screen alongside the people who questioned him, even though his answers were prerecorded. The Republicans also made extensive use of the five-minute spot commercial in 1956, while the Democrats initiated "televised production spots"—advertisements which did not depict the candidate.⁵

Though Eisenhower's, and to some extent Stevenson's, media strategies prefigured the political campaign film, John F. Kennedy's thirty-minute "biography," *The New Frontier*, became emblematic of the genre.⁶ The film combined documentary techniques with still photographs to produce a chronological record of Kennedy's personal history, featuring his school career, service to his country, dedication to family values, and qualifications for public office. He was shown to be a leader (although later candidates were sometimes presented as men of the people, depending on situational exigencies and strategies). The film stressed Kennedy's experience as a war hero and a senator from Massachusetts; he met with military and foreign leaders, and he concluded the film by averring his commitment to peace.

Its themes set the tone for later films: Kennedy promised to improve the economy, to keep America strong militarily, and to maintain peace. In this case, some of the negative issues that plagued the Kennedy campaign were explicitly addressed. He spoke to disgruntled coal miners in Virginia; he also responded to a question about whether his Catholicism would interfere with his ability to govern. Kennedy assured the questioner, and thus the viewer, that it would not.

Structurally, *The New Frontier* simulated newsreel footage, complete with stark black-and-white images, the anonymous voice of a narrator, and a static camera. One of *The New Frontier's* innovations was the use of on-location shooting to film Kennedy as he delivered speeches. There were no close-ups, nor did he appear "live" on camera to address the audience directly at any time. Rather, he was filmed in cinema-verité style, as if he were oblivious to the presence of the camera. The only indication of the media's presence was a microphone that Kennedy held in his hand as he spoke amidst crowds of people.

The film did not use many techniques of implication and asso-

ciation to make its points, nor did it incorporate the aesthetic qualities of advertisements. Clips of Kennedy's oratory on the campaign trail reiterated his catchphrase, America as the "New Frontier," and illustrated his vision of a prosperous, militarily strong, and peaceful America.

After 1960, as politicians increasingly made use of media techniques based upon advertising, political campaign films became correspondingly more sophisticated. The aberrant *Choice*, produced for Barry Goldwater without his approval by the Citizens for Goldwater/Mothers for Moral America group, deserves mention for its strong use of implication and innuendo as argumentative forms. Images of moral turpitude in Johnson's America were intercut with wholesome, idyllic images of Goldwater's America, offering viewers a "choice" between the two versions. NBC agreed to air the film; although the network demanded that an image of a woman in a topless bathing suit be cut, racist images of blacks were deemed permissible. Goldwater himself ordered the inflammatory film withdrawn prior to its airing.⁷ Yet the visual techniques of implication and innuendo carried on.

As political campaign directors have become more media-savvy, the films have increasingly combined techniques common to documentaries, advertising, and news. Initially, political campaign films were aired on national television as part of the networks' convention coverage, or they were paid for as advertising for the general campaign. Often, they aired during the convention and again during the closing weeks of the campaign. In 1972, Nixon's *Portrait of a President* was shown at the Republican National Convention, while *The Nixon Years: Change Without Chaos* (which incorporated footage from the first film) was later broadcast as a paid political film. (This recalls how *A New Beginning* was first aired at the convention, then a half-hour version played on national television to initiate the general campaign.) Many of the same personnel who made up Nixon's team of advertising experts, called the November Group, became Reagan's Tuesday Team in 1984; thus Reagan's campaign film repeated a strategy that worked for Nixon: replaying images that highlighted the strengths of the candidate.

Probably the film that most sharply contrasts with the Reagan film, while still showing the development of the genre, is *The Democratic Faith: The Johnson Years* (1968). Like other campaign films, it moved from a presentation of the man, to his domestic accomplishments, to foreign affairs. Johnson visited the military troops, although

he did not promote identification by dressing in uniform as Reagan later did. He appeared at a summit with foreign leaders, just as Reagan portrayed his meeting with the Chinese premier. Finally, the Johnson film ended with a final affirmation of his commitment to peace.

After Johnson announced on the eve of the primary that he would not run for reelection, the film was used to summarize the legacy of the Democratic Party, with a focus on Lyndon Johnson's term in office. If Johnson had decided to seek a second term, this film would have been used exclusively for his campaign. After its initial use at the Democratic convention, it was shown on NBC as a half-hour political "special."

The Johnson Years, produced eight years after *The New Frontier*, indicates the genre's evolving admixture of documentary and advertising styles. The film opens with Johnson, wearing a cowboy hat, standing by a river as he reflects upon the course of the country since the New Deal. Sentimental music plays; then this quiet moment is interrupted by newsreel footage of every Democratic president since Roosevelt. Powerful, emotional footage of Kennedy's funeral follows, with close-ups of burning candles and people in mourning. Johnson provides the voice-over narration, although his commentary is not "live," nor does it pertain to the images. His remarks are taken from earlier speeches. Unlike the Kennedy film, which merely depicts the candidate as he delivers speeches, the Johnson film matches the candidate's words with emotional images.

Further, Johnson does not narrate the entire film. Gregory Peck serves this function, illustrating a move toward famous, recognizable voices that speak for the candidate. In 1976, for instance, Joe Garagiola speaks for Gerald Ford, as E. G. Marshall does for Jimmy Carter. Ex-movie star and professional narrator Ronald Reagan speaks for himself in the 1984 film.

The Johnson film differed from *A New Beginning* in content as well as structure. *The Johnson Years* testified to the Democrats' commitment to the principles of the New Deal, a program that Reagan aimed to dismantle. Johnson and the Democrats were lauded for achievements of little importance to Ronald Reagan. Civil rights, affirmative action, Medicaid, Headstart, education, and Johnson's "War on Poverty" were central issues in the earlier film. Indigent families in Appalachia and urban ghettos existed in this issue-oriented film. Foreign policy and the war in Vietnam were discussed even though these topics were detrimental to the Democrats in 1968.

Following the Johnson film, the campaign films used by Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter in 1976 illustrated the increasingly sophisticated media techniques of the genre. In both cases, images were highly stylized although both remained rooted in the documentary mode of exposition. Ford's film, for example, opened with former baseball player Joe Garagiola seated in Air Force One. He introduced the film, telling the viewers the theme (Ford's candidacy) and how it would be developed. He began, "We'll see a documentary about his background, job, family, hopes for America . . . and then we'll hear from Gerald Ford himself."

The film developed chronologically, although the "documentary" footage of Ford as an athlete, scholar, military man, family man and public figure was intercut with interviews of "authoritative" figures. Singer Pearl Bailey voiced her support for Ford as part of Garagiola's introduction; later, members of Ford's college football team, friends from Yale, and members of Congress and the Senate testified to his character and leadership skills.

Unlike Carter, Ford primarily needed to establish his authority in 1976. His appeal was not populist; he did not rely upon the voices of ordinary people on the street to lend credibility to his candidacy. *A New Beginning*, on the other hand, illustrated Reagan's ability to reconcile these two opposing requirements; he managed to present himself as a leader and a man of the people in a seemingly noncontradictory manner.

The Ford film did, however, make use of strategies similar to those that structured the Reagan film. Visual clichés abounded: Air Force One, the American flag, the Statue of Liberty, productive farms, lush harvests, construction workers, people streaming out of factories. Ford's message was strikingly similar to Ronald Reagan's in 1984: he promised to cut taxes, reduce inflation, decrease government bureaucracy, make the United States strong militarily, and be a man of peace. There was even an attempt made to portray an American rebirth with images of the Bicentennial celebrations. Ford's claim that Americans had endured a period of conflict was supported with images of discontented Americans gathered in large demonstrations (of what it was not clear, nor did Ford specify the hardships that Americans had experienced).

A New Beginning alluded to past discontent through a sequence of barely discernible newspaper and magazine headlines proclaiming high interest rates and rocketing inflation, followed by another that heralded the economic recovery. These reinforced the authenticity of

Reagan's claims for a new beginning, and mitigated the potentially dispiriting effect of such reminders.

The Ford film depicted vivid images of conflict not necessarily located in the past. The Reagan film portrayed a revitalized America; the Ford film merely hinted at the possibility. The Ford film concluded with a song, "I'm Feeling Good About America," and a vignette of positive, upbeat images of America. But 1976 was too soon after Watergate for a Republican president to be leading a spiritual revival. The candidate's themes, aims, and objectives were similar to those of Ronald Reagan in 1984. Unlike Reagan, however, Ford could not associate himself with American resurgence.

The Ford film was not so highly produced as *A New Beginning*, but then neither was the candidate. Ford was not a central figure who rendered all of the images coherent. Further, Ford was hardly adept at televisual communication. In his one attempt to directly address the television audience at the end of the film, he did not use a teleprompter, and was obviously reading his speech rather than "conversing." He was filmed in a medium shot as a static "talking head," and there were no extreme close-ups that would have conveyed a feeling of intimacy with the viewer.

The visual techniques that structured the Ford film were not unified, and the images failed to convey the authority and authenticity of the candidate. Singer Pearl Bailey, for example, voiced her support for Ford by proclaiming, "Lord knows he's made mistakes . . . but he is trying."

In the opposing camp, Carter's 1976 campaign film *Jimmy Who?* also shared televisual characteristics with *A New Beginning*. It, too, included a song and had a musical score. It was not issue-oriented; interviews were conducted with people on the street who made comments such as, "I think he's sexy," and "What's wrong with a peanut farmer?" The film was in tune with the times, as it emphasized Carter's status as a Washington outsider and a (millionaire) man of the people.

The Carter film was lighthearted, using visual techniques such as animation and split-screen video. It was fast-paced and primarily a visual communication form. In one sequence, a montage of political cartoons of Carter, with his exaggerated grin, appeared on screen. The situational constraints surrounding both *Jimmy Who?* and *A New Beginning* suggested that neither needed to be issue-oriented. In the wake of Watergate, Carter needed to stress his integrity rather than his command of political issues; in the aftermath of Carter's dismal

four years and Reagan's apparently successful first term in office, the 1984 election was virtually no contest.

In 1980, the Reagan campaign produced an eight-minute film that tentatively established the theme of a new beginning. Carter, on the other hand, stopped smiling. His thirty-minute film in 1980 was less innovative and visual than the 1976 film. It was issue-oriented and filmed in the traditional campaign documentary style. Preoccupied with reestablishing his credibility, Carter reverted to familiar forms. The film stressed his leadership qualities and experience on the job. One principal disadvantage was that it was too forthcoming; it also referred to his weaknesses and the problems that remained unresolved.

A New Beginning, like the Reagan 1984 campaign in general, emphasized only the positive. Though the Reagan administration was indeed subject to criticism, this was not made apparent. The Republican film had the theme that America was experiencing an economic and spiritual rebirth. Its visual and structural devices, notably the presentation of the president himself as narrator, all worked to strengthen and reinforce this vision.

The Mondale film, on the other hand, emphasized that there were problems. In striking contrast to *A New Beginning*, the candidate was presented as mortal rather than divine. "What was your nickname in high school?" an off-camera voice asks Walter Mondale. "Crazy legs," he replies, with a self-deprecatory grin. The Mondale film had no song or slick visual techniques. Like its competitor, it incorporated many visual clichés that symbolize America. These were highlighted when CBS reporter Jeff Greenfield compared and contrasted the two films on the evening of the Republican National Convention (in lieu of showing the Reagan film). Similar images from both films were juxtaposed upon a split-screen video, thus emphasizing their differences. For example, while both films included images of the Statue of Liberty, the Mondale footage showed the statue before its massive reconstruction project had begun. The footage was old and outdated; the images presented a static figure to the viewer. In *A New Beginning*, however, a dynamic camera zoomed in on the statue, which was being repaired. It, like America, was being "rebuilt." Even this simple cliché conveyed the message of the film. More important, the Reagan film celebrated present-day reality, while the Mondale film was a negative reminder of the past.

All indications point to the continuing development and entrenchment of political campaign films. In 1984, *A New Beginning*

assumed a prominent position as part of the reelection campaign. It served as a microcosm of the tone, themes, and strategies of the 1984 campaign. It offered a substitute for a speech; it provided a condensed version of the aims and accomplishments of the Reagan administration; finally, it encompassed the best of the advertising strategies and the media-management skills of the Reagan advisers.

Such an accomplishment was not lost on George Bush or Michael Dukakis in 1988. Both candidates had campaign films, which they aired prior to their acceptance speeches at their conventions, as spot advertisements, and as parts of election-eve specials. The Dukakis film featured his cousin, the actress Olympia Dukakis, as narrator who literally walked viewers through the otherwise unremarkable film. Bush, who used many of the same media managers as Reagan, learned Reagan's lessons well, both in terms of general campaign strategy and the campaign film in particular. The Bush film extended Reagan's principally by mimicking its techniques. It used the same campaign song and images of Americans building, making, doing; it was structured as a nonsequential series of short vignettes that made use of modes of presentation characteristic of news and documentary genres. Interviews with "talking heads" were filmed in medium- to close-shot as they addressed the camera, while Ronald Reagan acted as an "eyewitness" who attested to the character of candidate Bush. Still photographs of the Bush family trekking West in the forties gave the film a documentary feel, although a filmed shot of the car traveling across the desert had to be a fabrication. An explication of the opening scene of the Bush film will show the accord between the two in more detail.

Like *A New Beginning*, the Bush film opens with a headline on a blank screen, "August 1988," ostensibly to locate the viewer in present time. This initial gambit is followed by a timeless slow-motion image of a young girl running through a grassy field. Her soft-focus image, accompanied by sentimental music, is reminiscent of an advertisement; quickly, this gentle image dissolves to white and is replaced by another headline that locates the viewer in the distant past: December 1941. Stark black-and-white images are complemented with harsh, throbbing music. Dissolve to white, and an anonymous narrator explains that America has faced many challenges throughout the century, and has found many people to meet those challenges. The unstated implication is that George Bush is one of them. The narrator's voice is accompanied by more black-and-white images of soldiers leaving for war that dissolve into them kissing

women goodbye. Rather than addressing the present and its challenges, the viewers are nostalgically returned to the site of one of America's great victories. Graphics and black-and-white footage serve as illustrative "proof" of the events to which the narrator alludes; along with his anonymous voice of truth narration, they cue the viewer to the film's authenticity.

Authenticity is also signaled by the use of still photographs in lieu of moving images. Bush's own voice follows that of the narrator, as Bush explains that he joined the army at eighteen because he wanted to become a pilot. Two still images accompany his words: one of George with his young wife Barbara, and the second of Bush wearing a pilot's cap and army uniform. These pictures, like the black-and-white footage, corroborate his words. The offscreen narrator returns to extol Bush's virtues as a war hero, describing the young army pilot's exploits when he earned a distinguished flying cross on a bombing run. His words, again, are illustrated by a black-and-white image of planes and smoke.

Then, for the first time, there is a disjunctive cut in the film and Bush's words and image are united in one shot. Color footage also indicates a shift to the present as Bush, seated comfortably in the White House, retells the experience that made him a hero. As he speaks, his words are verified by documentary footage of World War II. Pragmatically, this scene dispels charges of "wimpiness" that plagued the candidate early on in his campaign. In addition, Bush's mission fulfills the mythic pattern of the leader who is tested, overcomes challenge, and is the wiser for it.

Another dissolve transforms into the headlines on a movie marquee that advertise a newsreel titled "War Ends." The headlines narrativize the film in a way that retains its implied authenticity. The headlines show the passage of a significant moment; they also serve as proof that it occurred. The movie image is itself reflexive: it may unintentionally remind the viewer of the mediated nature of the news then and now, and of the mediated nature of the Bush film itself, that the viewer is, at that moment, watching a film about political "reality." While the 1984 Reagan campaign managers noted their ability to manipulate the media, by 1988 the Bush team flaunted their skills. (Later in the film, a montage of images shows Americans sitting in their living rooms watching television—another reflexive, contemporary visual cliché.)

The "War Ends" marquee is followed by still photographs of sailors returning home and people hugging. The music becomes soft

and sentimental; George Bush becomes part of the saga of American history, an important contributor to one of its most significant moments. Then cut back to the present with Bush seated in the White House. He articulates his desire to unify Americans, to make all a part of the same kind of team effort that resulted in victory in World War II. The scene finally ends with Barbara Bush who appears on camera to remind the viewers that her husband is, indeed, a caring man.

Not only does this opening scene implicitly set up Bush's alternating campaign strategy, advocating a nation that is kind and gentle, yet strong and prepared, it also articulates this message by blurring televisual genres. Overall, the preponderance of documentary images, intercut with more obviously mediated events constructed for the camera, disguise the fact that the film is, above all, an advertisement for George Bush. The advertisement is signaled by the young child in soft focus who appears at the very beginning (and later closes the film at its completion); yet this initial impression is overridden by the insistence of the documentary images to be perceived as representations of reality. The boundaries between different levels of mediation remain unclear, and different televisual genres are seamlessly linked through dissolves that blur distinctions. The film bolsters the candidate's credibility, and on an ideological level, creates a version of reality that appears to be natural and self-evidently true.

All of the political campaign films surveyed provide overviews of a particular candidate, summaries of who he was and what he stood for. *A New Beginning*, though, intensified the trend toward depicting a candidate, toward using images, symbols, and visual-communication conventions to create a positive climate surrounding the candidate. Most important, the film did not concede a separation between filmic and offscreen reality. In 1984, Ronald Reagan addressed viewers rather than readers, a strategy that worked for George Bush in 1988, and a strategy that will continue to elect presidents in the age of television.